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Religion and Science

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When this lecture* became inevitable, I decided, perhaps rather rashly, that I would try to set out what I believe to be the essential factors in a very comprehensive and complicated question: that of the relation between religion and modern science.

I am going to try to outline a situation chiefly marked by an unprecedented intellectual confusion arising out of the fact that the astonishingly rapid advance of modern science has caused many beliefs, axioms and assumptions of very long standing to be seriously questioned. The origins and nature of the universe and the situation of man in it have become matters of doubt and of speculation; such indeed are the very questions to which religion and science appear to give different answers. Now these are not questions of interest only to a few philosophers and theologians, they are of immense and immediate practical importance, simply because everyone, even if he hardly ever thinks at all, acts in accordance with some assumption or other concerning the basic realities of his situation. That assumption dictates the tendency, and therefore the ultimate effect, of all that he does, and if it is false his best endeavors are bound to go astray; and this applies with every bit as much force to the collectivity as to the individual. But in these days, in which there is no established traditional order, no unquestioned hierarchy of the intelligence or of anything else, all fundamental decisions are thrown back on to the judgement of the individual, and few indeed are those who are equipped to stand the strain.

First I must indicate as briefly as possible, what I mean by the words "religion" and "science." Not what other people mean, but

* *Editor's note:* The Fellowship Lecture delivered at Wye College in October, 1965.

what I mean; and I must ask you to try to remember, because I shall not qualify them every time they occur.

The Latin root of the word "religion" is connected with the idea of "binding" or "attachment." First, a very broad definition: religion is the link by which humanity is effectively attached to what is greater than itself. By "humanity" I mean mankind as a whole, past, present and future, with all its achievements, aspirations and potentialities both individual and collective. By the word "greater" I mean "eminently" or "incommensurably" greater. If no such attachment is possible, the word "religion" is superfluous. If it is possible, we ignore that possibility at our peril.

But that broad definition must be narrowed down a little. I am thinking, and I expect most of you (perhaps not all) to be thinking, primarily of the Christian religion. But I cannot include everything that claims to be Christian, for the epithet is used to bolster up all kinds of misconceptions, fantasies and sentimentalities. I do not exclude, with similar reservations, any of what are usually known as the "great religions" of the world. They are defined by the fact that they gave rise to great civilizations; it is therefore presumptuous to suppose that they fail to conform to my first definition, despite obvious differences in their outward forms. It is men and times that differ; religion insofar as it is a human institution differs with them, but in its essentials it is always the same.[1] I specifically exclude the many pseudo-religions of relatively recent origin that have attracted so many adherents and done so much to obscure the essentials of religion properly so called.

By the word "science" I mean the whole body of modern observational science in all its branches, but more especially the philosophy that has grown up round it as distinct from its method. That philosophy has permeated modern civilization, and it governs the thoughts and actions of many people to whom the word "philosophy" means almost nothing. The outlook peculiar to it is now pre-

1 The implications of any other view seem to me to be unacceptable. I am, however, far from suggesting that it is wrong to regard a particular religion as the best, or even as the only true religion, in a given set of circumstances individual or collective; on the contrary, it is normal and right, I can do no more than make these assertions, since a dissertation on comparative religion is out of the question here. This aspect of the matter is not vital to my argument. See also the following footnotes.

dominant, and this is something new; it is incontestable that in earlier ages an outlook that can broadly be called "religious" was predominant. Some would prefer to say "superstitious," but that is begging a very vital question. Others might prefer the more general word "traditional."

Is there a conflict between religion and science, and what is its nature if it exists? One can say that certainly there ought not to be a conflict, for each claims both to present truth and to be seeking it, so that the more nearly each justifies its claim the more nearly should they come together; but they don't seem to. I want if I can to indicate how far this is due to the fact that both religion and science have got themselves into a false position, though in very different ways, and how far it is due to fundamental divergences.

Religion and science both claim to be true, and I assert without fear of contradiction in this hall that nothing matters in the end but truth. The human faculty concerned in the appreciation of truth is the intelligence, and intelligence is therefore the highest human faculty. Now intelligence is more than reason alone, for reason must have material to work on; reason is that part of the intelligence which relates one datum to another. The source of the data available to reason is not solely external; in fact it is much more "how we see things" than "what we see." I shall return to this point, which is crucial. Meanwhile the point is that, if religion is true, it must engage the intelligence, and the intelligence above all, even before it engages the will and the emotions. I cannot emphasize this too strongly, particularly because the common assumption seems to be that science has a sort of monopoly of intelligence, and that religion is primarily concerned with the will and the emotions. Science, on its part is not worthy of the name unless it takes into account everything that can come within the range of the intelligence and not one aspect of reality alone.

