

Faith and Thought

A Journal devoted to the study of the inter-relation
of the Christian revelation and modern research

Vol. 92

Number 2

Winter 1961

REV. A. GARFIELD CURNOW

Religion : Fancy or Fact ?

SYNOPSIS

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

Scientists do not deny the existence of religious experiences, but affirm that they are 'psychological', imaginative, illusory.

This position illustrated from H. G. Wells, and in quotations from Walter Lippmann, A. J. Ayer, and others.

PART TWO: INVESTIGATION

Perversions of religion are no argument against religion at its best.

The casuistical plea that religion, though an illusion, should be encouraged because 'useful'.

Drastic consequences of the view that religion is an illusion: the whole rational life of man goes by the board.

Weakness of the view that everything which cannot be proved by scientific means is incapable of proof. The description of reality which science gives us covers only part of the truth.

PART THREE: CONCLUSION

Dubious nature of some arguments for the reality of the spiritual realm.

The impressive argument from the *extent* of religious experiences. Impossible to think that *all* are illusory. This would mean that the best and noblest of mankind were pathological subjects.

Historical evidence a conditioning factor. The personality of Jesus and the dependability of the Christian writings considered.

The word 'absolute' and its meaning.

Anthropomorphism versus mechanomorphism.

Religion the *ne plus ultra* of reality.

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

THE CLAIM STATED

(1)

THE claim to be considered in this essay may be illustrated by citing a modern instance of it. 'One of my colleagues in the scientific faculty of the University in which I now teach', says Dr John Baillie in a well-known book, 'said to me recently, "The difference between us men of

science and you men of religion is that we are realists whereas you are romantics".¹ This is a familiar charge against 'men of religion', and we shall refer to other examples of it.

But here let us note that it is not that scientists deny the actuality of religious experience. Ever since the publication of William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*—the Gifford Lectures of sixty years ago—it has been growingly true that scientists and philosophers 'are now prepared in a greater measure than formerly to consider religious experience as among the most significant of their data'.² Significant of what? is of course the whole question at issue, as we shall see; but suffice it for the moment to note, with Archbishop William. Temple, that this celebrated book, with its vast collation of evidence, 'encouraged the tendency of thought to recognise the reality and authenticity of religious experience'.³ So marked was this tendency that a scientist of the calibre of Julian Huxley, writing in 1931, refers to 'the inescapable fact of religious experience, which no scientific analysis can remove',⁴ and in a later book urges that science should admit 'the psychological basis of religion as an ultimate fact'.⁵

(2)

Scientists then do not deny the 'reality' of religious experience. It is now widely admitted that to do so would be to turn a blind eye to a multitude of indisputable facts. But the crux of the matter arises just here. It is indicated by the word 'psychological' in the second of the two quotations from Julian Huxley. That word is significant of the interpretation he puts upon the 'inescapable fact' of the first quotation. It means that to him religious experience is purely subjective; there is no objective reality at the back of it. Thus, in the first of the two books alluded to, he speaks of religion as 'a function of human nature',⁶ and of God as 'a product of the human mind'.⁷ And in the other book he affirms that revelation 'is revelation only in a psychological sense, not literally. There need be no supernatural being or force making the revelation; nor is the revelation one of an external reality'.⁸

¹ *Invitation to Pilgrimage*, Penguin edn., p. 30.

² Professor H. H. Farmer, *The World and God*, p. viii.

³ *Nature, Man and God*, p. 334.

⁴ *What Dare I Think?* p. 122.

⁵ *Religion Without Revelation*, revised edn. 1957, p. 116.

⁶ *What Dare I Think?* p. 187.

