

VI. -The sense of religion diminished.

And they have no rest day or night. REV. 14: 11.

The universal mastery which we have acquired over the forces of nature has overexcited man's sense of power; thereby dangerously weakening his sense of dependence; and this was bound to culminate in the attenuation of religious life, in a shrinking of the sphere of piety, in a lowering of the temperature in many a man's devotion to God. Herein lies the root cause of religious decay and of the hand over hand increasing unbelief, and therefore this had to be the primary concern. But still, in this dominance over nature lies not the sole cause of the strong ebb and flow of religious life. From this conquest of power over nature, so much more has emerged that has broken with religion. Let us first of all draw attention to the loss of that peace and quiet in which the life of piety once flourished.

The Book of Revelation speaks of the lost in their destruction: "They have no rest day nor night"; and this in contrast with the wonderful promise: "There remains a rest for the people of God". Time and again God's Word points out the preciousness of rest for our hunted and tortured hearts. The Sabbath as a day of rest rhythmically comes to bring quietness into our lives on the seventh day, and so beautifully does our Catechism say that this is a foretaste of the eternal Sabbath with God. A dry drink and rest with it" seemed to the poet of Proverbs a desirable fate; and the Ecclesiastes said again: "A handful with rest is better than both fists full of labor and torment of spirit. In the song of the good Shepherd, the Psalmist sings: "He leadeth me gently beside very still waters." In the lament of Jerusalem it is said: "My eye flows with tears, because there is no rest", and Baruch laments to Jeremiah: "I am weary with my sighs and find no rest." The apostle of Tarsen, in his wanderings, suffers oh, so bitterly from that lack of rest for mind and body (2 Cor. 2: 12 coll. 2 Cor. 7: 5.). And already in the prophecy it was said to Israel: "This is the rest, give peace to the timid, and this is the refreshment" (Is. 28:12), in Christ our peace appeared, and therefore he could promise it to us: "Learn from me that I am humble and meek, and you will find rest for your souls'.

Not all rest, alluded to here, is equal. The deepest rest is that which, in the secret of the soul, dispels the turmoil of the passions and brings us peace with our God. Then comes the peace that redeems us from the discontentment that men bring us. Then there is rest from the chasing of fate, which chases us, be it under the bitterness of our enemy, be it under the hardness of disappointment, painful loss or illness. Then there is rest, which dispels the doubt in our hearts and brings peace to

the world of our thoughts, senses and imagination. And from the rest already enjoyed here on earth, it then ascends to the higher rest of the eternal Sabbath in the Father's house of our God.

But whatever degree or form, whatever storm or agitation, from within or from without, the unrest, the turmoil, the discontent also overpowers our spirit, time and again the longing for rest, for peace, for quietness rises from the depths of our soul. This is most frightening to us in the delusional, in the emotional, in the always tense and overstrained man, who finally forgets himself and his God and seeks a solution in suicide. Just as Jesus says of the possessed that they wander in the tombs, seeking rest, so, and no other, is the turmoil of the human spirit, which must always go on, is never left still, and which is consumed internally by thirst, by hunger, by a piercing longing to come to rest. Especially in the East, from where the Scriptures came to us, this hunger and desire for quiet and rest for the horrified spirit is a characteristic of all people.

After the day comes the night, when God extinguishes the light for us, and draws long, pale shadows over our towns and villages. And with that nightly hour, and the darkness in which it envelops life, comes the rest of sleep. A rhythmic turning and turning of our life, in which the goodness of our God gives a new grace to the child of man. When the eye is closed, and our weary members stretch, and the agitated spirit sinks into self-indulgence. A rest from sleep for the third part of our existence. He who dies when he has reached the age of ninety, spends almost thirty years in that rest of sleep, and in that sleep comes his revival, his refreshment and the rebirth of his lost strength. Yes, even the silent grave, in the peace it brings, possesses a sweet attraction. What Marnix chose as a motto: "The rest hereafter", "repos ailleurs", is expressed on the headstone in the "Here rests". Always, in every way, in every tone of voice, this unquenchable desire, this written homesickness, this unquenchable thirst for rest is expressed. Rest for our conscience, rest from our sins, rest from our work, rest from our fellow man, rest from our enemy, rest from the fate that pursues us.

And to the enjoyment of that rest depends to such a considerable extent the quiet flourishing and soft blossoming of the life of our piety. The hermit, the saint of the pillars, the monastic, and those who withdrew into the desert, whatever their sins, never aimed for anything else but to withdraw from the turmoil and ferment of the world in order to seek communion with their God in silence and in prayer. It was the attempt to live in the world through separation, but as though the world did not

exist, and if necessary to give up the whole world rather than be robbed by the world of eternal peace, of the peace of the soul. The "solitary, but in communion with God" was also, among Protestants who left the monastery, the indication of the path that leads to the quiet of God's Zion.

In the countryside, where the turmoil of the world is at such a low ebb, the life of religion always found a place of refuge, when in the big cities it was smothered by the shouting and the tumult. Because of the peace and quiet it brought to the streets, to businesses and to the family, the Lord's Day was always the day when religious life was at its best.

