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902ND ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING

HELD IN THE LECTURE HALL OF THE NATIONAL SOCIETY FOR
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, 69, GREAT PETER STREET, WESTMINSTER,
S.W.1, ON MONDAY, 21ST MAY, 1951.

ERNEST WHITE, ESQ., M.B., B.S., IN THE CHAIR

The Minutes of the previous Meeting were read, confirmed and signed.
The CHAIRMAN then delivered the Annual Address on "The New Materialism."

ANNUAL ADDRESS

*Delivered before the Fellows, Members and Associates of the Victoria
Institute on Monday, May 21st, 1951.*

THE NEW MATERIALISM.

BY ERNEST WHITE, ESQ., M.B., B.S.

IT must be difficult, or even impossible, for the younger members of the present generation to realise the amazing revolution in ways of life, and the profound changes in basic conceptions of the universe around us, which have come about since the dawn of the present century. As those of us who are getting on in years look back on the world as it was in our childhood, and compare it with the world of to-day, we realise the amazing transformation which has come about.

We remember the security and peace of the late Victorian and early Edwardian era, the days when motor cars were almost unknown, radio was unheard of, and aeroplanes were dreams of the future; days when men envisaged the coming of the millennium by the peaceful evolution of civilization. The discoveries of the great scientific giants of the nineteenth century, the all-inclusive materialistic philosophy of men like Herbert Spencer and Haeckel, overwhelmed men's minds with the immense conception of the universal reign of Natural Law. The doctrine of Evolution was widely accepted, and it seemed as though men had reached the topmost pinnacle of intellectual achievement. The Universe was pictured as an immense and somewhat complicated machine, consisting of a very definite and solid basis called Matter, and another very definite, but immaterial factor called Force, or Energy. Apart from Matter and Energy we had another phenomenon called Life, which could be explained by chemical and physical processes. The Darwinian theory accounted for the development of life upward from the primitive cell right through all its manifestations until it reached its highest expression in man. Man in his turn would develop still further along evolutionary lines, until the super-man appeared. It

seemed almost possible that super-man was already on the way. Had not man formulated a completely satisfactory explanation of the Universe, and had he not so skilfully directed his own affairs, that wars had given place to arbitration? Democracy was triumphant, and men waited with confident expectation the full daylight and splendour of the New Age now dawning. The Christian conception of God was scarcely necessary. It might be necessary to postulate a First Cause, but once the Universe had been started upon its vast evolutionary career, everything took place according to eternal, immutable and universal Natural Laws. If God existed, He had no part in the Universe which He had created. Deprived of all personality and of all attributes except that of a problematical First Cause, He became an almost mythical abstraction, and could be left out of account in the thoughts and affairs of mankind.

Even Christian thought was rocked to its foundations, not only by the attack of revolutionary scientific hypotheses from without, but in addition by serious undermining and disruptive processes from within.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, destructive Biblical criticism, with its alleged assured results of scholarship, led men to lose faith in the Bible. Throughout the centuries of the Christian era the Bible had been regarded as the authoritative revelation and Word of God. Now men began to take a different view. It seemed that the Bible was no longer to be regarded as the revelation of God to men, but rather to be considered as a collection of human documents, in which might be discerned the quest of man for God. The history of the Old Testament was torn to shreds, and scarcely a single book of the New Testament was allowed to have been written by its traditional author. Extreme higher critical views found their way into our theological colleges, and from thence to the pulpits of every branch of the Christian Church.

Amid the flood of materialism and scepticism there were those who stood fast, and upheld the Christian faith, planting their feet firmly on the impregnable rock of Holy Scripture. Amongst those who remained faithful to the Christian tradition were the members of the Victoria Institute, and to-day, eighty-three years after the founding of the Institute, we may look back with satisfaction, and with thankfulness to an unbroken witness to the truth of the Bible as God's revelation to man. It is not that this Institute has closed its mind or shut its eyes to the rapid advance

of knowledge. We may reasonably claim, as we survey the contributions of the last few years, that the Victoria Institute has kept up to date. It has kept pace with modern advances in the various branches of science, seeking to examine them carefully in the light of the truths revealed in the Bible.

The materialistic theories of the late nineteenth century suffered rude shocks with the dawn of the present century. The complacency of the late Victorian era, and the external appearances of security and peace, were shaken and overturned.

The huge convulsions of the two World Wars of 1914 and 1939 destroyed the high hopes founded on a belief in the peaceful evolution of human society. Civilization, so painfully built up through the years, was revealed as a thin veneer covering savage and destructive forces which, in their eruption, threatened completely to overwhelm and submerge the fair hopes and prospects indulged in by previous generations. Nor is the threat removed to-day. Civilization, not yet entirely destroyed, stands trembling on the edge of an abyss of destruction, men's hearts are failing them for fear of the catastrophe which might be precipitated at any moment.