⁸ *Religion Without Revelation*, revised edn. 1957, p. 91.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 240

(3)

In all this Huxley is representative of many other writers in our day. The position of the school of thought to which he belongs—variously known as Naturalism, Agnosticism, Positivism, Empiricism, or more frequently at present as Humanism—is that religion is merely a matter of opinion which is not capable of demonstration or vindication. It rests on subjective desire rather than on objective fact. It is nothing more than the communion of man with his own subliminal consciousness which, not recognising it as his own, he hypostatizes as someone or something external to himself. It is merely a product of the imagination, a sentimental fantasy, a comforting illusion, a picture of the world as man would like it to be, imaginatively superimposed on the world as it really is. It is a form of the theory that self-existence is the only certainty, sometimes called solipsism, which has been described as ‘the circular distorting mirror which shows reflections of ourselves from all directions but nothing else’.¹ In other words, according to this school religion is not at all a report on the truth about the universe, but essentially a branch of pathological psychology. In the literature of this school, and in particular in the works of psychologists like Freud, Leuba, and Durkheim, the massive evidence of religious experience is countered by such phrases as ‘psychological explanation’, ‘father image’, ‘conditioning’, and ‘wishful thinking’. In short, the whole array of evidence is just a case of

‘The instinctive theorizing whence a fact
Looks to the eye as the eye likes the look.’²

(4)

An interesting instance of the genesis of religion according to this school of thought, and of the causes and growth of religious experience, is given by Mr Geoffrey West in his study of H. G. Wells.³ He says that during the first World War, Wells felt a necessity to ‘make an affirmation of positive belief in purpose lest he should fall into an abyss of despair’. Hence such novels as *Mr Britling Sees it Through*, *The Soul of a Bishop*, and others, which to many at the time seemed to indicate that Wells was ‘becoming religious’. But, says Mr West, the God

¹ F. G. Young, *Religion and the Scientists*, p. 41.

² Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, p. 30.

³ H. G. Wells, *A Sketch for a Portrait*, p. 214-215.

whom Wells seemed to have discovered was merely 'a highly emotion-alized objectification of a personal necessity'. Which is just the view of religion and of religious experience held by agnostics and naturalists and humanists generally, as is seen in the testimony of two prominent representatives of this school, Walter Lippmann and Professor A. J. Ayer.

Lippmann, in his book *A Preface to Morals*, after remarking that the popular religion rests on the belief that the Kingdom of God, the supernatural realm, is an objective fact, goes on to say: 'To the modern spirit, on the other hand, the belief in this kingdom must necessarily seem a grandiose fiction projected by human needs and desires. The humanist view is that the popular faith does not prove the existence of its objects, but only the presence of a desire that such objects should exist.'¹

Ayer is more cavalier. He roundly declares that 'all utterances about the nature of God are nonsensical'.² And again: 'The argument from religious experience is altogether fallacious. The fact that people have religious experiences is interesting from a psychological point of view, but it does not in any way imply that there is such a thing as religious knowledge. . . . Unless he [the theist] can formulate his "knowledge" in propositions that are empirically verifiable, we may be sure that he is deceiving himself.'³ We can at least be grateful to Ayer for making his position, and that of his school, clear beyond the possibility of misunderstanding.

(5)

It may be worth while to note, in closing this introductory section, that the position of these modern writers, after all the much-lauded scientific development of recent times, in no whit differs from the position of 'sceptics' and 'atheists' of more remote days. Thus it is said of George Gissing, who died in 1903, that 'his one interest in religion seemed to lie in his notion that it was a curious form of delusion almost ineradicable from the human mind'.⁴ And here is a reference to Jeremy Bentham, the rationalistic-utilitarian philosopher, who died in 1832: 'The Christian teaching that man is a child of God with an

¹ p. 143.

³ *Ibid.* p. 119.

⁴ Morley Roberts, *Private Life of Henry Maitland*, p. 113.

² *Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 115.

immortal destiny was, in his view, "nonsense on stilts".¹ The 'nonsense' of Bentham, placed alongside the 'nonsensical' of A. J. Ayer, is a curious sidelight on the alleged progress of this school of thought in over a hundred years.

