

■ This thoughtful paper is a remarkable expression of what may be called the way, the truth, and the light.

## A REASONABLE HOPE FOR OUR TIME

Ten days ago I was standing in the midst of the Amazon Jungle three hundred miles south of the Equator. There were seven of us who had set out to visit a settlement of the Yagua Indians who inhabit the forest areas along the Amazon River. Our bare-footed guide, himself a half-breed, after leading us through underbrush which he cut as he went along with his machete finally located the little clearing where one lone family of the Yaguas was living. The family consisted of the parents, four children, and a mother-in-law; their worldly possessions comprised three iron pots, a couple of hammocks, a blow gun with a quiver of poisoned darts, a few scraps of coloured cloth, and a jar of red paint with which they proceeded to decorate one of our party as a special sign of

favour. Their shelter was freshly cut from native tree branches; their food appeared to be a few fruits on a rack and a fish which was roasting in a banana leaf over the embers of a fire.

We were seven; they were seven — nothing except our common humanity made us kin — neither language, nor custom, nor civilization. We had expected to find ten times their number in an established village, but we were to learn that whenever a death occurs the entire camp is abandoned and the huts burned to the ground lest the evil spirits pursue the survivors. There apparently is no doubt in their minds but that there are evil spirits and that malicious spirits will do them evil. They are fearless as they pursue the jaguar and tiger through the forest with their slender

poisoned reeds, and as they paddle blithely along the Amazon in their fragile canoes knowing full well that the river is ready to swallow them up and the man-eating piranha is incapable. Of these things, they have little fear, and in dealing with them they have much knowledge; of the evil spirits, they have great fear, and in dealing with them they doubtless *think* that they also have great knowledge.

It is apparent, however, from our point of view, that in everyday life they act upon one kind of knowledge and in their religious life they operate upon a second kind. The knowledge and skill by which they not only turn the steaming jungle to the purposes of nourishment and shelter but even fathom out the secrets of medicine from the herbs of the field and the trees of the forest — in this they act upon the same principles and by the same methods as rational men everywhere;—and given the same facts and experience, we and they would doubtless find little upon

which to disagree. In the realm of the spirit world, however, it is doubtful whether many rational men would arrive at a common agreement with them.

The Greeks made a careful distinction between knowledge and opinion — between that which was verifiable and that which was based upon feeling or impression. Indeed, for that matter, so have all intelligent men, and all of us know that the hottest arguments arise in those areas where men have the strongest opinions and the least specific knowledge. Not all conflicts, to be sure, have arisen from faulty knowledge, but not a few of the bitter controversies in politics and religion have found their support more from the ignorance of men than from their enlightenment.

And yet men *must* have opinions for there are many relevant areas of life in which we must act without sufficient knowledge and for which there can be no postponement. Indeed, some sort of faith is an essential to existence as is the body of

verifiable knowledge requisite to rational daily living. I gather that except that each of us assembled here this morning felt the need of and had some intimations of the nature of faith we would hardly have left our comfortable homes to gather here. Faith may be, sometimes has been, and perhaps often is a lazy substitute for hard-headed thinking and wrestling with cold realities but it is far more than what and it is relevant even to the 20th century scientific man. Much faith has, indeed, been shallow and oftentimes we have told men to have faith when we couldn't think of anything else to tell them. Some of us will recall Calvin Coolidge's pat exhortation to **HAVE FAITH IN MASSACHUSETTS** when some of us would have preferred that he should have attempted to tell us what kind of Massachusetts he was offering us to have faith in.

My topic this morning is **A REASONABLE HOPE FOR OUR TIME**. In a sense, I, too, am urging you to have faith in our time, our world, our society — but I hope it

will not be a shallow faith nor an unrealistic one. To be sure, we could exhaust the remainder of the hour in enumerating all the reasons for abandoning hope in our time. We could recall the war in Vietnam, the crime in our cities, the corruption in our politics, the indifference of our people to social issues, the lost college generation with its hippies and addiction to drugs, the bitter tensions of civil rights and black power — all these and more can neither be dismissed nor brought under immediate solution. Yet it would be more unreasonable to be hopeless than to affirm our conviction in the ultimate triumph of righteousness. The fact is that the pluses still outnumber the minuses else the social order would have crumbled and we would indeed be in the midst of anarchy; crime is still newsworthy because it is exceptional, unusual and contrary to the usual order of events. It may be small comfort to affirm that there is more good than evil abroad in the land and in the world, and that most men whether

they be Yagua Indians on the Amazon or neighbours in Back Bay are more friendly than unfriendly, and more to be trusted than feared most of the time. Yet, from this modest premise we can build our stater mansions of faith, and upon these foundations we can build our castles of hope.

I discern, however, a number of false hopes in our time and I believe we should examine them candidly and dismiss them before they disillusion us.