In quite other and different ways the ideas of thinking men have undergone a profound change in the last fifty years. In two main directions revolutionary discoveries have led to entirely new conceptions of the material universe, and have brought about a fresh assessment of human personality. These new ideas may be traced back to two lines of research, both set in motion by workers in the respective fields of physics and psychology. Many names might be mentioned, but perhaps Madame Curie in Paris, and Freud in Vienna, may be taken as outstanding figures in the vanguard of the multitude of scientific workers who have changed the whole outlook of the scientific world.

Madame Curie's researches with radium and radio-activity opened the road to a series of new discoveries concerning the structure of the atom, and the nature of matter. From the time of Leucippus and Democritus, Greek philosophers of the fifth century before Christ, and the first known originators of the atomic theory, down to the time of the atomic theories of the nineteenth century of the Christian era, atoms were considered to be minute solid particles, indivisible and indestructible. Recent discoveries have completely superseded this theory, and the atom has been demonstrated to be a complicated structure of protons, electrons, and neutrons. Without dipping further into

the fascinating world thus opened up, it will suffice to observe that the modern hypotheses of the nature of matter and of energy have assumed cosmological importance. The new discoveries in physics, combined with the researches of astronomers and mathematicians, have presented us with fresh conceptions of the structure of the Universe, and of the nature of space and time, very different from the scientific ideas held by men of science fifty years ago. In reading accounts of the new hypotheses it seems sometimes as though matter, which had hitherto appeared so solid, dissolves beneath our astonished gaze into intangible electrical charges, or into mathematical formulae. In turn, the Author of the Universe, if acknowledged at all, has become a Super-Mathematician instead of a Super-Architect or Mechanician.

The latest hypothesis of the Universe does away altogether with the idea of an original creation. We are now presented with a theory of continuous creation, a creation without a Creator. Incidentally it may be noted that Hoyle, the popular exponent of the continuous creation theory, goes out of his way to pour scorn upon the Christian belief in immortality.

If we turn to the realm of psychology, which deals with the nature of man, the researches of Freud and his followers tend to dethrone the intellect of man, and to trace the sources of human conduct to deeper and more primitive elements hidden in the depths of the unconscious Id, and emerging in instinctive and emotional forces activating human behaviour.

Certain psychologists have recently taken a more sinister and materialistic direction. Following on the work of Pavlov on conditional reflexes, the behaviourist school arose in the United States, Watson being its pioneer and earliest exponent. This school by-passes consciousness, and ignores mind, and seeks to explain the whole of human behaviour in terms of reflexes based on the structure of the central nervous system. In 1949 Ryle of Oxford produced a book entitled *The Concept of Mind*, which might well be regarded as an attempt at a philosophical description of human conduct along behaviourist lines. He too denies the necessity of any conception of mind or spirit apart from the material body. He professes to lay the ghost unnecessarily introduced into the centre of human personality. Man is a material being and nothing more.

The materialist conception of psychology is influencing more and more, and to an alarming extent, the treatment of sufferers from nervous and mental disorders. Instead of attempting to

discover the causes of conflict within the mind, and trying to help the patient to solve them, the tendency is to resort more and more to physical treatment. With some psychiatrists Electrical Convulsive Therapy is becoming increasingly the treatment of choice. If this treatment fails to achieve its purpose, the patient is liable to be subjected to the mutilating operation of Leucotomy, an operation which permanently alters the personality, and whose effects are irreversible. No doubt these, and other physical methods of treatment, have their legitimate application in certain carefully selected cases, but they are being employed almost indiscriminately for large numbers of people with all types of neurotic or psychotic symptoms.

Other psychologists, including Leuba, Freud, Cattell and Flügel, have regarded God and immortality as illusions. Some writers, realising the necessity of some sort of religion, have proposed a religion of humanity. A vague conception, the Spirit of Humanity, somewhat akin to Emerson's Oversoul, is to be the object of devotion and veneration. When psychologists depart from their proper sphere, and express opinions about philosophy and religion, they betray the same divergencies of belief or unbelief as might be found in any cross-section of educated and intelligent people. One finds in the literature many shades of opinion. At one end of the scale are those who hold a purely materialistic conception, and at the other end a few, less in number than some of us would wish, who accept the Christian view. In between these extremes we find many who accept a spiritual interpretation of a kind, but reject the Christian doctrine.

