

INTELLECT, RELIGION AND THE UNIVERSE.

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[Concluded.]

I HAVE suggested that man's universe became larger as his intellect developed. But his inability to explain its construction and its natural phenomena caused him to imagine that existence of one or more deities who were responsible for what happened in his universal home. Considered from a standpoint of absolute truth, ancient conceptions can have but little value. It should be remembered, however, that the first step towards solving the mystery of the universe is to become aware of the fact that a universe exists. Quite a few among us, today, are not aware of that fact.

It is something to the credit of the Babylonians that they were capable of seeing stars when they looked at them. Had they possessed our modern intelligence, their star-religion would, of course, not have been. As matters stood, however, they crowded the deep of the world with their imaginary deities, who were, supposedly, the rulers of their destinies. Remarkable it is to note, in connection with this Babylonian star-worship, that many modern people do not travel far behind the ancients on the road leading towards understanding when they superstitiously embrace the pseudo-science of astrology.

The extraordinary universe that the Babylonians possessed interests us especially because they were instrumental in enlarging the limited world of which the Hebrew originally was aware. Certain passages, occasionally entire chapters, of the Old Testament point to the fact, that the Hebrew was acquainted with, and borrowed from, Babylonian mythology. These borrowed conceptions were gradually modified by him to harmonize more or less with his own religion.

The result is that we meet with two different conceptions of

Jahveh in the Old Testament. The one pictures the original, narrowly conceived deity, who reflects the mental and the moral qualities of the semi-savage. The other suggests a more or less universal deity who rules over a considerable part of the universe. One is rather baffled at first when finding these two conceptions side by side in the pages of the Bible.

Thus, in Genesis, we come across some fourteen verses devoted to the subject of the creation of the universe. They are garbed in a style that verily fits the subject of narration. And the universe of which the Hebrew is conscious includes "the face of the deep" and the "firmament of the heaven" with its greater and its lesser light. While the ushering in of Jahveh, however, fills us with expectation, we meet with disappointment, in the chapters that follow. From the universal Jahveh whose spirit moves upon the face of the waters, we descend to the Jahveh who dwells in trees and rocks and wells, to the Jahveh who repents his savage cruelty in the episode of the flood, to the tribal deity who reflects an intense degree of self-centeredness on the part of his worshiper.

The two conceptions of Jahveh hint at two different stages of intellectual development. The larger universe is new to the Hebrew but, in time, becomes his permanent home. In time, the universal Jahveh absorbs the tribal deity. There are, however, numberless stepping-stones that lead from the narrow to the larger conception. Many a superstition, many a barbaric rite, survive long after the old deity has been supplanted by the new.

We can not expect the larger universe which the Hebrew gradually beheld to be scientifically sound. Phenomena and facts concerning the universe when first observed by man, are never interpreted correctly. Their swaddling clothes are myth and child-like imagination. It is foolish, therefore, to inject scientific truth into the Biblical story of creation. Its unscientific nature is apparent to every unbiased reader. Is it necessary to point out that the Hebrew was unaware of the fact that the sun is the source of light? But why hold it against him that he created light and darkness first, and the sun and the moon afterwards? Why not realize that he was a pioneer in the infinite field of thought, and that he explained as well as he could? Is there anything discouraging, or sad, or immoral about that? There is not. But there *is* something discouraging about the fact that the ancient notion of divine revelation should still obstruct the path of intellectual progress.

The Babylonians who were instrumental in opening the Hebrew's eyes to the existence of a larger universe, were themselves not scientists. As a result we find a great deal of mythology and erroneous conception accompany the Hebrew on his excursions into the depths of the world. His universe was a mass of water, as was that of the Babylonians. The firmament created by Jahveh divided the waters above from those that were under it, so that the space between the earth and the heaven constituted a fairly dry locality. The Babylonians caused the waters of the deep to be inhabited by an army of sea-monsters, off-springs of the god Apsu and the goddess Tiamat. This strange population of the deep partly survived in Hebrew conceptions. There are many references in the Old Testament to Jahveh's struggle with such monsters. Rahab, Behemoth, the dragon and the serpent are animals which, according to Hebrew imagination inhabited the waters of space. And perhaps it is true that Jahveh's conquest of the dragon, even as the Babylonian god Marduk's victorious struggle with Tiamat's monsters, later symbolized the establishment of order in an original world of chaos.

