

# THE TWENTIES IN CONTEMPORARY COMMENTARY



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Trinity Church, New York City, 1916

## — MODERN FAITH —

The search for “modern faith” in the Twenties, within and beyond traditional religion, reflected two concurrent drives—the deep-seated need to affirm human goodness, hope, and salvation after the apocalyptic world war, and the struggle to accommodate modernity with traditional and revered belief systems. Whether man’s “soul” was god-given or a psychological construct, it called for sustenance. A sampling of the wide-ranged commentary is presented here.

Shepherd was a regular contributor to *Harper's*, *Collier's*, and other magazines of social and political commentary.

William G. Shepherd  
 “The Church of Today and Tomorrow”  
*Harper's*, August 1920

**W**e are not in the midst of a religious revival in America today, but we have plunged over our heads into a sea of religious and spiritual curiosity.

With our Ouija boards that sell faster than the manufacturers can make them; with our books on spiritualism that fill special tables in the country’s bookstores; with lectures on spiritualism<sup>1</sup> so frequent and so well attended that lecturers like Sir Oliver Lodge<sup>2</sup> become almost physically exhausted trying to keep their engagements; with a great religious play drawing ten thousand persons a day to Madison Square Garden . . . ;<sup>3</sup> with theaters in almost every American city which are used Sunday mornings for sermons by men and women of strange creeds, with new beliefs and doctrines arising so rapidly that even in social intercourse one hears the technical phrases of new religions bandied about as easily as stock market terms; with a great literary master like Maeterlinck<sup>4</sup> harking back to witchcraft and telling an intelligent American audience how to mark or scar wax dolls so that an injury corresponding to the scar or mark will appear in the corresponding part of the body of some other human being; with credited scientists writing as a scientific fact the statement that certain unknown material oozes from the bodies of mediums and hardens itself into the shape of rods or long arms by which a medium, with hands and feet bound, may reach about a darkened room and work his will; with many persons actually believing that they are conversing with the spirits of their dead and

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<sup>1</sup> *Spiritualism*: belief in communication with the dead through human liaisons (mediums).

<sup>2</sup> Sir Oliver Lodge: English physicist who pursued personal research in telepathy, other psychic phenomena, and the afterlife.

<sup>3</sup> *The Wayfarer*: modern passion play incorporating an allegorical theme of modern man struggling to find meaning amid the ruins of World War One. See p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Maurice Maeterlinck: Belgian playwright and essayist who wrote extensively on mysticism and the occult.

with many millions of other persons trying to believe that it is possible to do so—with all these unexpected facts before us, only one fact stands out that we can all explain. And that is:

We, in America today, are all groping toward invisible, spiritual things. Millions of us, each in his own way, seem to be essaying a Pilgrim's Progress.<sup>5</sup> We are all trying to find something solid to which we can anchor our faith. To put it simply, our revival-loving forefathers would have told us that we were hunting for the Rock of Ages—for something that would “tower o’er the wrecks of time.” . . .

Sick souls or no sick souls, the scores of millions of us in the United States who are interesting ourselves in the world of spirit, are seeking invisible, immaterial, holy things, such things as in other days our fathers and mothers turned to the church to find.

But are puzzled men and women of today turning to the church?

The scores of church leaders of all denominations with whom I have held conversation within the past few months desire to know why the masses appear as sheep without a shepherd.

“Why do not the distracted masses turn to the church?” they ask.

“And the masses, by their very attitude, reply: “Why should we turn to the church? Are the things we seek to be found there?”

James Edwin Crowther  
*The Wayfarer*  
Religious drama, 1919

Attracting full audiences for months in New York City, *The Wayfarer* dramatized the postwar disillusionment with man's capacity for goodness as a modern passion play (a drama depicting the final days of Christ). The playwright described the play's theme as a journey from despair to faith.

DESPAIR  
The world's awry, undone!  
What though the right should triumph in the strife,  
Who can restore our fallen youth to life;  
Waken the joy of our lost happiness;  
Replace the beauty of the world again;  
And give a peace that's more than barren words?  
Where shall you find true love or charity?  
What has become of honor, sacrifice,  
Kindness of heart, or loyalty of spirit?  
Are we not living in the final days  
When earthquake, famine and the lust of war  
Presage the coming of the Lord in wrath  
To hurl an impious world to ruin,  
And usher in the eternal night of doom?