If we turn for a moment from science to political philosophy, we are faced with the world-wide expansion of Communism.

This movement appears to infuse its disciples with all the zeal and fanaticism hitherto associated with religious movements, in spite of the fact that it is essentially materialistic and atheistic in character.

It leaves the spiritual and psychological forces lying behind the history of mankind entirely out of account, and substitutes for them a blind, deterministic theory of economic and class causes behind historic events. Individual liberties and rights are completely ignored, and a soulless society is conceived, rolling on like a great juggernaut, destroying all who dare to oppose its onward march. In such a society God and religion

have no place, and the human liberties for which men have fought and suffered, and even died, are ruthlessly crushed under foot.

Since the days of the infant church, when it was threatened by the overwhelming might of the pagan Roman Empire, there has been no greater threat to the Christian ideal than that of the spread of Communism in the world to-day.

The materialism of the nineteenth century formed a fairly consistent body of doctrine, with clear cut theories, and definite dogmas. It was founded upon the Reign of Law, the doctrine of evolution, and a mechanical view of the Universe. As we have seen, many of the hypotheses upon which materialism rested have been torn to shreds by the revolutionary discoveries of the last fifty years, and the ground upon which the materialist stood has been blown sky high. This does not mean, however, that materialism does not exist any longer, or that there has been any large movement of thought in the direction of the truths of Christianity. Unfortunately the present situation in England and in other civilized countries is far otherwise. The difficulty, as it now exists, is that materialism, no longer presenting a consistent and homogeneous body of doctrine, has assumed multiple and confused forms. It becomes increasingly difficult to discover any particular school of thought which one could label as materialism. The new materialism is like a poison infecting the springs of many streams of modern thought. Before examining some of the particular channels followed by the water from these poisoned springs, let us consider briefly one feature apparent in modern thought and frequently remarked upon by more than one author and speaker. I refer to the confusion of ideas seen on every hand. The vast flow of new ideas, the catastrophic changes in the world since 1914, the apprehensions bred in men's minds by the destructive uses to which modern scientific discoveries may be put at any moment in the near future, have combined to produce fear and confusion on every hand. To this fear and confusion has been added a deep pessimistic note. Men tremble for the future of civilization. A horrid nightmare of man bringing about his own destruction, and of the reduction of the civilized world to dust and ashes, haunts men's waking thoughts.

If we look away for a moment from the specialized sphere of the scientist to the educated or semi-educated man in the street, we find often enough a kind of bewilderment and uncertainty. It can hardly be called a positive materialism, but it is closely allied

to materialism in so far as God is left out of account. Seven out of ten of our population enter no place of worship. Too often the homes of the people are Godless, and in them the Bible is a closed book. On every hand we hear of the amazing ignorance of the Bible shown by the youth of this generation. Earlier generations who attended Sunday School and Church, and had some sort of Bible instruction in the day schools, obtained at least a superficial knowledge of Bible stories and of Christian teaching. In the last few years all this has been changed. We have growing up in this England of ours a semi-pagan population, devoid of all religious faith.

It has been truly said that man is essentially religious. He needs religion, he needs God. Much of the restlessness and uncertainty of to-day may be attributed to this shedding of the old beliefs. Men drift upon a sea of doubt and fear, rudderless, anchorless, and with no chart to give them their position, to indicate the direction of their drift, or to direct them to any approach to a safe haven. "Without hope and without God in the world" is an apt description of tens of thousands of our fellow-countrymen to-day.

Looked at from another point of view, the minds of men of this generation are full of a great question mark. Has life any meaning and, if so, what is it? Whither are we going, and what is the significance of the vast Universe in which we find ourselves? These are questions being asked, and too often finding no answer—old questions in a new setting.

In his introduction to *Portrait of Socrates* Sir R. W. Livingstone well sums up the unrest of the present generation. He compares the intellectual unrest of fifth-century Athens with the unrest of to-day, and then continues :

"The settled orthodoxy of the early Victorians, in religion, politics, morals, is no more. They received their opinions from their parents, as if they were inalienable heirlooms. To-day the entail is broken and the heirlooms gone, and in their place is apt to accumulate a strange medley of miscellaneous beliefs—something heard in a play or read in a novel or in the review of a book, the opinions of a novelist on Immortality or of the *Daily Express* on Free love—till the mind is like a dusty bandbox, full of stray ideas, and when you open it, it is a mere accident what happens to be on top.

How salutary if these opinions were submitted to the cold searching analysis of the Socratic technique.

But he [Socrates] has not been reincarnated in our generation, and one of its tragedies is that when it needed a Socrates it got a Shaw."

