

DOGMATIC DISBELIEF

A. S. MURRAY*

SCIENTISTS tend to be bad philosophers. They must as far as possible exclude from their observations what is relative to the observer, as in physics Einstein showed how to do completely. This ought not to mean excluding the observer from consideration: on the contrary it means determining the actual relation of the observer to his data. Yet many scientific workers ignore the observer and attend solely to the material under study, which in many departments may not be improper, but is unsound as a method of considering reality as a whole. For to ignore the observer and the fact that observation and reasoning are possible at all is to exclude from consideration some of the data most significant for an understanding of the whole. One finds some scientists forming their conception of reality from its less meaningful parts and drawing agnostic or atheistic conclusions.

Agnostics charge believers in God with wishful thinking: "projecting upon the screen of the universe their own desires and hopes." That persons often do so project their desires and hopes is of course true. But the hypothesis that such is the basis of historic Christianity fits the facts very poorly, and one suspects that those who dogmatically assert it to be true have not troubled to become familiar with historic Christianity. Far from offering a cosmic guarantee for the fulfilment of men's natural desires and hopes, as upon this hypothesis it exists to do, Christianity declares their fulfilment neither possible nor desirable, demands instead that they be drastically reconstructed, and offers men aid and guidance in so reconstructing them. Instead of Christian men's natural desires imposing upon them their view of the universe, it is their view of the universe which corrects their desires, centering them upon God and not upon self. And since Christians are put on guard against their natural desires by their beliefs, it is not believers but unbelievers who are the more liable to wishful thinking and the illusion of freedom from bias.

In experience men meet not only those aspects of reality which lend themselves to mathematical analysis and expression they meet also the beautiful and the good, together with their opposites. To the good one cannot be neutral: it demands men's approval and active devotion, and they must either yield to this demand or reject and resist it. In ordinary human

*Minister of St. Andrew's United Church, New Richmond, P. Q.

nature it meets strong resistance, so that one can choose and live the good only by overcoming this resistance. And indeed good that cost nothing would be worth no more. The man who fancies himself without bias in matters of good and evil, and especially in his choice whether he will acknowledge God in thought and life is the victim of his own wishful thinking, which betrays itself in dogmatic uncritical disbelief.

For example, a distinguished Oxford professor of history summarily disposes of God and the moral law because evolutionary theory has led into an almost purely relativist way of looking at things. He asserts that any rethinking of religion is entirely futile and as an example of such futility singles out C. S. Lewis. Professor Rowse's scorn for the thinking of Lewis may be more significant than Rowse himself perceives, for Lewis, with a confidence in reason rare in our day, challenges his readers to consider the facts as objectively as possible and to follow reason where it may lead. That Rowse rejects Lewis so decisively tells us less about the nature of the universe than it does about Professor Rowse.

With a far more profound knowledge of evolution than Professor Rowse, the late Lecomte du Nouy was convinced, and supported his conviction with acute mathematical analysis, that, given sufficiently intelligent consideration, the facts demonstrate the reality of God, and not merely the pure mathematician for whom Sir James Jeans argued, but God as moral personality. If the facts permit so brilliant a scientist as du Nouy to draw such a conclusion, how can they warrant anyone less informed in drawing a contrary conclusion with so much assurance?

The versatile and urbane British unbeliever, Alex Comfort, declares that science cannot accept a God who cannot be directly inferred. If God meted out obvious justice, then virtue would be identical with prudence; if God could be unmistakably inferred, then worldly wisdom and religious faith would be identical. In such a world character could not be achieved. And so what Comfort is really saying is that science can accept God only if God be morally negligible. This again tells us less about the universe than it does about the thinker and his desires.

A more pretentious and less critical dogmatism is found in Knight Dunlap, professor of psychology at Los Angeles, in his book *Religion, Its Functions in Human Life* (McGraw-Hill, 1946). The book, professing high appreciation of religion,

gives a plausible account of it without admitting its truth. Published as objective science, it distorts data both scientific and historical to support the author's views. According to him, the nature and function of religion are to be determined from early paganism, from which all elements in Jewish and Christian religion are traceable. A similar principle, if applied to science or art, that their meaning and worth are to be found only from their earliest beginnings, would exclude from them everything of importance. And the result that Dunlap gets by applying it to religion is similar.

His basic principle is that faiths grow from rituals, meaning systematized religious practices; not rituals from faiths. That faiths do grow from rituals may be granted; that rituals do not grow from faiths seems to mean that Dunlap dislikes and seeks to discredit the particular faiths, i.e., in one God and in his righteousness, out of which so many Jewish and Christian practices have grown. Certainly the faiths of Amos, of Hosea, of Isaiah and of Micah, and later, that of Jesus, each of whom was a strong critic and opponent of the rituals of his day, cannot be shown to have grown from rituals. Dunlap takes the easier course of suggesting by use of the word, "legends", that there is no accurate knowledge of these prophets or of their beliefs. He does not mention that they had a religion of one righteous God, although he does insinuate against it by pointing out that behaviour attributed to him in certain Hebrew scriptures is by later standards unjust. And he denies that the 8th century prophets were concerned with right and wrong, by asserting that Greek ideas coming in through Jewish philosophers at Alexandria are the source of Jewish ethics. It is true that Jewish ethics did not become philosophical until Greek and Jewish ideas were amalgamated at Alexandria by Philo, a contemporary of Jesus. But the denial of ethics to the prophets is an eight hundred year anachronism for their writings are full of ethical judgments, based on their belief in God.

