

MORAL PROOF OF RELIGIOUS CLAIMS

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IT IS NOW generally admitted by those who think critically and scientifically that the tests for religious theories and propositions are not, and in the nature of things cannot be, different from the tests for any other kind of theories and propositions. "Thought is all there is," said the late Henri Poincaré, the eminent French mathematician and physicist, even though thought be no more than "a flash of light between two eternities of darkness." If scientific methods and processes are of no avail in the realm of religion, then that realm is unreal and illusory—a mere mirage. We may legitimately be asked, indeed, to entertain, provisionally, this or that *hypothesis* concerning religious phenomena, but, in turn, we have the right to demand that such an hypothesis shall be treated with no more solemnity or awe than, say, the Darwinian hypothesis, or the theory of Relativity. It is not wicked to reject any religious theory, no matter how long it may have reigned in the intellectual world, when new facts establish its inadequacy or invalidity.

How, let us ask, do we arrive at religious truth? Let us grant, for the sake of the argument, that the pivotal belief in all religions is that in the existence of God—an unknowable and inscrutable Power in control of all nature. How does one reach or form that belief?

There are only two possible ways to that goal. One is revelation, the other is called science. In a world full of miracles, there is certainly nothing inherently impossible in revelation. But, since humanity is prone to illusion, error and fantasy, we cannot accept an assertion by any one concerning an alleged revelation in the absence of very strong and convincing proof. A man tells us that God communicated certain wonderful but vague truths to him, or dictated to him a set of positive commandments and principles. We are bound to ask him how he knows that it was God who had appeared to him or had spoken to him. *No proof of revelation is pos-*

sible, however, for the most sincere and excellent seer or philosopher may mistake the voice of his own heart for that of God. If, for example, Jesus actually thought and said that he was the son of God in an unusual, miraculous sense, a proposition which is open to doubt, the question still remains, "*is Jesus necessarily a good authority on the source of his inspiration?*" And the same question must be asked concerning every other founder of a religion, every other alleged special messenger of the hypothetical Supreme Being. The "divinity" of this or that prophet or savior of the human race is a claim which cannot be established by another claim—special revelation. Neither claim is susceptible of proof, and neither rests even on probability.

We are thus reduced to the prosaic, humble, empirical, experimental and common-sense methods of demonstrating religious propositions. We are driven to employ the tools and means of science. Does this conclusion alarm the religious thinker? Not if he is really a thinker, if he knows the nature and methods of science.

Among the modern scholars who have reflected on the religious problem and the phenomena of what we call the spiritual world there are bold men who accept the challenge of science and assert with complete confidence that essential religious truth *has been established precisely as other truths have been or are established*. These writers make no appeal to mere faith, to any "will to believe." They are prepared to submit their beliefs to the tests prescribed by the most rigorous savants.

Thus, Prof. L. P. Jacks, to whose moral solution of the problem of Evil I have referred critically in a previous issue of THE OPEN COURT, not only attempts to justify that solution, but takes the general position that religious and spiritual truth can be demonstrated *only by moral means*—that is, by facts and arguments drawn from the moral world. There are, he contends, only two possible theories of what we call the universe. One supposes the universe to be dead—mechanical, soulless, purposeless, irrational, while the other postulates a supreme will in the universe, a beneficent purpose in its creation and development, and a vital and spiritual principle in it and back of it. Which of these theories should we provisionally accept, and what can we do to test them? Mr. Jacks' answer is quite fair and candid. He claims no immunities or privileges for religion; he is willing to subject religious doctrines to genuinely scientific processes. Only, what processes and tests are available in the domain of religion? How can we conduct experiments to ascertain

the truth of this or that religious hypothesis? Mr. Jacks argues that life is the only available laboratory for religious experiments and the results of conduct are the only possible and proper tests of the theories of religious teachers.

Let one group or community live in accordance with the theory that the universe is dead, or mechanical, and that morality is a meaningless term; and let another group or community proceed on the opposite theory—that God rules the universe; that it moves toward a goal and is informed and inspired by a purpose, and that man possesses spiritual freedom and is capable of moral growth and perfection. What happens to the first, and what to the second? Compare the results, says Mr. Jacks, and you have the verification of one or another of the two theories.

It is hardly necessary to say that Mr. Jacks himself regards the first theory as established beyond rational doubt. If civilized humanity had not accepted the doctrines associated with religion—the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the golden rule, the supremacy of love and mercy—where would the world be today? Men would not be different from the beasts of prey; the struggle for life would be ruthless, and force and cunning would prevail over right, generosity and sympathy. History, therefore, Mr. Jacks contends, *has demonstrated the validity and soundness of the New Testament theory of the universe and man's place and mission in it.*

The argument is legitimate and logical. Mr. Jacks' *method* is scientific. But can his premises be accepted? And does history furnish the proof of the Christian philosophy?

