

AS A NATURALIST SEES IT

BY HARVEY M. WATTS

WHATEVER a scientist, a biologist, or, to use the more general term, a naturalist, may think of the great civilizing value of the various religions of conduct, as developed by man from pre-historic periods on, he cannot but be amazed today at the cocksureness with which some of those defending dogmatic Christianity seem to believe that they have saved the day for their cults by frank'y abandoning what they term very loosely the lay-science and the lay-history of the Bible, its "Mediterranean ignorance" in an endeavor to stress what is called its "divinely inspired spiritual message." Intelligent as are these various leaders in those denominations who assume to be more broad and more open-minded than their more dogmatic brethren, they do not seem to understand the inexorable implications, the inescapable dilemma of their admissions. It is apparent that with them the wish is father to the thought when they loudly cry out that there is "no conflict between Science and Religion," since when this statement is made from the pulpits or from the rostrums of science—and there are more "collegiate" scientists who are as fond of saying it to save their skins, their jobs, as are the pulpiteers—in every instance it does not mean and cannot mean that there is no conflict between science and dogmatic Christianity.¹

¹Despite the fact that a number of able scientists connected with educational institutions were not afraid to appear in favor of evolution and all its implications at Dayton, nothing was so full of menace in the Scopes case than the cowardice of certain other biologists, geologists, and naturalists who, in the face of assertive orthodoxy, either kept silence or played into the hands of the bigots by using the misleading phrase—weasel words, indeed—that science and religion were not in conflict. Even some of those who were conspicuous in their defense of evolution later fell back on this phrase when they were criticised, although their whole argument and their actual attitude precluded them believing what their Fundamentalist critics assumed that they believed that their researches were not in conflict with dogmatic Christianity. Indeed, many

For there is, indeed, an irrepressible and irreconcilable conflict between the conclusions of science and all so-called "revealed" yet probably man-made religions, not excluding Christianity, that the world knows of at this precise period of its history. Indeed, all that such a phrase can honestly mean is that there is no immediate conflict between the observed facts of nature and religion, only if one conceives of religion as some vague philosophic statement of a Final Cause and an Active Design in the development of the universe and man's relation thereto. For with all the familiar physical, personal deities of the past, science is in flat contradiction and as to there being any living, loving Personality, in the orthodox Christian sense, back of any Final Cause science is frankly skeptical, since, confronted by the illimitable extent of the universe whose make-up and motions under the reign of universal law are quite ascertainable, all the anthropomorphic personal deities of old, whether they be of the Plains of Shinar, the Valley of the Nile, or of the heights of Sinai, of Olympus, the Mount of Zion, or the Mount of Olives fade away. Moreover, no reasoning from the facts of nature justifies science today, therefore, in inventing any new deified personalities to explain the universe merely to satisfy the whim of those for whom the older mythologies still have a superstitious appeal. Science, indeed, repudiates the maudlin reconcilers and is never so much in opposition as when it keeps its serene counsel in the face of blatant orthodoxy broadcasting exultingly its obscurantistic ignorance from a thousand pulpits.

It is perhaps, too much to expect absolute candor in religious discussions. There are too many vested interests that have to be protected and too many positions that have to be supported. Hence, one is not surprised, though somewhat outraged, at the spectacle of certain doctors of divinity endeavoring to ward off the attacks of science by using smooth and specious words, rhetorical soft sawder, by adroitly claiming that the Church is not only not afraid of science

of the heresy hunters went about quoting Professors A, B and C as saying, "the natural sciences and the literal Bible are in perfect harmony." That the professors have indulged in vagueness to protect themselves in their positions and in their work from pulpiteering antagonists is part excuse, perhaps, and naturally they do not care to be hounded to death, as Burbank was, or removed from their positions by reason of a clamor directed at their honest convictions. But while this attitude may explain it cannot justify the action of those who have seemingly given in and bowed the knee to intolerance which, as the naturalist knows, is based on sheer humbug and appalling ignorance.