WAYFARER  
What gloom and bitterness are in these words!  
They speak of disillusionment and woe!  
Tell me thy name, oh downcast stranger,  
That I may know who chills me with dismay.  
*The Wayfarer, 1919*

Today much that has been held authoritative in the past is being submitted to searching criticism and challenge. Revolution has shaken the industrial and social fabric to its very foundation. The task of reconstruction is so tremendous that many devout people are bewildered and dismayed. Not a few question the ability of the Church to solve the problems of the new era. The Wayfarer represents this discouraged element. He is guided from despair to faith and service by Understanding, who interprets the presence of the living Christ in every age, triumphant over doubt and adversity.

Everett Dean Martin  
“Are We Facing a Revival of Religion?”  
*Harper's*, April 1924

A Protestant minister, newspaper essayist, and later proponent of adult education, Martin published *The Mystery of Religion* in 1924.

There is a widespread desire for someone who can give the world a new gospel or someone who will at any rate capture the imagination of the mass, touch its heart, and lead it back to the old faith. Certain professional evangelists in America have attempted to do this, but their work has not been very significant or enduring. For the most part, it has been lacking in sincerity. Revivals of this sort are not the “great revival” which makes of religion a mass movement. They are too obviously deliberate attempts to reach the masses by talking down to them, vulgarizing the values of religion. They are staged performances, not spontaneous awakenings, and while they do create temporary situations which reveal many of the characteristics of the crowd mind—certainly its egoism, hostility, and fixed system of ideas—yet these crowd movements create only an artificial fervor which is soon abated. . . . Can humanity stand the universe without its supernatural? I do not know. Through education and journalism, various phases of this scientific picture [of the world] are in a crude form coming to be part of popular knowledge. If the process continues unhindered, we may in a few decades have a situation unprecedented in history in which the average member of society, caught as he is in the relentless process of our industrialism and forced to a life of drudgery and sense of inferiority, strives to bear his burdens without the consolations of religion. What forms of escape will men then have from monotony and defeat?

<sup>5</sup> *Essaying*: attempting. *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come*: Christian allegory by John Bunyan published in England in 1678, in which the pilgrim, Christian, for the way to heaven, the “Celestial City.”

Reinhold Niebuhr  
*Leaves from the Notebook  
of a Tamed Cynic, 1929*

After completing Yale Divinity School in 1915, Reinhold Niebuhr, later one of the most influential American Protestant theologians, pastored a small Detroit congregation until 1928, during which he kept a journal on ministering in modern times. His reflections on the church's role in the industrial age, the fundamentalist-modernist divide in Christianity, and the need to preserve traditional religion in "modern faith," illuminate his self-described nature as a "tamed cynic"—a liberal who would not reject man's cultural wisdom to accommodate modernity.\*

**1922:** Just received a pitiful letter from a young pastor who is losing his church because he has been "too liberal." I suppose there are churches which will crucify a leader who tries to lead them into the modern world of thought and life. Yet here I have been all these years in a conservative communion [congregation] and have never had a squabble about theology. I suppose that is partly due to the fact that there were so few people here when I came that no one had to listen to me if he didn't like my approach. Those who have come have associated themselves with us because they were in general agreement with "our gospel." They have come, however, from conservative communions and churches. But of course they have been mostly young people.

**1924:** Going to St. Louis today a portly and garrulous gentleman sat back of me and became very much interested in two nuns who were reading their prayer books. The man, who seemed the perfect type of successful drummer [traveling salesman], felt very superior to the nuns. How can anyone "fall for that stuff" in this day and age, he wanted to know in a loud whisper. "They remind me of ghosts," he said.

I had to admit that there was something almost unearthly about these black figures with their white-rimmed hoods. But their faces were kindly and human, and the face of the drummer was sensuous and florid. Perhaps the difference between him and the nuns illustrates the quality of our "modernity," though I don't want to maintain that he is the perfect type of a modern man. But we do have a great many moderns who are emancipated from every kind of religious discipline without achieving any new loyalty which might qualify the brutal factors in human life.

