

BELIEF AND REASON: A STUDY IN THE NATURE OF
BELIEF AND ITS PLACE IN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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I

TO every man of thought there comes a time when he faces the question, "what, rationally, am I to believe and what am I to reject?" Feeling that in the past so much has been taken for granted, he joins in sceptic mood with the cry of Pope, "what can we reason but from what we know?"

It is perhaps in the works of Plato, "the first true theist and systematic philosopher," that one may trace the beginnings of a rational and logical attempt to distinguish "opinion" from "reasoned knowledge." Although Plato adopted a theistic attitude, it was scarcely religious, rather was it of a purely philosophical nature. In other words his theism had no essential religious value in itself. In fact, Plato was oftentimes at a loss to reconcile his beliefs with his experience. It is a significant fact that, in many cases, not finding sufficient rational proof for his belief, he narrated a myth claimed to be symbolic of the truth.

Yet recent thought demands truth that is something more than merely symbolical. Many thinkers nowadays seek argument and proof for their belief to which they can affix a Q. E. D. finding like Plato did, there is much in religion that seemingly cannot be proved by cold reasoning. Something more than a myth is required to explain such doctrines as, for example, the Trinity: there is a perpetual cry for "commonsense" proof and so often it is not found. In failing to reconcile vague religious ideas with what seem the certainties of everyday life, the "man in the street" is led to disparage religious belief in general.

Some even are convinced of the idea that their more religiously

inclined fellows act against the dictates of intellect, and refusing what their mind logically implies, blindly follow ideas socially accepted. Though often derided, are they not regarded with an element of envy? Surely this is because deep down in mortal hearts there is a craving for something in which to place belief. Certain sceptics may lay claim to the fact that they rejoice in believing nothing, yet how often is this due to their having in early days put belief in something that has betrayed or failed them! How often does it appear that the sweet milk of belief has been soured by a stormy crossing over life's turbulent seas!

The majority of modern psychologists would deny that belief is an instinct, yet admit that in every man lies an inborn tendency towards it. This is patent from infancy upwards: in fact "make-believe" is surely one of childhood's most popular games. From earliest days there is a continual seeking for objects of belief.

Man, then, by nature is prone to accept belief blindly. Afterwards, a little more seasoned by experience he sets out on the same quest as Plato, to distinguish belief from "reasoned knowledge," and fails. Then the question comes as to how much he is to believe of what he cannot prove by experience or logical argument. But one point will probably strike him before this. It is, why does belief seem to stand aloof from and irreconcilable with "rational knowledge?" An obvious answer suggests itself to this; the realm of belief stands just halfway between the domains of logic and psychology. Every belief has its logical and also its psychological aspect. These two have to fit together in some way, for neither logic or psychology have sheltered belief wholly. Thus belief, to quote Dr. F. C. S. Schiller, has fallen a prey to theology and become annexed purely to religious terminology instead of being used in a better, broader sense.

The whole root of the question, however, lies in what is the ultimate nature of "rational knowledge." To the plain man it would stand merely on merit of its name, but epistemology sheds a different light on the general prospect. It denies the "rational knowledge" our ancestors would have accepted that a flower is blue because one sees it so, that a table exists because it is tangible. What was proved for them is not necessarily proved today. A great revolution of thought has come about and even the "rational" proofs of logic and mathematics are not left unchallenged; many

are asking afresh whether there is such a thing as definite and fixed knowledge at all!

Thus we see that the distinction between knowing and believing in a thing is not so very marked. This is largely because "rational knowledge," such as we find in logic and mathematics is based upon fixed postulates, in other words, on assumption, whence it proceeds abstractedly from what is postulated.

This form of abstract reason surely is liable to arrive at absurd and incredible results. To take a familiar case of schoolboy days. If a man papers a room in one hour, sixty men will do so in a minute. Unfortunately the defects of human nature and the limited character of space render this impossible, yet it is mathematically sound. It is claimed that two plus two can lead to one result only, yet do, for example two caterpillars plus two systems of tariff reform make four? Four what? Also what do two plus two drops of water make?—one drop. If religion is abstract surely science is too! There would seem, in fact, to be little certainty at all. Certainty, then, is not absolute, it possesses various degrees of probability. Three types of certainty may be roughly picked out, they are not wholly distinct yet will serve for general, normal purposes.