but indeed views modern science as the very hand-maiden of a re-stated and broader faith. There are also unfortunately so-called men of science who, likewise, use ambiguous and ingratiating phrases and are traitors to frankness in their seeming admissions that revealed religions are not subject matter for laboratory research. But nothing, surely, since rhetoricians played with the blessed word "Mesopotamia," nothing has equalled the blind confidence with which those who somewhat faintly are aware of the impregnable position of modern science, and who wish to protect dogmatic Christianity from attack, feel they have settled everything by admitting that Mediterranean ignorance of natural phenomena, or knowledge as they like to put it, can be jauntily abandoned by Christianity. That these fairly intellectual prelates do not see the implications of their frank admissions, their forced concessions in the face of the facts of modern science which they feel the Church cannot any longer fight, is one of the most curious phenomena of today. Their seeming unconsciousness of the dilemma which impales them on both horns is remarkable. Take, for instance, a recent declaration of Bishop William T. Manning made in St. Thomas' Episcopal Church, New York, in a Lenten discourse entitled "What We Believe About the Bible Today and Why We Believe It." This seemingly frank declaration of the Bishop contained, among other things, this paragraph: "The Bible teaches Religion. It does not undertake to teach Science. It is the spiritual message of the Bible which is inspired, not its scientific allusions which naturally reflect the knowledge of the time." So! Is there no memory here of that old reconciler Gladstone, who was so completely demolished by Huxley? Is Bryan so soon forgotten? For, of course, Bishop Manning did not think it worth while to point out that not only the various communions of the Christian Church in the past but very large bodies of these communions today believe that the Bible does not reflect merely the human knowledge, or rather lack of knowledge, of the time in which it was written, but is completely, divinely inspired through and through, from beginning to end. And, as they assert, is as inspired in its teachings of history and science as it is in its so-called spiritual message which is the only thing that Bishop Manning wishes to save from out its contents as having meaning for this day and generation. A naturalist, however, would point out that the real fact is that the advance of all science has compelled the intellectuals of the Church, most reluctantly, to take the attitude that Bishop Manning takes as to the errancy of the Bible in matters

other than its spiritual message. He would agree with the Bishop that it is quite true that the Bible, representing a series of works by human beings, produced over many centuries, does reflect the unscientific attitude and the ignorance as to all natural phenomena of the periods during which it was written. He would agree that the Mosaic cosmogonies, the geocentric ideas as to the earth being the chief thing in the universe and all the suns and moons and stars being but a certain decorative background for its theological ideas as to the importance of the earth and man, have been quite disproved by science and have naturally brought it about that intellectuals, such as Bishop Manning are forced to yield along these lines, in order, as they see it, to save the Bible for the educated man of today and so find it necessary to say what the Bishop did in his curious Lenten discourse.

But these concessions do not stop the controversy. They only give it another angle for the honors are far from being with Bishop Manning, since the true naturalist cannot but point out that if the Bishop extricated himself from impalement on the horn of one dogmatic dilemma he cannot extricate himself from the other horn and that is that, as a study of comparative religions reveals, the Bible in its spiritual message is no more divinely inspired than in its secular. This is the issue that is really before the world today; that the theology of the Bible is as unsound as its admittedly incompetent science. It is this implication, which is truly inescapable, that Bishop Manning and all those who represent him shrink from accepting. Naturally, the hopelessly orthodox of all the Christian communions get over this difficulty by simply standing by the Bible in all its aspects and make this acceptance a matter of faith and a mystery which cannot be penetrated or understood by man or by his science. This is, of course, a familiar and an understandable position if a fatuous one, but it is the position which is being and has been successfully attacked by science. For the crux of the issue is that when the intellectuals and the modernists in the various denominations so frankly and almost glibly sacrifice the so-called "Mediterranean science," in order to hold to what they call the spiritual message of the Bible, they argue without their host, since some of the most important fundamentals of this false science, which they abandon as untrue, are the essentials of the dogmatic spiritual beliefs that are the main message of Christianity. In accepting evolution and in admitting that the cosmogonies of the Bible that would preclude a belief in evolution can be abandoned by the devout of today,

it is overlooked that the Semitic legend of Adam and Eve cannot be jettisoned since a belief in the Adam and Eve legend, or in the two contradictory legends of Adam and Eve that appear in the Bible,—admittedly reflecting the ignorance of Semitic and Mediterranean people as to the origins of life and of human beings,—is the very foundation of the Pauline theology of the Incarnation which is historic Christianity. That St. Paul in basing his teleological and theological arguments for the Incarnation and for the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth on the supposed sacrosanct and infallible old Sumerian-Semitic story of Adam and Eve reflected the Mediterranean and Mesopotamian ignorance no true scientist will dispute. He will, therefore, hold Bishop Manning cannot get rid of the one dilemma without involving the other. And the naturalist will point out that the religion of the Bible is as much subject to the investigation of science and of qualified acceptance and rejection today as is the secular science of the Bible which is now so frankly abandoned by the intellectuals and the modernists in the various Christian communions. For, hide the fact as it may, just as the Church has had to acquiesce in the newer conception of the universe and all those things growing out of the development of the earth as a somewhat insignificant dust speck with millions of solar systems and millions of suns whirling in what is essentially illimitable space, so it will have to deal with the revelations which science is today making as to the origin of all religions. And though in the face of an unparalleled recrudescence of old time bigotry in Catholic and Protestant communions by which the older orthodoxies are being passionately reaffirmed, the odds against science in general are not so formidable as they seem to many in these days of Dayton trials and anti-evolution laws.