**1925:** Why doesn't the church offer specific suggestions for the application of a Christian ethic to the difficulties of our day? If that suggestion is made, the answer is that such a policy would breed contention. It certainly would. No moral project can be presented and no adventure made without resistance from the traditionalist and debate among experimentalists. But besides being more effective, such a course would be more interesting than this constant bathing in sentimentalities. If the church could only achieve schisms on ethical issues! They would represent life and reality. Its present schisms are not immoral as such. They are immoral only in the sense that they perpetuate issues which have no relevancy in our day.

**1926:** The church honestly regards it of greater moment to prevent women from smoking cigarettes than to establish more Christian standards in industrial enterprise. A minister who tries to prevent fashionable women from smoking cigarettes is simply trying to enforce a code of personal habit established in the middle classes of the nineteenth century upon the plutocratic classes of the twentieth century. The effort is not only vain but has little to do with essential Christianity.

**1926:** I really wonder how we are going to build a civilization sufficiently intelligent to overcome dangerous prejudices and to emancipate itself from the inadequacies of conventional morality without creating the kind of sophistication which destroys all values by its skepticism and dampens every enthusiasm by its cynicism. In America that possibility is particularly dangerous because our intellectualism is of the sophomoric [juvenile] type. There is no generation, or only one generation, between the pioneers who conquered the prairies and these youngsters who are trying to absorb the whole of modern culture in four years. The traditions against which they react are less adequate, less modified by experience and culture, than those which inform the peoples of Europe.

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And the teachers who guide them into the world of new knowledge are frequently themselves so recently emancipated that they try to obscure their cultural, religious, and moral heritages by extreme iconoclasm. It is difficult to be patient with one of these smart-aleck Ph.D.s on a western campus who imagines that he can impress the world with his learning by being scornful of everything that was thought or done before this century.

**1926:** The church is like the Red Cross service in war time. It keeps life from degenerating into a consistent inhumanity, but it does not materially alter the fact of the struggle itself. The Red Cross neither wins the war nor abolishes it. Since the struggle between those who have and those who have not is a never-ending one, society will always be, in a sense, a battleground. It is therefore of some importance that human loveliness be preserved outside of the battle lines. But those who are engaged in this task ought to realize that the brutalities of the conflict may easily negate the most painstaking humanizing efforts behind the lines, and that these efforts may become a method for evading the dangers and risks of the battlefield.

If religion is to contribute anything to the solution of the industrial problem, a more heroic type of religion than flourishes in the average church must be set to the task. I don't believe that the men who are driven by that kind of religion need to dissociate themselves from the churches, but they must bind themselves together in more effective association than they now possess.

**1927:** Talked today at the open forum which meets every Sunday afternoon in the high school. The "lunatic fringe" of the city congregates there, in addition to many sensible people. The question period in such meetings is unfortunately monopolized to a great extent by the foolish ones, though not always. Today one old gentleman wanted to know when I thought the Lord would come again, while a young fellow spoke volubly on communism and ended by challenging me to admit that all religion is fantasy. Between those two you have the story of the tragic state of religion in modern life. One half of the world seems to believe that every poetic symbol with which religion must deal is an exact definition of a concrete or an historical fact; the other half, having learned that this is not the case, can come to no other conclusion but that all religion is based upon fantasy.

Fundamentalists have at least one characteristic in common with most scientists. Neither can understand that poetic and religious imagination has a way of arriving at truth by giving a clue to the total meaning of things without being in any sense an analytic description of detailed facts. The fundamentalists insist that religion is science, and thus they prompt those who know that this is not true to declare that all religious truth is contrary to scientific fact.

How can an age which is so devoid of poetic imagination as ours be truly religious?

**1928:** I have a dark suspicion that some of these modern religious educators do not really know what religion is about. They want a completely rational faith and do not realize that they are killing religion by a complete rationalization. . . .

Life is a battle between faith and reason in which each feeds upon the other, drawing sustenance from it and destroying it. Nature has wisely ordained that faith shall have an early advantage in the life of the child to compensate for its later difficulties. If we imagine that we help the progress of the race by inoculating children with a premature sophistication we are of all men most miserable. Reason, without the balance of faith, destroys a civilization soon enough, without giving it this advantage among the young. . . .