For it is true in mythology as it is in tradition that beings and events that at one time are real to man, gradually lose their reality and become symbolical beings and events. Thus, Jahveh's rescue of the Hebrews from the land of Egypt in time came to signify deliverance from darkness and ignorance. Rahab and the dragon, in whose monstrous existence the Hebrew once believed, became symbolical of all that is evil and wicked. And in the course of time the universe of the Hebrews became purified of its mythological rubbish and of the star-gods that had temporarily shared with Jahveh the worship of the Jews. In the end there were left the more or less limited universe which the Hebrews were capable of perceiving and the deity, its creator and ruler.

After this purification of the universe, two possibilities naturally presented themselves. The first one was that man would continue to enlarge the universe to its actual dimensions. The second was that he would endeavor to discover its physical construction and its nature. But it was not given to the Jews to grasp these possibilities. They had penetrated into the universe as far as their limited intellectual qualities allowed. While they were still engaged in building Jahveh's throne in the depths of the universe, evolution stirred the minds of another people, who were to ponder

over the nature of the universe and to philosophize on its construction. The Greek philosophers began where the Hebrews had let off, and travelled on the wings of thought in a universe that was well nigh infinite. They did nothing more than the Hebrew and the Babylonian and the pre-historic man had done. They endeavored to account for the existence of the mysterious, magnificent universe, which is the home of man, and to give a reasonable explanation of its phenomena.

If they were more successful in their endeavors than their predecessors had been, it was due to the fact that they represented a higher degree of intellectual development. The distance that lay between them and the brute stage was to such an extent remote, that they were in many instances capable of forgetting self and of becoming absorbed in a universe of beauty and marvel. We find the immortal expressions of that impersonal contemplation of existence in their art and in their literature. Art for art's sake will mirror beauty, and thought for truth's sake, will mirror reality.

Right here I venture to observe that one of the differences between science and religion is this: science endeavors to explain for truth's sake, religion for the sake of ME. The one is dispassionate, the other selfish, in its endeavor to fathom. And as the ancient people were more self-centered than their successors, we find a preponderance of religion, in some shape or other, in ancient times, and the birth and development of science in more modern times.

After the Hebrews had conceived of their universal deity, they ceased to be interested in the universe and its phenomena that formerly had played such a prominent part in the building of their religion. They centered all their attention on the problem of self. Not that they had ceased, while pondering over the mystery of Jahveh's nature, to be self-centered. Religion rarely seeks deity for deity's sake. After Jahveh's nature had once been fully established, man's own problem became of all-absorbing interest to him.

In darker ages food was man's main concern, and deity, divinity and magic found their birth in that necessity. Man's crude religion in those days was inspired by his stomach. A higher expression of man's concern about himself is the religion that endeavors to account for the existence of trials and tribulations. The belly has become an insignificant part of ME, the personality, and the nature-deity who controlled the clouds, the wind, the sunshine, and the rain has acquired a more intricate and universal nature. A

yet higher expression of man's concern about self, is his conception of a future existence. He has sufficiently delocalized himself to be able to ponder over an existence after death, and his deity who formerly expressed his wrath and displeasure in the trials and the calamities of life, now becomes associated with an eternity that holds rewards and punishments for man.

The problem that immediately presents itself in connection with the conception of a future existence is man's behavior here on earth. How should he behave and what things should he not do in order to obtain a life of peace and happiness in the hereafter? Ethics became the keynote of the religion of the Jews towards the Christian era, and the doctrine of retribution and that the life after death furnished a foundation for the Christian religion.

And thus we see religion, at first gradually, and then completely, lose interest in the universe and its phenomena on which it had fed for many centuries. The beginning of the Christian era marks a parting of the ways; science and philosophy, born among the Greeks of the pre-sophistic period, study the universe and its phenomena, and travel in an almost opposite direction from that taken by religion which concentrates all its attention on an infinitesimal part of the universe, man.

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It is not my purpose to furnish a critical analysis of religion. Religion, I take it, is the baby-talk of the intellect. It is a substitute, and a valuable one undoubtedly, for the correct answer. The answer to what? The answer to the question which eternally confronts man in the infinite shape of a universe. He began with the clouds, the thunder and the lightning, proceeded to the moon, and the sun and the stars, and finished with leaving a deity to rule over the by him discovered immensity.