First, there is "commonsense" certainty, a very valuable *guide* in life, yet nothing more. It is "commonsense" to suppose if winter comes spring cannot be far behind. In other words, one relies on what has happened before to take place again, following the outcome of experience; a necessary step in a great deal that we do. It is sometimes surprising to realize how much of life is carried on under the assumption that as things have been, so they will be. Were it not possible to assume this oftentimes one would indeed be much at a loss! Most branches of mathematical certainty would probably fall under this heading; it is a "commonsense" truth that two and two make four.

Next comes "intuitive" certainty, i.e. what is known *within* to be certain. One may feel "intuitively" certain that one exists yet if called upon absolutely to prove that existence, some very formidable barriers would be found in the way, and it is improbable that a final proof could be given that would satisfy modern philosophy. Yet one feels "intuitively" certain of a conscience at work within directing towards what is felt sure to be right, but which could

hardly be proved so. This is probably because "right" is not a thing in itself, it is relative to what is accepted good. The human conscience, though one of the greatest gifts bestowed upon man, surely is not a divine oracle; sometimes it is corrupted and gives a perverted answer. Does not a conscience owe its growth to what is customarily considered right and wrong in the social life of its possessor? A South Sea islander would, it appears, feel little, if any, pangs of conscience at eating his fellow—such has been the custom of his fathers and his father's fathers. Yet a white man might feel conscience-stricken at drowning a kitten! Thus one is led to assume that even the dictates of conscience are largely of a social nature: they often direct aright yet deserve not to be called by any means absolute.

The third certainty is "moral." One may feel quite certain, for example, in allowing a close friend to manage one's money matters. Yet this does not rise much beyond the level of "commonsense" and "intuitive" certainty.

To return to the original question:—how is belief reconcilable with rational certainty? The varying types of certainty have been examined and found based on certain inabsolute yet accepted postulates. In other words, the bases of belief and rationality have been placed on a similar level. Does it not seem that it is impracticable to draw a hard and fast line between belief and certainty, for certainty needs a basis of belief before it becomes such—the two are part and parcel of one another? Such is the position so far assumed.

In this light, therefore, surely religious belief has as much right to demand postulates as has mathematics and "rational knowledge." It remains to find the essential postulate of religion. It lies in a world-wide phenomenon which may be found in the fact that every form of worship postulates some sort of a sympathy between the cosmic order and man's destiny. Should it be objected here that certain oriental religions postulate the utter wretchedness and generally abject nature of existence, it is an accepted belief that some respite will be granted in the end; the deity will be compassionate at some time and alleviate his distressed worshippers. Although the Buddhist looks upon life as a state of misery one of his most assured convictions is that of a Nirvana: there is an ultimate element of sympathy between creator and created.

Christianity, from a different viewpoint, regards that sympathy to be of the present—God is forever compassionate. Dr. W. R. Matthews, the Dean of King's College, says that the Christian faith in the phrase "God so loved the world" speaks of God, the world and the relation between them; the quest of philosophy put in a nutshell. Thus Christianity and Buddhism, the West and the East, meet in agreement that the great postulate of religion is sympathy. This element is found, too, even in the most savage and primitive religions of the world that regard the deity as a hostile being to be propitiated, it is the fact that attempts *are* made to propitiate him that shows there is an expectance of mercy, of ultimate sympathy. Sympathy may not be characteristic, yet it lies within "The all powerful."

The Christian postulate of religion has just been mentioned: Christianity by saying God is love gives the clearest form of this universal belief. It is incredible that in his heart of hearts a man can claim an absolute misfit between value and reality, to do this would be to stultify the whole of human life and work: the amazing creation is not a meaningless mockery. This is the essential belief of religion that claims as much right to her postulates as science has to her axioms; and there is, incidentally, no insurmountable barrier between the postulated and the axiomatic, indeed Dr. Schiller supports this by claiming axioms are but successfully established postulates.

Religious belief is but a portion of the whole field of belief, and it is unfortunate that this latter should so frequently have attached a theological connotation. Familiar and recognized sequences in natural phenomena are known by reason of "common-sense," but as soon as one passes beyond the evidence of the senses the world of "hypothesis" is entered. Religious belief is thus dubbed "hypothetical" yet surely it is not more so than other forms of belief.