Here I am talking like a fundamentalist. But why not? If we must choose between types of fanaticism is there any particular reason why we should prefer the fanatics who destroy a vital culture in the name of freedom and reason to those who try to strangle a new culture at birth in the name of authority and dogma? The latter type of fanaticism is bound to end in futility. The growth of reason cannot be stopped by dogma. But the former type is dangerous because it easily enervates a rational culture with ennui ["world weariness"] and despair.

Robert S. Lynd & Helen Merrell Lynd  
*Middletown: A Study in American Culture*  
1929\*

Selected in 1924 as a typical town of "middle America," Muncie, Indiana, was the focus of two sociologists' research into the changes wrought in modernizing America since the late 1890s. Religion—the residents' faith and practice—was one of the five core areas examined in the study.

As changes proceed at accelerating speed in other sections of the city's life, the lack of dominance of religious beliefs becomes more apparent. The whole tide of this industrial culture would seem to be set more strongly than in the leisurely village of thirty-five years ago in the direction of the "go-getter" rather than in that of "Blessed are the meek" of the church. By their religious teachers Middletown people are told that they are sinners in need of salvation, by speakers at men's and women's clubs that they are assured that their city, their state, and their country are, if not perfect, at least the best in the world, that it is they who make them so, and that if they but continue in their present vigorous course, progress is assured.

Meanwhile, secular marriages are increasing, divorce is increasing, wives of both workers and businessmen would appear to stress loyalty to the church less than did their mothers in training their children; church attendance is apparently less regular than in 1890. Rotary [Club] which boasts that it includes all the leaders of the city will admit no minister, social activities are much less centered in the churches, leisure time is increasingly less touched by religious prohibitions in its encroachments upon the Sabbath, more and more community activities are, as the press points out in regard to questions of disease and health, being regarded not as "acts of God" but as subjects for investigation.

In theory, religious beliefs dominate all other activities in Middletown; actually, large regions of Middletown's life appear uncontrolled by them. Said a member of Rotary, leading prayer meeting in Middletown's largest church:

"We talk about 'believing in God the Father' and about 'the church and religion being more worthwhile than anything in life.' Now supposed somebody could follow our every thought and act for just two short days—how much of this would he discover? I'd hate just to try to say how little. I went to [the state capital] for two days last week and shouted myself hoarse for our Bearcats,<sup>6</sup> but would I do that for this church? No, you bet I wouldn't!" . . .

But if religious life as represented by the churches is less pervasive than a generation ago, other centers of "spiritual" activity are growing up in the community. However much the ideal of "service" in Rotary and the other civic clubs may be subordinated to certain other interests, these clubs are nevertheless marked sources of religious loyalty and zeal to some of their members. "Civic loyalty," "magic Middletown," as a religion, appears to be the greatest driving power for some Middletown citizens. Some leaders in certain of the women's clubs find in these clubs a similar focus of energy and enthusiasm.



"HOW IS IT THAT I NEVER SEE YOU AND YOUR HUSBAND IN CHURCH, MRS. BUNKER?"  
"WELL, YOU SEE, DOCTOR, WE FELT IT WAS SACRILEGIOUS TO SIT IN CHURCH AND THINK ABOUT GOLF, SO WE GAVE UP CHURCH."

*Life*, November 4, 1920

The religious war between the modernists and the fundamentalists has resulted, as usual, in an even greater Sunday morning congestion at the first tee.

"Life Lines," humor column, *Life*, July 30, 1925

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<sup>6</sup> Muncie High School sports teams.

William Bell Riley  
 "The Faith of the Fundamentalists"  
*Current History*, June 1927

A Baptist minister and president of the World's Christian Fundamentals Association, Bell outlined the Fundamentalist-Modernist divide in the U.S. that stemmed from 19<sup>th</sup>-c. "higher criticism"—the study of the historical origins of Biblical texts.