Science, the man-talk of the intellect, endeavors to furnish the direct answer. When it is incapable of doing that, it is silent. Substitute, in its opinion, is valueless. It furthermore studies the thing itself, the universe discovered bit by bit, by our forefathers and ancestors. The astronomer, for instance, reveals with mathematical precision the marvels of the universe, and expresses his admiration for star-lit immensity not in religious worship, but in facts and figures and laws that are eloquent enough. Being a scientist, he perhaps assumes an attitude of scepticism towards doctrines concerning things divine, and he may not fully accept as truth the deity and

the religion which we so conveniently inherited from our forefathers. Nevertheless, he is studying a stupendous reality. To study and interpret reality is the ultimate, if not the natural, occupation of the mind. The reality which the scientist studies is the reality of all realities, viz: the universe. The day is coming when intellect must perceive that it is an infinite-eternal reality. And when I write down, infinite-eternal reality, I mention all that conceivably is and can be.

Now I am not endeavoring to belittle the value of religion in order to exalt that of science. As I have said, religion is the baby-talk of the intellect. It is the average, popular interpretation of the riddle of the universe, whereas science is the interpretation furnished by the intellectual leaders of the human race. As milk is the right sort of food for babes, and meat that for the grown man, we should realize, that religion supplies a need. That need is a satisfactory answer to a question. That the answer is satisfactory is due to the degree of intellectual development of the questioner. Considered from his standpoint, religion is perfect.

Only when the religious man, himself, begins to ask the question, What is wrong with religion? as he is doing in these mad and turbulent days, may we suspect that it no longer supplies a need. Something has happened to the intellect of the worshipper whose questions have assumed a different nature and consequently require answers of a different nature. His intellect has probably outgrown the temporary necessity of faith and belief, and ventures on its maiden-trip into the universe for the purpose of discovering why religion's ethical teachings are true.

The ultimate aim of a truly broad religion can not be prescribing ethics only, no matter how admirable such ethics may be. Their blind acceptance on the part of the worshipper robs them of their divine truth, should they embody it. There is bound to come a day when man will ask himself why he should love his neighbor as himself and why he should refrain from killing. Explanation never accompanied the laws of human conduct as laid down by religion. In the days of Moses, when the Hebrew saw and heard Jahveh in the threatening storm cloud, when he heard his voice in the thunderbolt and in the roaring gale, when he perceived his chastizing hand in the calamities that befell him the command, "Thou shalt not," required little explanation. It was accompanied by a

threatening prediction, viz: That ignoring the command would cause the wrath of Jahveh to descend upon the guilty head.

The command, "Thou shalt not," changes into, "Thou shalt," in the days of Christ. Again, explanation is wanting, and perhaps not required. A promise, viz: possession of eternal life and admission into the kingdom of heaven, is explanation enough.

Nevertheless, ethical principles should own a background of truth or else in the long run become meaningless vagueries of the human mind. If it be true, for instance, that we should love our neighbor as ourself, there must be a reason for it. If it be true that we should not kill, why should we not? Jahveh's displeasure and Jesus' promise of eternal life are insufficient answers to these questions. It is unimaginable that the road which leads to deity is paved either with fear or selfishness. I cannot discover true and lasting value in ethical behavior that is inspired by selfish motives.

But, if religion does not explain, it fails to do so because the man who embraces it does not demand or require an explanation. If religion's viewpoint is narrow, it is so because the average man is unable to live in thought in the immensity of universe wherein he actually dwells. Religion, like all human institutions, is indirectly a creation of man himself. It is man who permits it to flourish by subscribing to its teachings. And he subscribes to its teachings because they reflect his own intellectual powers.

When evolution, therefore, adds to his intellectual powers, which it does every once in a while, his religion ceases to be their reflection. It becomes antiquated, and reformation along lines of modern conception is required. It must again be able to supply the sort of intellectual food which his brain is capable of digesting. And so does man himself mould and remould religion in accordance with his everincreasing intelligence.

The history of religion, back to the days when it was still in an embryonic condition, clearly reveals the gradual growth of human intelligence and the corresponding increase in size of man's religious structure. We have seen in the preceding chapter how the universe grew with the mind, and how the deity grew with the universe. The limit of growth of mind, and therefore of universe and deity, has not been attained. The average man lives to a considerable extent for and in himself and is totally blind to the existence of a universal immensity. His conceptions of existence must therefore of necessity be narrow, if not erroneous. And how can he pos-

sibly fathom the nature of his deity when he is not even roughly acquainted with the nature of the vast empire of universe which his deity is supposed to have created and over which he rules? Furthermore, how will he be able under such circumstances, to perceive the true relationship between deity and man, and to found his moral life on ethical principles that are the natural expressions of that relationship?

