

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

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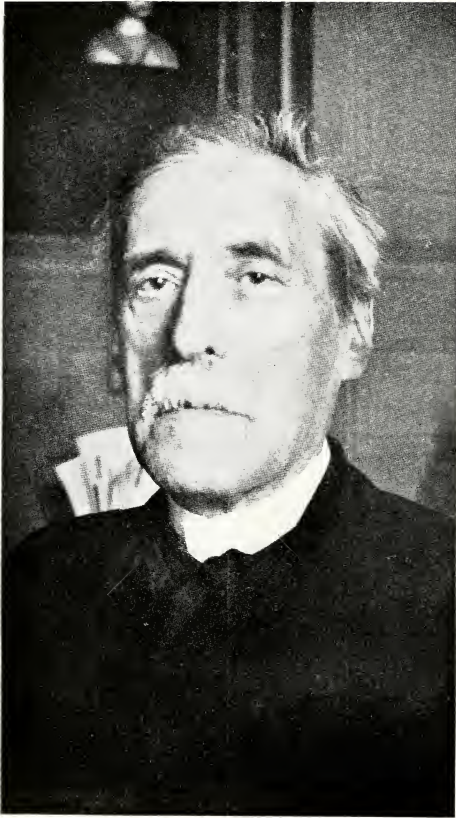
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EMILE BOUTROUX.

*Frontispiece to The Open Court.*

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## THE COMMON GROUND OF LIBERALISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM.

BY C. O. WEBER.

**D**ESPITE the issues of "fundamentalism" waged in the Baptist Church and to a lesser extent in others, there are propitious signs that we are once more to have a religion of the spirit in place of a religion of the word. Strange that the church should ever entertain the dangerous fallacy that the theological formulation of ideals in language is to realize them in fact. While for the most part the energy of the church has gone into a vain attempt to express the most sacred attitudes of life in the dialectic of theology, her spirit has found no other exercise than the rather flaccid one afforded by oyster suppers and the sale of haberdashery. The church has fallen into discredit to the extent that she has been satisfied with the role as conservator of doctrine. It cannot be denied that the church has devoted much of her interest to the development of an elaborate theology to justify the crude, mythological aspects of her faith. And it is a theology well calculated to exasperate the man of thought and to leave the mind of the average layman with the vague notion that Christianity is nothing more than some sort of "manifesto of piety" whose essence consists in its opposition to the other manifestos of Buddha and Confucius. Thus, the church has degenerated to the role of protectionism. Then, singularly enough, as though aware that all of her theological learning is as a card-board structure built on quicksand, she urges that religion must be accepted on faith, as though faith signified an intellectual suicide for the sake of some good that cannot be attained otherwise. With her cloak of infallibility torn to shreds by higher criticism, with a top-heavy theology which few understand, and which none in their hearts believe except those who are graciously predisposed to be convinced, with a rule of faith which, as someone observes, possesses the doubtful virtue of "being useful be-

cause it is incredible", the church has indeed fallen into bad straits. It has been aptly stated that it were as though a moss-grown orthodoxy, seeking compensation for its incapacity to learn, devoted itself to a grim determination not to forget. The shell of theology which religion unwittingly entered has become a prison house. Men turn from the church because they reject the three-story universe which theologians discuss so profoundly. This is the natural result of the attempt to make the Bible, which is a literature of power, into a literature of knowledge.

But it appears that another era is upon us when we again see many things "as through a glass darkly." From all directions come prophesies of "the religion of the future" and the prophets of the new do not often employ the traditional epithets. Indeed, the Christianity of today is following two tendencies, and examination will show that both of them are headed towards religious bankruptcy. On the one hand, the Catholic Pope has reaffirmed the eternal truth of catholic supernaturalism with all of its paraphrenalia of beads, censors, crosses, chasubles and holy water. Masses are still as real in their efficacy as inferno is real in its terrors; and purgatory and paradise still hold forth their promise. On the other hand, the "liberal spirits", such as Charles E. Eliot and Abbe Loisy are waxing eloquent about what they call the "new orthodoxy" and "the religion of the future." The inner content of their religion appears as a simple piety in place of the angels, devils and saints of Catholicism.