In childhood, before entering the world, and in old age, when one had withdrawn from the world, listening to the heavenly voice was always so much lighter than in years of manly vigor, when one had thrown oneself into the stream of full life. The custom, which exists especially in Russia, to withdraw now and then for a few weeks into a house of seclusion, and to live only for his God, has in that powerful empire still best protected the riches of the mystical life. In order to pour out his soul before his God, all pious people still seek solitude, and when they have withdrawn into the inner chamber, and the door is closed, and thus a place and place of rest has been found, the soul will open itself to prayer in the presence of the Lord. It is even remarkable how the boatmen of our inland navigation, proportionately, still have so much piety. After all, they too wander the waters, separated from the world, and in that isolation find a peace that is not found on the fixed shore.

This is not to say that godliness and piety cannot also flourish in the midst of the most tense life. The life of a man like De Ruyter, or Marnix van St. Aldegonde, shows otherwise. But then piety emerges precisely from the tension of the terrible responsibility with which one lays oneself to rest and with which one wakes up. God can also be found in the storms and in the tempests, but for the vast majority, the encounter with their God comes first in the lull of the gentle coolness. The quiet life breeds piety, peace of mind makes the religious life blossom, and on the other hand, in the midst of the violent turmoil and upheaval of the waters of life, the devil who wants to fly finds no place for the hole of her foot.

Now consider, with this in mind, the face of the world and the image of human life, as it has become through our superiority over the forces of nature, and you will understand the sinking of religious life in the age that lies behind us from this point of view also. We will not speak now of the consciously born again. A higher power

of the Spirit is at work in their lives, one that can withstand any onslaught, even if the souls suffer. But the born-again people are in the Sanctuary, and now we are speaking only of the great multitude that never came any further than the forecourt. That immense multitude was itself religiously affected in earlier centuries, but now, almost over its entire length and breadth, it is estranged from all religious participation. And for them we invoke your compassion, whereas, looking at yourselves, you would probably be inclined to pass a harsh judgment on the piety of the multitude.

What is the difference, the contrast, of this mass of the baptized between then and now; what is it but that the most sharply aroused hypersensitivity of the nervous life replaced the former calm and quiet. Look at our infirmaries, how they are becoming more and more populated; look at the list of suicide bombers, how it is expanding. Restlessness in thought, restlessness in mind, restlessness in home and business, always in a hurry, never having time to finish one's work calmly, always trembling in our blood and nerves of the electric current that puts all of life into overstrained motion. Almost everyone has been chased out of the house since the early morning, even the meals are never enjoyed at the family table, and as a result there is no longer any enjoyment of the homely company, and no more talk of gathering around God's Word, when thanksgiving for the good received will ascend to God. Once a first cordon of quiet around the house, then a second cordon of quiet around the place of one's residence, which one left only a few times in the year, and, also where one moved away from home, at least the patriotic border for almost everyone a final cordon, a cordon of national quiet. And now all cordon of peace is broken. Town and village, country and country are connected by electric wires. Rails running through a continent. The mail ship traversing all seas. No local market anymore except as a help, no market in the country even more than as an auxiliary link, and all pulled together in a world market encompassing the whole of our earth, with which every man of business or profession has to reckon. Even to a single continent the action can no longer be limited. Europe and America form a single whole of action, and Africa and Australia and Asia join in the turmoil that drives and sucks everything along. In a village one has no idea of this, but come to a metropolis and see how thousands and thousands of people keep on going, all day long, all evening in glittering light, and even adding a bit of night to the turbulent day. In the past, there was only one post in the whole day, now there are up to eight or ten in a 24-hour period, always flooded with new messages and new questions. The telegraph that overloads you with quick messages. The

telephone that calls you from work to listen. No more leisurely strolls through the large cities, but electric streetcars that await you and take you from one end of the city to the other in a jiffy. Everything in a hurry, without giving you time to think; quickly grasping what is being presented to you and deciding immediately. Then those meetings and gatherings and associations without end. All the interests that count on your support and cooperation. Involvement in business, involvement in the stock market, involvement in science, involvement in literature, involvement in art, involvement in politics. Celebrated in all your existence every day. No division of your labour is possible anymore. All jumbled up, seizing you with three, four things at the same time. And then you leave home again, go to a meeting elsewhere, and when you are finished and can't do any more, travel to seek restoration of strength. Like the leaves that fall from the branches in autumn and are propelled restlessly by the autumn wind, so whirling and full of unrest and in endless haste, the life of men of business in those great world cities goes on and on, not just for a few days, but year in year out. For a while they sought peace in the intoxication of drink, but this did not satisfy them either, and now the avoidance of wine and drink has become a matter of life and death. Still, people hunger for muscle power in order to keep their nerves tensed. Sport must provide this additional strength. But this too increases the unrest. Bicycles, motor-cars, automobiles, and soon balloons and aeroplanes will increase the tension in life. And even in the field of land and sea warfare, life in the past cannot be compared to the awesome development of power today. What a crew on board a battleship goes through in the heat of battle is not even remotely imaginable to anyone with ordinary nerves. It is described to you as a precursor to hell.

