

THE DISINTEGRATION OF SOCIETY IN CHRISTIAN COUNTRIES

by Paul Tillich

AN integrated state of society is one in which creative forces are held in balance by the power of an embracing and determining principle. When this principle is lost, balance is destroyed, and the society disintegrates. Disturbances of social equilibrium are, of course, unavoidable, because the dynamics of every life process involve tension between elements which are static and others which drive ahead. Such tension includes the risk of conflicts, defeats and partial destruction. It is a sign of power and strength when a life-process can stand many deep tensions without disintegration. But there is a limit which cannot be exceeded, and this limit is the preservation of a uniting and balancing principle.

In most Christian countries contemporary society has lost such a principle; it has either fallen into a spiritual vacuum or it has accepted principles which are disrupting instead of uniting. This is the general predicament of our period and the causes of its predominantly self-destructive traits. And the same development which has deprived our society of an embracing and determining centre has to a large extent made it inaccessible to the Christian message. In the past Christianity has furnished the uniting principle; but it has been so infected by the general contemporary disintegration that many now regard it as incapable of reintegrating secular society within Christian countries. Therefore when evangelism undertakes to conquer secularism within Christendom it faces an ambiguous situation. On the one hand, the secular mind is deeply moved by the conscious or unconscious quest for a new spiritual centre. On the other hand, it does not look to the Christian message as the answer to its quest; it regards Christianity as a well-known and well-refuted part of disrupted Western culture. Consequently the evangelist must ask two main questions: First, through what development has Christianity lost its power to be the uniting centre in the life of Christian countries? Second,

how can it become again, in the present situation, the spiritual centre of Western civilization? The following analysis is concerned with these two questions.

I DETERMINED AND AUTOMATIC BALANCE

It is obvious that every society represents a "balance of power"—political, social, intellectual, spiritual. Even the most conformist society, primitive as well as developed, involves actual and potential diversities which call for continual integration into the whole of the life-process. The question immediately arises as to what furnishes the balance; and two fundamentally different answers can be given.

In the first case equilibrium is attributed to a determining centre. This "centre" holds together political, cultural and spiritual elements in strict interdependence, and it constitutes an over-arching, all-supporting authority which is acknowledged spontaneously by the "common sense" of the society it unifies.

In the second case equilibrium is attributed to a self-regulating process. Here there is no visible, centralizing authority. Political, cultural and spiritual differences of a fundamental kind can even be accentuated without being looked upon as disruptive, because of faith in an uncentred automatic harmony.

Modern society has made a slow but irresistible transition from the first to the second type of structure. Loss of the determining principles of the European past and maximal acceptance of automatic adjustment of social processes has been the great theme of the recent centuries of Occidental history. The process has been slow, and it has never completely reached its goal; conversely, the centrally determined society of the past was never entirely lacking in divergent elements. But in history the predominant trend is decisive.

The state of contemporary Western society (and, through world-wide repercussions, of Eastern society in some measure) shows that belief in automatic balance is justified only so long as remnants of the first type of structure are consciously or unconsciously co-determinative. When the latter disappear entirely and automatic adjustment is the only means of regulating divergent political, cultural and spiritual tendencies, a process of rapid disintegration sets in, and the need for a new centre

is passionately felt. The success of all so-called totalitarian attempts is due to the fact that they seem to fulfil this need. These attempts are dangerous—and ultimately weak—because the centre they furnish is so biased that it must be imposed on dissenting groups through terror. Thus the reaction against uncentred automatic balance has led to the complete destruction of balance and to profound disruption in every sphere of human existence. But this reaction must not be evaluated in purely negative terms. Like ancient tragedy, it has a revealing character; it reveals the human situation in the light of the eternal, and it can give to present-day Christian evangelism a point of contact which has been lost sight of for centuries.

II THE PRINCIPLE OF IMMANENCE AND ITS DILEMMA

“The principle of immanence” is employed as a technical phrase in this article. It is intended to refer to view (*a*) which finds meaning, value and reality exclusively within natural and human processes, and (*b*) which therefore rejects the belief that these processes (and their meaning and value) depend upon a transcendent ground. As such, the phrase covers pantheistic views like Bruno’s and Spinoza’s; but it also includes modern naturalism. Criticisms of “the principle of immanence” offered in the following pages should not be misunderstood, as directed against belief in the immanence of (the transcendent-immanent) God.