PART TWO

INVESTIGATION

THE CLAIM EXAMINED

(1)

BEFORE proceeding to a critical examination of the Naturalistic school of thought, there are two preliminary points which should be briefly considered. The first concerns a phase of the question before us in this essay which, on the face of it, lends plausibility to the contention that religious experience is purely subjective. Writing nearly a century ago the author of *Ecce Homo* averred that 'nothing has been subjected to such multiform and grotesque perversion as Christianity'.² William James, fifty years later, refers to the 'many grovelling and horrible superstitions' that the student of religions has to become acquainted with, and points out that one consequence of this is that 'there is a notion in the air about us that religion is probably only an anachronism, a case of "survival", an atavistic relapse into a mode of thought which humanity in its more enlightened examples has outgrown.'³

There can be no doubt that some forms of religion go far to justify this view. When one thinks of the crazy extravagances of deluded fanatics through the ages, and of the band of credulous folk who are always ready to follow these unbalanced cranks, it is no wonder that many form the opinion that religious experiences are pathological exhibitions and nothing more.

Even William James himself, it may be mentioned in passing, is not without blame in this connection, inasmuch as the religious experiences he relates 'are, nearly always, thoroughly abnormal'.⁴ Indeed, they are

¹ John Moody, *J. H. Newman*, p. 28.

² Chap. xiv (p. 191 in 1908 edn.).

³ *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 490.

⁴ F. R. Barry, *Christianity and Psychology*, p. 134.

often crude and bizarre. It is a pity that the value of such a valuable book should be 'lessened', as Archbishop Temple says it is, by this feature.¹

But the weakness of the argument that the extravagances of religious fanaticism justify a general charge of subjectivism against religion is easily pointed out. It is well stated by Baron von Hügel. 'Religion', he says, 'is subject to excesses and defects, to diseases and aberrations, more or less special to itself, but which no more prove anything against Religion at its best . . . than do the corresponding excesses and defects, deflections and diseases of Art, of Science, of Politics, of Marriage, prove aught against these kinds of life and reality, taken at their best.'²

That is a reasonable and effective declaration. It will be generally agreed that not only Art and Science and Politics and Marriage, but every other department of human activity, to be fairly judged, must be judged 'at their best', and not by their 'excesses, defects, deflections and diseases'. The same rule should apply to religion. The mumbo-jumbo of African witch-doctors is no more an argument against intelligent religion than their loathsome medicinal concoctions are against modern medical science.

(2)

The other preliminary point is this. Some members of the Naturalistic school endeavour to qualify their view of the illusory nature of religion, or at any rate to supplement it, by a plea which can only be described as casuistical, or even cynical. "There are those who, like Jung,' writes Julian Huxley, 'believe that religion is an illusion, but also a necessity to the bulk of mankind, and therefore should be encouraged.'³

Huxley himself is far from countenancing this view, while Bertrand Russell, another of the same school, indignantly condemns it: 'I can respect the men who argue that religion is true and therefore ought to be believed, but I can only feel profound moral reprobation for those who say that religion ought to be believed because it is useful.'⁴

The admirable candour of these words does honour to their writer. It is indeed melancholy that scientific thinkers, who presumably share the proud boast of science that its aim is 'to seek the truth whate'er

¹ *Nature, Man and God*, p. 334.

³ *Essays of a Biologist*, p. 290.

² *Letters to a Niece*, p. 134.

⁴ *Why I am Not a Christian*, p. 172.

it is, and follow wheresoe'er it leads', regardless of consequences and scornful of ulterior motives, should lay themselves open to such a rebuke.

(3)

In subjecting the Naturalistic school of thought to a critical examination, the main thing to be noted is that on its view of the universe it is not only religion that is an illusion. That would be to state the consequences mildly. Much else disappears into mirage. The belief that mechanistic naturalism is a complete account of reality means that this is a quantitative universe, and the fact is that in a merely quantitative universe *all* qualitative life is alien. This is an all-important point. If the cosmos is basically physical and merely quantitative, then all the qualitative aspects of our lives, and not only religion, are subjective fantasies. The appreciation of spiritual values like goodness, truth, and beauty, together with such experiences as colour, harmony, affection, and ideals—all this comes under the ban; all this is swept away by the same argument which disposes of religion.