When religion became religion proper and, unwillingly enough, left the study of nature and the universe to science and philosophy, the average religious man started on the road towards refined self-centeredness. Of what ultimate benefit were his ethics and his theory of life after death with its retribution, in view of the fact that he accepted them blindly as coming from an authoritative source? Have these nineteen centuries of religious concern about self and its future changed him into the moral man whom we would expect to be a fair product of such ethics? They have not. We are still loving ourselves alarmingly more than we do our neighbor. There is still glory and honor attached to killing our fellow. But why illustrate the obvious?

The intellectual leaders of the human race, the scientists and the philosophers, were not so much concerned about self as well as about the nature of the star-lit universe, which the ancients had seen but had not understood. The history of science and philosophy records a constant broadening of the mind, a getting away from self, and an ever-increasing tendency to live in thought in a universe instead of in a shack or in a palace. Though the masses are ever slow to follow their intellectual leaders, and more often than not, condemn them to the cross (in a symbolical sense, of course) their more universal thoughts, in time, leave a dim but permanent reflection in the life of humanity. That this reflection becomes the permanent possession of the masses and slowly gains in brilliance, is due to the fact that the average intellect is, of course, also constantly developing in the direction of universality. Science and philosophy are ahead of the times and announce what the average man some day is going to know and think.

It is hardly necessary, of course, to point to the growth of the average intellect since the beginning of the Christian era. And it is equally unnecessary, I suppose, to remark that this growth was not encouraged by man's popular interpretation of the mystery of existence which is embodied in his religion. On the contrary, and

we may as well be candid about it, religion has done everything possible to prevent man from obtaining a glimpse of the reality of things. That, of course, was due to ignorance and stupidity; and we can not hold man responsible for being ignorant and stupid.

It is science and philosophy that stimulated the growth of the intellect and—strange to say—were instrumental in causing man to follow more and more the path of the Christian. They accomplished these things by suggesting to man to forget himself once in a while and to realize that there were other things and beings, in fact an immeasurable universe of things and beings, existing besides his own insignificant self. Perhaps Columbus was the first to start these suggestions. His imagination and perseverance were the attributes of a mind that was able to think beyond a few square miles of territory. His journey across the Atlantic was but the beginning of man's journey through the immensity of existence. He compelled people to think in terms of continents and worlds, and thereby made the subsequent invention of steamships and railroads, of telegraph and telephone, urgent necessities. Lusitanias and Imperators owe their existence to the discovery of the New World; or better, to the existence of a mind that was broad enough to venture away from home and self, and to explore the earth.

There were minds capable of traveling farther than across a terrestrial ocean. Copernicus is the Columbus of our Solar system. His mind journeyed on the sea of space, and transferred the boundaries of man's intellectual world to the limits of a sun-system. Of course, the stellar universe had been seen thousands of years before Copernicus and his illustrious successors ventured into its depths. It had been seen but not understood. Fantastic thought, a product of the infant mind, had made of it the home of countless gods and had interwoven its starry depths with the strangest myths and superstitions. The astronomers discovered system, mathematics, law, in the depths of the universe. They revealed to the world a marvelously law-governed and well-balanced universe. The word, rational, was first written by them in unmistakable characters across the heavens.

The achievements of science and philosophy stimulated the growth of the average intellect because they compelled the masses to live in thought in a constantly enlarging world. It was the broader mind that invented the telephone and the telegraph. But the telephone and the telegraph in turn caused the average man to

live in thought in a larger world. Likewise did certain facts discovered by astronomy become the intellectual property of the ordinary man. His world extended beyond the limit of the earth and had its vague boundaries somewhere in the depths of space. In short, science and philosophy, as I have stated, before, helped man to get away from his self occasionally, and to realize that an immense world of creatures and things existed besides his self. This getting away from self is absolutely necessary to the existence of unselfishness. In fact, unselfishness is its natural expression. If man, today, therefore is less selfish than his ancestor, if good will and brotherly love are at present more in evidence than they were in the past, this is due to the fact that man today lives in thought in a considerably larger universe than he formerly did. The point I wish to make is this: Ethics (and the sum and substance of all ethics is unselfishness, the opposite of thought of self) find their foundation in knowledge of the universe and in understanding of its nature. It is the man who has some conception of the immensity of existence who can not help but reflect something of that immensity in his actions and in his attitude towards his fellow-being. And it is the man who in thought lives close to self who is barred from becoming acquainted with the nature of the universe and with the laws that govern its members, himself included.

