

DR. WHITEHEAD AND PROF. MATHER ON RELIGION

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THE views of a distinguished scientist and philosopher on religion—its essence, foundation and rôle—when expressed deliberately, and after much anxious study and reflection, are of course worthy of the most serious attention. The present writer has deplored and criticised offhand, superficial utterances on religion by prominent and influential men of science, and it is plain that such utterances help neither science nor religion. But the exact thinker, the sincere and thoughtful student who gives us his mature convictions on the subject of religion renders a real service to the cause of truth and reason, and should be warmly commended for his contribution.

Prof. A. N. Whitehead—to whose religious essays the writer has repeatedly but briefly referred in previous papers—is a physicist, a mathematician, a philosopher and an original, independent thinker. In dealing with religion he apparently makes no assumptions, begs no questions, evades no difficulties. He tries to be as rigorous, as precise, in short, as scientific, as he is when dealing with matter, with conceptions of space and time, with the development of the theories of evolution.

It is for this reason that his Lowell lectures on religion, delivered in 1926 and published in book form under the title *Religion in the Making* possess deep interest and significance. Both his negative and his positive conclusions are calculated to challenge attention and provoke discussion. While the germs of these essays may be easily found in his *Science and the Modern World*—discussed by the present writer in these pages—they are valuable and instructive because they expand, elucidate and amplify the propositions adumbrated in the more general volume.

The conventional and orthodox theologians will not care for the essays. The advanced and radical schools of religious thought and the frank agnostics may be puzzled here and there by some of the author's arguments, or terminology, or methods, but they will be grateful for the essays. There is much in them that makes for clear, honest thinking and for the right treatment of religion.

To begin with, how does Dr. Whitehead define religion? It is worthy of note that he attempts no strict, technical definition. He prefers to indicate the nature and essence of religion in several pregnant phrases. Here are some of them:

"Religion is the art and the theory of the internal life of man, so far as it depends on the man himself and on what is permanent in the nature of things."

"Religion is the force of belief cleansing the inward parts."

"Religion is solitariness" or "What the individual does with his solitariness."

"Religion is world loyalty."

"The final principle of religion is that there is a wisdom in the nature of things, from which flow our direction of practice and our possibility of the theoretical analysis of fact."

"Religion insists that the world is a mutually adjusted disposition of things, issuing in value for its own sake."

The foregoing quotations are obviously superior to narrow definitions. But we have only generalities so far. What is *essential in doctrine* to religion? What are its basic propositions?

Fundamental to religion, answers Dr. Whitehead, is the doctrine of the nature of God. In this respect, as we know, great cleavages of religious thought arise. Dr. Whitehead impartially states the two opposite extremes, the doctrine of God as the *impersonal* ruler of the universe, and the doctrine of God as the *one person* creating and sustaining and governing the universe, and rejects both—naturally enough. His own conception of God may be summarized as follows:

"God is the kingdom of Heaven; that is to say, the complete conceptual realization of the realm of ideal forms. He is complete in the sense that his vision determines every possibility of value. He is not infinite; he is limited, and his limitation is goodness. God is the mirror which discloses to every creature its own greatness. The world lives by the incarnation of God into itself; apart from God, there would be no actual world, and apart from the actual

world, there would be no rational explanation of the ideal vision which constitutes God."

In other words, God is the term we have evolved to denote and sum up our highest ideals—ideals that cannot be alien to the nature of the world and that are in fact implicit and inherent in it. If there were no ideals of goodness and justice, there would be no worthy conception of God. There is evil in the world, but we can and must eradicate it. Good must overcome evil, and our belief in this potency of good is a belief in God. God confronts the actual with the potential and possible; he thus solves all contradictions and indeterminations. God, therefore, is the *valuation of the world*, not the world itself. He is not a person or super-person; he does not answer prayers; he does not promise or vouchsafe immortality to human beings; he does not send any one to save any one else—all such notions are childish.

But it is natural for human beings to entertain crude beliefs and to modify them gradually in the light of science, method, critical thinking and history. Religions that fail to adjust their creeds and dogmas, their metaphysics and philosophy, to new conceptions decline and die. Christianity is one of the decaying religions because of its impurities, its survivals, its slavery to dogma and irrelevant tradition. But *religion* is not dead or dying; it is only "in the making." We need and are fashioning a true and sound religion that will solve the riddles of obsolete theologies, that science will accept and that will once more offer light and guidance to humanity. If religion does not shape conduct, it is not a real, significant thing. To believe in order and in righteousness in the universe is to believe in living up to and working for that order, that ideal of righteousness.