Science, for example, thrives upon beliefs. Probability is "the guide of life"; this is illustrated well by the continual biological variations, by these the developments of nature have been made possible. Natural organisms of the present times are the result of countless years of development occasioned largely by gradual variation: the modern horse, for example, is known to be descended from an animal some three feet high. The theories of Darwin,

despite continual criticism, seem to remain for the most part undeniable; more recent discovery strengthens rather than questions their truth. Man, whether or no he be stamped by God in His own image, is the outcome of thousands of years of development. Mendel, the secluded monk in his monastic garden, has brought the world to see that variation is an essential factor in the course of the existence of every living organism.

Hypotheses, experiments and beliefs seem as essential to the progress of nature as to religious thought, for nature puts things forward "in trust" that they will adapt themselves to environment and flourish. A creeper gradually sends out its climbing tendrils to explore the way, for example, up the side of a house entirely "on trust" that they will find root. To continue the parallel, religious belief is in like manner ever climbing and clinging "in trust" to God to find a fixed resting place for the soul. Nature develops herself by experiment and hypothesis, likewise does man in the course of his religious development, in the process of coming into closer knowledge or fellowship with God. It is not a matter of accepting dogmas or fixed creeds, but a yearning of the soul towards the truth: some indeed may claim to have attained that truth, yet even after that there still remains a never ending state of experimentation to perfection.

To sum up the position taken: Science has her axioms and postulates, which though not absolute, are justly applicable. So has religion, which claims as much a right to them as does science and "rational knowledge." Religion demands some sympathy between creator and created, whilst the fellowship between the two is a gradual and experimental process of development according to natural lines. The phenomena of the religious experience *do* harmonize with other phenomena; so often they are regarded as being entirely exceptional, not as reconcilable with the rest of human life.

Religion, says one modern writer, can claim, in common with the sciences, the right first to describe its own particular sets of phenomena, secondly to set out what they implicate, and finally to examine the validity of the postulates relied upon, for the nature of belief as connected with the religious experience concurs with that of other phenomena.

II.

There are many who entirely disavow the accepted religious beliefs and, along with Herbert Spencer, sarcastically call religion "a hypothesis supposed to render the universe comprehensible." As has been said, it is not infrequently thought that the religiously minded are consciously and purposely blinding their eyes to fact in their endeavor to find an unfindable why and wherefore for "the way things act," to put it in the words of Byron, "sapping a solemn creed with solemn sneer." A certain school of thought forbids the looking upon religious belief as the normal and very natural process of deepening one's fellowship with, and knowledge of, the divine. Rather does it "look for a sign," or something unnatural, for men of today do not very greatly differ from their brethren of two thousand years ago, whilst those who are still expectant one day of entering a city of gold resounding with the music of harps would seem to forget Him who said, "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you."

Religious belief is essentially natural, can and should be gradually developed according to the believer's mind, is not separate from the rest of human experience. In other words it should not be isolated and kept in a realm apart, though Schleiermacher claims for religion "an independent domain over and above metaphysics and ethics." Whether it be an instinct or no, religious belief is natural to man who feels his need for the divine in the same way as for the many other necessities of life. This is strengthened by the fact that there is not a tribe in the world entirely void of some sort of religious beliefs: they may be there in a very crude form yet are certainly present in some way. How it comes about is a subject of much dispute: Wundt, for example, expresses the view that an ideal existence is the original source of religious feeling, all ideas are religious that refer to the ideal. Though this holds good in much it can hardly be claimed conclusive for all. Hegel identified religion with philosophy whilst David Hume discovers its origin "not from a contemplation of the works of nature, but from a concern with regard to the events of life and from the incessant hopes and fears which actuate the human mind."

Differing as these theories may be there is underlying them a gradual and natural realization of the divine. It is true that no reference has so far been made to the religions that embody magic

and the supernatural. Where religion begins and magic ends is not a clear cut line, yet in this essay the viewpoint of Martineau has been adopted distinguishing religion as "the belief in an ever living God, that is, a divine mind and will ruling the universe and holding moral relation with mankind. It is the word "moral" that is the great "differentia" of religion as we understand it, and distinguishes it from magic and witchcraft. Moreover, the aim of religion is to deepen that moral relation, and this deepening is a gradual, normal process.