Furthermore, in this article, the phrase “spiritual centre” is used to stand for the determining centre of society as a whole. Such terminology is justifiable because a centre cannot be established in either the cultural or the political realm without a spiritual foundation from which it derives (spontaneously acknowledged) authority. Even the totalitarian systems have recognized this, despite the fact that they have been anti-spiritual and one-sidedly political in character. They have identified their political organization with the ultimate meaning of life, and they have used quasi-religious symbols in thought and action for the establishment and maintenance of their authority. Thus they have become rivals of those groups, especially the churches, which have preserved a spiritual centre from the past.

Unless a “centre” is basically spiritual, it cannot unify society.

On the other hand, a spiritual centre is not real and has no power to furnish balance unless it is embodied in a political group and expressed in cultural forms. Even the most anti-political and anti-cultural religious ideas cannot escape the latter fact. "Spirit" is the meaning *and* power of communal and personal life, not their meaning alone.

The loss of a spiritual centre in modern society coincides with the rise of the principle of immanence. The causes of this rise are "material" as well as "ideal", and the effects are political and cultural as well as religious. But whenever the principle has gained ascendancy, it has destroyed the spiritual centre of personal and communal life.

The principle of immanence reduces existence to a sum of finite life-centres and their inter-relationships. Each finite centre of being, value, meaning and purpose is conditioned by others; all are transitory and ambiguous in their significance. None is suited to represent an ultimate concern, to evoke an unconditional devotion, to become a spiritual centre determining and balancing all the others. There is no balancing principle in the totality of the finite; there is no power of ultimate integration in the "world".

Thus modern society has been driven into an insoluble dilemma. Either it must rely on the supposedly automatic balance of the finite centres, or it must establish one of them as the all-embracing and supreme power which controls all the others. If it follows the former alternative—ostensibly in the interests of freedom—it is driven into patterns where human values are subjugated to impersonal "laws" of economics and politics. If it follows the latter alternative, it arbitrarily regiments all other finite interests by investing one particular centre (or centres) with absolute power; and when the source of order thus becomes tyrannical, human life is disrupted through either revolt or enslavement.

In our period the second alternative has followed the first, revealing the real depths of the disintegration which attends belief in the principle of immanence and the consequent loss of a spiritual centre. An outstanding contemporary example of the dilemma is seen in the split between American and Russian centres of world power. Everyone recommends a balance between them, but since a spiritual centre which transcends both is lacking, each takes one step after another in the direction of

a "monolithic" structure of world-organization. Confidence in an automatic harmony between finite centres breaks down as soon as any important decision has to be made.

A less spectacular but perhaps even more significant example of the lack of a spiritual centre is to be found in the family. The function of the modern family has become almost entirely utilitarian. It makes provision for sexual relations; it constitutes the smallest economic unit; it guarantees the introduction of the younger generation to some traditional patterns of life; it creates a protective community of comradeship, friendship and love. In all these respects the family still makes an effective contribution towards preserving present-day society. But it has to struggle against great odds. And where there is no uniting principle which transcends utilitarian considerations, the life of the family is at the mercy of the strength or weakness of the factors just mentioned; sexual satisfaction, economic success, mutual sympathy, social protection and adjustment. Since these factors are subject to the tremendous oscillations and insecurities of a competitive society, the cohesion of the family becomes weaker every day. No "enlightened self-interest" on the part of its members is strong enough to resolve automatically the conflicts that arise—especially those which originate in the unconscious.

This leads to a third example: the disintegrating effects of the principle of immanence upon the individual personality. Here the conflict between various unconscious strivings, each of which tries to conquer the centre of consciousness, presents the basic problem of integration. An influential school of modern psychological thought believes that personal integration is possible by an automatic balance of the various personal trends; it assumes something like a pre-established harmony between them. Psychologists recognize that this harmony has been disturbed by external influences, especially in early childhood. But they believe that if the structural effects of these early disturbances are therapeutically removed and the personality is "set free", an automatic process of balancing will begin and the conscious centre will be able to make free decisions unaffected by the compulsive power of morbid strains. From this point of view, a determining spiritual centre is not only superfluous, but even dangerous. It is claimed that the "spiritual centre" in innumerable cases has been a means of internal