That the rationalizing prelates and modernist doctors of divinity seem to be able to indulge themselves in vain delusions in an effort to save what they consider the spiritual message of the Scriptures which they only consider Holy in one aspect is, after all, a small matter. For, if they know anything they know that the comparative study of religions and the comparative study of Biblical texts reveal the Bible as a man-made work and not as the inerrant inspiration of an omniscient, omnipotent deity, and Judaism and Christianity as developing along the familiar lines of all other religions, not unlike those that Christian dogmatism so freely describes as false religions. For these comparative sciences reveal that man, in an endeavor to give mystic and miraculous virtues to his own practical

inventions, in a very frenzy and ecstasy of self-abnegation ascribes to the most abject of deities all the cult obligations, customs and ceremonies which he has himself worked out in travail these thousands of years. It is not God, nor the gods, but man who has invented all the litanies, all the liturgies, all the literature, all the theories, all the deities, creating them, indeed, in his own image more or less glorified; all the poetry, all the prose, all the arts, all the humanities, all the consolations in an endeavor to invest these so-called "divine" inventions which however are really all his own with beauty and a compelling appeal of love and light. And he has also invented all the laws and codes of ethics and morals, all the religions of conduct developed through the life and utterances of human beings who have assumed the role of prophets and teachers, sublime or otherwise. Consequently, instead of ascribing moral codes, such as the Ten Commandments, to the necessities growing out of human experience they are claimed by the myth makers to be the direct revelation of divinity and essentially miraculous as are also all the taboos and all the don'ts of all other cults. And, naturally, the origin of all the founders of the various religions is invested also with a miraculous glamor and every teacher and prophet, about whose personality crystallizes a religion, is assumed not to have been born in ordinary generation, but to have been the product of the extra and supernatural relation of divinity to human beings. Virgin or miraculous births are common to many beliefs and have endowed numerous founders of religion with attributes of godhead. To all this, which might be called, and which often is in the humorless discussion of the day, an almost grotesquely obstetrical conception of religion, science very flatly, through biology and through its comparative study of religious origins, declares that these outgivings are all man-made and "inspired" only in the sense that any work of creative human ability is inspired.

To sum up, science faces both the dilemmas presented by Bishop Manning's statement and refuses to be impaled under one or the other. Science, viewing the Bible as man-made, listens somewhat contemptuously to the constant disparagement of science not only by Fundamentalist divines but by other prelates who ought to know better, and by certain weak-kneed scientists affecting a false humility, and is particularly impatient of those who believe they are defending the faith by loudly proclaiming the disingenuous argument that because geologists, physicists and biologists may differ honestly as to the age of the earth and the determining methods of evolution,

the only alternative is to accept blindly a worn-out Sumerian-Semitic legend of a world created in six days, culminating in Adam and Eve! And science is even more impatient of the equally specious claims made in so many Fundamentalist pulpits today that archaeology and historic research "confirm" the Bible. Science frankly admits this "confirmation" but in a wholly different sense from that in which the pulpiteers present it to their bewildered auditors. As a naturalist sees it, in the proper logical sense, the science of archaeology and of comparative history and the science of comparative religions and the science of comparative texts "confirm" the Bible in a nowise different manner than modern investigations confirm Hammurabi, the Babylonian and Egyptian writings, Hesiod, Homer and Herodotus, or any of the Greek and Roman myths, legends and beliefs as to the origin of man, the origin of their deities and their civilizations. In these "confirmations" which indicate all these Scriptures as man-made, a naturalist, however, sees nothing derogatory, nor does anyone worthy of the name of an equipped scientist deny the ethical value of or that there were and are magnificent consolations and civilizing influences in all these man-invented cults and religions, though the part man played in them is ignored, degraded and despised for dogmatic purposes by Christian theologians. As William James once pointed out in determining the values of the various religions and the civilizing effect of their codes and consolations, Christianity naturally is placed on the highest plane. But science values these consolations for their approved results as man-made institutions, knowing that there is nothing supernatural back of them, the beliefs being nothing more than human altruism in its most appealing and transcendent aspect, the result of man's humanity to man reflected in the practical codes and in the most idealistic of the beatitudes. As to secular science itself the naturalist knows that the illuminating fact is that it is through the unparalleled physical discoveries of science that man has been spiritually emancipated by being freed from the abject fear of nature over which he has acquired dominion by his own unaided efforts. In the face of this, when somewhat impertinently asked by orthodoxy today to affirm its attitude toward a possible personal deity behind the mechanism of the universe, science honestly takes the agnostic position and declares "it does not know." This is not the same thing as saying that it cannot know or may not know sometime, though there is nothing which Fundamentalism so misrepresents as this agnostic position of science which Fundamentalism interprets, because it is fearful of

the real implications as meaning that science is incompetent to judge of Christianity or of any religion. It refuses to see that, on the contrary, as to the inadequacy of the Mediterranean religions to explain the universe science sees displayed, as it were, in the book of Nature the old familiar inscription, writ larger and more luminous than the vision that Belshazzar had, conveying to the squabbling Christian secretaries the inescapable warning: "*Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin!*"