

[1958. Review of *The Coming World Civilization*, by William Ernest Hocking. *Christianity Today* (May 26).]

One Religion?

The Coming World Civilization, by
William Ernest Hocking. Harper,
1956. \$3.75

The first, shortest, and I believe the best section of this small book concerns “The Impotence of the State.” Clarity and force characterize Professor Hocking’s argument that a state depends on motivation it cannot supply. A secular state cannot control crime: punishment presupposes that the criminal recognizes the justice of the penalty, but the state cannot produce a sense of justice. Nor can the state educate: teachers must have moral standards, but the state does not furnish them. All the less can the state safeguard the family. The state can, and Professor Hocking thinks that the state ought to control the economic life of the nation but it cannot make prosperity produce contentment.

Despite the deficiencies of the state the author is apparently none the less a socialist. He equates individualism with solipsism and constructs some clever but not too convincing arguments against the latter. As a philosophic essay this second part of this book is highly entertaining.

The third section on the merging of the several historic civilizations into one civilization prepares the ground for the fourth section on the universalization of Christianity.

No religion can any longer remain ‘local’ (i.e., particular or distinctive). “Jealous gods and chosen people are normal chiefly within an accepted polytheism no longer thinkable” (p. 81). The particularity of Christianity, expressed in the phrases ‘he that loseth his life *for my sake*’ and ‘ye have done it *unto me*,’ he empties of any definite meaning by reducing them to “the affirmative power of a purposeful devotion” (pp. 90, 94). Similarly on a later page he writes, “The doctrine of Incarnation [note the omission of the definite article] could be defined as a generality whose role it is to escape from generality, accepting the responsibility of the universal for realization in the particular” (pp. 180-181).

To justify the merging of Christianity with Buddhism and the other religions, Dr. Hocking argues that “Affirmation is not exclusion. . . Christian faith does not present itself as an hypothesis competing with other hypotheses . . . ‘This is a way of peace.’ As affirmative, it is not exclusive” (pp. 137-138). There is an ‘Only Way,’ but “The Only Way so far as its essence has by valid induction achieved finality is no longer the Way that marks out one religion from all others; it is the Way *already present in all*, either explicitly or *in ovo*. The several universal religions are *already fused together, so to speak*, at the top. . . . The religions of mankind—Buddhism not excluded—are already one religion” (p. 149; ital. his).

Now, in criticism, there are two things I should like to say, only one of which there is room for. It would take a treatise to argue that there is no such thing as religion. There are religions, but there is no intellectual or even emotional content both common and meaningfully definite in all. A particular religion may become geographically universal, but the philosophic universal ‘religion’ is another night in which all cows are black.

Second, Professor Hocking’s reinterpretation of Christianity is neither objective nor historically accurate. “For my sake” must not be reduced to the empty verbalism of “the affirmative power of a personal devotion.” There are too many incompatible devotions. Nor can one honestly equate “No man cometh unto the Father but by me” with a Way that is already present in Buddhism. In this case the affirmation is most definitely an exclusion. And the statement, “The faith of the Christian is continuous with the nature faith by which all men live” (p. 113) is simply false.

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