

THE TREND IN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

THERE was a time—not so long ago—when educated men wrote about “the bankruptcy of science,” the dogmatism and unwarranted arrogance of specialists and savants, and the impossibility of ordering life, individual or social, without faith, without religion and a super-scientific or extra-scientific morality.

Today science is once more supreme, confident and dominant. Indeed, as we have seen in a previous paper, even philosophy bows to science, especially to mathematics, and humbly begs for a corner in the sun, a corner to be cultivated in a strictly scientific manner, since, by its own admission, it must be scientific or else lose its occupation and all claim to authority. Naturally, the old controversy regarding the proper and permanent relation between science and religion could hardly fail to enjoy a vigorous revival. If science is in full, undisputed possession of the whole field of thought; if nothing can be taken for granted and every proposition must be proved in accordance with the methods known to science, then the question arises, What of religion? Is it becoming scientific: has science supplied it with new data or new theories; are the men of science professing religious convictions and assigning a definite and worthy place to religious scholarship and speculation?

These are interesting queries, and we are in this article to attempt an answer to them. We shall glance at several books of merit and substance which have been written lately on the question of religion versus science, or religion in the light of modern science, and comment on some of the conclusions or major affirmations in these works.

One thing may be noted at the outset—namely, that the discussion of religion and religious claims is deeply affected and colored by the general fashions and tendencies of the time. Psycho-analysis, behaviorism in psychology, modified pragmatism, neo-realism and

like doctrines have consciously and unconsciously shaped the course of religious thought and research. Religious thinkers desire to be as up-to-date as the men of exact science, and nothing modern is foreign to them. Whether the cause of religious faith is served by such an attitude may be, and has been, questioned, but that point does not now concern us. What interests us is the endeavor of so many religious thinkers to find new formulas and new grounds for their beliefs.

There is, for example, the book of Mr. Everett Dean Martin, a psychologist of distinction, entitled *The Mystery of Religion*, in which, as a critical and independent follower of the Freud-Jung school, he puts new constructions upon old terms and finds new meanings in old symbols and myths. To Mr. Martin, religion is "the symbolic appreciation of the mystery of existence in terms of the interests of the ego." In other words, the average man, finding life depressing, dull; empty, and failing to justify it to himself on common-sense grounds, seeks solace in mystical religion. Agnosticism will not give him peace; faith does, and will continue to do so. Science is not for the mass of humanity; in fact, ignorance is ever becoming more and more general and profound as science advances, for, in the words of Dr. Nicholas M. Butler, there are so many more things to be ignorant of than there were in the past. What remains for the mass, then, if not religion? The only alternative is despair and anarchy, and Mr. Martin is not a pessimist. He thinks, in fact, that the increasing discontent of labor and the peasantry, and the universal disillusionment which followed the great war, cannot fail to bring about a return to religion. However, Mr. Martin does not expect or desire a return to crude and gross superstitions and to childish ideas; he does not plead for dogma and ritual; he hopes that life may be endowed with spiritual meaning and that religion will be made as rational as possible, though elements of mystery there always will remain in religion. He holds that a purified psycho-analysis can serve religion by revaluing old symbols, investing religious ceremonial and practices with new significance, and help men to reach spiritual maturity.

Mr. Martin's effort, notable as it is, unfortunately raises more problems than it solves, and it is not clear whether the rational religion he looks forward to is intended for the many or the superior few. If the many need religion as a refuge, defence, protest, and the like, it is to be feared that psychoanalysis, behaviorism and scientific theories of religion will not greatly help them in their quest.

However, the book is a sign of the time, and we may expect more such signs. The more we explore the subconscious and the mysterious in human nature, the more we learn about ungratified wishes, sublimation, fancies, compensations in dreams or visions, and the like, the more efforts we shall feel compelled to build up a religious theory based on the new psychology. But those efforts can never fully *rationalize* religion.

