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"RELIGION-BREAKERS AND RELIGION-MAKERS"  
A Jewish Reaction to Huxley and the Hucksters

A sermon preached by Rabbi Norman Lamm  
at The Jewish Center, New York City, on  
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I

About two weeks ago there appeared in the daily press an article which caused wide public reaction and a great deal of comment. The article was a report of an address by the distinguished English biologist Sir Julian Huxley at the University of Chicago where a special convocation was held celebrating the 100th anniversary of the publication of Charles Darwin's epic work, "Origin of Species." What was of especial interest to religious people was the part of Huxley's talk in which he addressed himself to religion and evolution. The world, said Sir Julian Huxley, needs a new ideology centered upon evolution. Not a man to keep the world waiting, he immediately proceeded to demonstrate why the "old" ideologies were inadequate, and to prescribe the new evolutionary ideology that would solve all the world's ills.

The N.Y. Times' report of the address shows us Huxley in two poses. One - - as a "religion-breaker", as the somewhat overly cheerful writer of the obituary of traditional theistic faith. And two - - as a "religion-maker", as one who is formulating for modern man a new religion to replace the old. We shall confine our remarks to these two aspects of Huxley's talk - - his criticism of traditional religion and his advocacy of the new, "evolutionary" kind. We do so in the belief that the wide currency given to his speech makes it necessary to offer a Jewish reaction to it.

II

Let us state at the very outset that we largely agree with Huxley's first criticism of religion. "Religion of some sort," he says, "is probably necessary, but it is not necessarily a good thing." He then gives 3 examples of the vices of religion: declaring the teaching of evolution as illegal in Tennessee, legal prohibition for doctors in certain states to give certain kinds of medical information to their patients, and persecution of dissidents by religions such as Christianity and Communism.

I say that he is right, because the use of religion as a tool for tyranny is all too well known, especially to Jews, to require much comment. Our whole history bears the scars of Christian piety. Bigotry and prejudice have, alas, all too often been closely allied with religion.

And yet it would be wrong for us to let it go at that. As a responsible scientist, Huxley ought to know that one should not form a conclusive opinion until he has studied all the available evidence. And the evidence points to a profound paradox. Dr. Gordon W. Allport, professor of psychology at Harvard University, has recently written a most interesting article (The Crane Review, Fall 1959) showing that "brotherhood and bigotry are intertwined in all religion," that whereas many religious persons are markedly prejudiced, yet the most valiant fighters for tolerance and brotherhood have been deeply religious people. From Moses to the Maccabees to many of the founders of the American republic religious people have blazed the trail for freedom and tolerance and equality. To make, therefore, a blanket charge against religion as such on the basis of some bigoted excesses, and to ignore on the one hand the leadership in freedom movements by religious souls and on the other hand the brutal inhumanity and racism espoused and practiced by Nazi scientists who were committed to evolution and G-dlessness, is the height of folly. It represents a prejudice common to a number of scientists and many of their followers, hucksters of all new intellectual fads, a group of people which includes especially those between the ages of 15 and 22.

### III

Sir Julian's second source of dissatisfaction with Religion is the "split between religion and science" which cannot be mended except by accepting Dr. Huxley's prescription of an evolving, relativistic religion. "The earth was not created; it evolved," says Huxley, and with that one feels that the dragon of religion has been slain by the brave young knight in the shining armor of science.

Here we voice our utter disagreement with Huxley. Granted that here were or are areas where religious teaching and scientific assumption run counter to each other. But the declaration first that evolution and creation are antonyms, and second that evolution has won the day over creation, is an uncalled for assumption confounded by an unwarranted conclusion.

The Jewish tradition is not uncompromisingly literalist in its interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis. The significant and crucial aspect of Genesis is the central fact of G-d as creator, and all the varied religious, moral, and philosophical consequences that flow from that fact. The technique of creation by G-d was always regarded as an esoteric study (maaseh bereshit), the words of the Bible being considered only a garment for the inner, symbolic meaning. The pattern of creation as recorded in the Bible shows a general evolutionary development from the simple to the complex. The Talmud in many places reveals remarkable insights anticipating the teachings of later evolutionists. Both the Kabbalah and certain Jewish medieval philosophers spoke of a form of evolution by which the material world came about from the pure spirit of G-d. From Maimonides, (Guide for the Perplexed, 2:29) to the late Rabbi Kook, (Ingrot Riyah, 1:134), Jewish thinkers have urged that the story of creation not be treated literally. What then is to prevent the traditional Jew from believing, in full conformity with his faith, that G-d created in the manner described by modern cosmologists or biologists, that evolution is G-d's way of doing things? Huxley is in error when he assumes that evolution and creation are two doctrines unalterably opposed to each other.