Indeed, the whole range of the mental life of mankind is similarly affected. The Naturalist cannot condemn other people's thoughts because they have irrational causes and continue to believe his own which have (if Naturalism is true) equally irrational causes. As Mr C. S. Lewis shrewdly puts it, 'The Freudian proves that all thoughts are merely due to complexes except the thoughts which constitute this proof itself.'¹

Alfred Noyes presses the point even more effectively. He refers to a materialist who told him 'he did not believe in the existence of anything invisible, imponderable and non-measurable', but 'was nevertheless quite certain of the existence of his own thought, which he was unable to weigh, measure or see'.²

If anything more is needed to demonstrate the devastating effect of the logical consequences of the materialistic position, and to show its absurdity, the following extract surely administers its *coup-de-grâce*. 'A brilliant young psychologist spent some time demonstrating to me the necessarily irrational nature of my beliefs. He said he was sure I was honest in my faith but my beliefs were merely the result of purely irrational desires and repulsions in the sub-conscious. When he had finished I asked him if the same was true of his psychological theories;

¹ *Miracles*, p. 30.

² *The Unknown God*, p. 122.

were they also irrational outcrops from the sub-conscious; and, if not, why not? He had, of course, no answer. He had already successfully destroyed the basis of all rational discussion.¹

That is precisely the outcome of the claim that religion is an illusion, and religious experiences merely subjective. If admitted, the whole rational life of man, and every phase of his mental activity, equally goes by the board.

Bishop Gore's weighty summary of the position cannot be improved upon: 'Faith in God . . . has accumulated . . . a body of experience so vast as to make it impossible to deny that man is in real contact with God, without at the same time denying the validity of all human experience and opening the doors wide to a thoroughgoing scepticism, such as would paralyse not only man's religious activity, but his moral, social and scientific activity as well.'²

(4)

The root mistake made by those who hold the subjective view of religious experience, and the illusory nature of religion, is to suppose that the universe necessarily ends at the point where our physical senses cease to register its phenomena. According to this view a religious proposition is fallacious because there is no sensory test by which the proposition can be verified. Thus Freud declares that religious doctrines 'are all illusions; they do not admit of proof', and goes on to say that they cannot be proved because they do not lend themselves to scientific method, 'which is our only way to the knowledge of external reality'.³ That is, everything which cannot be proved by scientific means is incapable of proof, and everything inconsistent with science is thereby disproved. Similarly the logical positivists (to give them their own appellation) are fond of asserting that nothing is true which cannot be empirically verified. We may know phenomena, and the laws by which they are connected, but nothing more. If there is anything more we can never apprehend it. The world of which alone we can have any cognisance is that world which is the subject-matter of the physical sciences. Here, and here only, can we discover anything which deserves to be described as knowledge.

As against this reckless dogmatism it must be affirmed that the description of reality which science gives us, however accurate and

¹ Peter Green, *Our Heavenly Father*, p. 35.

² *Can We Then Believe?* p. 37.

³ *The Future of an Illusion*, p. 55.

marvellous, covers only part of the truth. In the words of General Smuts: 'The world consists not only of electrons and radiations but also of souls and aspirations. Beauty and holiness are as much aspects of nature as energy and entropy.'¹ Or as a writer in the *Daily Telegraph* said: 'Man has two modes of cognition open to him: the one by nature religious, spiritual or intuitive, and the other depending on physical observation and deduction. These two need not be mutually exclusive and should be unified in every inquiring mind, the one being complementary to the other.'²

The unification of these two modes of enquiry is indeed greatly to be desired. To bring it about, the next step forward nowadays would seem to lie in the direction of scientists broadening their horizons to embrace the non-material mental and spiritual fields with which theologians and philosophers are concerned, as well as the purely physical field with which they are familiar. This broadening of scientific outlook, though there are welcome individual instances of it, is still far from general, and must be courteously but firmly urged on the ground that 'we can no more exhaust reality by scientific pointer-readings than we can exhaust the Sistine Madonna by a chemical analysis of its paint'.³

(5)