Fundamentalism is forever the antithesis of modernist critical theology. It is made up of another and an opposing school. Modernism submits all Scripture to the judgment of man. According to its method he may reject any portion of the Book as uninspired, unprofitable, and even undesirable, and accept another portion as from God because its sentences suit him, or its teachings inspire him. Fundamentalism, on the contrary, makes the Bible "the supreme and final authority in faith and life." Its teachings determine every question upon which they have spoken with some degree of fullness, and its mandates are only disregarded by the unbelieving, the materialistic, and the immoral. Fundamentalists hold that the world is illumined and the Church is instructed and even science itself is confirmed, when true, and condemned when false, by the clear teachings of the open Book, while Liberalism, as *The Nation* once said, "pretends to preach the higher criticism by interpreting the sacred writings as esoteric fables." In other words, the two have nothing in common save church membership, and all the world wonders that they do or can remain together; . . .

John Gresham Machen  
*Christianity and Liberalism*  
 1923

A conservative Princeton theologian, Machen was a leading fundamentalist spokesman.

According to the Bible, man is a sinner under the just condemnation of God; according to modern liberalism, there is really no such thing as sin. At the very root of the modern liberal movement is the loss of the consciousness of sin.

The consciousness of sin was formerly the starting point of all preaching, but today it is gone. Characteristic of the modern age, above all else, is a supreme confidence in human goodness. . . . Get beneath the rough exterior of men, we are told, and we shall discover enough self-sacrifice to found upon it the hope of society. The world's evil, it is said, can be overcome with the world's good; no help is needed from outside the world.

**"WHAT IS A FUNDAMENTALIST?"**

Definition Contest, *The Forum*, 1926

Recruiting readers' definitions for terms looming large in current discussion was a regular feature of the periodical *The Forum*. In December 1926, seven definitions chosen by the editors were published, inviting readers to vote for their favorites.

**A Fundamentalist** is one who believes that the Bible is the word of God—revealed to men specially prepared to receive and record it, and so safeguarded that it comes to us with absolute divine authority. Many Fundamentalists feel called to resist the tendency of "Modernism," so called, to reduce the Bible to the basis of naturalism, by which Jesus Christ is reduced to the ranks of humanity, thereby ceasing to be recognized as the Savior of the world in virtue of His sacrificial death on the cross. They consider this to be a serious menace to lost sinners.

-Rev. J. W. Brown, Ph.D., South Gorham, Maine

**A Fundamentalist** is a besieged Christian anxious to dictate the terms of surrender to Science.

-Paul Langdon, Fort Wayne, Indiana

In every realm of life there are certain great ultimates of truth. These are basic and cannot be improved upon. You cannot improve on the straight line or the multiplication table or the seven primary colors. In the spiritual realm we have ultimates, such as The Existence of God, the Inspiration of the Scriptures, the Supernatural birth and life of Jesus Christ, His bodily Resurrection and His Atonement for sin and his Coming Kingdom. **The Fundamentalist** accepts without questioning these great ultimates.

J. W. Mahood, Pacific Palisades, California

**A Fundamentalist** is one who thinks that if the stone on which he stands should be taken away there would be nothing underneath.

Emilie Ewald, Perrysburg, New York

**A Fundamentalist** is one who is located at the bottom. He holds to his moorings, too timid to break away and fearful of all new adventures and discoveries. Theories weigh little with him and hypotheses miss his mark. Fiction appeals not to him. He is no gambler. His element of risk is zero. He takes no step in the dark, scales no mountains, discovers no North Poles, and swims no Channels. He is "sot" in his ways and fears all change for it might bring grief. It applies to his religion, business, citizenship, and recreation.

Rev. J. S. Hodges, D.D., Denison, Texas

**Fundamentalist:** (1) One who believes (a) that the Bible is "the Word of God" and infallible; (b) that Jesus was God incarnate, the second member of the Trinity; (c) that he was born of a Virgin; (d) performed the miracles attributed to Him; (e) suffered on the cross as a vicarious atonement for "original sin"; (f) was bodily resurrected; and (g) occupies a seat on the throne of God, when he will descend on the appointed Day to judge the quick and the dead. (2) One who accepts and employs the method of tradition, which is *revelation*, as distinguished from the method of science, which is *discovery*.

-Maynard Shipley, San Francisco, California

# **THE FUNDAMENTALIST-MODERNIST DIVIDE**

Leading Presbyterian clergymen Harry Emerson Fosdick (liberal/modernist) and Clarence Macartney (conservative/fundamentalist) delivered point-counterpoint sermons in 1922 that were published and widely discussed.