True religion, it would seem, should sanction both an object and an attitude of loyalty toward it. Yet religion threatens to break asunder with Catholicism holding blindly to the object while the liberals take possession of mere loyalty—of mere attitude without any object whatever. This development was foreshadowed by the recent furore in philosophy concerning the merits and demerits of pragmatism. Scholastic theism in general and Hegelianism in particular have sought to compel belief in the tenets of religion as a rational necessity. The pragmatists in general with William James in particular have sought to justify religion solely on the strength of its practical necessity. Thus, a faith so highly rationalized and generalized that it fails to satisfy anyone in particular, as an average coat would fail to fit any man, has been opposed to the theory that "the axes of reality run solely through the egoistic places."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Citations from James are taken from his *Varieties of Religious Experience*.



It is instructive to note the diverse views of God that are held by these opposed views. The God of absolute idealism, whom James terms a "metaphysical monster" is replaced by a "pallid adumbration of a spiritual universe" with which we need to establish "union or harmonious relation." Then, as though realizing the thinness of this concept, James sanctions the "overbeliefs" which will give more objectivity to this too highly attenuated a bit of empiricism, which, however, "is objectively true so far as it goes."

Thus, the spiritual universe of James is only able to get content by an injection of the overbeliefs that are purely individual in their origin. He even volunteers such an overbelief of his own in which he attributes to the spiritual reality, which remains after rejecting theological trappings, *goodness* and *personality*. These overbeliefs he admits to be "somewhat of a pallid kind" as is fitting to a philosopher. Thus, the spiritual universe of James free from all overbeliefs is not one whit better than the "metaphysical monster" he condemns, since both alike are conceived to satisfy theoretical interests. It can become dynamic only by the addition of the overbeliefs and these are by hypothesis the additions of individual human beings. In this view, religion becomes *true* in more than a metaphysical sense only by becoming of practical value. This in none other than the philosophical version of the tendency of the present day prophets of whom I have already spoken. Schleiermacher's conception of religion as predominantly a volitional and moral experience with a reward all its own, is a typical exemplar of the liberal tendency.

In seeking to resolve these oppositions we may proceed in two ways. If our bias is historical, and our attitude conservative, we are inclined to declare that when religion becomes detached from such conceptions as that of God and His Divine attributes, it ceases to be religion, though it may lay claim to be an ethical system. If our bias is for individuality and progress (understood to mean *change*) we will declare against this conservatism that it is an unbecoming Chinese ancestor-worship or a stubborn nominalism which forgets meanings in its excessive devotion to conceptualism.

If, with the "fundamentalists", we seek to determine what religion is by discovering the "essence" or common element that the religions of the past have exhibited, we engage in a futile undertaking. There is no agreement among those considered competent in this task that have enabled us to say with certainty what

the content of religion is or what its true symptoms are; and Emile Boutroux has well observed that from the viewpoint of psychology the essence of religion is no other essence than ignorance. If we are to seek for the "essence" of religion, we should begin by purging the word of a certain fixed bias that lurks in it. Heretofore it has been assumed that the essence of religion consists in some *belief* that all religions hold in common. In this case, they were possibly doomed to failure at the very outset for it is conceivable that the essence of religion may not at all inhere in some rational belief; and, indeed, comparative religion presents us with an array of types—some affirming God and some denying him; some affirming an after-life, others denying it; some with well defined moral codes, others without them.

Fortunately, there is an entirely different viewpoint from which we may approach religion; and this viewpoint, I think, will end in something other than the barren results of the ordinary method of comparative research. It is clearly set forth by Emile Boutroux in the article already referred to. Of the attempt to comprehend religion in terms of a concept that will exhibit the common characteristics of all religions, Boutroux speaks as follows:

"To content oneself with this concept in deciding whether religion subsists or is to subsist, is to regard existence, pure and simple, as adequate without enquiring into its quality..... We must note that both in everyday life, and in philosophical reflection, we have constantly to deal not with concept but with idea. When we speak of the future of art and science, of democracy, and socialism, we are not thinking of them as actually given or presented, or as they would be defined in a logical generalization: we assuredly have in mind the thought of what science and democracy can and ought to be, to attain to full realization, i. e., not the concept but the idea of science or democracy."<sup>2</sup>