In the first place is it true that we are bound to choose between the two hypotheses formulated by Mr. Jacks? Must the thoughtful and scientific thinker declare himself either a mechanist or a vitalist? And must he who calls himself a mechanist necessarily assume that he has solved the riddle of existence? The answer to each of these queries is, No.

The Agnostic refuses to put any dogmatic label upon himself. He has no solution for any ultimate problem. He stops where science stops. He ponders and analyzes experience and draws conclusions from it. He examines himself and observes his fellows, contemporary and of past ages. He analyzes facts and ventures upon cautious generalizations. Where the facts suggest no satisfactory hypothesis, he suspends judgment until more facts, enough facts, have been accumulated and studied. Now, the facts of nature and recorded history do *not* seem to the Agnostic to warrant *any* provi-

sional theory regarding the governance of the universe or the power manifesting itself in it. At the same time, the Agnostic who adopts the mechanistic position intelligently merely affirms that it is *convenient* to regard the universe as a mechanism. He does not assert anything concerning purposes and meanings in the universe; he merely rejects naive, facile, childish explanations of cosmic phenomena, explanations which add to our difficulties instead of removing them. When asked to choose between the two theories formulated by Mr. Jacks, he gently but firmly declines to do so—he is unprepared, he says, to accept either. The universe, he holds, is what is, and all we humans can do is to give names to things and separate them when advisable and helpful, into classes and sets. The question whether the universe is dead or alive, mechanical or free, is without significance to the Agnostic. He points out that if we humans who *call* some parts of nature animate and others inanimate, some inorganic and some organic and super-organic. It would seem to be ridiculous to say that the tiniest and least important insect is alive and the sun is dead—the sun, whose rays nourish and sustain all living creatures on this and—perhaps—on other planets, but, defining life as we do, that conclusion is natural and proper, and not at all ridiculous or impudent.

But, it may be urged, if we take the universe as it is, and frame no ultimate theories concerning it, what basis have we for ethics and for esthetics? Why prefer beauty to ugliness, gentleness to cruelty, peace to war, love to hate? Why dream of justice and solidarity, of progress?

The answer to this set of questions is clear, certain and scientific. *The basis and sanction for morality are natural, not supernatural.* The "kingdom of God" is within us; that is to say, the sentiment of justice and righteousness, as well as the sentiment of mercy, is innate and as characteristic of our nature as the instinct of self-preservation. We are moral not because of some external command, but *because we cannot help being so.* Man is not anti-social by nature; he is not condemned to a savage struggle for existence. Altruistic conduct is just as essential to survival, just as primordial, just as "natural," as egoistic conduct. Mutual aid, sympathy, love, self-subordination are quite as important, as factors of evolution and progress, as self-preservation, self-assertion and self-expression. All human instincts and emotions register the experience of the race, its trials, errors, failures and victories.

Why, then, regard ethics as miraculous and supernatural? Nothing could be more arbitrary, less scientific, less philosophical than a view which regards rational principles of human conduct as something outside and beyond racial and general experience, as something not traceable to need and manifest utility. Professor Huxley was guilty of a curious fallacy when he contrasted cosmic ethics with human ethics. He overlooked the fact that we have evolved our ethics to suit our own human conditions and needs, and that it is foolishly arrogant to apply our standards to the cosmos. Certainly our ethics must make for our survival in the cosmos; adaptation to universal law is implied in any conception or policy or course of conduct intended to promote human welfare and human progress. Once we assume or feel that life is good and desirable, we commit ourselves to the corollary all men have the same right to live and live abundantly. We cannot demand life for ourselves and deny it to others. Justice thus emerges, and then negative beneficence, and finally positive beneficence. The highest conduct of the highest groups of human beings finds justification in its fruits—the double fruits of peace and contentment with one's self and of service to others.

And yet the human race is far from being completely socialized or civilized. It is idle to pretend that history is a record of the uninterrupted advance of the good, the true and the beautiful. The solidarity of humanity is an ideal, but how far we have yet to travel, how hard to labor, how much to suffer, on the road to that ideal! Race antipathy, national prejudices and hatreds, class and group antagonisms, conflicts of interest and ambition, these sources of evil and misery are still threateningly active and powerful. *The moral order has yet to be established*, and it will be established by weak, poor, groping, errant humanity only after ages and millenniums of tragic waste and anguish. Even today no so-called Christian nation dares practice Christian teaching. No lover of peace, for example, would seriously ask the nations least disposed to grab and plunder to disarm and rely on the subtle influence of non-resistance. Might is no guaranty of right, and right is not always sure of victory over brute force and aggression. To appeal to history is to appeal to a most uncertain and confused record. It will support no particular creed. To believe in the possibility, probability and even certainty of moral progress, on the other hand, is to affirm that, with all its defects and weaknesses, humanity is capable of realizing its own moral ideals, and that slowly the better sides of common human