One other weakness in the Naturalistic position may be indicated. However 'subjective' religious experiences may be, according to the allegation of this school, they spring from deeply rooted instincts in human nature, instincts which are so widespread as to be virtually universal. Many years ago Professor G. J. Romanes wrote something concerning instincts in general, and religious instincts in particular, which is still relevant. 'If the religious instincts of the human race point out to no reality as their object,' he says, 'then they are out of analogy with other instinctive endowments. Elsewhere in the animal world we never meet with such a thing as an instinct pointing aimlessly.'⁴

In all the years which have elapsed since Romanes penned this passage, no instance of 'an instinct pointing aimlessly' has ever been adduced. Surely then the presumption is that Romanes' analogy is a sound one. Just as truly as hunger points to its satisfaction in food, and so on

¹ Quoted *Life*, by J. C. Smuts, p. 321.

² John Wilcox, *Daily Telegraph*, 25 January, 1961.

³ Fosdick, *As I See Religion*, p. 134.

⁴ *Thoughts on Religion*, p. 82.

through the whole range of physical instincts, so the religious instinct, so deeply rooted in mankind, so ineradicable, points to the reality of the spiritual world. Man cannot find contentment without spiritual interpretations of his life, and spiritual sustenance and satisfactions. The Psalmist's cry, 'My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God', indicates a basal need of human nature, and points to and is an argument for the reality of its satisfaction. As the historian Lecky observes: 'That the religious instincts are as truly a part of our nature as are our appetites and our nerves is a fact which all history establishes, and which forms one of the strongest proofs of the reality of that unseen world to which the soul of man continually tends.'¹

PART THREE

CONCLUSION

THE CLAIM ANSWERED

THE question to be faced in this section may be thus stated: Is there any reasonable ground for the belief that man has access to a plane of spiritual and eternal reality? William James puts the same question in a different way. After affirming that man becomes conscious in his religious experience that the higher part of himself 'is conterminous and continuous with a *more* of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with',² he asks: 'Is such a "more" merely our own notion, or does it really exist?'³ Is it factual, or a mere dream? Can we demonstrate its actuality, or does it belong to the category of wishful thinking? Such is the question we are now to ask, and answer.

(I)

Let us clear the ground by observing that some of the answers returned to this question by those who desire to prove the reality of this 'more', the reality of the spiritual realm, rest on arguments which are unsatisfactory. For example, there is an insidious variant of the argument from the 'usefulness' of religion, to which reference was

¹ W. E. H. Lecky, *The Map of Life*, p. 219.

² *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 508.

³ *Ibid.* p. 510.

made in the previous section. It takes this form. Religious experience shows that certain beliefs have elevated human nature and improved its capacities. It seems natural then to infer from this that these beliefs bring the believer into touch with reality. But this inference must be drawn with caution.

On the face of it, it does seem reasonable to say that the spiritual effectiveness of specific beliefs points to the truth of these beliefs. But a very little enquiry produces abundant evidence that ideas and practices of the most contradictory kinds have shown spiritual effectiveness. It is often said that the validity of doctrine or cultus can be sufficiently proved by the power to arouse devotion. But the dubious nature of this plea is obvious on reflection. If pressed it would justify almost any pious fraud of medieval priestcraft. The robust words of Dean Inge strike exactly the right note: 'When Christianity says that a thing is true, it does not mean merely that it works, nor that we should be happier and better for believing it. It means that what it tells us to believe is objectively true, part of the constitution of the world in which we live, part of the laws of God's creation.'¹

(2)

One impressive argument from religious experiences to the objective truth of religion is their extent. As Archbishop Temple says, 'it is not religious experiences, but religious experience as a whole, that is of chief concern'.² And when we consider the great amount of this 'whole', the colossal accumulation of evidence as reported in numerous books over the last fifty years, evidence drawn from all countries, all centuries, and from all ranks of society, it is extremely difficult to write it all off as mere delusion.