oppression and a source of compulsions. That certain theological ideas have been and still are employed repressively is an undeniable fact; *vide* hopeless feelings of guilt before the wrath of an arbitrary Deity, fear of Hell, belief in double predestination, etc. Moreover, the authoritarian, oppressive character of earlier transcendent principles is partly responsible for the movements in modern history which have replaced a spiritual centre by an automatic process. It was the domination of the centralized late-medieval Church which brought about the reaction of the nation-state with its stress upon absolute political sovereignty and reliance on the balance of power. It was the abuse of paternal authority and its ritual consecration by the churches which brought about the reaction, first of the wife and then of the children, against domestic tyranny. An inflexible and unimaginative attitude towards sacred marital laws and the social conventions they safeguard has played a part in fomenting rebellion against monogamy. Finally, the false identification of religion with legalistic demands has contributed to an explosive reaction against repression, and to reliance upon automatic psychological balance, for the liberation (autonomy) of personality. In view of these developments, one can understand why much modern psychotherapy is very suspicious of attempts to re-establish a spiritual centre for personal life. Knowledge of the devastating consequences of religious authority in the past leads to the assumption that such authority will always be arbitrary and repressive. What contemporary psycho-analytic theory largely overlooks, however, is the fact that even the "liberated" personality, like every other, needs a directing and supporting centre. Even when oppressive patterns have been overcome, new forms of servitude—anarchic and eccentric, perhaps, instead of compulsive and conformist—are likely to replace those which have been eradicated. Everything depends upon whether the new centre is partial, and consequently destructive, or whether it is universal, and consequently creative. Only an "ultimate" concern can balance the various conditioned concerns of our personal life. Psychotherapy can help men to reduce internal conflicts, anxiety and hostility; but by itself it cannot furnish goals and values that are free from the distortions of purely personal or cultural pressures. To-day mental disease is most widespread in lands where a strong repressive tradition has been followed by an *uncentred*

secular culture. Psychotherapy has contributed to the removal of repressions, but it cannot remedy, and in some respects it even aggravates, the lack of a spiritual centre.

All these developments are supported by changes in the relationship between man and the realm of "things". This relation constitutes the fourth example of the loss of a spiritual centre under the principle of immanence. It is so obvious, that it has received a major share of attention from interpreters of our time. It can be described as the perversion of means into ends because of the disappearance of an ultimate end. An ultimate end necessarily transcends all preliminary ends; it makes the latter means for something beyond themselves. Thus it is a spiritual centre towards which all dealings with "things" can be orientated. When religion, by presenting an ultimate end in an "other-worldly" way, deprives preliminary ends of their significance, it leaves unused the infinite and almost miraculous means given in the structure of nature and in man's power to understand and control nature. For thousands of years, including centuries of Christian history, the transcendent end prevented the free development of immanent ends and the infinite means for their fulfilment. The victory of the principle of immanence, however, has changed the situation radically. It has liberated man from an animal-like slavery to nature. The discovery of new means has created new ends in turn; and there is no discernible limit to this discovery of new terrestrial "goods" through science. At the same time, however, the criterion of the value of an end has been lost. Man is engulfed in a continuous stream of ends which become means and means which become ends; the waves of this stream come and go without expressing anything unconditional, and without being related to a transcendent criterion. One of the most expressive symbols of this situation is the way in which money can transform itself from a means into an end—the all-pervading end for innumerable people. Man himself becomes a means in the service of "things", and he becomes empty in the process of pursuing one provisional end after another without any ultimate end. Therefore he is ready to accept any ostensibly ultimate goal which is presented with passion and convincing power. But under the principle of immanence no end can really be transcendent and unconditional, though it may appear to be so. And in the struggle to enforce the acceptance of some finite end as

absolute, the immensities of the technological means discovered by science are used for an immensity of destruction. The belief that expansion of scientific control over nature is accomplished by an automatic balance of finite ends breaks down, just as the theory of automatic balance has broken down in politics and economics, in family and community life, and in the psychology of personality.

Out of the break-down emerges the quest for a new spiritual centre which is truly transcendent, unconditional and universal. Evangelism should show the way to an answer.

