

THE PHILOSOPHIC STUDY OF RELIGION.

BY GEORGE A. BARROW.

THE age of the opposition of religion to philosophy has gone by; not, however, as has been sometimes said, to give place to an era of good feeling, which is virtually a triumph for the philosopher, but to be succeeded by a period of *indifference to philosophy*. The religious leader of to-day does not oppose, he disregards, philosophy. Academic circles have not recognized this to any extent, but to an outsider nothing is more marked than the weariness of even educated laymen with any form of philosophical discussion. They care less for it than they do for the old dogmatic sermons of our fathers. The movement of our religious and church life to-day is more practical, we say, and rightly. I do not, however, believe that this is due to any depreciation of philosophy on the part of the religious man, but only to the feeling that the philosopher has not considered him. The study I have undertaken in this paper is to find and set forth the explanation of this disregard.

In the modern philosophical study of religion there are three directions of advance. The interest that undoubtedly does exist on the part of the student of philosophy towards religion takes the form either of a study of theism, of the science of religion, or of the philosophy of religion. Theism exists either as the philosophic form of orthodox theology, or as the philosophic construction of monism or absolutism. In the first case we have the same attitude to religion whether we are dealing with an advocate of the idea of a divine revelation above reason, or with a man who draws his arguments for that revelation from current philosophy. In each case we are dealing with the support of an already formed system, and all that can be done is to improve the arguments for that system. Reconstructions there have been, but advance does not seem to result. This form of theism is forever on the defensive. There is, next, constructive philosophical monism or absolutism in its many forms. Progress here is continuous, so continuous that we wonder

at times if any two ages will have the same idea of God. For these men, of whom Royce may be taken as one of the best representatives, God is believed in in order to explain the universe, or at least the constitution of the universe. He is a theoretical construction of a higher order, but used much as atoms are used in science.

Different in scope and aim is the science of religion. I use this term because it is convenient, waiving the question as to how far that science may be descriptive and how far normative. The interest here is either on the individual or on the religious forms. In the first case we have men like James, Pratt,—and the Worcester school generally—, and in the second the study of comparative religions. So far as this study is purely historical and descriptive, we can not call it philosophic, but there is in each case the method of analysis and of valuation of the elements found. This valuation, however, is on the basis of effectiveness, not of belief. For instance mysticism is studied and valued for its effect on emotions, morals, etc., not for the correctness of its theological belief. As James points out, these beliefs may be exactly opposed. In the comparison of religions the question, which is the more correct, is not raised.

There remains finally the third method of what I have called the philosophy of religion. This studies the religious experience, the religious beliefs, and the religious demands and attempts to value them according to their truth. It takes mysticism, for instance, and considers it not only as a phenomenon of human life, but asks whether its method of reaching God is valid, and whether God is such a being that He can be reached in that way. I am not claiming that it is the crown of the sciences or even of philosophy. As one's metaphysics varies, so will one's philosophy of religion, and a variation in the valuation of religious truth must have its effect on one's metaphysics.

One thing is of importance, the philosophy of religion studies the religious assertions and demands as well as the religious emotions and religious forms. There have been attempts, of course, to limit the philosophy of religion either to an additional argument for theism, or to a critical account of religious phenomena. Any philosophic criticism, however, must go further than bolstering up received views, or describing and explaining phenomena. Religion as a phenomenon is the subject not of philosophy but of science. The subjective side, the tests of truth and the demand for a valuation in terms of truth are the legitimate field for a philosophic critique.

The religious consciousness always asserts that it feels or knows

the presence of a power other than itself. It is not sufficient to argue at once as theism does that this is God, then proceed to argue for God's existence, nor does it cover the whole field to study that consciousness or its expression in ritual and history. We must carefully analyze the elements in that consciousness, and ask their truth, and validity. To this task few have set themselves, and little has been done. It may be said that the way is not yet prepared, but we do not need to wait for a perfect science before constructing our philosophy. So some advance has been made in this direction, but awakens very little interest from the technical philosopher.

Of the three main lines of the study of religion which we have outlined, theism would seem to satisfy easily the religious man. It is built up on the foundation of his beliefs, and uses its energies in arguing for those beliefs. It needs, however, but little study of the history of theology to convince us that these beliefs are not deductions from the experience itself. They have been evolved in response to religious demands, but mixed in is much of ancient science and more of ancient philosophy.