Furthermore, the conclusion reached by Huxley that if evolution and the Biblical theory of creation are opposed to each other, that then evolution is right and the Bible wrong, is utterly unnecessary. Despite all the evidence pointing to the plausibility of the evolutionary scheme, "evolution is not a fact in the strict sense in which science understands the term," as Jean-Paul Aron, an internationally known French biologist, wrote only a few years ago, "it remains an idea." Responsible scientists ought to be more careful, therefore, and inform their audiences of the distinction between scientifically established facts and good ideas. There remains a difference between them - a great difference.

### IV

Sir Julian Huxley makes a third point in his role as "religion-breaker" which is, essentially, unworthy of a response. He decries religion as an escape - - not a refreshingly novel idea. This is unworthy of a response because the psychological knife cuts both ways, and the scalpel of personal analysis can be used to expose the disease of escapism in the surgeon himself. So religion is a desire by man "to take refuge from his loneliness in the divinized father-figure whom he himself has created!" Is it not at least as true that many children of religious families have rebelled against religion precisely because they bore hostility against their fathers, and have felt that denying G-d is a way of destroying paternal authority? If Huxley is to stoop to the accusation that religious people create a G-d to escape loneliness, we might be equally ungenerous and explain his philosophy as the rationalization of an adolescent desire to escape authority by destroying religion. It is unbecoming for a serious and objective thinker to meet the issues raised by his opponent by discussing personalities and casting suspicion on motives.

V

When Huxley now turns to his role as a "religion-maker" he exposes himself to far more serious charges.

The new or emergent religion that Huxley predicts, one arising through evolution and based on scientific findings, would "serve the needs of the coming era." His new ideology, as a matter of fact, would include religion - - his kind - - as one of a number of new factors. Such a development, we are told, is essential to deal with threats of nuclear war, overpopulation, the spread of Communist ideology, and other problems.

What Huxley fails to see is that when religion exists only to "fill a need," even if the need is as great as preventing war and feeding the world's population and fighting Communists, that such a religion is not really a religion, that it is essentially a throw-back to primitive magic. For magic was essentially the use of cult and ritual to achieve ulterior aims. When faith becomes a mere instrument for the attainment of higher ends, it no longer is a genuine religion. Peace, health, and freedom are all precious goals. But if I am asked to have faith because I will thus help battle the armament makers, the Catholic hierarchy, and the Communist menace, I must in all good conscience demur. If I believe, it is only because I am convinced that the content of my faith is true. To believe because it will help me in my health, my business, or my politics is the kind of primitive idolatry which in modern days has been espoused by the advocates of "Positive Thinking." When Huxley wants us to have religion so as to fight Communism he places himself in the same league with the "Positive Thinking" and "Peace of Mind" preachers who want us to have religion so we can be better salesmen; and both are akin to the ancient pagan who brought a bowl of fruit to his idol so that he may thereby succeed in bagging more game in his hunt. All three are not primarily concerned with the content of what they believe as much as in "what is in it for me?" One had hoped that modern religious thought had evolved beyond that stage.

VI

"Instead of worshipping supernatural rulers," Huxley goes on to say about his new religion, "it will sanctify the higher manifestations of human nature in art and love, in intellectual comprehension and aspiring adoration and will emphasize the fuller realization of life's possibilities as a sacred trust." So that in Huxley's new religion we are no longer to worship G-d, but we are to worship our own higher nature. In a word, man is to worship himself! Strip this of its sophisticated phraseology and you have again a regression down the evolutionary scale, for you meet in modern guise the emperor-gods of Egypt and Rome and Japan who thought it perfectly proper for religion to be the worship of a single man. Huxley has merely broadened this to include all men. Where Judaism opened a window in man's soul so that he may look up and catch a glimpse of G-d, Huxley coats it with silver and makes a mirror of it, telling man to worship his own image in the form of "the higher manifestations of human nature."

VII

Once G-d has been dethroned in the palace of religion, what religion is there left to speak of? A careful reading of Sir Julian's address reveals an interesting emphasis on the "feeling" and the "emotion" of holiness and sacredness. True holiness, authentic sacredness, which is the imitation of G-d, the flight of the soul towards Him, and man's self-transcendence in the process, cannot exist in Huxley's G-dless religion. All he can manage to salvage for us is "feeling" or "emotion." With all due respect to these noble qualities which are basically the results of the secretion of the adrenal glands, religion to be meaningful and decisive in life must be concerned with more than "feelings" and "emotions." Huxley has in effect asked modern man to be religious without possessing a

religion -- which is about as meaningful as being scientific whilst discarding science, or being idealistic without having any ideals.

### VIII

A profound German-Jewish thinker, the late Dr. Isaac Breuer, has referred to three parts or "wills" as comprising the human personality: the ratzon behemi, the "animal will" or the whole complex of man's drives and appetites and instincts; the ratzon sikhli, the "intellectual will"; and the ratzon chazoni, the "prophetic will," the uniquely spiritual side of man. When man is stripped of the "prophetic will" there is a natural tendency for his intellect to seek justification for the full expression of his animal self; in a word, he rationalizes the beast within him. It is only when he exercises his spiritual qualities that his intellect serves the purpose of sanctifying man and elevating even his purely natural aspect.

