

RELIGION AND...

Progress and Politics

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Robert Nisbet is among our most enduringly estimable social critics. In his *History of the Idea of Progress* (Basic Books) he again launches an important critique on the basis of an intriguingly inclusive argument. The thesis is that the idea of progress has been the motor force of Western civilization for nearly three thousand years and now the motor is sputtering very ominously. By the idea of progress Nisbet means the belief "that mankind has advanced in the past—from some aboriginal condition of primitiveness, barbarism, or even nullity—is now advancing, and will continue to advance through the foreseeable future."

The book is something of a tour de force in which Nisbet, who is not a professional historian, ranges with stunning facility across centuries and scholarly disciplines. One need not agree with all of Nisbet's historical judgments to be persuaded that his brief is essentially correct. No social enterprise can sustain itself without the confidence that it is meaningful, contributing to a future that will vindicate it as worthwhile. In short, a society cannot get along without some idea of progress. Today that confidence has been eroded by disillusionment with technology, ecological crisis, nuclear terror, political betrayal, and a host of other popularly perceived ills. Whatever the facts may be, it is the perception of the facts that really counts. "For perhaps the first time in more than two millennia there are enough intellectuals convinced of the hopelessness of our...problems to communicate to an even larger number of people the futility of hopes for human progress."

In an epilogue, "Progress and Providence," Nisbet addresses the assumption that is implicit throughout: that progress is ultimately a religious idea. If the historical enterprise is to enlist the labors and sacrifices of thoughtful people, it must be thought that history is going somewhere desirable. While the legendary common man or woman is not a philosopher or theologian practiced in the language of ultimacy, their quotidian lives are premised upon perhaps unspoken faith in ultimate meaningfulness. It is that faith—inescapably religious in character if not in name—that is today, in Nisbet's words, "at bay."

That faith has in the past been embodied and sustained for many people in the Church of Politics. Politics and religion "are the only major areas of life in which charismatic leaders, prophets, followings, rituals, feast days, creed, and calling have a commanding place; [where] human beings exist who are not only willing but eager to sacrifice—worldly possessions, even life itself." But the Church of Politics has come upon hard times. "Today, certainly in the West and possibly in other areas, including the Soviet Union, the appeal of the political diminishes visibly year by year. The Church of Politics began to lose communicants

during World War I, but that was only a small apostasy by comparison with what the polls and surveys reveal at the present time."

Since people cannot live without religion, the question arises as to what will replace the religion of politics. Nisbet suggests religion. He is ambivalent, however, about the current revival of religion in Western and world history. "In the ancient world, it is possible to measure the progress of Christianity in the very terms of the decline of the Roman Empire." In this assertion Nisbet tends to contradict his earlier and, I believe, correct assessment of the positive achievements of the Christendom that succeeded and in some ways continued the Empire. He sounds almost Marxist in his view of religion as the alternative to political engagement, religion as the sign of an oppressed humanity, as the escape from world-historical tasks.

Among the many merits of Nisbet's study, it gives further and eloquent evidence of the collapse of the secular Enlightenment that we are witnessing on all sides. From the eighteenth century, notably in France, that version of the Enlightenment has been religiously devoted to an inexorably cumulative rationality that would, by technical-political means, banish life's pains and discontents and thus make religion obsolete. Religion would, in that theory, either wither away or be confined to the purely private, even eccentric, dimension of life. Obviously, that has not happened. In fact, precisely the reverse process may be under way.

In truth, much of the current religious revival, especially in America, does seem to be escapist, an evasion of the world-historical tasks. It reflects not the renewal of social and historical vision but the despair of it. This is particularly evident in the impassioned simplisms of the electronic church and the banners of "Evangelical" boosterism. It is too early to say whether this religious quickening that accompanies the decline of confidence in politics and technology can portend a renewal of historical vision. The issue will not be decided by contentions between conservatives and liberals, between mainliners and Evangelicals, between social activists and quietists. It will be decided, I believe, theologically.

The question is whether the Judeo-Christian tradition can again produce a public philosophy that will give ultimate meaning to our penultimate labors. Although it may not seem immediately related, this in turn requires ecumenical progress. Since the seventeenth-century wars of religion the "intrusion" of religion in the public realm has been widely viewed as divisive, threatening the base of civil discourse. Only ecumenical religion can promise a unifying, rather than fragmenting, public philosophy. Given this theological reconstruction and religious unity, neither of which is certain, the result might be something like a New Christendom with a powerfully revived idea of progress. Nisbet is a reliable guide who walks us up to the edge of that prospect. But he hesitates there. He seems uncertain whether the next step is onto a bridge or into an abyss.

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