The great Calvinistic system is plainly indebted to the current legal conceptions for its conception of the atonement, and the doctrine of the Trinity owes its present form mainly to the ideas and terms brought over from Greek philosophy. All this is looked at from the point of view of the religious need, but it interprets about as truly his legal or scientific need as it does the demands of his religious nature.

The theories of God as creator are a good example of this. The underlying religious demand is for a power in which the man may put absolute trust, therefore he seeks omnipotence in his God. When we study the ideas of God's omnipotence, however, we find that it involves about as much argument concerning a first cause, which is scientific, or an all knower, which is epistemological, or arguments from analogy. In no case, so far as I know, is there an inquiry into the sense in which the religious need for a firm foundation requires an omnipotent God, and then less still is there an interest on the part of theism to establish this foundation by a conclusive proof. Instead we have the effort to establish ideas of God which we have inherited from Jew and Greek. It is because orthodox theism does not study religion that men are turning away from it.

With philosophic theism the case is still plainer. One has only to glance through the current discussions in philosophical circles as to the nature of the Absolute, or as to his existence, to realize that religion is not in even the fringe of consciousness. The absolutist

and monistic systems need some one principle or idea to complete and bind together their system, and because historically that one principle has been called God, they call their One or Absolute by the religious name. It is neither based on an analysis of the religious experience or demand, nor does it aim to establish a foundation for that experience. Of course such a foundation may be laid in agreement with an absolutist system but the current discussions are not attempting to lay this foundation. The man who feels within himself something that is called the influence of God, and seeks to find whether God, the God of philosophical theism, can become known to him in such an experience, finds no answer. Such a problem is not even considered by current philosophy. It is no wonder, then, that here also, the religious man feels little concern with philosophy.

The science of religion, the second line of approach which I outlined, comes closer to the religious man. It takes account of the religious experience, and studies it. Yet, of the two, the religious consciousness is more interested in theism than in the descriptive studies which are now being made. The religious leaders may feel a certain interest in the average age of conversion, but it is more curiosity than concern. I have had certain theories as to the proper age for confirmation, but in practice that theory has been broken as often as it has been kept under pressure of other factors. This is almost, I might say, quite, universal.

The religious leader is not concerned with the average but with what is best for the individual. The study of the experience follows, but does not help, the course of that experience. We cannot go by the analogy of the natural sciences and say that the study of phenomena must react on the use of phenomena. The science of religion which is analogous to physics or chemistry is found in the experience and methods of the churches, not in the work of James or Pratt. These latter are not seeking to construct a working science, but to explain the phenomena of religion. This study may and will advance, and have some effect on the work of the religious leader, but the man who has the experience, and is concerned with it only in himself, not in inducing it in others, does not turn to the science of religion for help. He does not need a description, he knows it far better than any description can express it, nor does he care for its expression in others. What he is concerned with is, can he trust this experience? Will it lead him to right action? will it free him from the weaknesses of his character? Such work as has been done has a place, but since it does not try to answer these questions, the seeker after the truth of religion passes it by.

The study of the types or history of religion comes closer to the religious need, not as philosophy, but as history. A partial answer to the truth or the expression and forms of religion is given in history, and by the study of what other men have done and felt. This however is not philosophy. The study of other religions awakens far more interest to-day than does the philosophy of our own. This was the one thing that impressed me most at the recent missionary exposition in Boston. Doctrine, the city as a whole cared little for, but account of the ways and thoughts of men of other religions awakened a ready interest. This was not entirely, by any means, the curiosity for anything new, but was very largely a discriminating interest in other expressions of religion. Yet this could have but one result, to awaken the question which the history of religions can not solve, which is the true belief and the true expression, or is there any one truth in religion? These questions belong to philosophy, and their answer must come from philosophy.

The truth of this indifference of philosophy to the claims of religion may be admitted, and yet the whole matter be regarded as only another case of the followers of a special line of study claiming for themselves the center of the field. If we claimed, as some have done, that theology was the queen of the sciences or the crown of philosophy, this would have some truth in it. Such is not in the least my contention. In the first place I am not arguing for what should be, but only explaining what is, the indifference of the educated religious man to the philosophical study of his religious experience.