We have, I venture to think, in the foregoing, a faithful and sympathetic though brief restatement of the position taken in Dr. Whitehead's essays on religion. It is plain that with all the negative conclusions of the lectures, or the historical exposition they contain, or the charitable attitude of the author toward human frailty, inconsistency and tendency to formalism, rigidity, wrong emphasis, veneration of nonessentials and unwitting sacrifice of essentials in religion, it is impossible not to agree. But, unfortunately, there are weak points in the case for religion built up from Dr. Whitehead's interesting point of view. At any rate, the Agnostic is not likely to be easily converted to that point of view.

In the first place, the legitimacy of Dr. Whitehead's definitions and characterizations of God may well be—and have been—questioned. His right to use words in any sense he pleases is admitted, but that is irrelevant. How many other thinkers will be persuaded to use the word God in Dr. Whitehead's sense? A god without a name, a habitat, personality, attributes, will not do. Spencer used the term Unknowable instead of the term God, but he assumed the existence of a Power whence all things proceed. Dr. Whitehead rejects such phrases. He does not like the words Power, Force, Unknowable, Spirit, and studiously avoids them. He believes in the moral order of the Universe, in moral progress, in the conquest of evil by good, in the gradual development of harmony in human society. There is, he says, order in the universe, else it could not exist. Yes, there is a sort of order, but is it *moral*? We cannot speak of moral order among the suns and constellations, the solar systems and their planets. Moral conceptions are purely human, and have no reference to any other phenomena. The birth or death of a planet or a star is a fact without our moral significance. The death of this earth of ours would be an event of small moment to the universe, and would be neither moral nor immoral. But the relations between individual human beings, or between nations, or between states and individuals give rise to moral conceptions. Dr. Whitehead attaches far too much importance to the human race, and his religion, after all, is strangely anthropomorphic.

Further, he assumes that good is overcoming evil and that the ideal is transforming the actual in this world of ours. But he must know that there are thinkers who do not believe in moral progress and see no real evidence of it. They insist that only forms and modes are changing, while the essence of human nature remains unaltered. We still have war, crime, revenge, cruelty, punishment, selfishness, misery, injustice, oppression. Evil is everywhere, and the triumphs of goodness are few and shadowy. Where, then, they ask, is God, and what is his function and authority? And suppose evil conquers in the end, not good. Suppose strife and brute force destroy civilization—a not inconceivable possibility in view of the world war, the preparations for another war, the revival of militarism and navalism, the recrudescence of overheated nationalism and narrow, formal patriotism.

The present writer believes in moral progress, and thinks that history sufficiently supports the doctrine of progress. But he does

not believe in the *elimination* of evil. New forms of evil always appear and will continue to appear; the ideal will never overtake and completely transform the actual. In that case, the idea of God, even of a limited God, will become more nebulous and misty than ever.

There is still another difficulty for Dr. Whitehead to face. Where does he find his data for the ideal of goodness and harmony, of beauty and nobility? How does he evolve his idea of goodness and morality? He does not, of course, accept the childish belief in Revelation. He does not believe that this or that man was God's special messenger and savior, or that any particular message or book is "inspired," in the conventional sense of the term. He quotes Jesus' "the kingdom of God is within you" and assumes that the phrase implied that the kingdom of God was not and could not be *anywhere else*. In passing we may remark that this interpretation is quite arbitrary, for Jesus believed in a personal God, in a place called heaven, in the resurrection of the dead, in human immortality, in other orthodox Hebrew notions of his time and milieu. He stressed the fatherhood of God, it is true, and the love and mercy of God. But in this he is not always consistent—at least, as portrayed and represented by his disciples and worshippers. His inconsistencies and contradictions, indeed, are part of his fascination and mystery.

If, then, our ideas and conceptions are *our own*, based on our experience, racial and individual; if conditions, traditions, circumstances, the logic of necessity and utility combine to fashion our beliefs and ideas, the God hypothesis is entirely superfluous. The law of parsimony or economy, so-called, forbids the use of gratuitous and unnecessary suppositions. Men have believed monstrous nonsense, and there is no quality of their mind that saves them from superstition and absurdity. Facts mar and do force them to modify their beliefs; facts, not any inner grace or light. Is experience God? Is God a name for all phenomena, past, present and to come? That is not Dr. Whitehead's view, though logically he cannot escape it. He deliberately limits God to goodness, but goodness is not an absolute, a fixed quantity of a determinate quality. It is relative, and God must be relative if he is another name for goodness. A relative, limited God—one can hardly conceive such an image!