What then is the universe? The common reaction to that question is to the effect that it cannot at present be answered fully, but that anyhow the only way to find out what the universe is, is by looking at it. The difficulty is that looking at the universe, or at any part of it, can never tell us what it is, but only what it looks like to us. The image is not independent of ourselves who make it. We paint a picture of the universe; it is inevitably highly selective because the material available is limitless, and incidentally includes ourselves. So we choose what interests us, and we also choose the

light in which it is to be represented. As with all pictures, the result is more than anything else a picture of our own outlook, however "representational" of the outer world we believe it to be.

Furthermore: the seer is not what he sees. This duality is inherent in the act of observation, to whatever that act may be applied; it defines the act. Each one of you can observe the psycho-physical complex of which his body is the material aspect; therefore that complex is other than the observer, other than yourself. So if anyone thinks either that he as observer is aware of anything but the reflected image of the outside world in himself, or that he as observer can turn round and discover by observation what he himself is, he is in manifest error. Yet if he does not know what he himself is, he cannot possibly understand the nature of the images that constitute his knowledge of the universe.

This is the inescapable dilemma sometimes summed up in the words "the eye cannot see itself." Directly we put ourselves into the position of observers, we elude our own observation. Our relationship to our environment is therefore not as simple as we like to think, for we are part of the universe and cannot separate ourselves from it. If we think we can, we fool ourselves. A common and natural reaction to this would be: "So what? We cannot alter that situation; we have nothing to go on but our powers of observation and deduction, and must do our best with what we have, so why bother our heads with such matters?" The answer is that I am talking about a philosophy of science that dominates the world, and these considerations are fundamental to that philosophy, whether it likes it or not.

Is there anything, then, that we can say for sure about the universe? At least we can say that it is an order, a "cosmos"; it is not a "chaos." The living being is also an order, an organism, a "microcosm"; like the universe it is a whole coordinated by something. What is it that makes the universe what it is, and us what we are, and gives to each its inward unity? This is the goal of philosophy, whether it be based on religion or on science.

Science seeks this coordinating principle in the observable. From this point of view the universe consists of identifiable and numerable entities; it does not matter what you call them, because all terms such as "particles" or "forces" are provisional and analogical, since the ultimate constituents, as at present envisaged, can only be described in mathematical terms. The point is that the

nature of those constituents is regarded as being deducible from observation, and further, since they are the fundamental constituents of the universe, the coordinating principle is regarded as being inherent in their nature. Therefore the task of science is to elucidate that nature; and it is assumed that if this could be done, everything would be explained; and "everything" must include the psychic element we can observe in living beings. However, that psychic element comes late into the picture, since living beings are regarded as a late (and possibly rather rare and freakish) development in the evolutionary process; nobody supposes that it is they who arranged the stars. But if we, in the name of science, reject all that is not in principle observable, and regard life as a late evolutionary development, we are forced to assume that these inanimate elementary entities or forces, known or as yet unknown, are so constituted as to have here and there combined and arranged themselves in incredibly complex and relatively stable patterns, in such a way that all the phenomena of life are manifested: not only birth, growth, reproduction and death, but also a consciousness both objective and subjective, an active will, memory, emotion and intelligence itself.

This sounds like nonsense, as indeed it is. Nonsense is the only possible result of any attempt to find the coordinating principle of the observable in the observable, or, what amounts to the same thing, of the relative in the relative. Such attempts can only lead to a going round and round in circles, in search of something that is always round the corner and always will be; to a wrapping up of the mystery—or the miracle—of existence and of intelligence in words that get nowhere, in a desperate endeavor to escape at all costs from mystery and from miracle. But in vain, for this mystery is the only thing from which there is no escape save by death. It is the mystery of our own existence and our own intelligence, at once self-evident and inexplicable.

I must explain in parenthesis that the word "mystery," in its debased and commonplace sense, signifies merely anything that is unknown but in principle discoverable. I use it throughout in its original and proper sense, in which it signifies whatever is too exalted or too comprehensive to be grasped or defined distinctively, though it can in principle be apprehended directly. The mysteries of religion are always of this latter nature: the mysteries of science are of the former.