When, however, you have completely denied the existence of an independent spiritual element in man - - call it a soul, if you will - - and have, like Huxley, reduced the phenomenon of religion to a combination of mental, emotional, and social factors thus canceling out the ratzon chazoni completely; when you have, like Huxley, taken the universal sweep of religion and so disfigured it that it becomes a mere "function" amongst a host of others - - an "organ of psychosocial man" - - instead of the sublime dialogue between man and his Maker; then you have missed the truly unique characteristics of genuine, mature religion. More than that, you have opened the door to every kind of rationalization and deification of the ratzon behemi. Who is to assure us that a new generation will not arise which will entertain the same "feelings" and "emotions" of sacredness experienced by Huxley, but will direct them towards the worship not of love and art and intellectual comprehension, but of plunder and pillage by a race of supermen - - something which they might very well consider "man's higher nature?" Has Huxley already forgotten that this happened in only the recent past? A religion which recognizes neither G-d nor the prophetic instinct in man is not a religion at all; it is merely a convenient way to plug the gaps in a cold, dark, lifeless, mechanistic conception of the universe. It is somewhat like the temporary filling used by a dentist - - it has no inherent value, it fills the cavities adequately for the present, and will be discarded as soon as something better is found.

### IX

Huxley's self-assurance in declaring as archaic the traditional theistic religions and in proposing an "evolutionary" religion to replace them, is of one piece with the very dogmatism and arrogance he claims to find in the religions he attacks. Instead of Huxley's pat answers and uncomplicated certainty as to the findings of science, I prefer and commend to my congregation's attention the words of other scientists of first rank. I am impressed by what Prof. P. W. Bridgman has to say: "We are now approaching a bound beyond which we are forever stopped from pushing our inquiries, not by the construction of the world but by the construction of ourselves. The world fades out and eludes us because it becomes meaningless... We have reached the limit of vision of the great pioneers of science, the vision namely that we live in a sympathetic world, in that it is comprehensible by our minds." Or the words of Prof. Robert Oppenheimer: "We know that we are ignorant; we are well taught it, and the more surely and deeply we know our job the better are we able to appreciate the full measure of our pervasive ignorance." Or, finally, another voice in the chorus of distinguished men of science who do not share Huxley's certainty that science has abolished the belief in G-d, that of Sir Edmund Whittaker: "The deeper understanding of the nature of the material universe... has opened up new prospects and possibilities to the advocate of belief in G-d."

X

Allow me to conclude with a Jewish vision of evolution that preceded Darwin, the prophet of Huxley's new religion, by several thousand years. It was our Father Jacob who had an immortal vision of "a ladder set up on the earth and the top of it reached to heaven, and behold the angels of G-d ascending and descending on it." (Gen. 28:12, 13).

The spiritual life of man is such a ladder. Man begins his pilgrimage through the world as an earth-bound creature, aware only of his own wants, desires, and needs. But step by step, rung by rung, from early childhood through old age, his prophetic will and spiritual restlessness urge him to climb higher and higher, evolving gradually towards a new and sublime and transcendent vision. Man does not achieve spiritual greatness in one day. The ascent to heaven is a slow, painful, tortuous climb on the ladder of the soul. Sometimes he may slip downwards on that ladder, even as did the angels in Jacob's dream, and he must start all over again. But when he finally reaches the top, the climax of his evolutionary ascent, what does he find? - "and behold, the Lord was on it!" The apex of man's spiritual evolution is not the discovery of a meaningless mechanistic world in which all that remains to be worshipped is his own "higher nature." It is a vision of G-d in all His glory. And the G-d he finds there is not merely an Idea or a Principle, a "Sufficient Cause" or a Master Mathematician. Instead he is the One Who proclaims to Jacob "I am the Lord, the G-d of Abraham thy father, and the G-d of Isaac." When we have reached the pinnacle of our spiritual ladder we discover -- better, rediscover -- the G-d of our fathers: the G-d of Creation, the Lord of Sinai, the Shield of Abraham. The ladder of spiritual evolution leads us back to the G-d many of us had abandoned a long time ago.

XI

We who are committed to the sacred Jewish Tradition will not be shaken by every shift in the wind of doctrine. "Science" is not a label which automatically guarantees the intellectual "kashrut" of an idea. We must at all times be willing to listen and to learn, but strength of faith and courage of conviction are old Jewish traits which we cannot and must not abandon. Our Torah is such a ladder keeping us on the ground of fact, implanted in the world of reality and science. But it leads, slowly and gradually, to the loftiest heights and most sublime vision possible for mortal man: "and behold the Lord was upon it."