It is one thing to say, and indeed quite reasonable to believe, that *some* of these experiences may be based on delusion. But to say that *all* spring from delusion—and it cannot be too carefully noted that this is the contention of humanism—is quite another thing, and anything but reasonable. 'To suppose that *all* of those who . . . have felt the sustaining hand of God were deluded, is to be guilty of monstrous arrogance.'³ Can there be any doubt that the severe words of this accusation are justified?

¹ *Personal Religion*, p. 54.

² *Nature, Man and God*, p. 334.

³ Trueblood, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 267.

Think of those who would have to be included under delusion on this hypothesis. Countless thousands of the noblest spirits of the ages, prophets, poets, sages, saints, the very flower of the race, on whose eminence and superlative qualities the verdict of posterity is an unmistakable one—is it credible that all these were deluded?

On this matter of the verdict of posterity Mr Arnold J. Toynbee institutes an interesting comparison. 'The works of artists and men of letters', he says, 'outlive the deeds of business men, soldiers and statesmen. The poets and philosophers outrange the historians; while the prophets and the saints overtop and outlast them all.'¹

But on the humanist contention prophets and saints, on whom the infallible judgment of time thus sets its supreme imprimatur, were of all deluded mortals the most deluded, for these are the very ones whom we most associate with religious experiences. Is it reasonable to suppose that these best and noblest of mankind were sub-normal mentalities, pathological subjects?

And when to these illustrious personages we add the testimony of untold millions of ordinary, hard-working, plain-living men and women, honourable in their generations for worth of character and moral probity, of unquestioned saneness and balance of mind, the cumulative argument that in their spiritual experiences they were in touch with reality seems irresistible.

(3)

But the evidence of religious experience, however vast in quantity and impressive in quality, must not be regarded as in itself conclusive. Spiritual experience, at any rate as far as the Christian religion is concerned, is subject to historical evidence, and can never be a substitute for it, for Christianity is profoundly based on historical events, on a series of facts in space and time. 'The Christian experience is always based upon and conditioned by a postulate of historical truth.'²

It is said of George Eliot that while for her 'Christianity had lost its basis in history, it remained the most relevant and moving symbolism for the mysteries of life'.³ But there is abundant evidence to show how tenuous is the hold of the 'moving symbolism' of Christianity, and even of its deepest principles, when severed from their roots in history.

¹ *Civilisation on Trial*, p. 3.

² Gore, *Philosophy of the Good Life*, p. 280.

³ Humphrey House, *All in Due Time*, p. 116.

'I can only express my dismay', writes Professor A. S. Peake, 'at the recklessness with which the Christian case is sometimes staked on experience alone.'¹ This tendency has sometimes taken the extreme form of dismissing the historical evidence as unnecessary and redundant, something which can be dispensed with in the interests of a purely 'spiritual' faith. But thus to disregard the historical evidence in favour of the evidential value of our individual experience may lead to putting a halo around our own foibles and eccentricities, and obviously is to play directly into the hands of those who regard religious experiences as subjective. It is a combination of historical proof with the argument from experience which alone is adequate.

And the historical proof available is so cogent that it can leave little doubt in an unprejudiced mind that in the Christian religion we have a category of truth. This opens up a vast subject, and all we can do in the space at our disposal is to make a brief reference to two salient points—the personality of Jesus and the dependability of the Christian Scriptures.

(4)

The historicity of Jesus of Nazareth is the datum line from which we start, and this is generally accepted nowadays by all schools of thought. But even if it is queried, there can be no doubt as to his unprecedented influence during the centuries. The quality of this influence, when all allowance is made for inadequate theological theories and all the misrepresentation of extremists, vindicates the belief that he embodies for us the truth about God, man, and the universe.

We see in Jesus a truly unified personality; he exhibits complete balance and harmony of mind, utter sanity and that *ἐπιείκεια* of which St Paul speaks,² and which Matthew Arnold translated as 'sweet reasonableness'. He manifests freedom and control, intense vitality and absolute self-mastery, deep wisdom, together with triumphant adequacy in the face of the worst that life or death could bring.

