

PROGRESS & RELIGION

BY THE SAME AUTHOR:
THE AGE OF THE GODS

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PROGRESS
AND
RELIGION

AN HISTORICAL ENQUIRY

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To
MY PARENTS

PREFACE

THE doctrine of Progress was first clearly formulated by the Abbé de St. Pierre after the close of the War of the Spanish Succession, at a time when he was conducting his propaganda for the formation of a kind of League of Nations which should ensure perpetual peace in Europe. For two centuries it has dominated the European mind to such an extent that any attempt to question it was regarded as a paradox or a heresy, and it is only during the last twenty years that its supremacy has begun to be seriously challenged. By a curious irony of circumstance, the years which have seen the partial fulfilment of the Abbé's hopes have also witnessed the disappearance of that unquestioning faith in social progress of which he was the protagonist.

It is easy to understand the immediate causes of this change. The accumulated strain and suffering of four years of war ended either in defeat and revolution, or in victory and disillusion, and it was natural enough that, in such circumstances, there should be a tendency to despair of the future of Europe, and to take refuge in fatalistic theories of the inevitability of cultural decline.

But behind this temporary movement of discouragement and disillusion there are signs of a deeper change, which marks the passing, not merely of an age or a social order, but of an intellectual tradition. We are accustomed to speak of this change as a reaction from Victorian ideas, but something much more fundamental is at stake, for Victorian ideas were

P R E F A C E

but the English middle-class version of the optimistic Liberal creed, which had set out to re-fashion the world in the preceding century.

This creed has played somewhat the same part in our civilization as that taken by religion at other periods of history. Every living culture must possess some spiritual dynamic, which provides the energy necessary for that sustained social effort which is civilization. Normally this dynamic is supplied by a religion, but in exceptional circumstances the religious impulse may disguise itself under philosophical or political forms.

It is this vital relation between religion and culture which I have attempted to study in the present book. Sociologists in the past have tended to disregard or minimize the social functions of religion, while students of religion have concentrated their attention on the psychological or ethical aspects of their subject. If it is true, as I believe, that every culturally vital society must possess a religion, whether explicit or disguised, and that the religion of a society determines to a great extent its cultural form, it is obvious that the whole problem of social development and change must be studied anew in relation to the religious factor. I cannot hope to have succeeded in doing this in the limits of the present essay, but it is enough if I have at least suggested the possibilities of a new way of approach.

I must express my thanks to the editors and publishers of the *Sociological*, the *Quarterly*, and the *Dublin Reviews*, for allowing me to make use of some passages from articles which have appeared in these reviews at various times during the last ten years. I must also gratefully acknowledge the help of my friend, Mr. E. I. Watkin, who has been kind enough to read the proofs and to prepare the list of contents.

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