While fully agreeing with Livingstone about the need for clarification of thought, many of us believe this generation needs also to turn to a greater than Socrates, to One Who claimed that He was the Truth.

Turning from the man in the street to the scientific world we find the same confusion and uncertainty. The scientist of to-day is not so dogmatic as his predecessors of the nineteenth century, but we may frequently detect the same opposition to revealed religion, howbeit expressed in different form.

In the realm of psychology, Freud, writing about twenty-five years ago, describes religion as the universal obsessional neurosis of mankind. In the same essay, entitled *The Future of an Illusion*, his thesis is that the idea of God and immortality are illusions to be discarded as knowledge advances. He admits the value of religion in unifying human societies, but maintains that it represents a stage in development, and that it should be left behind as the human race moves on toward maturity. Much more recently, about four years ago, a book appeared by Professor Flügel, of University College, London, entitled *Man, Morals and Society*, in which the author enlarges upon the views of religion put forward by Freud, and emphasises the necessity for scientifically minded people to abandon belief in God and immortality. He also takes the pessimistic view that no answer can be found to the riddle of the Universe, and men must be content to progress without the consolations of religion. Man is to find his satisfaction in drawing nearer to his fellow men, and in trying to make the world a better place for his children and descendants.

A more spiritual attitude is taken up by the followers of the Jungian school, but, on the whole, they reject the Christian revelation, and take refuge in vague statements about the need of man for a religious basis. No definite basis is offered, but at least the door is left open for a more definite religious faith.

The *Gestalt* school ignores religion, and deals chiefly with man in his material environment. The extreme materialistic position is taken up by the behaviourist school. This has found wide acceptance in the United States of America, but is less popular in this country.

From the purely material and scientific point of view, all these and other schools of psychology are contributing much valuable knowledge, and it is unfortunate that so many psychologists are either hostile to Christianity, or take up a neutral attitude. There are, however, some notable exceptions.

In passing, I would point out the need for a unifying philosophy of psychology. The different schools are not necessarily contradictory. Each is providing new lines of research from different angles, and establishing new facts bearing on human personality and behaviour. Unfortunately each school of psychology is producing a crop of new words, many of which are not clearly defined. In addition, one finds that different authors attach different meanings to the same words, and this does not make for clarity of thought.

There is an urgent need for workers of high intelligence, and trained in philosophy and logic, who would set themselves to two main tasks. The first task would be to clarify and define terms at present in use, and the second, perhaps a much greater task, to undertake a synthetic and constructive philosophy which would bring unity into the present diversity of thought. Such synthetic and definitive tasks are sorely needed over the whole range of modern thought, and in every branch of modern science.

I do not find myself qualified to deal with the materialistic tendencies emerging in other lines of scientific thought. It emerges here and there in broadcast talks on the wireless, and in popular scientific books. There has hardly been time yet to assess the philosophic and religious implication of the newest cosmological theories, but one's first reactions are rather in the direction of the opinion that these theories leave no room for the Creator of heaven and earth revealed in the Bible. Some of the leaders of modern thought in this country appear to be either frankly hostile to Christianity, or mildly agnostic.

It is as true to-day as it was when the words were written nineteen centuries ago that "the world by wisdom knew not God"; and there comes to mind the question asked at a still more ancient date, "Canst thou by searching find out God?"

If this generation needs a Socrates to clarify its thought, and to bring order and unity out of the confusion and bewilderment which abound, it still more needs to return to faith in God and His revealed Word.

In this address I have tried to bring before you some of the problems which confront us to-day. In science and philosophy,

as in the political arena, this is an age of revolution and confusion. The Victoria Institute has a unique function to fulfil in examining these trends of thought in the light of God's revelation as it is given to us in the Bible and in the Word made flesh. This is no unworthy task, but it is also a task of great magnitude. We need the prayers and the co-operation of all our present Fellows and Members in striving towards accomplishment. We need also (and we should extend a welcome to) men and women engaged in any branch of philosophical and scientific work who would be willing to throw in their lot with us and help us in the furtherance of our aims and objects.

We do not need to take up an apologetic attitude toward the world for the faith which we hold, nor do we believe that faith should be divorced from reason. We believe that all truth comes from God, whether it be found in science, philosophy, or in Scripture.

We are not to be carried away by every new hypothesis that comes along, nor are we to be dismayed by apparent contradictions between science and the Bible. It should rather be our task and our privilege to hold our minds open to the truth from whatever source it may come and wherever it is to be found, with the firm assurance and unshakable conviction that Truth, although it has many facets, is essentially one great Unity.