Belief in God has not unsuitably been likened to deep trust placed in a friend. One may put utter trust in that friend on the very first day of acquaintance, and utter belief in God the first time He is realized, yet just as in friendship, the divine fellowship broadens as the years roll by, growing more perfect and complete. True religious belief, then, is a gradual, slow yet sure strengthening of one's fellowship with God, its essence lies here rather than in tenets and creeds, dogmas and fixed phrases, as sceptics are often led to think. The Christian church, especially today is much misunderstood with regard to its beliefs. Its object is not to lay down the law "you must believe this, you must do that"—rather does it seek to lead men to a clearer knowledge of God through Jesus Christ, or to quote its aim in the words of the title of a famous work of theology, "Through Christ to God." Naturally, the church according to its varied branches and denominations has different ways of expressing this belief. Sceptics are apt to lay hands on these differing ways, find one or another of them irreconcilable with their own viewpoint, and reject the whole because of the part. Any belief that savours of dogma is dropped upon and often a far more dogmatical proclamation is made against the validity of an accepted truth, for, as Dr. Schiller has remarked, all disbelief is really belief in something else.

Yet few would deny that the really genuine sceptic (there are indeed very few of them!) really plays quite a valuable part in the progress of religious belief. It is he who helps to keep alive that necessary spirit of inquiry preventing the all too common tendency to take things for granted. There are doubtless still such people as the now famous peasant, who, when questioned as to his creed, replied, "I believe what the Holy Church believes." "But what does the Holy Church believe?" he was asked. "How am I

to know?" said he, "but I expect the priest could tell you." One cannot feel wholly devoid of sympathy for the man who is sceptical of such things as this, and it can be well argued that nowadays there can be found no sufficient reason why positive belief should be considered meritorious simply because it *is* positive whilst disbelief is wicked merely because of its negativeness.

Those strongly convicted of their belief would sometimes damn the "doubter" as lost, yet as one well known Oxford philosopher writes, "to know when to doubt and when to believe, when to deliberate and when to act, may make all the difference between sanity and insanity, success and failure in life." It is in this realm that truth is discovered and discriminated from error and from it are fully tested truths brought into the field of belief whilst proven errors are transported to that of disbelief. It is not always patent that the way to truth is often found through mistakes, not through "uncontradicted affirmatives." This was realized even by very ancient philosophy; the doctrine of Heraclitus was that truth owed its source to conflict, whilst, as Pythagoras wrote, "Of everything two views may be taken."

The main issue of this little essay is that true knowledge of God is a natural experimental development, progressing much in the same way as other form of knowledge or science. Yet many have taken the view that religion is the very "last word" in finality and absoluteness, and therefore, incidentally, unprogressive. This is how religion and science are so often seemingly set in opposition against one another. Science is restlessly progressive, shrinking from the conception of any truth as unalterably absolute, there is a constant process of revision and reconstruction of beliefs to keep in touch with the changes of reality.

The truths of science and religion, however, though kindred in many respects cannot be regarded in exactly the same light. We may believe in a "tenet" of a science because it has been sufficiently proved, yet, as William James so aptly puts it, there is indeed a right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been "coerced." Now the necessary postulate in every form of study is that reality is knowable and truth is attainable and real. Religious belief regards God as the ground of reality and claims that that reality can be known, whilst a reality that responds to the approach

of our reason may also respond to other human values: if it does not there is no guarantee that our reason is not a mere will-o'-the-wisp forever doomed to excavate errors and deem them to be truths.

The study of religion claims that God is knowable. Yet religious belief should not be based solely on facts to the exclusion of all unproved beliefs. James fails to agree with Clifford when he over-cautiously proclaims belief to be desecrated when given to unproved and unquestioned statements "for the solace of the believer" who protects the purity of his belief "with a very fanaticism of jealous care."

Whether one adopts an empiricist or an absolutist view of taking the truth is a minor point. What is vitally essential is the actual attainment thereof, and a far lesser point is whether we infallibly recognize it when it is attained. One school of empiricist philosophy sets out the duty of a thinker as to know the truth and to avoid error. Yet errors are surely not such terrible things after all! James pleads for a lightheartedness that will not grow heavy if a slip occurs, a willing spirit towards belief. To those who would say it is better to go devoid of belief rather than to believe a single lie would reply that this merely shews "a preponderant private fear of being a dupe." Generals do not advise their soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound.

No, there is a call for action, for taking our life, our belief, into our own hands. Belief is measured by action and the whole defence of Christian faith revolves upon it; we must take a leap no matter whether it even be into the dark. "We stand on a mountain pass," Fitz James Stephen wrote, "in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? 'Be strong and of a good courage.' Act for the best, hope for the best and take what comes. . . . If death ends all, we cannot meet death better."