Let me exemplify the differences involved when we consider the issue between the liberals and the orthodox, first by the conceptual method, and then by the method proposed by Boutroux. To the orthodox in general religion involves a type of belief and conduct whose sanction is Divine; whereas to the liberals the religious life involves a type of conduct whose sanction is human well-being. To decide which of the two deserves to be called religion, we should ask, "What difference in meaning is involved by a life of loyalty to God or a life of loyalty to humanity?" This

<sup>2</sup> "The Essence of Religion", *Monist*, July 1921, pp. 337-349.



plan of campaign, however, is far from being as simple as its statement would indicate. To look for the difference in meaning that God has for the orthodox and that philanthropy has for the liberals is in the end hopeless; for though they admit of the common denominator of "dearness", this quality is notoriously incommensurable. Similarly, to look for the difference that may exist in the practical lives of the liberal and the orthodox, as pragmatism would do, is equally hopeless; for though the practical life may be measurable in a quantitative sense, they are, as quantities, without any meaning or value. This lands us in the dilemma of being unable to decide, from the conceptual view, whether the orthodox or the liberals set forth the true meaning of religion. The failure is due to the fact that it either forces us to adopt a criterion of religion to begin with (typically, the historical criterion) or else leads us to formulations without inner substance. That is, if we set out with the belief that true religion consists in the "worship of God", we ensnare ourselves in the common error that this phrase has an unvarying and unmistakable meaning; and this is precisely the issue that is raised by the liberalists.

The fact that they are in dispute is so far the only result concerning which the orthodox and the liberals can agree. Yet, there must be some more substantial agreement between them that conceptualism cannot evaluate, still less discover. There is another fact that both liberals and the orthodox have overlooked in their zeal, and that is, the dumb acknowledgement of each that *somehow their differences are not final, and that it were a blessing to all if there could be some understanding*. Have we not here already a sympathetic agreement, fundamental in the lives of men, which if brought to light by some method of magic would explain away the differences that are so insistent on the intellectual plane? It is indeed some blessing inarticulately hoped for that animates their argument. Can the intellect show them the common measure of excellence they look for in their religious lives? We have seen that it cannot. Is perhaps the intellect responsible for the fact that they have differences at all? In answer to these questions, let us consider in turn the objections each disputant has of the others religion.

The orthodox object that the liberal insistence on human welfare and its neglect of the attributes and will of God involves the contradiction that we shall find in humanity something better than human—the contradiction of mankind lifting itself by its own boot-

straps. The orthodox cannot conceive of striving except in terms of two levels, one human and the other super-human. The liberals, on the other hand, will complain that the orthodox conception only seems to provide the better things to our hopes: that the two levels of orthodoxy, the human and the Divine, fail to function after all for they are levels that are *different in kind and not in degree*. One is limited, the other unlimited: there can be no transition from the one to the other. God is perfectly good while man is only partially good; and between them there is no common measure just as there is no common measure between miles and an infinite space. How the human and the Divine can enter into the same experience is inconceivable if one occupies an absolute and the other a finite realm.

Boutroux would find in the very natures of the orthodox and liberal the "energizer" that their intellects failed to find. The intellect will always express a functional relationship in terms of levels—as a transition of stages. As a method of describing the occurrence this method may be satisfactory enough; but we are seeking to understand how it may be experienced. This view leaves us with the insoluble contradiction as to how the static realm of heaven and the dynamic realm of human affairs can articulate with each other. It is the contradiction of how perfect rest can hinder or aid human progress; of how perfection can help, still less sympathize with, imperfection; of how perfect wisdom can understand ignorance. Such contradictions are not peculiar to theology alone but arise whenever we seek to conceive dynamism of any kind in the language of conceptualism. What actually occurs in the lives of men is not an inexplicable jump from one state to another; but rather *a creative process which at once makes new levels as it arrives at them*. Needless to say this is an insoluble paradox to the intellect; but it has nevertheless a logic of its own as certain of verification as is the principle of contradiction upon which all formal logic rests.