The conviction that religion must contain irreducible mystical elements, and that modern science and philosophy only substitute one form of mysticism for another, informs and inspires another new and suggestive book on theology, entitled *Can We Find God?*, the author of which is the Rev. A. B. Patten, who is conversant with science and is anxious to make religion once more a living and potent force.

Mr. Patten's method leaves much to be desired. He does not appreciate the necessity of clearly defining his terms or of distinguishing between different types or degrees of belief. He is often rhetorical instead of being exact, and, moreover, he does not separate evolutionary conceptions of ethics from genuinely religious postulates or principles. Indeed, too many contemporary theologians fall into the error of tacitly admitting that religion is merely ethics touched with emotion, in the familiar phrase of Matthew Arnold—a phrase that is acceptable to Agnosticism but hardly to mystics or believers. It may be argued, of course, that ethics cannot be fully explained on rational grounds. The late Benjamin Kidd, it will be recalled, contended that much in the conduct we commend and enjoin as ethical is super-rational or irrational. We shall return to this vital point, but at this stage of the discussion it is sufficient to note that many of the moral precepts humanity has evolved and learned to obey are plainly utilitarian, as even mystical theologians will recognize. Religious systems have their own sanctions, their own hypotheses and premises, and deal with problems peculiar to the special field they cover.

Mr. Patten betrays some confusion of thought in comparing what he calls the faith of the man of science with that of the devout theologian. Thus he says: "No saint could be more audacious in believing in God than Marconi and Edison have been in believing in Nature." This statement is fallacious. It is not necessary to "believe" in Nature. Nature is a word we have coined to designate the totality of things which we are called upon to interpret, to investigate, to adjust ourselves to so far as we are able. Nature is here,

on every side of us, and we know that we are but beginning to understand it. Science is modest, not audacious. It keenly feels its ignorance as well as the limitations of the finite mind. It does not mistake convenient assumptions for facts, or names for realities. Science as such depends on evidence and demonstrations, not on faith. The man of science may have faith, but his faith is not verifiable, and he gives other grounds for it than those we call scientific.

Take another of Mr. Patten's favorite affirmations—namely, that “we can find God where he finds us.” Here is question begging with a vengeance. If you know that God has found you, then you have found God. But the problem of the book is precisely to find God, and if we do not know how to find him, how can we allege that he has found us? Again, if God exists, he is, by the hypothesis, omniscient and omnipotent, and he does not have to “find” us finite creatures. But we finite, growing and pathetically limited beings have to find God, or assure ourselves of his existence and determine our relation to him. To affirm, as Mr. Patten does, that we find him in Jesus, is equally question-begging. Jesus believed in God, called himself the son of God (and also the son of man, by the way), and declared that love of God was best exemplified by love and service of humanity. But Jesus was merely one of the great mystics and ethical seers, and his beliefs cannot be cited as *proof* of anything not otherwise demonstrable. The world has had other great religious teachers, and divinity has been claimed for them by their respective followers just as it is claimed by orthodox Christians for the Nazarene. There is nothing very peculiar about the Christian dogmas and myths, though there no doubt is something peculiar about Christian ethics. But, as we have seen, ethics and moral teachings, however sublime, do not prove God; they may merely prove exceptional insight into human nature and the laws of human evolution.

Let us briefly glance at Mr. Patten's other alleged proofs of the existence and governance of God. He bids us find the ruler of the cosmos in our own personalities, in our sense of duty, in revelation, in evolution, in fellowship and democracy, in intuition and in reason. It is greatly to be feared that Mr. Patten mistakes words for ideas. Agnostics are unable to find God in *any* of the phenomena or facts he mentions, and as to revelation, it is far from being a *fact*. It is only a claim, and a most improbable one. To repeat, religion can no more be permitted to start from arbitrary assumptions or to make meaningless statements than can *any* science or any branch of

empirical knowledge which aspires to a scientific status. It is idle to ask the human mind to accept beliefs, even provisionally, without an amount of evidence sufficient to warrant such beliefs.