Where in history is there anything approaching this phenomenon? Is it any wonder that a writer so little given to superlatives as Dean Inge should give it as his opinion that 'beyond Jesus of Nazareth . . . the moral stature of humanity can never go'?³ Or that so unlikely a

¹ *The Nature of Scripture*, p. 236.

² 2 Cor. x. i.

³ *Christian Ethics and Modern Problems*, p. 191.

critic as H. G. Wells was constrained to exclaim, 'To this day this Galilean is too much for our small hearts'!¹

It is not enough to say, with a recent writer, that 'once we have succeeded in . . . getting back as nearly as possible to the person and the teaching of the historical Jesus, we shall find there, to say the least, a good and safe foundation on which to build a new type of empirical theology for the future'.² That is certainly true; but it is not an adequate statement of the case. The construction of a future theology, however desirable, however necessary, must not hide from us what we already possess in the teaching of Christ. Canon Streeter is much nearer the mark: 'Look at the facts and say how and where the march of progress has left Christ behind. Have men since found an answer more true or more inspiring to the questions which every man or woman who thinks and feels is compelled to ask?'³

Yes, the answers are *there*, in the teaching of Christ, either in the form of direct statement or, more characteristically, embodied in pregnant principle. But even this is not to say enough. It is not the principles enunciated by Christ, vital as these are, on which we must focus our main attention. It is because of his personality, what he was and not merely what he said or did, that Jesus is seen more and more clearly in every generation to be the key to right understanding of both man and God and of their relations to one another.

For the highest thing our universe has evolved is personality, and, on the principle of Aristotle's famous dictum that 'the nature of a thing is that which it is when its becoming is completed', this means that personality is the clue to the understanding of the universe. From which it follows that personality at its best, as we see it manifested in Jesus, is the interpretation for us of the highest meaning of the concept of reality. As has been well said, 'For mankind there are two unique sacraments which disclose the meaning and convey the experience of reality; they are the created universe and the person of Jesus Christ.'⁴ And of these two the created universe, with all its marvel, must give precedence to the person of Christ as a revelation of reality, for in this universe it is not stars and rocks and atoms that are the ultimate truth-tellers about the cosmos, but self-conscious being with its powers of reflective thought, creative art, developed goodness, and effective

¹ *Outline of History*, p. 531.

² Dennis A. Routh, *Hibbert Journal*, October 1955, p. 49.

³ *Reality*, p. 69.

⁴ Quoted C. A. Coulson, *Science and Christian Belief*, p. 115.

purpose. In a word, personality is the most significant thing we know; and if this applies to personality as we know it in ourselves, it applies *a fortiori* to personality as we see it in Christ.

Reality, then, must be interpreted in terms of the personality of Christ, and not merely, as is so often done, in terms of spiritual values like goodness, truth, and beauty. Here is a typical utterance in this connection. 'Goodness, truth and beauty are eternal realities, existing by their own indefeasible right. . . . These values are the true meaning, not only of our own little lives . . . but of the universe itself . . . they belong to the innermost heart of Reality.'¹ There is much in this passage to commend itself, especially in a mechano-materialistic age like ours. It is indeed true, and cannot be too much emphasised, that goodness, truth and beauty are eternal realities. But it is not these values in themselves, as theoretical entities, existing as it were *in vacuo*, that we can speak of as 'the innermost heart of reality'. In a universe which has developed personality as its end product, its finest fruit, we must see these values not as 'existing by their own indefeasible right', but as existing in and expressed by personality. And that means, to come back again to the point we are making, the salient point of the whole matter, supremely in Jesus Christ. Just as, in the terminology of the Fourth Gospel, the eternal Logos 'became flesh' in the Man of Nazareth, so did the eternal spiritual values of goodness, truth, and beauty.

