

MUST WE KEEP HAMMERING AWAY AT RELIGION

BY JOHN HEINTZ

IN ALL LIKELIHOOD the question raised by the title of this article would be answered in the affirmative by those who are for winning the world to atheism or agnosticism and are apparently in a hurry to do it. Particularly so, if they happen to be young people still more or less ablaze with the proselytizing fervor which often accompanies a conversion to a new belief or viewpoint. The writer went through this intellectual phase some twenty-five years ago when a dissatisfaction with orthodox religious teachings led him to Ingersoll and a resultant introduction into a new world of literature and thought. I felt quite sure at that time that the future progress of the human race depended to some degree upon my acquainting every orthodox person that I could get to listen to me with the mistakes of Moses. I must confess at this writing that the mellowing process of time has not only greatly reduced this original ardor but has caused me to believe that not only is it unnecessary to keep forever hammering away at religion but that it may be just as well to let religion work out its own salvation in its own way and time.

That it will do this there is no doubt in my mind nor is there any doubt that it should be allowed to do it. George Bernard Shaw's satire on democracy, "The Apple Cart," could, with a new set of characters and the necessary revision as to text, be changed into a satire on skepticism. I feel quite certain that any theologian, with as keen and sympathetic an intellect as King Magnus, fully alive to the superstitions and defects of his religion on the one hand and on the other clearly seeing the inadequacy of skeptical solutions to satisfy certain definite longings peculiar to human nature, could propound problems to which skepticism can give no satisfactory answers for the simple reason that it does not possess any.

Such a theologian might ask, for instance, how about the extremely important problem to certain types of minds of the question of a future existence? The answer of skepticism, of course, would have to be any one of those philosophical reactions to a future state of being which run all the way from the attempt to picture man, not so much as an individual but as part of an eternal process in an endless scheme of things, to a blunt acceptance of Epicureanism with its cold but exceedingly practical reaction to the idea of an endless death.

But there is one objection to such solutions of this time-honored problem and it appears to be an insuperable one in a great many cases—they are only suited to persons possessed of the kind of mental equipments for making such sort of adjustments. How about the multitude to whom the idea of annihilation is anathema? How about the cases of maladjustment that science creates? Tschaikowsky, for example. The Russian composer's letters, as revealed by his biography, fairly reek with his lamentations over his disillusionment due to science and philosophy. Converted to skepticism by their influence he was utterly unable to reconcile his mind to the prospect of annihilation after death. In his own words he was "set adrift on a limitless sea of skepticism—seeking a haven and finding none." Here is a case which represents a clear illustration of the fact that scientific truths and theories are not an un-mixed blessing for every one and that their acceptance may work havoc in a certain type of individual. Tschaikowsky's sufferings were frequent and intense and his agony of mind was of such a nature that he, the skeptic, actually envied "no one so much as the religious man."

Just how many cases of a similar nature the disillusionizing revelations of science have brought about, or will bring into existence, no one can know because the inner struggles of most minds never get into the open to be scrutinized by the general public. But any one who has read William James', "The Varieties of Religious Experience," must realize that in the reaction to the idea of a future existence or the cosmos in general there are innumerable cases of maladjustment which shade all the way down from the extreme melancholy and sensitiveness of Tolstoy, Tschaikowsky and John Bunyan, to the minor cases whose adjustment problems present less difficulty.

It appears then that we are confronted by the undoubted presence of an innumerable number of persons whose peculiar psychology presents an obstacle in the way of the dissemination of scientific truths from the standpoint of their tranquility and peace of mind, for the attacks upon religion have for their objective the removal of such persons source of comfort while they supply no alternative with which their minds can feel any sympathy and not only that, but what science does offer them in its ultimate realities is so opposed to their instinctive hopes that in all likelihood bringing it to their attention will have the effect of creating new cases of maladjustment similar to that of Tschaikowsky.

The problem is serious and difficult for no matter which way we turn we are confronted by the possibility of maladjustments. Religion creates them, but it possesses this feature; that its superstitions are often able to allay the very fears which they create as the case of Bunyan, whose religion finally brought him release from his terrors, testifies to; whereas science, in the cases which it creates, offers no way of escape. There stand its realities, bald and naked. If you are constitutionally phlegmatic enough to shake your shoulders at them, or if you are stoical enough to face them courageously, well and good; if not, then irreconcilability, with all its attendant evils, will be your portion.

The question which now naturally arises is whether this sort of persons whose congenital psychological equipment cannot be adjusted to naturalistic cosmological speculations have any claim upon our sympathy in the highly important mission of the dissemination of truth? The reply of the anti-religionist is, of course, that the spread of truth is entirely too important to wait upon anyone's feelings; to which the writer can only reply in turn, that while admitting the force of that argument as a general policy in the onward march of progress, he believes that there may be circumstances which justifiably limit its application.

