

McConnell, Francis John, bp.

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VOICES OF THE TIMES.

Abstract of address by Bishop Francis J. McConnell at
Ohio State University June 14, 1927.

It is well for all of us who wish to play a part in making democracy effective to learn to distinguish the varying degrees of importance which should be assigned to the manifold voices of the times in which we live. Not all of the voices of today have their significance in the actual content of what they utter. Language is usually described as an instrument for the communication of thought. It is primarily conceived of as directed to someone besides the speaker himself. As a matter of psychological and sociological fact, however, speech is quite often an instrument of self-realization on the part of the speaker himself. That is to say, it is a means of self-relief. A great many of our letter-day attempts to limit or curb free speech overlook the simple and commonplace consideration that some speech is not to be judged by what it says, but by what it provides for in the way of vent to relieve the feeling of the speaker. One thing is sure, - social orders can never be overthrown by what men say out in everybody's hearing, except as they win the consent of the majority. Social orders are not likely to be overthrown by anarchists' bombs; but the bombs do damage when they are set off; and they are not likely to be set off, when those who hold wild and crazy notions get a chance to talk out what is in their minds. The simple process of allowing people to talk out their ideas is about as complete a safeguard against violent attempts to overthrow an existing order as any remedy that can be devised. In the talk-out process some ideas are seen to be irrational, others to be ridiculous, and others

to be sensible. The best guard against the irrational and the ridiculous is to get them in full hearing. The ideas are often seen for what they are even by their proponents themselves when they are uttered out in the open before a group. It is not often that the men who have been given full opportunity to state their views thereafter take either to dynamite or conspiracies. They find in speech itself a better and more enjoyable channel of self-expression.

A second type of voice is that which we may call the symptomatic utterance, by which we mean the utterance which is to be judged not so much by what it says as by what it reveals as a symptom. Suppose a good many of the utterances of the present day are crazy. How do we deal with lunacy in the individual? The alienist patiently seats himself beside the man of disordered mind and takes the utterances of that mind as symptomatic of the disorder itself; and by listening tries to find out the real cause which is at the bottom of the trouble. Likewise in social disorders the wise policy is to take a good deal of social theory, which may seem to us to be wild, and judge it not by what it actually says but by what it reveals as to the cause of the social discontent. Take even an extreme form of socialism,- we have not disposed of it when we have pointed out its logical falacies, for such extreme socialism must be looked upon as the protest of deep-seated discontent. A wise social alienist, then, will seek for the cause of the discontent and try to remove it. So also in the field of the relations between the nations that we think of as more advanced and those less favored. It is the custom in certain circles today to speak of all races and nations outside of the occidental type of civilization as "non-adult." Granting, just for the sake of the argument, that we may thus

speaking of the more backward peoples let us ask ourselves how we should deal with the utterances of non-adults. Do we seek to repress such utterances because they seem to us to lack sense? Is it not part of the glory of adolescence that it is most irrepressible at the very moment when it seems to us to be farthest from our type of wisdom? No, - the part of safety in dealing with non-adult individuals, or non-adult groups, is to study the utterances for what they reveal as to the direction in which the individual or social mind may be moving.

There are still other voices, however, at the present time that are uttering words of deepest wisdom in the very content of the utterance itself. The highest wisdom may come to a particular age in the form of affirmation or in the form of question. Ours seems to be an age of questioning, - especially on the part of the younger generation. It is well that those of us of middle age, and beyond, have these questions insistently and remorselessly thrust upon us by every succeeding generation of youth. For twenty-five years I have been holding conferences with groups of students on the deeper questions of life and conduct. The questions brought forward by the younger people have never before been as serious as those now being asked. I cannot answer the questions, and I do not know anyone else who can. Still, the very fact that the younger generation is asking insoluble questions is one hopeful sign. We can take a right attitude toward a question even when we cannot give a full answer. It is fortunate for us all that we are not allowed to dodge problems that have to do with the higher meanings of life and destiny. A voice of the times that speaks in question may be just as productive of faith in the long run as one which speaks in terms of direct affirmation. In any case the affirmations most worth while are those which have come out of long periods of questioning. We need not be surprised that in an age of questioning much flippancy and irreverence come to the surface; but under the surface is an intellectual and moral seriousness than can be depended

upon finally to reinforce the soundest and weightiest affirmation of which the human soul is capable.

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