The very principle of the scientific method is to objectify as far as possible. It uses the intelligence but takes its existence for granted; very practical, very sensible, since for most of the work of the world it is superfluous to do otherwise. But if you by-pass the subject, without which there is not objective knowledge, you must not philosophize.

I am far from suggesting that, because they are not "properties of matter" or anything of the kind, life and love, beauty and joy, and intelligence itself, are not of the stuff of which the cosmos is made. Of course they are; they are inherent in its very cause, in its eternal principle, where they subsist as imperishable possibilities. We are aware only of their manifestation under terrestrial conditions, and that manifestation implies the coexistence of their negation;[2] but they are doubtless manifested under endless other conditions of which we can have no inkling while we cannot see beyond our present state. For our universe, in its totality, only represents one of an indefinite multitude of systems of "compossibles," and we only know or can ever know an insignificant fraction even of our own universe, which in its totality is far more extensive, more varied and more wonderful than the wildest dreams of science could ever make it out to be,[3] as Shakespeare knew well: "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophies."

I said that it is nonsense to try to find the coordinating principle of the relative in the relative. It is in fact completely illogical, if words mean anything. I go one further step and suggest to you that what we are always in reality looking for, what we lean on and what we thirst for, whether we know it or not and whatever we think we are looking for, is in fact the non-relative, that is to say, the Absolute, although it is inherently mysterious, unseizable and non-observable. For instance: if you assert that everything is relative, your state-

2 Existence is by derivation a "standing apart." Anything that exists stands apart distinctively from everything else, including its own cause and its own opposite or correlative. Its existence therefore implies that of its opposite or correlative; neither light nor darkness has any distinctive existence without the other. In the light of a real grasp of all that this implies, many puzzling questions sort themselves out.

3 *Editor's note:* ". . . let us return for a moment to the modern scientific outlook, since it plays so decisive a part in the modern mentality. There seems to be absolutely no reason for going into raptures about space-flights; the saints in their ecstasies climb infinitely higher, and these words are used in no allegorical sense, but in a perfectly concrete sense that could be called 'scientific' or 'exact.'

ment is itself relative, that is to say, contingent and mobile. It may be right today and wrong tomorrow, and is scarcely worth making. If you maintain that anything (your statement for instance) is less relative than something else, you are bringing in the Absolute. You may argue that there are regions of relative stability, or modes of higher probability, and that your statement is related to them, and so can be said to be more valid than other statements. What can "relative stability" or "higher probability" be taken to mean? They can only mean "near to something yet more stable" or "still less relative," and so on; and in the end inescapably "near to the unchanging, to the non-relative," that is to say: "nearer to the Absolute."

In fact thought is impossible, it is completely chaotic, save in relation to *the* Absolute unqualified and unqualifiable. We are in fact usually thinking of something "relatively absolute," that is to say, of something that represents the Absolute on a particular plane or in a particular region, rather than of the Absolute itself, but this does not alter the fact that the Absolute constitutes the basic condition and the fundamental assumption of all logical and coherent thought. It is limitless and all-comprehending and therefore undefinable, nevertheless it forces itself upon us even when we ignore it or try to dispense with it. If we try to escape from it, we inevitably end up by inventing a false absolute, which amounts to adopting an unreal and invalid point of reference. This fact is by no means unconnected with the fact that if we try to dispense with God we inevitably end by inventing false gods; and this is true although the word "absolute" and the word "God" are not interchangeable. And when false gods fail it, as they must, humanity has nothing left to

In vain does modern science explore the infinitely distant and the infinitely small; it can reach in its own way the world of galaxies and that of molecules, but it is unaware—since it believes neither in Revelation nor in pure intellection—of all the immaterial and supra-sensorial worlds that as it were envelop our sensorial dimensions, and in relation to which these dimensions are no more than a sort of fragile coagulation, destined to disappear when its time comes before the blinding power of the Divine Reality. To postulate a science without metaphysic is a flagrant contradiction, for without metaphysic there can be no standards and no criteria, no intelligence able to penetrate, contemplate and coordinate. Both a relativistic psychologism which ignores the absolute, and also evolutionism which is absurd because contradictory (since the greater cannot come from the less) can be explained only by this exclusion of what is essential and total in intelligence." Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (World Wisdom, Bloomington, Indiana, 1984), p. 130.

deify but itself. This development has a name: "humanism" we call it.

