

RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND MODERN DEMANDS

By JOHN E. OWEN

SOME devout adherents of organized religion show an unfortunate indifference, if not hostility, to the newer sciences of psychology, anthropology, and sociology.

Yet it might be rewarding to the friends of religion to examine these other approaches to human experience. Indeed, should any source of knowledge and insight be excluded, any new avenue be ignored, in the search for religious truth?

There is manifest a subtle and indirect opposition to submitting religious beliefs to the view of modern social science. The fears of an older generation that the effects of university experience may cause the young "to lose their faith" are but one example of this tendency to shut out new knowledge. Yet if a religious faith cannot stand up to the clear light of impartial inquiry, is it a faith worth having in the first instance? In religion man finds security, and the need for security is deep-seated in the human psyche, yet should security be based upon illusory foundations, or upon outlooks and beliefs to which one has become emotionally attached on account of the security-feeling they evoke? It is well known that dogmatism, in religion or elsewhere, is frequently a shield and a cover for an underlying sense of uncertainty regarding the truth of doctrines which may be vehemently espoused but whose validity is uncomfortably suspect. When this spirit reveals itself in theological realms, does it represent authentic security on the part of the believer, or is it merely grounded, in greater or lesser degree, upon ignorance of the believer's own compulsions and psychological needs?

It is perhaps unreasonable to expect that the average individual be sufficiently enlightened as to be able to analyze his own emotional needs and urges in their religious expression and in terms of modern psychological and sociological insights. But is this too much to hope for from his religious leaders? If organized religion loses ground, as it has appeared in certain ways to be doing before the impact of new knowledge, will this not in some measure be the fault of those religious leaders who, instead of welcoming this new knowledge, ignore or attack it? For despite the current widespread interest in religion that is reported from many university centres, there is manifested to-

day on both sides of the Atlantic an outright rejection of religious orthodoxy by many intellectuals. The phenomenon of the educated intellectual with no active church connection is so well known as to need no comment. But if an explanation be called for, it would appear that orthodoxy can no longer be fitted into his new definition of the world, into his emancipated value-system. And inquiry would probably reveal that the new interest in religion among university students is not an uncritical interest in orthodoxy *per se*. It represents rather a return to the fundamental questions that men have always asked, but it remains to be seen whether the modern generation will long be satisfied, if at all, with the answers that have traditionally been given.

For the old answers, in the way that theological orthodoxy has formulated them, cannot easily be reconciled with the "acids of modernity." These answers fail to satisfy, largely because the modern mind has rejected the assumptions on which they are based. A friendly but impartial observer would have to admit that certain aspects of religious orthodoxy involve what the sociologist would term "cultural lag," or a failure on the part of this element of modern culture to keep pace with contemporary thought-patterns. In religion this failure consists, in part, in an inability to re-define its conceptions and to reconcile itself with the new knowledge presented by the natural and social sciences. And this problem involves the fact that some representatives of religion see no compelling need to recognize the claims of modern knowledge. They still tend to accept the old definitions of the human situation and naturally assume that the ideological framework within which their religious philosophy operates is valid and adequate for present-day needs.

Hegel reminded us that when a civilization begins to speculate about itself it is on the decline, and as the Dean of St. Paul's, London, has noted, modern man may be pertinently compared with a hypochondriac who is forever taking his own temperature, for no type of literature is more popular among thoughtful persons than that which would tell them where they stand and where they are going.¹ And the late Karl Mannheim has brilliantly affirmed that we are now passing through a crisis-situation in human culture in which the established value-systems are being disintegrated and gradually replaced with new values.²

(1) W. R. Matthews, *Essays in Construction*, 1934.

(2) Karl Mannheim, *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction*, 1940.

One of the distinguished thinkers of India likewise avers that "the generation that is passing built its traditions and institutions on the values of freedom and sense of responsibility of the individual on the one hand, and the efficiency and power of industrial organization and ambition for empire and world domination in the organized state-society on the other. The new generation is inclined to build on the values of personal association, social security, and equality in the sharing of great values. It is also groping after total and human (world) values into which regional and national values may be integrated, an ethical system that is universal for mankind, and that achieves order and solidarity on a global basis by world-wide institutions and practices."³

If such a transformation is actually taking place, and the foregoing and other diagnoses would certainly suggest that it is, then the sooner the religious implications of this evolution of values are recognized, the better. For a faith that does not inquire, that is not alert to the latest advances on man's sociological and intellectual frontiers and to the human situation as it exists, will not long survive. If, as some present-day thinkers claim, much in traditional religion is either an illusion or an irrelevance, then it is the task of the religious mind to seek a re-definition and re-interpretation of the faith that will be neither illusory nor irrelevant. Only such a clear-sighted faith can endure and meet the needs of the modern world-situation. Indeed, does any faith deserve to endure if it cannot relate itself to those needs?

