

Comment

STOW PERSONS

IN HIS REMINISCENCES Henry Wallace remarked that his father and grandfather had been instrumental in forming his mind, while his mother had made him more essentially what he was; that is, she had formed his character.¹ Since we are here concerned with the mind of a farm leader it is the paternal line of influence I would like to explore for a moment. I have nothing to add to Professor Kirkendall's excellent discussion of Wallace's career as an agricultural journalist, but would call your attention instead to his abiding interest in religion. The sturdy Scottish Calvinism of his grandfather and father had been tempered by a streak of stubborn independence which early reappeared in young Wallace. He insisted upon approaching religion in a personal way, which led him to stray from the strict bounds of denominational orthodoxy. During a period of youthful skepticism a school friend introduced him to the writings of the New Thought essayist Ralph Waldo Trine, through which he discovered the great tradition of religious and philosophical idealism.² Emerson became one of his heroes, and later it was William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* that showed him how to interpret his religious impulses in terms of a scien-

1. Henry A. Wallace, "Reminiscences," Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, 1950-1951 (typescript copy, Henry A. Wallace Collection, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries), 29-30.

2. "Reminiscences," 49; Ralph Waldo Trine, *In Tune with the Infinite* (New York, 1897).

tifically respectable empirical psychology.³ At the same time, he was attracted by the emotional symbolism of the Catholic mass, but it was not to Roman Catholicism that he turned, but rather to a small and obscure sect, the Liberal Catholic church, an offshoot of Theosophy, in which he was actively involved between about 1925 and 1930.⁴ In the end, he joined the Episcopal church, from which vantage point he was able to look back on boyish opinions which he now regarded as "primitive."⁵

Wallace's religious migration was not without lasting effects on his thinking about public matters. New Thought confirmed his conviction that religion is not merely an other-worldly matter, but a vital component of our being, to be expressed in our daily lives. I believe this was what he meant when he described himself as a "*practical mystic*."⁶ The divine spirit is immanent as well as transcendent, expressing itself in an entirely practical way as the "Fullness of Peace, Power, and Plenty," to use Trine's phrase. In later life, when he restated his religious convictions in more specifically Christian terms it was with emphasis on the universal aspects which Christianity shared with all of the great religions. On occasion he could adopt a prophetic tone and call upon his fellow citizens to repent, as when, in 1934, he declared that "until recently this generation has been all too immersed in the greed of capitalism, the spiritual sloth of ever-increasing material pleasures and the humanistic agnosticism of men who drew their inspiration from the superficial scientists and economists of the nineteenth century"—strong stuff for an occupant of high office. An apocalyptic quality sometimes appeared, as when he sensed a great impending spiritual change in the United States, perhaps a Second Coming.⁷ It is possible, of course, that these were simply rhetorical extravagances indulged in by an erstwhile journalist whose

3. "Reminiscences," 47-49.

4. Bishop Irving S. Cooper to and from Henry A. Wallace, 30 August 1925, 16 October 1926, 12 July 1927, 10 September 1929, Wallace Collection, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.

5. "Reminiscences," 50.

6. Theodore A. Wilson, "Henry Agard Wallace and the Progressive Faith," in John N. Schacht, ed., *Three Progressives from Iowa* (Iowa City, 1980), 45; Henry A. Wallace, *Statesmanship and Religion* (New York, 1934), 45-47.

7. *Statesmanship and Religion*, 75-79.

trade required an easy flow of language, but they relate directly to one dimension of the New Deal as a political movement.

Wallace believed that democracy and Christianity were very closely related. In fact, he said that "democracy is the only true political expression of Christianity."⁸ Such an affirmation spiritualizes politics and makes religion responsible for the general welfare. The American ideal, he said, is as religious as the ideal of any church, at once transcendent and practical. The function of religion was to reach out to God so as to develop an understanding of the potentialities for joyous cooperative action, and to inculcate feelings of mutual security and belonging.⁹