The rightful domain of science is that of the observable, and surely it ought to be enough, for it is inexhaustible, though so very far from being everything. The rightful domain of religion is that of the fundamental but non-observable mystery, call it what you will, that is the key to everything, though some who claim to represent religion seem to behave as if they had forgotten the fact. Conflict and confusion arise when either tries to occupy the domain of the other. Science gets into trouble and ends up nowhere when it tries to philosophize about ultimates, instead of getting on with its entirely practical work, its craft. Religion gets into trouble when it tries to adapt itself to the approach of science, instead of trying to perfect its own approach.

We are obsessed by the fact that we have found out how to do so much to enlarge the sensitivity of our organs of sense, by the use of telescopes, microscopes and all the rest. We forget that it is what we are, our own inmost nature, the "light that is in us" that conditions what we make of the messages we receive through the senses, and that is vastly more important than how many different sense-impressions we receive; "And if that light be darkness, how great is that darkness."[4] We forget that a mere multiplication of facts (which is, in the strictest sense of the word, interminable) can do nothing whatever towards improving the quality of our intelligence; indeed, when it becomes an obsession, it can easily lead to a fragmentation of knowledge rather than to its unification. I would go farther, and say that it inevitably does so; also that computers cannot help, because they are not intelligent. The most widely traveled individual is not necessarily the wisest; a hermit may be far wiser than he. It is indeed perfectly possible to see too much, and, in the common phrase, to be unable to see the wood for the trees. It is equally possible to look so hard in one direction that you see nothing in the other; to be so preoccupied with your botanizing that you do not notice the bull charging you from behind.

Only one who knows what his own existence is (and he cannot find out by observation, nor can he know any existence but his own) knows what existence as such is, that of other people and things, as

4 Matt. 6:23.

well as his own.[5] Not how he himself or other people or things look or behave, that can be learnt by observation, but what they are, what it is that behaves in such and such a way, whether its appearance be that of a man or an atom or a star. It is ten thousand times more important to know what man is, even imperfectly, than to know, however completely, the distances of the stars or how to smash an atom. It is perhaps not surprising that this kind of knowledge is often most accessible, intuitively but not analytically, to the mentally uncomplicated, and is "hidden from the wise and prudent."[6] You may recall too that the "mystery of the Kingdom of God . . . cometh not with observation" but is "within you."[7]

Not for nothing was the inscription "Know Thyself" written over the gateway to Aristotle's school of philosophy; but of course his philosophy was founded on religion. Religion is there to teach us what we are—each according to his capacity to accept and to understand—and, insofar as it does so, not only does it engage the intelligence, but it is the very foundation of intelligence. "To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," said Ecclesiasticus.[8]

Someone may be thinking: "What is all this preoccupation with oneself? Surely it is contrary to religion as well as to our natural feelings, and surely the one thing that is useful and unselfish is to get

5 *Editor's note:* "Modern science, which is rationalist as to its subject and materialist as to its object, can describe our situation physically and approximately, but it can tell us nothing about our extra-spatial situation in the total and real Universe. Astronomers know more or less where we are in space, in what relative 'place,' in which of the peripheral arms of the Milky Way, and they may perhaps know where the Milky Way is situated among the other assemblages of stardust; but they do not know where we are in existential 'space,' namely, in a state of hardness and at the center or summit thereof, and that we are simultaneously on the edge of an immense 'rotation,' which is not other than the current of forms, the 'samsaric' flow of phenomena, the *panta rhei* of Heraclitus. Profane science, in seeking to pierce to its depth the mystery of the things that contain—space, time, matter, energy—forget the mystery of the things that are contained: it tries to explain the quintessential properties of our bodies and the intimate functioning of our souls, but it does not know what intelligence and existence are; consequently, seeing what its 'principles' are, it cannot be otherwise than ignorant of what man is." Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (World Wisdom, Bloomington, Indiana, 1984), p. 111.

6 Matt. 11:25.

7 Luke 17:20 and 21.

8 Ecclesiasticus 1:14.

on as best we can with making the world a better place; for we can only take things as we find them, ourselves included, and do our best with them."