## **“Shall the Fundamentalists Win?”**

REV. HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

Sermon, First Presbyterian Church, New York City, May 21, 1922

As I plead thus for an intellectually hospitable, tolerant, liberty-loving Church, I am, of course, thinking primarily about this new generation. We have boys and girls growing up in our homes and schools, and because we love them we may well wonder about the Church which will be waiting to receive them. Now, the worst kind of Church that can possibly be offered to the allegiance of the new generation is an intolerant Church. Ministers often bewail the fact that young people turn from religion to science for the regulative ideas of their lives. But this is easily explicable.

Science treats a young man’s mind as though it were really important. A scientist says to a young man, “Here is the universe challenging our investigation. Here are the truths which we have seen, so far. Come, study with us! See what we already have seen and then look further to see more, for science is an intellectual adventure for the truth.” Can you imagine any man who is worthwhile turning from that call to the church if the Church seems to him to say, “Come, and we will feed you opinions from a spoon. No thinking is allowed here except such as brings you to certain specified, predetermined conclusions. These prescribed opinions we will give you in advance of your thinking; now think, but only so as to reach these results.” My friends, nothing in all the world is so much worth thinking of as God, Christ, the Bible, sin and salvation, the divine purposes for humankind, life everlasting. But you cannot challenge the dedicated thinking of this generation to these sublime themes upon any such terms as are laid down by an intolerant Church. . . .

. . . If, during the war, when the nations were wrestling upon the very brink of hell and at times all seemed lost, you chanced to hear two men in an altercation about some minor matter of sectarian denominationalism, could you restrain your indignation? You said, “What can you do with folks like this who, in the face of colossal issues, play with the tiddlywinks and peccadillos of religion?” So, now, when from the terrific questions of this generation one is called away by the noise of this Fundamentalist controversy, he thinks it almost unforgivable that men should tithe mint and anise and cumin, and quarrel over them, when the world is perishing for the lack of the weightier matters of the law, justice, and mercy, and faith.<sup>7</sup>

## **“Shall Unbelief Win?”**

REV. CLARENCE MACARTNEY

Sermon, Arch St. Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, July 13, 1922

. . . The greatest need of the Church today is a few men of ability and faith who are not afraid of being called “bigots,” “narrow,” “medieval” in their religious thought. I do not mean to infer that Dr. Fosdick ever so thinks of those who repudiate his views, for he goes out of his way to rebuke those of his side who indulge in this childish pastime. But more and more there is a tendency to brand as illiberal, medieval, and narrow any man who differs from the current of popular religious thought, and declares it to be nonChristian in its tendencies. There is a great discussion in the pulpit and out of it as to what the Church is to do or not to do. . . .

. . . They who, above all others, ought to read [Fosdick’s] sermon are not the conservatives and not the rationalists, but the middle-of-the-road people who are fondly hoping that these schools are divided only by a difference in words and names, and that the two positions can and will be reconciled. Dr. Fosdick’s sermon shows the impossibility and the undesirability of such reconciliation. . . . If this [Fosdick’s position] is truth, then let it prevail, no matter how many churches sink into oblivion. But whether he is right, or whether the evangelical position is right, one thing all must now admit: both positions cannot be right; one MUST be wrong.

Macartney reviews the Christian orthodoxies of the Virgin Birth, the divine inspiration of the Bible, the Second Coming, and atonement.

Our chief complaint against the rationalist and modernist is not their writings and saying about the Deity of our Lord, the Bible, the Second Advent, but their rejection of the one great truth of Christianity, that through His death we have remission of our sins and are justified with God. . . .