Applying this solution to the chronic differences between the way popes and philanthropists conceive religion, we would say that popes after all are right in declaring that religion must embody more than complacent average opinion aspires to. Yet, the exponents of the "religion of humanity" are also right in demanding that worship be more than is afforded by an eternally complete God. A complete religion, as we said heretofore, must involve both an object and an attitude, a hope and at once a fulfillment, a realization which is still a resolve. But these cannot be discovered in terms

of logical externality, *for here a simultaneous identity and difference cannot exist*. It is only on the psychological level that this is possible; for it is here that we have change and yet identity, a subject who is undeniably at the same time an object. It is in subjective life that we find simultaneously the sense of something lacking and the possession of this something (in degree and not in part). In short, it is in immediate experience that the religion of the future may find the common grounds of all faiths which it has consistently failed to find when it employs dialectic.

The objection is invariably urged that immediate experience is inutterable; but the whole issue turns upon the consideration of whether in religion this is not a virtue rather than a fault. Some form of utterance it indeed has—the utterance of deeds. It finds voice, not intermittently as do arguments in a debate, but continuously in action. The intellect first gets its evidence and then believes, said Saint Anselm, but in religion we must believe first and then come to understand. So it is by living the life of Christ that we shall come to understand Christianity. Yet, it is not impossible to describe that life in words.

The fundamental fact in the lives of men everywhere is their conviction, whether articulate or inutterable, that life is essentially creative in nature. The very first verse of Scripture has therefore sounded the essential nature and mission of God in saying that God created the world. The stamp of the Divine sonship of man consists in the fact that he also can create. Theology spoiled the account by referring it to a point in time, whereas creation is omnipresent wherever there is life, and Bergson has been able to show that mental processes are inexplicable unless we suppose its presence. The creative aspect of life has always escaped science which by its very method is destined to make of all history a re-threshing of old straw, a redistribution of elements given once for all. It was in deference to a tyrannical intellectualism that made the law of conservation its cornerstone, that led religionists to the subterfuge that creation is a fact but a "miraculous" one. It is high time to give to religion the benefit of the fact that creationism is just as verified a fact in the universe as is conservationism. In social and psychological science the fact of creation is just as necessary as an hypothesis as is the law of conservation in exact science. But in the lives of ordinary men, creation is not a theory, but a responsibility—it is their natural religion. Religion is the overwhelming conviction that our powers exist and that they must be

expressed, that we must strive, however hopeless victory may seem. The true foe of religion, as Wilm observes, is not naturalism, but the mechanical absolutism of science which makes striving a deceptive appearance; or an absolute intellectualism which defeats our powers by representing all problems as solved.<sup>3</sup> That our hopes are realizable is assurance enough for the soul not addicted to the sickness of metaphysical grubbing about the question as to whether or not the good is really predominant in the universe. Dr. McTaggart declared that the important problem for any philosophy of religion is the question, "Is the world on the whole good or bad?" Well, this may continue to be the concern of the philosophy of religion, but as for the religion of the rest of mankind the question is rather, "can the world on the whole be changed from the bad to the good?" To this question there is an answer in the heart of every person. We have the assurance that we do indeed possess such transforming powers; and if the content of religion must be a belief, surely it is this one. That life is a creative enterprise is indeed the common conviction of all mankind unless we except those who find in the very philosophy of determinism a field where their creative imaginations may expend their zeal. When we once possess and understand this idea of creationism we may wholly dispense with theology and its "levels" as the misapplication of a spatial concepts to facts of the psychological order where they can only be vicious metaphors.

Were this theme of freedom the concern of man only in his political affairs it might well continue to be the theme solely of dissertations on politics, statescraft and economics. But to the spiritual genius of mankind it is more than this. The theme of freedom is the theme of all life—it is the moving spirit of religion.

Said Boutroux, "The originality of religion lies in the fact that it proceeds not from power to duty but from duty to power; that it advances resolutely, taking for granted that the problem is solved, and that it starts from God. *"Ab actu, ab posse"*, such is its motto. "Be of good cheer", said Jesus to Pascal, "thou wouldst not seek me hadst thou not found me". God is being and principle, the overflowing spring of perfection and might. He who shares in the life of God can really transcend nature; he can create. Religion is creation, true, beautiful and beneficent, in God and by God."

<sup>3</sup> E. C. Wilm, Henri Bergson, *A Study in Radical Evolution*, p. 149.