Cooperation always occupied a prominent place among Wallace's social ideals. While he was still a student he made a trip to the arid regions of the West to observe irrigation projects. The cooperative organization of the water users of the irrigation districts—vital to their productivity—made a strong impression on him.¹⁰ As a young man he thought of himself as a "Progressive Capitalist" in the tradition of Theodore Roosevelt, confining competition within limits defined by essential cooperative activity. It may come as a surprise to learn that Wallace the scientist always distrusted Charles Darwin, whose *Origin of Species* he considered to be an overrated book. On the other hand, the man who at the age of eight under the supervision of his friend George Washington Carver had been crossing pansies always greatly admired the work of the pioneer geneticist Gregor Mendel, going out of his way while traveling in Austria to visit the monastery garden where the famous experiments with crossing peas were conducted.¹² Although I have not found a statement of his reasons for disapproving Darwinism we may speculate that it was partly because Darwinism in its pristine form lacked a genetic foundation, but perhaps more important because of its conception of life as a struggle for exis-

8. Henry A. Wallace, *The Century of the Common Man* (New York, 1943), 14.

9. Henry A. Wallace, *Paths to Plenty* (Washington, D.C., 1938), 55-79; *Statesmanship and Religion*, 8, 9, 79-81.

10. "Reminiscences," 73-74.

11. *Ibid.*, 77-78.

12. *Ibid.*, 1-65; *Statesmanship and Religion*, 123-131.

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tence, an idea which was profoundly repugnant to Wallace. The great task of his generation, he believed, was to purge itself of Social Darwinism, the nineteenth-century heritage of ruthless economic competition, which he held to be brutal, wasteful, and immoral.¹³

Although it was understandable perhaps that some observers, including the Wallace biographer, Russell Lord, should have thought Wallace inclined toward socialism, they were nevertheless mistaken. It is true that from his reading in Marx, Max Weber, and Thorstein Veblen he acquired a sense of the historical development of economic and social systems. He believed that capitalism was a natural outgrowth of Protestantism, and that socialism, communism, and fascism were in turn natural developments from capitalism. So far, this was familiar socialist doctrine. But Wallace emphatically rejected the inevitability of such outcomes, at least so far as the United States was concerned. He deplored the hatred and enviousness of "the old -isms," including socialism. The great change which was necessary in order to make machine-age democracy effective was not the social-economic revolution preached by the socialists, but a change of heart in which freedom would be balanced by devotion to the general welfare.¹⁴ A progressive capitalist as distinct from a laissez-faire capitalist was one who envisaged a substantial element of cooperative activity under governmental supervision to assure fair prices, wages, and working conditions. Wallace always thought of himself as a "middle-of-the-roader," by which he meant that the ethics of service could be reconciled with the self-serving ethics of economic individualism.¹⁵

Wallace's essential optimism was reflected in his response to the cyclical theory of the rise and fall of civilizations, an ancient idea resurrected in the twentieth century by Flinders Petrie and Oswald Spengler. As summarized succinctly by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes the theory held that civilizations flourish first in arts, then in arms, then in riches, then democra-

13. Henry A. Wallace, *Democracy Reborn* (New York, 1944), 94-100.

14. *Statesmanship and Religion*, 82-83, 121-123; *Democracy Reborn*, 94-95.

15. *Century of the Common Man*, 7-9.

tize, and then—good night. Although Wallace found the idea intriguing, he was wholly unwilling and probably unable for reasons of temperament to accept the conclusion that his own civilization was on the verge of inevitable collapse. He believed that by adopting appropriate measures the end could be postponed indefinitely. Rather than confront the assertion that democracy itself was somehow instrumental in the collapse he focused on the failure of capitalism to provide a decent standard of living for many. Cooperation between government, capital, and labor would assure the indefinite survival of the system.¹⁶

The agriculturalist who always thought in terms of world markets came naturally to the view that the world was one, and that the brotherhood of man should receive some kind of expression in outward form. He regretted that the great religions had for the most part abdicated their responsibility to stand for human solidarity. His vision of world order included a universal economy in which all would be free to buy and sell, a vision ultimately capitalistic. With the coming of the Second World War he early anticipated the post-war confrontation of capitalistic democracy and socialistic communism, and he searched desperately to find a way to mitigate the conflict. He emphasized the concern of either system to serve the needs of the common man through education, full employment, and human rights. Wallace never lost faith in the resources of his own tradition: "If we want peace, we must treat other nations in the spirit of democratic Christianity."

16. *Paths to Plenty*, 11-25; *Democracy Reborn*, 133.

17. *Statesmanship and Religion*, 79-81, 104-105; *Democracy Reborn*, 80; *Century of the Common Man*, 7, 19-21, 35-41, 79-81.

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