The truth that makes men free is a many-sided truth, to be found in varied sources. It is absurd to assume that any one approach to experience has any monopoly of truth. Yet in recent decades there is one outlook, that of natural science, that has taken the field in vast areas of thought. Science, it is held, contains the sole key to truth. The very word, "scientific," has almost become a fetish with thousands, and although self-determination in the world of the mind cannot be any more justifiably absolute than in the world of politics, many would make the naive claim that only the sciences can give valid knowledge. It is not necessary to dwell upon the philosophical shortcomings of this viewpoint. But it is significant that the attempt to live by scientific facts alone has left a moral and spiritual void in modern man, a void fraught with untold dangers, especially the danger of falling for false gods, as recent German experience

(3) Radhakamal Mukerjee, *The Social Structure of Values*, 1950, p. 7.

plainly reveals. Religion must fill this void, but what kind of a faith will it be that is adequate to the demands of the contemporary situation?

A first requirement would be that the modern faith be intellectually respectable. It is thirty years since Sir Henry Jones gave his Gifford Lectures under the title, *A Faith that Inquires*. Since that time the humanistic sciences of semantics, psychology, sociology, and anthropology have advanced in several interesting directions and have asked many new questions. But how many Christians are aware of these questions? How many believers have an enlightened faith, or would be able to give a respectable statement of their own religious philosophy? Is it not a truism that all too many individuals continue to employ theological phrases without thinking of their meaning? The new science of semantics has been seldom applied to religious terminology and concepts. We have seldom asked ourselves what empirical validity inheres in our theological concepts and beliefs. Are they actually rooted in man's experience, or are they merely part of a culturally-acquired system of thought that has come down to us from past epochs and is currently believed in for the main reason that most adherents were born into that particular system? The question of why men believe what they believe, in all of its psychological and historical ramifications, is one that needs to be analyzed anew.

Even the logical positivists, paradoxically, can be of service to Christianity by their insistence upon the clearer definition of terms used in religious language. Not that the religious mind is likely to accept the principle of logical positivism that sees no reality beyond sense-experience. The religious conception of "experience" is much broader, and very rightly so. Yet positivist claims should act as a stimulus upon Christian thinkers to re-examine their own epistemological assumptions and to affirm the more meaningful doctrine of man and his destiny that their faith embraces.

Some devout believers would doubtless resent any attempt to inquire into the meaning or validity of religious faith and experience. Their beliefs, they would maintain, are self-evident and sacred. One may respect the sincerity involved in this claim, yet there is little ground for the view that it is in any way sacrilegious to inquire into the philosophical and psychological foundations of belief. The on-coming generation, and especially the university-bred, will demand "a faith that inquires."

The new areas of inquiry are as yet in their infancy, yet they already have raised issues that demand answering. One pertinent example, likely to become more significant with the rising prestige of social science, involves the sociological study of comparative cultures and the consequent claim that moral principles are merely social rules, lacking objective validity. This view is unfounded, as moral philosophers are well aware, but it has become part of the contemporary climate of opinion. Another question on the border-line of psychology and sociology is that of whether secular humanism does not involve the implicit expression of a collective social ego, of humanity's pride in itself, and the sanctioning of a cultural value-system. Psychology and sociology can enable men to look with more objective vision at such questions and to analyze human emotions and urges and their institutionalized religious expression.

The study of religious origins afforded by anthropology does not establish, or destroy, the validity of religious beliefs or practices. But it does make for a deeper understanding and insight, and can lead to a more critical examination of the underlying meanings and cultural foundations of belief, an examination that many Christians have often failed to pursue, on the mistaken view that to think analytically regarding their faith is to be disloyal to it.

The critical mind learns to distinguish between the poetry of faith, the symbols of religion, the collective representations that Durkheim spoke of,⁴ and the reality that these portray. But has there not been perhaps an over-concentration on the poetry and the symbols of religion, verbal and other, with a consequent neglect at times of the deeper realities that underlie them?

One of the sociological criteria of religion concerns its effects upon group life and interaction. Does the faith merely sanction the customary and so tend to resist constructive change, or does it make for the inculcation of as yet unrealized social ideals and the creative integration of human personality?

The psychology and sociology of religion are subsidiary to religious philosophy and its concern with the place of religion in human experience and the ultimate validity of religious conceptions. It is now widely recognized in thoughtful circles that religion must be tested by the same logical tests that are applied to other areas of experience. The knowledge-problem,

(4) E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 1915.

however, has largely been ignored by all too many believers. The man in the pew too frequently fails to distinguish between logical certainty and his own felt need for psychological certainty. Yet the conviction with which a belief is held has no direct bearing upon the validity of the belief itself. The mere re-affirmation of a belief or article of faith does nothing to establish its philosophical foundations, and religious convictions are not infrequently in danger of being supported by little more than self-authenticating intuitions. These observations apply more particularly to those groups in which the fervor of religious emotion is more in evidence than the critical faculty. Yet Christians in general need to become more enlightened regarding their faith and their own psychological and philosophical reasons for its affirmation.