There is in the minds of many men the hope of *uniformity* — that somehow the day will come when all men, presumably by the process of education and yet of their own free will, will come to think and act alike. In religion they will all be good Unitarians, or Catholics, or Baptists, or whatever our own preference in these matters; in politics they will instinctively adhere to the right issues and parties; in taste they will enjoy the same music, the same art, the same recreations. In short, it is very difficult for most of us to accept the fact that other

individuals can possibly differ from us in an essential matter except it be from ignorance, stupidity, or perverseness.

Another heresy of our time is like unto the first, namely the false hope of *conformity*. If men will not or cannot honestly arrive at the same convictions in all matters essential, then we like to believe that somehow a false uniformity may be achieved by imposing a gentle or less gentle conformity. The pressures to conform are not the same in our generation as those of the Spanish Inquisition or Puritan New England, but they are not absent and the flower people, if they have a message for our age, may be just saying this—to remind us that the pressures to conform are *real* and sometimes *oppressive*.

Another heresy of our time is the *ecumenical movement* because, I believe, it is a false hope. Good Christian people, recalling all the bickerings, the bloody religious wars, the useless theological squabbles, are decided that Christianity should bury its differences and strive for

uniformity and conformity, the better to propagate its doctrines and to defend itself against the indifference and hostility of a secular age. Our orthodox friends are undergoing much soul searching and agony of spirit as they struggle to reduce the peculiarities of their own particular tradition into conformity with a single statement of faith and common creed, losing much, I believe, of the richness of their religious heritage in the process.

These are hopes of our time — in politics, in society, in religion. I have called them heresies because I am convinced that they are false hopes and will neither be achieved, nor is it desirable that they *should* be realized. It is *not* bad that men should think differently, that they should act differently, that they should believe differently. It is *bad* that they should fight with each other, that they should hate, that they should be uncharitable and dishonest with one another. **BUT THESE ARE DIFFERENT MATTERS.**

But there are real and reasonable hopes in our

time — positive signs of promise and faith.

There is the hope of the unity of understanding. We live in a marvelous era of communication and enlightenment. Many of our grandparents lived lives of extraordinary isolation; — or if not our own grandparents, the generations immediately behind them — they seldom traveled, they read little more than local news, they had only the foggiest notions of what life was like outside their own section of the United States, much less the rest of the world. In fact, it didn't really make much difference anyway, for the United States had not yet become a world power and they, as individuals were not likely to affect many people outside their own community. Today, there is no isolation; indeed, there is no escape. I have heard American jazz in the Sahara Desert and the Amazon valley. Radio has brought sound, and television has brought images into the most remote community — thousands upon thousands have traversed the globe either as civilians or to even

more remote areas in military service. We do not have Wendell Wilkie's one world politically, but we are moving forward to one world of understanding, if it be true that knowledge and experience make for understanding and sympathy. What age has even approached the degree of knowledge of its peoples of one another, or when have more diverse individuals been brought into contact one with another?

And then there is the hope for the unity of good will. Here we need perhaps a higher degree of faith for not all we behold on the face of the earth is in the nature of good will. I believe, however, there is more good will abroad among men today than ever before. There have been foreign missionaries in other centuries and they have served selflessly and with devotion; but what age has ever before seen a Marshall Plan, or a Peace Corps, or organized political concern for the oppressed. Civil rights, fair housing, desegregation—perhaps some of these issues are too pre-

cipitantly launched — but who can say that they are not evidence of a unity of good will unparalleled in our history.

Understanding and good will are the foundations of any reasonable hope for the present or the future. But more than this, there must also be a unity of MUTUAL RESPECT. Men will not arrive at uniformity nor will they conform for any extended time. Nor will men really succeed in reducing the diversity of Christian experience to an ecumenical unity. Nor is it perhaps desirable that any of these thoughts should be brought to pass.

The Unitarian movement is an attempt to incorporate into a religious institution the ideas which I have been discussing this morning. It has always striven to be hard-headed and rational, but it is as aware as any church that men do not live by bread alone. We, as members of this liberal tradition, have never claimed that ours is the only road to salvation or, perhaps, the right road for many

people. We have ever suspected uniformity and conformity in life and doctrine, and we have not so much opposed creeds and forms because of our suspicion of their validity, as from our fear that they may stifle the believer in his personal search after truth. It is not without pain that we suffer fools gladly within our movement and without it, but the same charity that we ask for ourselves must perforce be extended to the most bizarre individualist or the most rigid institutionalist, provided he be sincere and honest in his profession. Our own movement is blessed with diversity and no one can claim that our strength lies in conformity and uniformity.

There is a rational hope for

the year that lies before us and for the unfolding progress of man. But that hope will be realized only as men and women, like ourselves, believe and accept the challenge to make the world better for their having lived in it. The apostle Paul may have been a poor theologian when he tried to deal with sin and election, but he never discerned the spirit of the universe better than when he reminds us that we are co-workers together with God in the building of the kingdom of the spirit. Let us, therefore, take courage with that which has been achieved, fall to the task of the present, and be of good cheer for the future.—*By Reverend Richard D. Pierce, S.T.M., Ph.D., LL.D.*

## LOYALTY TO PROFESSION

Every man owes some of his time to the up-building of the profession to which he belongs.

— *Theodore Roosevelt*