It is difficult to see then, what good the God hypothesis does if we follow out Dr. Whitehead's analysis.

And, to use his own words, a religion that does not serve the ideal, the good and the true, is not religion worthy of the name.

Dr. Whitehead points out that religion may be destructive and injurious, and that the worst crimes against the essence of religion have been committed in its name and in the name of God. We may add that millions of men think they are religious when they merely profess certain empty and hollow doctrines, or exalted doctrines which they have no intention of translating into practice. If a Christian be one who loves Jesus and accepts his teachings as divine, or as true and healing, then there are very few Christians in the world, since few, if any, apply or practice Christian precepts and teachings. He who believes in a doctrine and violates it in his daily life believes only in a Pickwickian sense.

Man, says Dr. Whitehead, is or is not religious. Thinking has nothing to do with religion. To believe in values and ideals is to co-operate with the forces that make for righteousness in realizing those values and ideals; to co-operate with God, Dr. Whitehead would say. To be true to one's own best and noblest self, the writer prefers to say. And it does not seem quite philosophical to call the best in us "God."

Similar reflections and criticisms are invited by the opinions and expressions of Prof. K. F. Mather, of the Harvard chair of geology, in a new book entitled *Science in Search of God*. This volume has received high praise from serious thinkers, and demands consideration. Prof. Mather believes that science and religion are, or should be, friends and co-workers, not enemies, and of course he asks theologians to adopt the scientific method. So far so good. But he has certain admonitions and explanations for the men of science who are indifferent to religion or frankly antagonistic to its claims. He says:

"Science has as its goal the complete description of the universe in which we live; religion seeks to find the most abundant life which men may possess in such a universe."

But do not the several sciences seek to find the most abundant life? What is the mission of economics, ethics, politics, sociology and philosophy if not the enrichment and improvement of life? It is arguable that religion begins where the social and moral sciences stop, but that must be proved, and cannot be assumed. Prof. Mather makes an attempt to point out specifically the part played by

religion, and religious ritual and ceremonial, in making life most abundant. To quote again :

“Love and beauty are not yet resolvable into units of a scale or ticks of a clock; either they have no time-space relations or those relations are not yet susceptible to measurements. . . . Those qualities of the spiritual which are revealed by measurable transformations of matter and of energy in time and space should be studied scientifically. But other qualities of the spiritual are revealed only in the discovery of values. These are distinctly in the field of religion; it is religions insight rather than scientific observation which permits their recognition.”

Here, again, the words are ambiguous and question-begging, and the conceptions behind them vague, too vague for scientific discussion. Love and beauty are real and important values, the most important in human life, but there is nothing religious about much of what appears to us lovely and beautiful. Love between the sexes is not a religious value, and other examples may be cited on the same point without swallowing Freud and his exaggerations. Because some values cannot be measured or explained physically and physiologically, it does not follow that we are driven to postulate supernatural origins and significance for them. What is called “religious insight” takes us nowhere; it leaves us facing an impenetrable mystery. We “recognize” nothing beyond our ignorance and mystery the moment we leave science. We are free to make assumptions, but no instinct is responsible for the assumptions of religion. We do not know, for instance, of what stuff the universe is made, and we gain nothing by saying that the unknown stuff was created by God. We are finding out, in the words of Bertrand Russell, that the physical is not as physical nor the mental as mental as men have thought in the past. We are satisfied that there is mind in all living things, and perhaps in non-living things, but we have no idea what mind is and can only know what it does where we can watch and test its operations. To say that some instinct refers mind to the field of religious values is to say nothing that has any meaning.

Too many men of science protest too much when they disclaim antagonism to religion and assure the average man that science and religion are not incompatible. Such condescension and patronage may satisfy nervous theologians, but they offend common sense. The man of science, as man of science, is an Agnostic beyond his own sphere. He cannot pass upon the claims of religion and theology

except in so far as they are scientific. When he is asked to express opinions about God, the purpose of being, the future of the universe, the meaning of life, the fate of the so called human soul, he must plead ignorance. He has no data to justify even bold speculation. He must suspend judgment.

To allege that we are religious when we love somebody, or find joy in work and in research, or serve our fellows, or admit that we know very little, or have faith in human progress despite evil, injustice and cruelty in nature and in human life, is not to use scientific terms at all. A little more rigor, Messrs. Savants.