Religion does not explain why we should conduct ourselves in the manner prescribed by it. That is the reason why only those who lack the intellectual ability to survey the universe, accept its teachings in faith. Belief and faith are substitutes for knowledge and understanding and the man who is good because the church commands him to be good, is really not good at heart; he is neither good nor bad. To be good is to be good spontaneously. The good man can not help being good. He is good because he is what he is. Not all the teachers in the world, not all the codes of morals, can make him better or worse.

It is this failure to explain on the part of the church, which is the cause of so many new religions having sprung up like mushrooms during the last ten or twenty years. Leaving alone the question whether or not they teach truth, the fact remains that they supply an urgent demand viz: explanation. These religions teach neither dogma nor philosophy, but something that partakes of the nature of both. They should be termed more properly, philosophico-religions, and they should be considered to constitute the stepping-

stone that leads from religion to philosophy. They have taken thousands, hundreds of thousands of worshippers, away from the Old Church, and continue to take.

Of course, one method of accounting for this phenomenon is to say that these people have gone to the dogs and are advancing rapidly towards Hades' gates. Another, more accurate, way of interpreting it is, by stating that the brain of man is subject to slow and gradual development, and that a certain percentage of mankind have outgrown certain teachings that were excellent food for the brain some fifteen hundred or two thousand years ago. And it is an absolutely hopeless task to try to induce that certain percentage to return to the old faith. Not even the best of music, or the most expensive of advertising campaigns can accomplish such a task. The only way open left to the church, in order to maintain its influence upon the masses, is the one which leads to the intellect itself. It is for the church to find its worshipper, when the worshipper can not find his church.

The church is a man-made and a man-owned institution, and reflects average thought and conception, concerning the mystery of existence. But it does not reflect at all times the same thought and conception. The teachings of religion in the past have kept pace with the growth of the average intellect. And they will have to keep pace with the rapidly developing modern intellect if the church wants to maintain itself. In these days of science and popular education in schools, newspapers, magazines and libraries, it is a mighty difficult problem to interest man in ancient myths, traditions, and conceptions regarding life, death and deity, to such an extent that he will accept them as part of his religion. What school boy, for instance, who reads the simply written and absorbing articles on astronomy in the Sunday edition of a newspaper can help wondering where heaven or hell may be? Will he not smile the smile of a skeptic when he becomes acquainted with the religious conceptions of a dwelling place after death where the streets are paved with gold, etc., etc.?

It is no disgrace for the church to gradually remould its teachings along lines of modern conception and of science. It is no disgrace to adhere to the truth, even if former convictions must be discarded or modified. The one terrific obstacle to such proceedings would of course be that absurdity of absurdities, the infallibility of the Bible. But no sensible man today accepts the fairy-tale of

“revealed truth”, much less the authenticity of personal conversations alleged to have been held between the deity and some ancient Hebrews. Ancient history, and modern research work among the hoary ruins of Babylonia and Palestina, throw an entirely new and different light on the Scriptures. Astounding as the fact may be, it is nevertheless true that they ask of us to read the Bible as we would the Koran, or the Vedas, or any other literature, belonging to an ancient people. The Scriptures are simply thoughts expressed by a thinking people who lived thousands of years before our own time. They contain pearls of wisdom and nuggets of truth, even as the Koran and the Vedas. Also, and considered from our present degree of intellectual development, they contain an enormous amount of literary nonsense, even as the Koran and the Vedas or any other ancient literary production.

We therefore must conclude that religion should enlarge the thought-world of its worshippers beyond the century-old and narrow confines of dogma. If it be truth that man craves, and not merely the soothing promises of religion concerning the hereafter, then he is bound to enter into the realms of science and philosophy, which reveal truth as far as they are capable of knowing it. I shall word the statement differently, and say that the conscientious truth-seeker is compelled to study an ever-enlarging universe, the ultimate boundaries of which are infinite. For, science and philosophy reveal the truth about the universe, in part or as a whole. There is, it must be conceded, no other truth to be revealed. And if religion claims to possess or reveal another truth which concerns things that lie beyond the realm and beyond the nature of the universe, then its claims must be pronounced fantastic. A little logical thinking will readily convince us, *that there is nothing but universe.*