Now there is a difference between nerves and nervousness. A people like that of Japan possess a nervous life that hardly ever shakes or is shaken. It is the opposite of the Negro, whose nerves tremble much more than ours. And it is precisely this hardening of the nerves which makes the Japanese soldier and sailor so unusually strong in the present war. We, Europeans, take our place between the two extremes. Not as irritable as the Negro, but three times more sensitive in our nervous lives than the Mongol. And in the middle and west of Europe we suffer much more from our nervous life than in the East. It has also been observed that this sensitivity and irritability of the nerves increases with generation in the sexes. Born of parents who were already victims of this high nervous tension, the child is already potentially more sensitive. If this continues, in the next two or three generations the excitability of life will reach an alarming level. This is something

that prompted a French writer to prophesy that the world will end up inhabited only by madmen.

We therefore make no apology for the lack of religious feeling among the great majority. Everyone, whoever he may be, who does not live piously before his God, is guilty. But looked at from the human side, it may be asked whether you yourself do not feel how this overstrained condition of the brain and nervous life impedes the cultivation of a religious sense and general piety in an unbelievable way. People live small; there is no longer an inner room for quiet prayer. Home religious exercises are no longer available or there is no time to attend them. On Sundays one wants to catch up on what was left unfinished, or seeks relief and relaxation in nature. The vibrations of the nervous system are too strong to allow us to sit quietly under the preaching of the Word. One never comes to rest. There is no place, no time for retreat. One cannot think of retreating into oneself. Everything rushes and storms through the head and heart. From all sides, every faculty of our feeling and thinking is so unceasingly seized upon that there is not a moment left to lift the soul to God. All the denser mists rise before the world of the eternal. The light on earth shines so brightly that looking up to God's starry heavens in the firmament becomes obsolete. Nothing impresses anymore. One is so powerful oneself, and the world around us is so full of power, that the Almighty Origin of all things is no longer asked for. The conscience still speaks, but in the noise of the world its whispering is drowned out. And then comes as a reaction to the overexcitement the wild, bewildering laughter, and with the laughter the ridicule, and when one dies, well, then that restless chasing will be over. And therefore, a death without eternity that follows seems almost desirable. Then the sinking into eternity does not come. And that is what one, half-Buddhist, yearns for.

Just notice the three generations that in succession of years surround you, and you see the ever-increasing destruction of religion. Among all three of these generations, as before, and through all ages, a multitude of utterly indifferent, lowly characters, concerned only with money and pleasure. They do not count. They have never set the tone, and still do not. But now take the higher, the better families, the people of nobler sense, and what do you see? This, that among the older generation, which is now on its way to the grave, a certain remnant of an earlier religious sense still lives on. Among those older people one is no longer as orthodox as before, but they are still not completely detached from the Word. They still pray in their homes. They still instill respect for the sacred in their children. God's blessing is still indispensable to them. They still believe in His Providential

Order. They still have religious ideals. Weakened, faded, waning, but still there is a certain life of religion in such families. But already in the second generation, which now blossoms into manhood, this was different. No more Bible, no more going to church, no sacrament sought, no more prayer at the table. All that has been done away with. Some reverence for the sacred is still detectable, but this dissolves almost entirely in ideal morality. And then, at most, something mystical. Also, spiritualism, or theosophy, but in the vast majority of cases cold, cold, numbness. There is no longer any thought of practicing religion, of seeking God's hidden intercourse. And in clear indifference everyone looks ahead on the road, without ever raising an eye to the sky. And even more fearful is the situation with the third generation, with the young people who are just becoming men. For them, all religion is a strange property of a small group of retards. Interesting though, those strange, single-minded people with their going to church and their praying. They no longer make fun of it. It is simply an interesting, never-ending phenomenon of life. But they themselves have done away with it. For them, science is everything. Science is the end of it. We will walk by its light. It will show us the ideal. The old times with their legends, and mysteries, and dreaming are over. Before us is modern life. And modern man does have a feeling for a nobler meaning, does want to elevate the human being, to live for an ideal goal, but they no longer know religion. It is an extinguished glow for them. An antiquity, which modern man looks back on with nostalgia of curiosity.

Thus, life around you unfolds in ever clearer form. Lord and Master instead of slave and victim of the forces of nature, he no longer feels dependent, but supreme, and it is precisely this power over nature that has transformed all human life, has stimulated it from its former rest into nerve-racking activity, and by doing so has removed from life precisely that quiet, that peaceful, that conciliatory, that calming which formerly led to seclusion, to reflection on one's situation and to introspection. And the evil consequence is that religion, which cannot do without peace and quiet, is increasingly losing the ground on which it used to be able to flourish among the unconverted. The mighty current of the modern life of the world has uprooted, dislocated and lifted up all the roots of religion, and is taking them with it as an uprooted tree on the bank.