In his celebrated autobiography, John Stuart Mill, in describing the attitude of his father towards Christianity, says that he looked with indignation upon the identification of the worship of the Christian God with Christianity. The son . . . thinks the day will come when we shall have a Christianity with God left out. For me, this sums up better than anything I have ever read the menace of the rationalistic and modernist movement in Protestant Christianity. The movement is slowly secularizing the Church, and if permitted to go unchecked and unchallenged, will ere long produce in our churches a new kind of Christianity, a Christianity without worship, without God, and without Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 23:23: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.” [King James version]

Walter Lippmann  
*A Preface to Morals*  
1929

For over fifty years Lippmann was one of the most influential commentators on American political and intellectual life. His early works include *Liberty and the News* (1920), *The Phantom Public* (1925), and his ultimate showdown with the modern age, *A Preface to Morals* (1929). As a young liberal, he understood the challenge that the skeptic or unbeliever had conjured for himself—replacing deity-based religion with a schema that rendered moral authority and spiritual solidity. In the sidebar is commentary from the modernist dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School.

## CH. 1: THE PROBLEM OF UNBELIEF

Among those who no longer believe in the religion of their fathers, some are proudly defiant, and many are indifferent. But there are also a few, perhaps an increasing number, who feel that there is a vacancy in their lives. This inquiry deals with their problem. It is not intended to disturb the serenity of those who are unshaken in the faith they hold, and it is not concerned with those who are still exhilarated by their escape from some stale orthodoxy. It is concerned with those who are perplexed by the consequences of their own irreligion. It deals with the problem of unbelief, not as believers are accustomed to deal with it, in the spirit of men confidently calling the lost sheep back into the fold, but as unbelievers themselves must, I think, face the problem if they face it candidly and with presumption.

When such men put their feelings into words they are likely to say that, having lost their faith, they have lost the certainty that their lives are significant, and that it matters what they do with their lives. If they deal with young people they are likely to say that they know of no compelling reason which certifies the moral code they adhere to, and that, therefore, their own preferences, when tested by the ruthless curiosity of their children, seem to have no sure foundation of any kind. They are likely to point to the world about them, and to ask whether the modern man possesses any criterion by which he can measure the value of his own desires, whether there is any standard he really believes in which permits him to put a term upon that pursuit of money, of power, and of excitement which has created so much of the turmoil and the squalor and the explosiveness of modern civilization. . . .

What most distinguishes the generation who have approached maturity since the debacle of idealism at the end of the War is not their parents, but their disillusionment with their own rebellion. It is common for young men and women to rebel, but that they should rebel sadly and without faith in their own rebellion, that they should distrust the new freedom no less than the old certainties—that is something of a novelty. . . .

Yet the current attempts to modernize religious creeds are inspired by the hope that somehow it will be possible to construct a form of belief which will fit into this vacuum. It is evident that life soon becomes distracted and tiresome if it is not illuminated by communion with what William James called “a wider self through which saving experiences come.” The eager search for new religions, the hasty adherence to cults, and the urgent appeals for a reconciliation between religion and science are confessions that to the modern man his activity seems to have no place in any rational order. His life seems mere restlessness and compulsion, rather than conduct lighted by luminous beliefs. . . .

Yet there remain the wants which orthodoxy of some sort satisfies. The natural man, when he is released from restraints, and has no substitute for them, is at sixes and sevens with himself and the world. For in the free play of his uninhibited instincts he does not find any natural substitute for those accumulated convictions which, however badly they did it, nevertheless organized his soul, economized his effort, consoled him, and gave him dignity in his own eyes

**Shailer Mathews, response to Lippmann's Preface, in “The Modern Unbeliever's Quest for Religion,” *Current History*, October 1929**

[Mr. Lippmann] is a social diagnostician who wishes to effect a cure. He sees the moral order in need of foundations. The punitive God, the infallible Church, the infallible Bible upon which ethics has been based are no longer in control of morality. . . . Mr. Lippmann's volume is a modernized Ecclesiastes, describing the disillusionment of the sophisticated man searching for satisfaction. . . .

### NEED OF A NEW RELIGION

Fearing that moral order is turning to anarchy, Mr. Lippmann accordingly seeks for it a new unifying basis. This he can see in religion alone. But this religion must be independent of the old authorities. He has little patience with any theology that would exploit orthodoxy while changing its content. . . .

It is a difficult task he faces. He vacillates between the negative pole of keen social observation, which leads to the distrust of any particular faith, and the positive pole of a desire to show that “goodness is victorious vitality and badness defeated vitality.” . . . Right and wrong, goodness and sin, evil and happiness are relative terms to which it is difficult to give definite content. . . .