But faith is not solely an affair of the intellect. Religion is patently concerned with the motives and intentions and with the moral judgments that men make, not as creatures of reason alone but as living beings of feeling, emotion, and will. Is it not in the moral arena above all that more enlightenment is called for today? A faith that can meet the demands of the dilemma of contemporary culture will have to be one that is grounded in ethical insight, in clear moral vision. Indeed, is this not essential to the foundation of all high religion? For high religion is concerned with the supreme moral and spiritual values, and probably the greatest need of the present, as always, is the inculcation of a keener degree of moral insight on the part of ever-widening sections of mankind.

Yet ever since Schleiermacher spoke of "mere ethics," Protestantism has appeared to act upon the doubtful premise that a sincere avowal of Christian faith would automatically imply a higher degree of moral insight, and the consequent practice of an ethical life. Involved in this view is the equally dubious assumption that most individuals and groups ordinarily know the right course of action to take even in the most complex moral situations and hence religion simply exists to give them the dynamic emotional fervor to implement and carry out their "Christian" intentions. But experience would hardly warrant the correctness of this assumption. Far from giving more moral vision to its adherents, conventional religion may easily have the opposite effect of confirming their prejudices. Instead of enabling them to see through the rationalizations by which men justify their egoistic impulses, it may itself provide the main justification for these impulses. As Reinhold Nie-

buhr has pointed out, every age has its characteristic hypocrisies by which it seeks to justify its egoistic urges.⁵ Although our contemporary moral justifications appear to have a superior plausibility about them, we face a crisis resulting from lack of consensus regarding values and from the different levels of ethical sensitivity in various segments of mankind. Our own ability to penetrate through the rationalizations of other past eras (for example, the social Darwinism of the nineteenth century) does not necessarily open our eyes to similar questionable aspects of moral wisdom that our own age embodies.

Religion and morality are intertwined variables, but the quality of any faith depends in large measure upon the degree of moral insight that it embraces. Morality, in a wide sense, may be regarded as the empirical element in religion, in that it is moral values that relate faith to the pressing problems of man's life. One main function of religion is to point to and exemplify the intrinsic worth of moral values in human experience. It is ethical insight that distinguishes a high faith from the type that merely sanctions the customary standards of social expectation and action. In certain historical epochs great moral leaders stand out as men who revealed a keen sense of moral insight by which the then current faith became ennobled and purified.⁶ Thus in the pre-Christian period Socrates and Plato, and in more recent times Kant and the nineteenth-century humanitarians, were among those who attempted to search for and apply high ethical perception to human experience. On a moral view the deity is a Being of righteousness, and it is an evolution in essentially ethical conceptions that marks the rise of religion from its early associations with barbarism and superstition to the moral genius of the Old Testament prophets, culminating in the teachings of Jesus, who showed that moral vision is the first step towards individual and social redemption.

Historical Christianity has made little attempt at a critical examination of moral experience, largely on account of the mistaken assumptions previously noted. But problems of morality, broadly conceived, are the most urgent of modern life, and a faith which is adequate for twentieth-century society will have to speak and act with a clarity of ethical awareness that has not hitherto been toweringly noticeable in the conflicts of loyalties involved in economic arrangements, race relations, and international tensions. The failure to penetrate to the ultimate

(5) Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era*, 1932.

(6) See L. T. Hobhouse, *Morals in Evolution, a Study in Comparative Ethics*, 1906, and later editions.

ethical implications of faith has been tragically widespread in its consequences. Far too frequently western Christianity has appeared to acquiesce with an apparently easy conscience in rampant social injustice, and to accept the moral presuppositions of the surrounding culture, conserving the values already reached by society in its upward evolution, rather than making effectual efforts to enhance or elevate those values. The charge against religious orthodoxy concerning its helplessness in the present social scene would be robbed of much of its cogency if the representatives of the faith were to exemplify the moral vision that made Christianity so powerful a force in earlier epochs, and if Christian thinkers were more aggressive in counteracting the modern scientific concept of man as a creature identical with the rest of nature.

Christians themselves sometimes make the plea that they are at present caught in a transition period of history, an era when the power of the mind and the fruits of the spirit appear impotent against the onrush of historical-political events and the forces of scientific materialism. But to concede that the creative force of the spirit is a mere pawn of other forces is to admit, in effect, the validity of the Marxist view of man and history.

A faith fit for the needs of the future will have to keep abreast of the best knowledge of the present, without sacrificing the valid insights of the past. To command the allegiance of the ethically enlightened, it will have to embody a level of moral wisdom that transcends contemporary standards. For upon the moral judgments that men make, the quality of their religion and the future of their civilization, depend.