

The New Story:

Comments on The Origin, Identification and Transmission of Values

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IT'S ALL A question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The Old Story—the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it—is not functioning properly, and we have not learned the New Story. The Old Story sustained us for a long period of time. It shaped our emotional attitudes, provided us with life purpose, energized action. It consecrated suffering, integrated knowledge, guided education. We awoke in the morning and knew where we were. We could answer the questions of our children. We could identify crime, punish criminals. Everything was taken care of because the story was there. It did not make men good, it did not take away the pains and stupidities of life, or make for unfailing warmth in human association. But it did provide a context in which life could function in a meaningful manner.

Today, however, our traditional story is nonfunctional in its larger social dimensions even though some persons believe it firmly and act according to its dictates. It works in its limited orbit. It is an encouragement to us as individuals. Yet the dissolution of our institutions and our life programs continues. We see this in every phase of our present society. Aware of the nonfunctional aspects of the traditional program some persons have moved on into different modern programs. But these programs, for the most part, have quickly become tangential. Most are revealed as ephemeral, as incapable of sustaining the life situation of this late twentieth century. Other persons are returning to the earlier religious fundamentalism. But this too is quickly seen as a sterile gesture. Security is not there. The basic elements in the religious community of the modern world have become trivialized. What we offer our society serves only a temporary function. It simply enables us to keep a semblance of meaning in our institutions and in our public life.

When we look outside the traditional believing community we see a society that is also dysfunctional. Even with advanced science and technology, with superb techniques in manufacturing and commerce, in communications and computation, our secular society remains