If philosophy took the stand that it was not interested in the special fields of practical human activity, but remained always abstract, then none could complain of its attitude toward religion. But it is interested in religion, as the activity put into theism and into the psychology of religion proves. Nor can it be said that the students of philosophy are pursuing the more important line of inquiry for religion. The most important, to the one professing to be religious, of the aspects of religion is its connection with morality, and to this both psychology and ethics contribute nothing. Modern ethics does consider the claims and need of the moral life, but nowhere is that which is for so many the dynamic power of morality, religion, given adequate consideration. This has not been true in the past, for the Kantian movement as a whole has taken religion into account, but the modern rush after the practical has passed by what is for many, probably without question for a majority of the world

to-day, one of the most practical concerns of life, the effort to escape from sin and its consequences.

The modern pragmatists and humanists must relearn the old lesson, that we cannot solve problems by ignoring them, and the problem that religion raises must be solved. In its outline I have already stated it: does that emotion, or feeling, or experience, which we call religion, have its roots in the world of reality; can there be an assurance of escape from what we feel and call sin; is the moral life something based on the nature of the universe, and has it the backing of the powers of the universe, or is it something passing, and not obligatory on man.

These are the practical questions which the religious man asks of philosophy, and they are not being answered, nor is an answer sought, by the bulk of the students of the philosophy or science of religion.

Finally, I wish again to make clear the relation of such a study as I have indicated, to the other work of the student of philosophy. It falls midway between ethics and metaphysics. The questions concerned with the nature of the moral life lap over into the field of ethics, but with a different purpose than to establish the nature of any particular ethical system. The question is general, as to the meaning of any ethical life. Then we have the problem of how far other forces than those of reason reinforce the impulses toward morality. Reason really plays little part in conduct, therefore if the forces that affect action are not fundamental to life, morality has little lasting power, no matter how reasonable it may be. This is not, however, a biological study of the evolution of morality. Such a study reveals no more whether morality be a permanent element in life than it does whether the instincts of the bee are the passing or permanent expression of the forces which evolved bees. The most a natural science can do is to describe and correlate. What the study of religion needs is analysis of the moral and religious life, and then the consideration of whether the principles of existence require morality and are aided by religion. When this neglected field is covered, the present indifference of religion to philosophy will disappear, and philosophy regain once more her true place in the esteem of the religious man.

EDITORIAL COMMENT.

The Rev. George A. Barrow, of Chelsea, Mass., stands in the midst of practical church life, and is in direct touch with religious people. He must know what he states when he says: "The religious

leader of to-day does not oppose, he disregards, philosophy," and this sounds like a reproach to the philosopher who is blamed for not entering into the deep significance of religious sentiment. To some extent his strictures seem to us unfair for philosophers are giving more thought to religious experience and the importance of religious life than ever before; but we must recognize that most of these investigations are of a scientific nature and are disregarded by faithful believers who are neither willing nor able to investigate their own state of mind. Mr. Barrow informs us that the question of the faithful is not answered directly by psychological and philological inquiries into religious experience. The religious man wants to know: "Does that emotion, or feeling, or experience, which we call religion, have its roots in the world of reality; can there be an assurance of escape from what we feel and call sin; is the moral life something based on the nature of the universe, and has it the backing of the powers of the universe, or is it something passing and not obligatory on man?"

We would answer these questions in brief: (1) Religious experience has its roots in reality; (2) it helps man to overcome what in a religious term is called sin; (3) it is indeed backed by the cosmic constitution of the world, and (4) it refers not to anything accidental or indifferent, but conveys directions which are obligatory on man. In other words man as an individual feels the insufficiency of his nature, and as the gravity in every material principle indicates its interrelation with the totality of existence, so in the domain of sentiency every being is animated by the feeling which seeks the solution of its life problem outside of itself. This general feeling which grows from universal interrelations of everything that exists, we have characterized as a panpathy or all-feeling. From this religion grows all emotion, appearing first in those instincts which are characterized as conscious, imposing certain duties upon man's life. The development of religion accordingly depends upon the world-conception, and it naturally rises from dim and uncultured views of the powers that sway us to a pure and scientific conception of the universe.

Primitive religion is naturally mythical. It changes into a symbolical dogmatism and will finally reach the stage of a purely scientific world-conception, but we must insist that in attaining its highest phase it does not disown its prior preparatory phases, for the truths contained in myths do not become untrue by reaching a state of clearness, and before we can see truth face to face we will naturally see it as through a glass darkly.