There are two immediate answers. Firstly: action cannot be effective unless based on a knowledge as accurate and as comprehensive as possible. Goodwill is of course necessary, but, alone it is powerless. If what I have said is right, and if the key to understanding is in the answer to the question, "What am I?" which cannot be answered by observation, then to seek it where it is to be found, namely "within you," cannot be selfish; even apart from the fact that no task is more exacting than that search, which necessitates (at first sight paradoxically) the elimination of all personal ambition or desire. Nor is any task more charitable, since its fulfillment alone can teach us what we are. As a specialist task it is by no means everyone's: it demands both vocation and training; but all other tasks are justified by the extent to which they help to make it possible. This may seem a surprising assertion, yet that is the principle underlying the structure of every civilization founded on religion, however imperfectly it may be realized. No wonder we don't understand such civilizations.

Secondly: the objective of action must be clear and valid. It cannot be either if it is based on uncertainty or misconception about what man is, or about what are his origin, function and destiny. Where any such misconception exists, efforts to do good are likely to be misdirected. That is putting it mildly. "Where there is no vision the people perish."[9]

Most of our actions today are dictated by a combination between a philosophy of science, more or less popularized, and habits of thought originating in a religion that has largely lost its original authority. I am evidently implying that this combination is weak in its understanding of the origin, function and destiny of man. That there should be confusion is not surprising, for it is in their respective views of man's situation that religion and science differ most conspicuously. In discussing their differences, I shall of course use the religious language that is familiar to most of us. It is as adequate as words can be for giving expression to ideas concerning the mystery of existence but it is essential not to forget that it is sym-

9 Proverbs 29:18.

bolical, because it cannot be "descriptive" in the limitative sense of the word.[10]

Let us consider origin and function first. According to the religious view, the origin of all things is divine, and therefore mysterious in the proper sense. Man is the culminating point of the creation, the representative of God on earth, and his special function is to keep the universe in touch with God, who is its origin and its end, and this implies that he must above all keep himself in touch with God. For this purpose he was created and has been given his dominion over the animals and plants. But let me quote St. Francis of Sales (not of Assisi) who, in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, puts the religious view of the function of man in its purest—some would say its most extreme—form.

> God did not put you into this world because of any need that he had of you, but only that he might exercise in you his goodness, giving you his grace and his glory. To this end he has given you understanding wherewith to know him, memory wherewith to remember him, will wherewith to love him, imagination that you

10 Not all religions envisage the origin of the universe in terms of a divine "Creation," as do Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Not all are even theistic, for Buddhism is not. The mystery that underlies all existence can be symbolized in many different ways, not necessarily outwardly coincident, much in the same way as separate two-dimensional projections of a solid object may differ according to the point of view without being intrinsically false. They may suggest the third dimension, but cannot specify it by their form alone. We rightly seek precision in our statements, but a statement can be precise in two senses: either because it is inherently unequivocal, or because it is understood as it was intended to be. Only one kind of statement inherently is unequivocal, and that is the purely quantitative, of which the type is "two and two make four" and the development is constituted by mathematical formulae of all degrees of complexity. Quantity by itself has no significance, however elaborate its formulation; in order to be significant it must be related to something qualitatively distinguishable. In our efforts to obtain precision we are continually seeking to reduce quality to quantity, that is to say, to reduce reality to mathematical formulae. The result is that the great positive qualities: love, beauty, goodness, mercy, intelligence and so on, are relegated to a secondary position, as if they were purely human and subjective, whereas in reality they lie at the heart of everything. For the world, inanimate as well as animate, is constituted by the interaction of quality and quantity, which very broadly correspond to what we call "spirit" and "material" respectively. In trying to express everything in terms appropriate to the "material" aspect alone we lose sight of the spirit. A statement having a qualitative significance can be perfectly precise, despite the fact that the possibility of misunderstanding cannot be eliminated.

> might picture his benefits, eyes that you might see the marvels of his works, a tongue wherewith to praise him, and likewise with the other faculties. Being created and put into this world with that intention, all intentions contrary thereto must be rejected and avoided, and those that in no way serve this end must be despised as being vain and superfluous. Consider the misfortune of the world which thinks not at all of this, but lives as if thinking that it had been created only to build houses, plant trees, amass riches and disport itself.

The scientific view, in its purest or most extreme form, is that all things are the product of an evolutionary process, the details of which it is the task of science to elucidate. They are mysterious only in the popular sense. According to his view, man is a product of evolution; his faculties have been developed step by step, by a process not yet fully understood, but in principle ascertainable. The function of man is therefore whatever he likes to make it, and in practice, to look after himself. If he has a responsibility towards his neighbors, human and non-human, it is a matter of conscience or of mutual advantage; and conscience itself must be a product of evolution; and evolution cannot be allowed by many advanced contemporary philosophers to be purposive in any sense, for fear of admitting the idea, however attenuated, of a god of some sort. So the best that man can do is to derive as much advantage to himself as he can from the accidents of his constitution and of his environment.