A very sincere and interesting book, parts of which have appeared in a popular magazine and attracted much attention, recognizes the truth of what has just been said—namely, that the mind cannot be *ordered* to accept this or that belief because it is agreeable, or respectable, or traditional, but must be *convinced* by proof worthy of the name—and at the same time boldly claims that there is a legitimate way of opening the skeptical mind to tentative religious beliefs and gradually transforming them into profound convictions. I refer to Mr. Philip Cabot's *Except Ye Be Born Again*, which tells the story of a conversion of a man past middle age and which incidentally attempts to apply new psychological conceptions to religious issues.

Mr. Cabot believes in prayer and in miracles; he offers proof based on his personal experience; and this experience, he avers, any ordinary mortal can undergo at will provided he can free himself from obstinate prejudice. We are admonished to give religion a chance by cultivating the will to believe and letting the subconscious operations of the mind do their work. The appeal is *ultimately* to reason and science but it is Mr. Cabot's contention that a predisposition to belief is a condition precedent to the reception and correct interpretation of religious truth.

It is not clear, however, that scientific procedure is possible where a predisposition to belief has been created. It has been said that even men of science taking the greatest care to avoid hasty generalizations *often see what they wish to see*—that is, what would support a pet theory. In the laboratory the will to believe is known to be fatal to accuracy and precision: the only condition insisted upon is *the disposition to doubt*, to suspend judgment, to await the slow results of patient and prolonged investigations. What would the theologian say if Einstein demanded a will to believe in Relativity? The answer is tolerably obvious. Why, then, should any believer demand a different attitude toward *his* theories? It is one thing to expel prejudice from the mind and keep it open; it is another thing to abjure prejudice in the abstract and then readmit a particular prejudice in the name of that will to believe which science has never desired as a prop or ally, but, on the contrary, has always sought to banish from its processes.

We now turn to works of a somewhat different category from those so far commented upon, works which revive and seek to answer to old questions regarding the basis for an entente cordiale between science and modern philosophy, on the one hand, and religion on the other. We have, first, the symposium on "Christianity and Modern Thought" by nine thinkers of standing, some of them churchmen and some pure scientists. All these thinkers assert that religion, and especially the Christian variety of it, can be completely "justified in face of the facts that science establishes," to use the expression of one of the contributors, Prof. Spalding of Yale. Some of the contributors go further, affirming, for example, that science *fortifies* religion by enlarging our conception of the supreme being. As one puts it, thanks to modern thought our choice in religion is not between crude, barbarous ideas of God and the relatively advanced Hebrew-Christian idea of a single, great personal ruler of the universe, but between a personal God and *something higher than personality*. Most of the contributors explicitly or implicitly indorse this formula, but the difficulty with it, as with them, is that the formula is a woefully insufficient foundation for a religion or a religious philosophy. As I have argued in previous papers in this journal, no real meaning can be attached to the phrase, "something greater than personality." The sun is greater than a human being, in one sense, and much, much smaller in another, since the sun possesses no conscience, is incapable of introspection, and does not speculate or torment itself with questions respecting ultimates, purpose in nature, the goal of evolution, and the like. If we find it convenient, or even inevitable, as many contend, to *assume* purpose in the cosmos, or thought and goodness in the conception of it as well as in its succession of cycles of growth and dissolution; and if, further, we choose to give the name of God to the inscrutable, incomprehensible, unknowable *power* we suppose to be controlling and guiding existence through all its vicissitudes, our method of procedure may claim a certain legitimacy, but we must not deceive ourselves as to the value of that procedure. We have solved no problem by it; we have used a form of words to conceal our ignorance, and we have made no advance whatever on frank, humble Agnosticism.