III IMMANENCE AND INDIVIDUALITY

The principle of immanence has an implication which deserves special discussion, namely, the "unordered" rise of the individual as individual. Individualization has an ambiguous character. It intensifies, but it also separates. At the human level, the individual possesses freedom and capacity for self-transcendence; thereby man stands at the top of the scale of being. At the same time, human individuality is completely self-related, isolated and lonely. (Self-relatedness is a structural, not a moral-or-immoral, characteristic of man.) To be sure, man as an individual self has a capacity for reunion, love or communion, which is lacking in every sub-human being. This power of reunion, however, is dependent on a reality which transcends the individual self without dissolving the structure of self-relatedness. This reality has been called "Grace" or "Love" (*Agape*) or "the New Creature". It has been the main content of Christian preaching, and it is supposed to overcome the ambiguity of individual selfhood.

Christianity has always acknowledged that the individual self is the bearer of the divine image; but it has not always understood the significance of the individual as a unique mirror of the divine life and as the realization of a unique eternal destiny. Christianity has used its reunifying power for the rejection of the claims of the individual self, and thus it has unintentionally produced the individualistic reaction which characterizes secularism. Secularism, in turn, has lost the spiritual centre in which the individual is liberated from isolation and loneliness. Estrangement of individual from individual characterizes life within the Christian nations. The word "individualism" is not

only outworn, it fails to touch the real point, namely, the tragic isolation of the individual because of the loss of a trans-individual uniting centre.

The individual is strong as long as he lives from a communal spiritual substance, of which he is a unique expression. He loses his power in so far as the spiritual substance is wasted or lacking. Then the following process starts: The individual falls prey to the mass; he becomes an atom within a mass, normalized, standardized, driven by the forces of mass-psychology. The lonely individual hides himself under the pattern of his group. He has no power to resist it. He has no spiritual standard by means of which he can judge the group (and himself). When this happens the situation is ripe for the rise of a few powerful individuals who determine the pattern of the life of every individual in the group of which they have become leaders or dictators. The standardized individuals subject themselves to those who represent their standardized, often unconscious, ideals. Then a collective situation can be created in which the individual loses his temporal as well as his eternal significance. He is not lonely any more, because he has surrendered his individual self and because there is no life-content left in him by means of which he could separate himself from the collective. The anxiety of isolation and loneliness is overcome, but the price paid is sacrifice of individual personality. The rush towards standardization and collectivization within modern society is an indirect quest for a spiritual centre. But the path which is being followed leads to an extinction of the individual as individual, and therefore to a demonic, sub-personal structure of life. This is a tragic consequence of the loss of Christianity as the spiritual centre of the "Christian" nations. The reaction against an empty individualism leads to a demonic collectivism.

IV POINTS OF CONTACT FOR EVANGELIZATION IN THE LIFE OF WESTERN SOCIETY

The general point of contact for evangelical apologetics is the (conscious and unconscious) quest for a new spiritual centre on the part of Western society. Christian evangelism in its application to the needs of man in our disintegrated Western world must show that Christianity is able to furnish a transcendent and unconditional centre, and at the same time to balance the

concrete, divergent elements which enter into our present social, political and spiritual existence. The Christian churches can seek to demonstrate these things, first, by their very existence, second, by their evangelistic witness, and third, by their apologetic power. In order to succeed, Christian faith must liberate itself from those distortions which have made it participate in the disintegration of the Christian nations. This in turn involves two things. First, Christian faith must conquer in itself the principles of immanence and of empty individualism. Second, Christian faith must not again become authoritarian (heteronomous) in an oppressive and arbitrary way.

The disintegration of society within the Christian nations closes one way and opens another for Christianity. It closes the traditional way of the Christian churches and it opens a new way which is not yet fully visible but whose direction can already be discerned.

The first requisite action is one of dissociating the Christian order from disintegrated Western society. No "religion" that is merely part of the process of disintegration can become a healing power; only something which transcends the process can give it a new spiritual centre. The Christian order can dissociate itself only through the power of that Foundation which is at the same time its Judge: The New Being, manifest in Jesus as the Christ. The prophetic note (not the theological system) offered by Barth and his friends must be understood in terms of a movement to dissociate the Christian order from the Christian nations and their disintegrating culture. Barth points to the absolute transcendence of the absolute, the unconditional character of the unconditioned, the divinity of the divine. These seeming tautologies are the theme of every prophetic message, of every dissociation of the healing power from what it is supposed to heal.