I cannot begin to see how these two points of view can be reconciled, unless they are so watered down as to be unrecognizable. However they may be formulated, the priorities implied by each are diametrically opposed.

So much for origin and function. What about destiny? Or if you like a nice scientific-sounding word: eschatology? Religion says that God gave us our lives and that at death they are taken back by Him. Our bodies are but the temporary dwelling-place of an immortal soul, which is subject to a judgement after death, as a result of which it goes to paradise, purgatory or hell. This aspect of religion is often nowadays glossed over as far as possible, but that does not alter the fact that it is absolutely essential.[11]

11 Our eschatological situation is beyond the reach of our imagination, which is derived entirely from our terrestrial experience. The symbolical image of it that

It may occur to you that if what you the observer, the knower, the subject really are is other than the psycho-physical complex you can observe, there is no particular reason why you should perish when it perishes. But the exclusively scientific mind shies at such ideas because they cannot be checked in any way by observation. How could they? They are concerned only with that inmost "I" which we cannot observe, but which is nevertheless our real selves, on the one hand, and on the other with a state in which the real self is detached from the conditions of its mundane existence, including time and space. And if anyone says that only things tied to time, space or other terrestrial conditions can have any relevance for us or contact with us during our lives, I reply that it is precisely the intelligence that is not tied in that way—unless indeed it insists on forging its own chains.

By contrast, the eschatology of observational science is extremely simple, for the method it employs can never reveal any reason for regarding death—the only certainty that faces all of us—as anything but a total extinction; indeed if man is identified with his body it can be nothing else. (I might mention by the way, that there is no need to question the reality of some of the phenomena associated with spiritualism; the interpretation to be assigned to them is a very different matter.) If extinction be in fact our destiny, the hitherto almost universal belief of humanity in some sort of "after-life" must be a delusion, no doubt largely wishful in origin, and must be replaced as quickly as possible by a more realistic view. A realistic view must however take account of every aspect of reality inward as well as outward: so which view is really realistic? And incidentally which is really dispassionate? It seems to me that the postulate of total extinction can serve as an easy way out of the necessity of facing the dread alternative of a heaven and a hell, and the prospect of a judgement in which our smallest and least considered actions and attitudes may outweigh all those we now regard as significant, because it is they that give the show away. And then, with the veil of the flesh torn away, at last we really see ourselves.

An eschatological compromise seems even more impossible than in the cases of origin and function. Either religion is childish and misleading, and destined to give way to an intellectual maturity

most adequately suggests its reality to a particular sector of humanity is the image presented by the religion characteristic of that sector.

of very recent appearance and great potentiality; or else science, insofar as it concerns itself with the origin of the universe or the function and destiny of man, is just plain wrong.

Such fundamental divergences impose an ineluctable choice. I have suggested that, since truth is in question, that choice must be referred to the intelligence, bearing in mind that intelligence is more than reason alone. I should not be surprised if some of you are thinking that in that connection I am attributing more to religion than is really there. More than meets the eye of the casual or unsympathetic observer—yes; more than it is easy for the unprejudiced but puzzled enquirer to find—perhaps; but more than is there—no.

The enemies of religion are interested above all in making it appear to be as arbitrary, as non-essential and as unintellectual as possible. One would sometimes think that some of its defenders, in their efforts to popularize it, were prepared to go a very long way in the same direction. I have made frequent reservations concerning religion in connection with some of its contemporary tendencies, all pointing to the fact that its intellectual aspect—the doctrinal aspect that engages the intelligence and is "metaphysical" in the proper sense of that much abused word,[12] or "philosophical" in the ancient sense of that word—that aspect has become so obscured by an overlay of moralism and emotionalism as almost to be forgotten. Nevertheless, it is always present, and accessible to those that "have ears to hear," in the words of the sacred Scriptures and of their orthodox commentaries; it is also implicit in the outward forms of religion, including its doctrinal formulations and its ritual which, if they had no intellectual basis, would indeed be arbitrary. This intellectual or metaphysical background is the heart of all religion, and, when it is lost sight of, religion cannot but go astray.