There is yet another important criticism to be made on the book under consideration. Like the other meant-to-be scientific justifications of religion, it fails to distinguish between ethics and its sphere, on the one hand, and religion and its sphere, on the other. To affirm

as the contributors do, that, after all, the essence and fundamentals of Christianity are to be found in the integrity, moral efficacy and all-conquering virtue of Jesus of Nazareth is to imply that Christianity is not a religion at all, but a code of conduct, a way of life. Agnostics, as we have already remarked, can cheerfully accept this claim without for a moment conceding the divinity of Jesus, or any other supernormal element in or about him. One does not effect a reconciliation between science and religion by subscribing to a certain ethical system which requires no supernatural sanction and lives or dies by its fruits. Moreover, one must never weary of iterating and reiterating the fact that few, if any, of the self-styled Christians who eloquently and lyrically proclaim "the moral efficacy of the life and teachings of Jesus" emulate that life or practice those teachings. If Christianity be neither more nor less than the ethics of Jesus, it simply does not possess the least vitality. It does not touch life and is wholly alien to human conduct. Jesus, we must remember, expounded a theological as well as an ethical system. It will not do to ignore his theology and dwell on his moral commandments and subtle sayings, or to pretend that proof of the soundness of the latter in some manner establishes the truth of the former. A wise, profound moralist may yet be altogether mistaken in his theological and purely religious notions. We do not accept Mohammedan theology on the strength of some of the admirable teachings of the Koran, which is eminently a book of and for simple desert tribes, as H. G. Wells pointed out in his *Outline of History*. We admire Dante as a seer, moralist and poet, but we do not treat seriously his obsolete theology. The same is true of other great sages and prophets. It is manifestly arbitrary and irrational to ask us to make an exception of Jesus because of his alleged divinity—which is an assumption supported by not a scrap or scintilla of *scientific* evidence. Those who appeal to modern thought for support of their religious views must begin by understanding the logic and methods of modern thought and by applying them to religion without fear of consequences.

Somewhat different and superior to the volume we have been criticising is the other recent symposium on the relations between science and religion, entitled *Contributions of Science to Religion*, and edited by Dr. Shailer Mathews of the University of Chicago, a broad-minded thinker and tolerant educator. The keynote to this volume is struck by Doctor Mathews himself in the opening essay, and one gathers that each of the contributors, whether man of sci-

ence, theologian or religious philosopher, was supposed to approach his particular task with the tacit assumption *that science not only has not undermined or weakened religion properly understood, but has actually revived and strengthened rational faith*. No effort could, therefore, be more opportune or welcome at this juncture. Unfortunately, some of the scientific contributors limit themselves to glorification of truth, to emphasis upon the unity of truth, and, after thus rendering homage to what they conceive to be the *spirit* of religion, settle down to an exposition of their respective special branches of knowledge without even mentioning its connection with religion. Further, and equally unfortunately, even the scientific contributors who, bearing in mind the purpose of the symposium and their own duty—that, namely, of testifying in favor of religion out of their own experience in a field of science—did venture upon a few direct observations on that theme, have precious little to say, and even that little is neither scientific nor tolerably definite.

After reading and re-reading the volume the anxious inquirer must assuredly conclude that modern science has done nothing for religion, but has chosen to leave that whole province severely alone. Even Doctor Mathews only claims that science is giving new content to the conception of God, banishing crude beliefs in tribal gods and arbitrary, despotic rulers of the cosmos, and supplying in increasing measure warrant for assuming reason, purpose and personality in the universe. God, in Doctor Mathews' definition, is the personality of the cosmos, and he holds that science sanctions that definition.

But what science deals with any evidence of "personality" in the cosmos? Science has no facts whereon to base affirmations or denials of personality in the cosmos; it preserves complete silence on that subject. Science knows that the God of the Hebrew-Christian bible was made in the image of limited men, and is no more real than were the numerous gods of the ancient Greeks. Science has caused the rejection of many primitive conceptions, but has furnished no *new* conception. Religion is compelled, of course, to take cognizance of science—even the more rational Fundamentalists do that—and to enlarge and refine its conceptions; but so far no new conception of God advanced by theologians has commended itself to science.