nature are bound to prevail over the worse. Bossuet said that the malignity of the human heart is prodigious, and that it ever inclines to evil. If this were true, even the crude and rudimentary civilization we possess could never have evolved, and the religious and moral seers would never have founded systems or attracted hosts of devout and ardent followers. Man does not live by material comforts alone, and he will not be content with technical, economic and industrial progress. He will long, work and fight for spiritual and moral progress, but he will not, in doing so, stake all on a particular theory of the universe. Least of all will he base principles of conduct on a theory concerning the origin, purpose and destiny of existence, for those who plead inability to form such theories are as ethical, and always have been as ethical, as the staunchest upholders of dogmatic religious creeds. Society is not cemented by creeds and theories; it is built upon and held together by stern necessity. To say society is to say morality; even the social animals and insects have rigid moral codes, which they obey instinctively.

In short, moral tests are relevant and applicable only to moral experiences. They prove nothing outside or beyond the moral sphere. What is known in science and logic as the law of parsimony forbids us to build ethical codes on the shaky foundation of question-begging propositions.

So far as Christianity in particular is concerned, it is doubly rash for any one to claim that history "demonstrates" its central conceptions. Of all fairly advanced and mature religions, Christianity is the least vital or significant. Christianity is professed, but not practised. As we have seen in several previous articles in this Review, not a single essential principle or command laid down by Jesus is observed in spirit or letter. The states which choose to call themselves Christian not only ignore all the vital teachings of Jesus, but venture to assert that only individuals as individuals are bound to live up to such teachings, while that bodies politic have ethics of their own, ethics totally opposed to the Christian code. As jurors, as judges, as officers of the law, as soldiers of the so-called Christians systematically violate the doctrines of Jesus. In all dealings with other states, with criminals and with conscientious objectors, governments and popular majorities act as if Christian tenets and ideas had never been promulgated. How, then, can any serious and thoughtful person contend that *the conduct of Christian communities proves the validity of a theory that is never applied?*

Mere probity, honesty, decency, reasonable regard for others, love of justice and of rational mercy are not traits peculiar to Christianity. Jews, Mohammedans, Buddhists, as well as Agnostics possess them in the same degree as the so-called Christians.

It has been argued—by Mr. Balfour, among others—that the Agnostics are, socially and ethically speaking, parasites; that they are safe and comfortable because they are able to enjoy the fruits of a civilization that is based on belief in divine guidance and supported by the great majority of men and women; that society would face chaos and dissolution were the majority to lose their religious convictions, and that Agnostic morals, founded on utilitarian ideas, would prove hollow, impotent and worthless.

It is impossible to dogmatize on this point. Sudden conversions of the ignorant or superficially “educated” millions to Agnosticism is of course out of the question. Not only current religions, but current superstitions, live and thrive despite all that science and empirical knowledge are doing to banish crude, foolish and absurd beliefs. Men have believed the most grotesque and ludicrous things, and will continue to believe such things. To quote from a recent article by Professor Gilbert Murray on faith and worship:

“In the field of religion, beliefs can seldom be put to any effective test, and beliefs about very remote past history never can. The belief lives or dies by its own power of survival or attraction, and by the credulous or incredulous, barbarous or rational, temper of the society in which its seed is sown. It is never killed by meeting a fact, for there are no facts.”

And G. Lowes Dickinson, writing of widespread beliefs and their evidential value, said recently:

“Men have believed that the soul lives like a pale shadow, craving blood to feed it; that it migrates into innumerable forms of animals or of men; that it repeats indefinitely its main occupations here and especially that of fighting; that it is tortured for aeons in hells or that it sings hymns forever. What have men not believed! And how miserable should we be if we believed anything similar.”

Students of history and of evolution in ideas and mental habits are not afraid that the gradual disappearance of current superstitions or unfounded beliefs will endanger the pillars of civilization. And the abandonment of the whole arbitrary assumption that the mystery of life, of the universe itself, is somehow solved, or rendered less baffling and less difficult by explaining it, verbally, in terms of a still deeper mystery, is not in the least likely to destroy men's painfully

acquired belief in essential ethical standards. Men will not revert to stealing, killing, bearing false witness, and the like, no matter what they think, or assert, concerning the incomprehensible, inscrutable Power behind phenomena. To repeat, we are born with social as well as with anti-social instincts. Reason fortifies and vindicates the social instincts, the better and finer sides of human nature. If religion henceforth fails to satisfy reason and to meet the tests of science, it will fade and vanish from the lives of thoughtful and sincere men. He is no true friend of religion who divorces it finally from science and philosophy based on science. He is no friend of religion who asks us to accept a gratuitous hypothesis which serves no purpose and does not contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the realm of religion. There are writers who confidently anticipate a great religious revival, but unless it be justified by reason, it will share the fate of other such emotional and hysterical revivals.

We must not mistake revivals of superstition for religious revival. The choice is between a scientific and philosophical religion and modest humble Agnosticism.