

**WINDS OF DOCTRINE.
STUDIES IN
CONTEMPORARY
OPINION**

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Winds of doctrine. Studies in contemporary opinion by G. Santayana

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CONTEMPORARY OPINION

BY
G. SANTAYANA
LATE PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN HARVARD UNIVERSITY



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WINDS OF DOCTRINE

I

THE INTELLECTUAL TEMPER OF THE AGE

THE present age is a critical one and interesting to live in. The civilisation characteristic of Christendom has not disappeared, yet another civilisation has begun to take its place. We still understand the value of religious faith; we still appreciate the pompous arts of our forefathers; we are brought up on academic architecture, sculpture, painting, poetry, and music. We still love monarchy and aristocracy, together with that picturesque and dutiful order which rested on local institutions, class privileges, and the authority of the family. We may even feel an organic need for all these things, cling to them tenaciously, and dream of rejuvenating them. On the other hand the shell of Christendom is broken. The unconquerable mind of the East, the pagan past, the industrial socialistic future confront it with their equal authority. Our whole life and mind is saturated with the slow upward filtration of a new spirit—that of an emancipated, atheistic, international democracy.

These epithets may make us shudder; but what they describe is something positive and self-justified, something deeply rooted in our animal nature and inspiring to our hearts, something which, like every vital impulse,

is pregnant with a morality of its own. In vain do we deprecate it; it has possession of us already through our propensities, fashions, and language. Our very plutocrats and monarchs are at ease only when they are vulgar. Even prelates and missionaries are hardly sincere or conscious of an honest function, save as they devote themselves to social work; for willy-nilly the new spirit has hold of our consciences as well. This spirit is amiable as well as disquieting, liberating as well as barbaric; and a philosopher in our day, conscious both of the old life and of the new, might repeat what Goethe said of his successive love affairs—that it is sweet to see the moon rise while the sun is still mildly shining.

Meantime our bodies in this generation are generally safe, and often comfortable; and for those who can suspend their irrational labours long enough to look about them, the spectacle of the world, if not particularly beautiful or touching, presents a rapid and crowded drama and (what here concerns me most) one unusually intelligible. The nations, parties, and movements that divide the scene have a known history. We are not condemned, as most generations have been, to fight and believe without an inkling of the cause. The past lies before us; the history of everything is published. Every one records his opinion, and loudly proclaims what he wants. In this Babel of ideals few demands are ever literally satisfied; but many evaporate, merge together, and reach an unintended issue, with which they are content. The whole drift of things presents a huge, good-natured comedy to the observer. It stirs not

unpleasantly a certain sturdy animality and hearty self-trust which lie at the base of human nature.

A chief characteristic of the situation is that moral confusion is not limited to the world at large, always the scene of profound conflicts, but that it has penetrated to the mind and heart of the average individual. Never perhaps were men so like one another and so divided within themselves. In other ages, even more than at present, different classes of men have stood at different levels of culture, with a magnificent readiness to persecute and to be martyred for their respective principles. These militant believers have been keenly conscious that they had enemies; but their enemies were strangers to them, whom they could think of merely as such, regarding them as blank negative forces, hateful black devils, whose existence might make life difficult but could not confuse the ideal of life. No one sought to understand these enemies of his, nor even to conciliate them, unless under compulsion or out of insidious policy, to convert them against their will; he merely pelted them with blind refutations and clumsy blows. Every one sincerely felt that the right was entirely on his side, a proof that such intelligence as he had moved freely and exclusively within the lines of his faith. The result of this was that his faith was intelligent, I mean, that he understood it, and had a clear, almost instinctive perception of what was compatible or incompatible with it. He defended his walls and he cultivated his garden. His position and his possessions were unmistakable.

When men and minds were so distinct it was possible to describe and to count them. During the Reformation,

when external confusion was at its height, you might have ascertained almost statistically what persons and what regions each side snatched from the other; it was not doubtful which was which. The history of their respective victories and defeats could consequently be written. So in the eighteenth century it was easy to perceive how many people Voltaire and Rousseau might be alienating from Bossuet and Fénelon. But how shall we satisfy ourselves now whether, for instance, Christianity is holding its own? Who can tell what vagary or what compromise may not be calling itself Christianity? A bishop may be a modernist, a chemist may be a mystical theologian, a psychologist may be a believer in ghosts. For science, too, which had promised to supply a new and solid foundation for philosophy, has allowed philosophy rather to undermine its foundation, and is seen eating its own words, through the mouths of some of its accredited spokesmen, and reducing itself to something utterly conventional and insecure. It is characteristic of human nature to be as impatient of ignorance regarding what is not known as lazy in acquiring such knowledge as is at hand; and even those who have not been lazy sometimes take it into their heads to disparage their science and to outdo the professional philosophers in psychological scepticism, in order to plunge with them into the most vapid speculation. Nor is this insecurity about first principles limited to abstract subjects. It reigns in politics as well. Liberalism had been supposed to advocate liberty; but what the advanced parties that still call themselves liberal now advocate is control, control over property, trade, wages, hours of work, meat

and drink, amusements, and in a truly advanced country like France control over education and religion; and it is only on the subject of marriage (if we ignore eugenics) that liberalism is growing more and more liberal. Those who speak most of progress measure it by quantity and not by quality; how many people read and write, or how many people there are, or what is the annual value of their trade; whereas true progress would rather lie in reading or writing fewer and better things, and being fewer and better men, and enjoying life more. But the philanthropists are now preparing an absolute subjection of the individual, in soul and body, to the instincts of the majority—the most cruel and unprogressive of masters; and I am not sure that the liberal maxim, “the greatest happiness of the greatest number,” has not lost whatever was just or generous in its intent and come to mean the greatest idleness of the largest possible population.

Nationality offers another occasion for strange moral confusion. It had seemed that an age that was levelling and connecting all nations, an age whose real achievements were of international application, was destined to establish the solidarity of mankind as a sort of axiom. The idea of solidarity is indeed often invoked in speeches, and there is an extreme socialistic party that—when a wave of national passion does not carry it the other way—believes in international brotherhood. But even here, black men and yellow men are generally excluded; and in higher circles, where history, literature, and political ambition dominate men's minds, nationalism has become of late an omnivorous all-permeating passion. Local parliaments must be everywhere established, extinct or