12 The word "metaphysical" comes from the Greek. It does not mean "beyond the physical" in the current sense of the last word, but rather "beyond the natural," that is to say "beyond the observable." It is therefore equivalent to the Latin "supernatural," provided that the latter is understood literally and not in its degraded sense, in which it is applied to almost any unexplained phenomenon. Properly speaking, neither word is concerned with phenomena as such, but exclusively with the universal principles underlying all phenomena, explicable or otherwise; and that is as much as to say—with the "mystery" in the ancient sense (from a Greek word meaning "to be silent"). Therefore the language of metaphysic is always symbolical and not descriptive; it must leave room for the inexpressible.

There are two ways of accounting for the hold that religion has maintained on mankind since the dawn of history until now—or should I say—"until very recently"? One is that there appears to be a kind of religious phase, factual but difficult to explain, in the evolutionary progress of humanity from a relatively bestial state to a civilized maturity, of which the present age is probably only the beginning.

The other is related to what I have just said, that the ultimate truth about the nature of the universe and the situation of man is implicit in, and somehow shines through, the very varied forms of religion; and that it is the concordance of this truth with our own inmost nature that confers on religion its mysterious power to attract and to hold. This truth is too comprehensive to be contained by any unequivocal dialectical formulation, so that, for a large majority at least, religious conformity in the shape of belief and observance brings them much nearer to the truth than anything else possibly could. Religious belief therefore is a manifestation of intelligence, at least insofar as it is the expression of a real inward understanding which is unable to express itself in any other way, and moreover has no need to try to do so. Religion takes man as he is, and not as if everyone were a saint or a sage.

Belief is the form in which religious truth reaches the many. There are always some whom it reaches in a more explicitly intellectual form, and they alone are qualified to oppose dialectically any system of ideas that contradicts either religion as a whole or a particular religion. When those who are sufficiently well qualified are too few, or when pandemonium prevents their voices from being heard, religion is led into making more and more compromises, not with facts, which it never denies, but with a philosophy which seeks to reduce God to the measure of man, even when it does not reject God flatly, in either case depriving man of the possibility of rising above himself. The real strength of religion lies in its conformity to its metaphysical background,[13] in the light of which a synthetic view of the complexities of experience becomes

13 The essential unity of the great religions resides in their conformity to this common metaphysical background, and in nothing else. That background has been called the "*philosophia perennis*"; it is the "undying wisdom" that is the heritage of the whole human race.

possible, and in which the situation of man becomes clear in all its essentials. The strength of religion lies also, humanly speaking, in the uncompromising nature of its doctrines, provided that it does not admit compromise.

There can be no justifiable criticism of the precision of science, nor of its objectivity, its quasi-mathematical detachment and (in theory at least) its dispassion. The effectiveness of your work depends on your maintaining those characteristics to the utmost; but their inherent limitation must be recognized. A good thing can get out of place, and I am certainly not suggesting that it is the fault of you, the practical men, that it has happened in this case. The fact is that the approach of science does not get to the heart of things, and it is impossible that it ever should. Nobody denies its effectiveness in changing the face of the world, and in providing us with material possessions on a scale hitherto undreamt of, and in combating disease and pain. Nevertheless, its application has not yet produced much contentment or feeling of security, which seems to be as far off as ever, if not farther. Why do people persist in their quarrels and discontents, hatreds, suspicions and revolts, and show no signs of amendment? Is it really because they have not yet got enough, or because someone else's lack of goodwill or stupidity delays the raising of the standard of living everywhere? It becomes daily more difficult to make that kind of explanation fit the facts. Or is it in the last analysis because even those who are most abundantly equipped for living are starved as never before of all that could give meaning to their lives, and because what is being offered to them—or should I say: what is being thrust down their throats?—does nothing whatever towards meeting this, the first of all needs?

If that be so, I suggest that the reason is that we, whatever may be our *credo*, have in practice behaved as if this life carried its own justification in itself, and have chosen to treat our existence as if it were an accident, and our intelligence as no more than a tool for the satisfaction of earthly needs and desires; whereas in reality that intelligence, provided that we are not too proud to acknowledge the mystery of its origin and of our own, can penetrate beyond the confines of the universe of phenomena and give us a glimpse of what is greater than ourselves; and that is what we need above all to give direction and meaning to our lives, to give us something to live for, and something to die for.

Religion and Science by Lord Northbourne

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