If this dissociation is carried through, the possibility of a new spiritual centre appears; the principle of immanence is broken, and with it the vicious dilemma between an automatic and a tyrannical organization of social life. The transcendence of the spiritual principle guarantees that it is not identical with any conditioned, finite centre. On the other hand, however, it does not simply abandon human life to its automatic, compulsive and self-destructive patterns. The voice calling for dissociation—in Jewish prophetism, in the New Testament, in the Reforma-

tion, in Neo-orthodoxy—never sanctions the establishment of a new idolatry; but men, of course, quickly misunderstand it and identify the new spiritual centre with an absolute nation, an absolute Church, an absolute creed or an absolute theology. Whenever this misunderstanding occurs, the dissociation merely leads to another, often a more tyrannical, attempt to claim that some conditional form of life is unconditional.

Dissociation of the Christian message from disintegrating Western society requires a true conception of the relationship between transcendence and immanence. The orthodox supernaturalistic version of this relationship is disastrous; it regards the transcendent as a second objective "realm" of miraculous events, and heavenly individuals (including God) beyond the natural, historical world. So long as the issue is conceived in such a manner, naturalism is always right in refusing to acknowledge this transcendent realm. The creative ground, the judging power and the fulfilling meaning of all finite centres and events is not a second "realm" of reality; it is the source, structure and ultimate meaning of the *one* world in which finite centres and events are found. It has been and always should be the intention of the Christian Church to point to this ultimate ground of life and experience, and thus to lead every generation to *the* spiritual centre of its own existence. The Christian Church should perform this task for "the Christian nations" of the present age.

Hence the true dissociation of the Christian order from the disintegrating Western world includes a true association with Western culture and with every other part of our world. Supernaturalism, because it is incapable of a true dissociation of the unconditional from the conditional, is also incapable of a true association of them. It seeks to control and suppress from outside the finite centres of meaning and being, instead of permeating and affirming from within. Yet association and dissociation are interdependent in a precise way, and each must be complete. It was the glory of the Jewish prophets that they reached completeness in both respects; by distinguishing the righteousness of God from all finite human aims, they pointed to the restoration of a right relationship between the two. Similarly to-day the Church, by differentiating its message from the shattered assumptions and illusions of Western culture, must *be* the spiritual centre for a re-integration of human life. It

must become a spiritual centre for healing the neurotic mind of the individual and the split consciousness of the masses. It must become a spiritual centre for children in relation to their parents, and for parents in relation to each other and to their children. It must become a spiritual centre for the relation of man to nature and to the machine, to money and to the competitor. It must become a spiritual centre for the self-accusing scientist, and for the educator whose task has become empty because he (and his culture) has no stable scale of values to offer a younger generation. If the Christian faith, through the Church, is unable to furnish a new, all-embracing, non-tyrannical spiritual centre, then it has nothing serious to say to our time; and it will perish in the West as one finite centre of life and meaning in the vast disintegration of the Western world. Christianity is either healing power from the ground of human existence, or it is one contributing factor, among others, to the personal and social sickness of our period, and will perish with it.

The problem discussed in this article thus leads inevitably to the fundamental question about Christianity's healing power. In so far as Christianity is merely one cultural phenomenon among others, it is enmeshed in the forces that are destroying Western society. It can resist disintegration only by furnishing a spiritual centre which transcends the patterns of Western culture; and it can furnish the basis for a new integration of life only by replacing the principles of immanence with a principle which reunites all finite concerns—political, communal and personal—with their ultimate ground. Of course, it is not possible to assert that Western society can be saved. Still less is it possible to assert that God's plan for the world depends upon its salvation and that of the Western churches which have been associated with it. This paper is written from the conviction that Western civilization has in the past incorporated great spiritual values, that it is worth saving if it can be saved, and that the only means by which it can be saved is the recovery of the Gospel of Christ as the power which can heal the sickness of society from within, from the ground of its own being. Even if all this were destroyed, the Gospel would still be the Gospel, and God's purpose would go forward through other men and in other ways.