Mr. Lippmann, however, unexpectedly identifies morality with authority. The Ten Commandments he knows to be the formulation of religious ideals dissolved by the acid of modernity, but some new authority, he feels, must lie



because he was part of some greater whole. The acids of modernity are so powerful that they do not tolerate a crystallization of ideas which will serve as a new orthodoxy into which men can retreat. And so the modern world is haunted by a realization, which it becomes constantly less easy to ignore, that it is impossible to reconstruct an enduring orthodoxy, and impossible to live well without the satisfactions which an orthodoxy would provide. . . .

#### CH. 4: THE ACIDS OF MODERNITY\_\_

Novelties crowd the consciousness of modern men. The machinery of intelligence, the press, the radio, the moving picture, have enormously multiplied the number of unseen events and strange people and queer doings with which he has to be concerned. They compel him to pay attention to facts that are detached from their backgrounds, their causes and their consequences, and are only half known because they are not seen or touched or actually heard. These experiences come to him having no beginning, no middle, and no end, mere flashes of publicity playing fitfully upon a dark tangle of circumstances. I pick up a newspaper at the start of the day and I am depressed and rejoiced to learn that: anthracite miners have struck in Pennsylvania; that a price boost plot is charged; that Mr. Ziegfeld has imported a blonde from England who weighs 112 pounds and has pretty legs; that the Pope, on the other hand, has refused to receive women in low-necked dress and with their arms bare; that airplanes are flying in Hawaii; and that the Mayor says that the would-be Mayor is a liar . . . [ellipsis in original]

Now in an ordered universe there ought to be [a] place for all human experiences. But it is not strange that the modern newspaper reader finds it increasingly difficult to believe that through it all there is order, permanence, and connecting principle. Such experience as comes to him from the outside is a dissonance composed of a thousand noises. And amidst these noises he has for inner guidance only a conscience which consists, as he half suspects, of the confused echoes of earlier tunes.

#### CH. 7: THE DRAMA OF DESTINY\_\_

The effect of modernity, then, is to specialize and thus to intensify our separated activities. Once all things were phases of a single destiny: the church, the state, the family, the school were means to the same end; the rights and duties of the individual in society, the rules of morality, the themes of art, and the teachings of science were all of them ways of revealing, of celebrating, of applying the laws laid down in the divine constitution of the universe. In the modern world institutions are more or less independent, each serving its own proximate purpose, and our culture is really a collection of separate interests each sovereign within its own realm. We do not put shrines in our workshops, and we think it unseemly to talk business in the vestibule of a church. We dislike politics in the pulpit and preaching from politicians. We do not look upon our scholars as priests or upon our priests as learned men. We do not expect science to sustain theology, nor religion to dominate art. On the contrary we insist with much fervor on the separation of church and state, or religion and science, of politics and historical research, of morality and art, of business and love. This separation of activities has its counterpart in a separation of selves; the life of a modern man is not so much the history of a single soul; it is rather a play of many characters within a single body.

back of morality." . . . For such an authority he can see only two alternatives, that of popular religion which "rests on the belief that the kingdom is an objective fact," and that of the humanist, who raises the problem "how mankind, deprived of the great fictions, is to come to terms with the needs which created these fictions."

#### HUMANISM AS A "HIGH RELIGION"

So Mr. Lippmann turns to humanism. . . . The final formula of this "high religion" he finds in an ideal of the human personality which he calls a religion of the spirit. Its summary he finds in the words of Confucius, "to follow what the heart desires without transgressing what is right." For he has learned to desire what is right.

But what sort of morality would this justify? Does it not lead directly away from authority toward that self-determined search for "satisfaction" which he has so cleverly exposed? As a matter of fact, such following of heart's desires is the opposite of Mr. Lippmann's conception of morality, and constitutes a subtle appeal to self-indulgence. . . .

. . . He points out what every student of human affairs must recognize, namely, that men and women cannot safely live unregulated, indulgent, self-centered lives. Whether they like it or not, there is a wise way and a foolish way of living. But, of course, this is no novelty to ethics. . . .

. . . Our modern life, however much the acid of modernity may have eaten into ancient authorities, is carrying along attitudes and institutions, formulas and practices, which are forces of actual moral control. We have the religion for which he looks in actual operation.