

BIOLOGY

Biologists on Verge of Major Discoveries

► BIOLOGISTS are on the verge of discoveries equal to the "revolutionary and potentially devastating kind" that have led to the production of atomic bombs and intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Dr. H. Bentley Glass of Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Md., giving the principal address of the American Institute of Biological Sciences meeting, warned more than 3,000 of his colleagues they would do well "to observe soberly the conscience-stricken efforts of some atomic scientists."

He observed that the biological scientists were "divinely ignorant" of what effect their biological discoveries will have in altering human life. This is their ivory tower. However, a little comprehension of human history and the inescapable nature of human society, of human motives and human values, Dr. Glass pointed out, might save us in time.

Power, especially unlimited power, can be more of a danger than a blessing, Dr. Glass said, and cautioned that if man were sufficiently foolhardy, this age may constitute "the last chapter of human history, the terminus of the time-scale."

"Today we stand on the verge of biological discoveries of an equally revolutionary and potentially devastating kind, which it will require all our wisdom to control."

Calling the ignorance of what biologists will do with discoveries that can alter human life the biologists' "quandary," Dr. Glass challenged his colleagues to preserve freedom of thought in the growth of science.

This same freedom, he said, can be lost in a matter of months, even though it was gained through "centuries of struggle."

"We face new problems in this area which are likely to become critical in the next years. The domination of scientific research by the holders of the purse-strings is ominous, even though until now our foundations and government agencies have pursued policies of the most liberal kind. How long may that be expected to continue if the people, and the representatives of the people, feel that science is a useful servant, or slave, to minister to the needs of society as bidden?"

The answer, Dr. Glass said, could be found by looking at the Soviet Union.

"Within our universities," he continued, "problems of the domination of scientists threaten to arise in the choice of their experimental problems and the publication of their results, should these chance, for example, to bear unfavorably on large industries (tobacco), or local interests (butter), or to conflict with deeply held prejudices (racial segregation)."

It is distressing, Dr. Glass said, "that so relatively few biologists are to be found in the ranks of the American Association of University Professors or the American Civil Liberties Union or other organizations that defend the essential freedom of science."

(See pp. 147, 149 and 150 for other articles on research reported at the meeting.)

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