One unacquainted with the facts could very easily get the idea from some of the skeptical literature of today that the warfare of religion and science is still raging with its pristine vigor. It hardly ought to be necessary to remind anyone that we are no longer burning people at the stake for holding heretical opinions and that numerous methods of coercion formerly used by theologians to strangle thought have fallen into disuse. I am aware, of course,

that there is still antagonism between science and religion but I think it should be plain to a discerning observer that back in the heads of the orthodox there is lurking the feeling that there is something amiss in the inability of the theologians to discredit science; a feeling which has resulted in putting orthodoxy on the defensive. It no longer attacks with its former arrogance. It seems willing enough to keep its hands off of science for the price of being let alone.

The reason of course is that science has been victorious. The future belongs to it. Such sporadic antagonisms as the Dayton trial are merely so many pebbles in the way of its progress. Evidence of the triumph of science confronts us on every side; not only on the physical plane of life but on the economic, industrial and social as well. Science has released educational, democratizing and secularizing forces which are ceaselessly at work reconstructing society and their influence upon it is unsleeping. In America, the breaking down of racial hatreds, the secularization of industry, the democratization of sport and recreation are bringing into existence a cast of mind which must necessarily modify that powerful bias back of all thought and opinion—the measure of probability. Just what part it is destined to play in determining the religious beliefs of the future may be predicted from the declining influence of religion today which is due more to its influence than to the arguments of skeptics. The history of opinions reveals that progress in ideas comes about in this manner. Ideas which are spurned in one age are only taken up by a later one when the progress of civilization has created a bias in favor of them. So in America, forces are at work which are gradually bringing about a bias in favor of skeptical ideas and the doom of theological notions may be predicted with certainty.

Thus militant skepticism may rest assured that its aims will be accomplished by the passing of a certain period of time. No institution, however time-honored, can resist for long the pressure of its age and orthodox Christianity will prove to be no exception to this rule. Skeptical ideas, brought into existence by science, philosophy and criticism have become entrenched in the minds of an innumerable host of intelligent, thinking people and are beginning to trickle down to the man in the street in various ways. Unlike formerly he is becoming more receptive to their influence due to

the progress of civilization and the consequent change in the measure of probability.

However, the ascendance of skeptical notions is being compensated for by the loss of potency of the charge that religion is a stumbling-block in the way of progress. Schopenhauer's remark that, "The positive side of religion is the harm it has done; the negative side is the good it has done," no longer holds as good as formerly. With the truths of science in safe hands and the teeth taken out of religion's capacity to work harm it is gradually receding from the foreground to the background of life where it appears destined to remain for a considerable period of time administering, in one way or another, to the spiritual wants of a heterogeneous humanity.

Whatever element of danger may be latent in this shifting of values will be experienced, I believe, to the degree by which the movement is accelerated by skeptical criticism. Thus, for my part, although intellectually I accept agnosticism and my reaction to the cosmos is an Epicurean one, I am for letting religion alone to work out its own destiny. I am convinced that the gradual process of the natural disintegration of theological ideas before an advancing civilization is much more to be desired than their speedier destruction by criticism owing to the fact that the slower movement will give religion a better opportunity to readjust itself to changing conditions.

From the diversity of psychological types this slower movement of adjustment seems to constitute a real necessity despite the fact that it is receiving short shrift at the hands of militant skepticism. What the critics of religion overlook is that humanity is short on the underlying reason for skepticism—intellectual curiosity, and the result is that in the mass it experiences no urge to acquire the sort of information which the skeptical reformers have to impart and which is sought only by a type of intellect that is open-mindedly progressive. To try, therefore, by means of proselytism to convert large masses of the people over to skepticism is to attempt something which appears destined to be barren of real results and I submit that inasmuch as the cold and bleak realities of science, which require a certain type of mental caliber for their study and acceptance, are unadapted to humanity in general, the speedy revision of creeds by their leaders under the whip of intellectual

criticism would create innumerable cases of maladjustment with its consequent unhappiness.

The whole question turns on the individual's right to contentment and peace of mind within certain limits. With the freeing of science from theological fetters and the winning of the right to the individual of free inquiry these limits have been observed. In a world whose ultimate destiny is to spin through space a lifeless orb such an alluring phrase as eternal truth loses some of its glamour and the values of life may be justifiably viewed through a utilitarian lens. The present stage of progress does not demand at all that innumerable persons, whose type of psychology demands religious consolations, should sacrifice their happiness and contentment on the altar of scientific beliefs and theories.