True, one of the scientific contributors to the symposium says that it is no more difficult to see God in the universe than to see electrons, but he refrains from telling us what he *means* by God,

whereas the physicists never hesitate to tell us what they mean by electrons and just why they need them in the new atomic theories. It is, of course, just as childish to think of God as an old man whose work is finished as it is to describe God as a young man full of energy who is still experimenting and learning, striving after perfection. The simple truth is that all modern efforts to form an *image*, or an *idea* of God are quite futile. The phrase "personality of the cosmos" as used by Doctor Mathews is devoid of meaning. If he and his fellow-contributors believe that the movements and changes of the cosmic process, the birth and death of worlds, the evolution and dissolution of solar systems, the rise and fall of societies on this little planet, etc., are all determined by a Purpose, and that the inconceivable and inscrutable purpose is willed and executed by a Supreme Being, they have a right to proclaim their faith and ask us to share it; but they must not pretend that that sort of anaemic faith is worthy of the name of science or that it rests on facts of the order and quality which science deals with and builds upon. Neither should they pretend that a faith of that sort in any way shapes or influences human conduct.

A religion that does not bind, guide men, ennoble and inspire them is not a religion.

Two remarks may be made in conclusion. In the first place, religious thinkers and writers should pay more attention than they do to the question hinted at above—the super-rational or mystical elements of ethics, if such elements there *be* in ethics, as some hold. Should it be demonstrated that utilitarian considerations, even plus inherited ethical feelings, can not adequately account for ethics and ethical conduct, religion would receive a powerful stimulus. This matter, however, we must leave for another occasion. In the second place, what believers should ask of men of science is not grudging admissions, crumbs, condescending praise of good intentions, or willingness to take part in Sunday school exercises or conciliation conferences, but explicit recognition of the existence of religious problems clearly formulated and systematic aid in the solution of those problems. Some men of science—for instance, Prof. William McDougall of Harvard, an eminent psychologist—simply declare that they lay no claim to religious convictions and are content to stop there. Such savants should be pressed to say whether or not they admit *the existence of specifically religious problems* and the possibility of working out a solution of them in a scientific spirit and in intelligible terms. And they should formulate the problems

they consider religious and distinguish between them and such problems as are ethical, or philosophical, or psychological, or historical. Religion should not be another name for a fog. Too many men of science are willing to treat religion—or avoid it—as if it were just that, another name for a fog. Intellectual honesty, clear thinking and the desire to combat cynicism and pessimism in the young should unite to produce a truly scientific attitude toward religion and a scientific method of dealing with its proper and special problems.

A KNIGHT-ERRANT IN THE DEPARTMENT OF THE GULF

EPISODE IN THE LIFE OF EDWIN MILLER WHEELOCK

BY CHARLES KASSEL

IN earlier issues of the present magazine, we followed the career of the author of *Proteus* from his Harvard days as a student of law and theology, in the middle years of the last century, to his appointment as Deputy Superintendent of Negro Labor with the Northern armies at New Orleans on February 20th, 1863.

The interval had been filled with experiences of a noteworthy character. His pulpit at Dover, New Hampshire, largely influenced by the teachings of Theodore Parker, had been dedicated to a gospel unusually liberal, for that time, even in the case of a Unitarian ministry, and his deliverances upon negro slavery had been as vigorous and outspoken as any word of Parker himself.

The raid at Harper's Ferry, with the execution of John Brown, had evoked from the lips of the young minister as remarkable an utterance as can be found in the literature of that crisis, tracing in bold outline, with unerring finger, the course of events to follow. When, at last, the emancipation proclamation of President Lincoln bound the North definitely and irrevocably to the cause of negro freedom, he saw the fulfilment of his cherished hopes, and from