In spite of most sweeping claims to familiarity with the relevant material, Dunlap is inaccurate in small historical details as well as in the broad picture. For example, he says that the Pool of Siloam was a holy well long before the rise of the Hebrews. It was never a holy well and did not exist until created by the Hebrew king, Hezekiah, when he hid a spring outside Jerusalem from approaching besiegers and, by his famous tunnel, led it into the city as a water supply.

In spite of the claim to rest upon irrefutable scholarship

Dunlap's picture of the origins of Christianity is not more historical. He does not mention the chief contribution of Jewish religion to Christianity: the belief in God and his righteousness, which is the foundation of both. He says that although Judaism contributed something, Greek and Levantine paganisms contributed more. Presumably he means that the invocation of the saints was a reappearance of Greek polytheism. But there is no saint worship in the New Testament. In making Levantine paganism a large contributor he means that the beliefs in the divinity of Jesus and in his resurrection were derived from the Babylonian myth of the dying and rising of the god Tammuz, and those of the Persian god Mithra, and the belief in salvation by the blood of Jesus from that in salvation by the blood of Mithra. One objection to these purely speculative hypotheses is that the first Christians were Jews, highly intolerant of pagan myths, very unlikely even to have known of these, much less, to have adopted them if they had. And Paul, who on this theory made Christianity sacramental by introducing pagan sacramental practices, uses language exceptionally severe even for him in condemning such practices as devil-worship.

And there is early evidence that the belief in the resurrection arose, not out of myths, but out of appearances which those who saw them were convinced were Jesus himself, alive after his death. In an admittedly authentic epistle Paul says that the risen Jesus had been seen by more than five hundred brethren at once, the majority of whom were still alive when he wrote. In contrast the alleged derivation from Babylonian and Persian myth is pure speculation. In support of the speculation Dunlap insinuates by the word "legends" that many narratives in the gospels, even that of the crucifixion itself, are unhistorical.

He makes free not only with historical but also with scientific data, e.g., he asserts that we know of no benefit that fear confers. If, as his context requires, he means rational apprehension, the statement is absurd. He calls belief in mind-reading unfounded, in spite of a mass of experimental evidence that has convinced many who have considered it carefully. He identifies pacifism with cowardice in spite of the fact that standing for unpopular principles, wise or foolish, in the face of popular passion demands a courage rarer than the courage that faces gunfire.

In Dunlap's book Protestantism is seriously misconceived: he says that Protestants rely for salvation on "ritual",

i.e., on "systematized religious behaviour"; that the salvation which they seek is purely other-worldly; that the desire for it is purely selfish and as such immoral; that magical "mana" in the water is relied on for the efficacy of baptism; that all religions are interested only in their own survival as institutions, all of which statements are untrue.

Pointing out that religion initiated several services, such as schools and hospitals, now rendered by secular agencies, Dunlap says that its function is rendering services until they can be taken over by more efficient secular agencies. The sooner it makes itself superfluous the better; especially the sooner it ceases to be the guardian of morals, for it is a bad one, in two ways: (1) it tends to base morals on dogma and myths; and (2) basing morals on religion involves a major appeal to selfishness and so strengthens the evil it is supposed to combat. For "dogma and myths", however, read, "belief in God and the life and teachings of the prophets and Jesus; when these are found to be legendary, morals so based tend to collapse!" It is true of some teaching that it does base morals on an appeal to selfishness, completely false to the teaching of Jesus, who warned in the strongest terms against self-seeking: "He that saveth his life shall lose it," and whose constant appeal was to gratitude, to love and to the imitation of a Father who is perfect. And the writers of the New Testament, notably Paul, continue this appeal, contrary to Dunlap's implication, in attributing Christianity entirely to pagan sources, that Jesus' influence within it was small.

Dunlap declares that inspiration is impossible and that it cannot be known whether the idea of God corresponds to reality. If nothing can be known of God, he does not explain how it can be known of God, if such there be, that he is powerless to reveal himself. Ridiculing those who take the idea of God for true, he still pronounces it useful as a moral goal and advises the church to proclaim God, freedom and immortality because these beliefs will be useful until the time, not yet near, when the last religious functions can be taken over by more efficient agencies. Until then the church should protect its youth against premature corrosion of their Christian beliefs by guarding them from contact with unsettling knowledge.

This warning against candor may be ironical, yet Dunlap practices pretty much what he recommends to others, for his book is calculated, by dogmatic adaptation of facts under guise of unbiased research, to protect university youth against critical corrosion of their adolescent religious doubts.