(5)

The degree of dependability to be accorded to the Christian Scriptures is obviously a question the importance of which cannot be exaggerated, since these writings are our sole sources of information concerning Jesus of Nazareth. This of course is a matter for testimony from the experts, and of these we will cite, in the first place, two of the most eminent of textual critics. Sir Frederick Kenyon tells us that the New Testament text 'is far better attested than that of any other work of ancient literature. Its problems and difficulties arise not from a deficiency of evidence, but from an excess of it. In the case of no work of Greek or Latin literature do we possess manuscripts so plentiful in number, or so near the date of composition.'² To which may be added the

¹ J. H. Beibitz, *Belief, Faith and Proof*, p. 179.

² F. G. Kenyon, *Recent Developments in the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, pp. 74-75.

words of Dr J. O. F. Murray: 'A comparison of the texts put forward by critical editors shows that the passages on which there is still room for serious difference of opinion are few and relatively unimportant.'¹

That is reassuring as to the sufficient accuracy of the text, and its conformability to the original autographs, which of course have disappeared. On the matter of the overall impression produced by the evangelic narratives, and their inherent characteristics, we will again cite two authorities, one an 'advanced' New Testament critic of our own day, and the other an eighteenth-century rationalist.

William Wrede, the well-known German theologian, writing of the Gospels, pays tribute to 'the plain deep teaching of the purest piety and morality; the illuminating clear parables, the short striking sayings, the rules of life, which are so original in their form'. But besides all this, Wrede continues, we have in the Gospels 'a wholly definite image . . . of a real personality . . . speaking to us with all the force of reality, exalted, majestic, subduing, great and pure, deep and clear, serious and loving, strong and mild'.²

Rousseau, in his *Emile*, gives us this succinct testimony: 'The Gospel has notes of reality which are so great, so striking, so absolutely inimitable, that their inventor would be a more astonishing person than their hero.'³

Thus, both from the standpoint of the technical authenticity of the text, and from the standpoint of the unmistakable internal marks of genuineness, we can be confident of the dependability of the Christian sacred writings.

(6)

We may close our consideration of the founder of Christianity, and of the writings which give us our knowledge of him, by referring to a word often used in discussions similar to the one in which we are engaged—the word 'absolute'. Sometimes the word is used without qualification, sometimes with reservations. Thus Bishop Gore affirms that Christian theology 'never claims to be able to give expression to absolute truth'. But he goes on to say that the light given us in the revelation which came through Christ 'is the utmost we could receive. . . . It is the reality as far as we can know it.'⁴ Surely then we are

¹ *Peake's Commentary*, p. 601.

² *Origin of the New Testament*, p. 75.

³ Quoted Moffatt, *Approach to the New Testament*, p. 167.

⁴ *Can We Then Believe?* p. 166.

justified in using the word 'absolute' concerning it? If it is 'the reality as far as we can know it' is that not tantamount to saying that it is the 'absolute' for us?

Dean Inge is more forthright and more convincing than his fellow ecclesiastic. He comments thus on the statement 'the revelation of Christ is an absolute revelation': 'What we mean by it is that after two thousand years we are unable to conceive of its being superseded in any particular. And if anyone finds this inadequate, he may be invited to explain what higher degree of certainty is within our reach.'¹

(7)

One of the greatest philosophers of the last hundred years, F. H. Bradley, in an oft-quoted passage, declares that 'There is nothing more real than what comes in religion. . . . The man who demands a reality more solid than that of the religious consciousness, seeks he does not know what.'² Such is the contention of this essay; and in the second section of it we have seen reason to believe that Bradley's statement is justified. The evidence that religion at its highest and best is

No fable old, nor mythic lore
 No dream of bards and seers,
 No dead fact stranded on the shore
 Of the oblivious years³

is compelling and conclusive. A writer of a very different type from Bradley, though equally unprejudiced and dispassionate, Paul Elmer More, the distinguished American literary critic, may be quoted to the same effect. 'I am utterly convinced', he says, 'that an honest search for the meaning of life must lead to the simple faith of theism.'⁴ To say that the meaning of life is to be found in theism is only another way of saying that reality is to be found in religion.

At the risk of an apparent digression we may here observe that the very mention of theism is sure to lead in some quarters to the charge of anthropomorphism, the charge of fashioning the Infinite in the form of human personality—man making God in his own image. But if, as we have seen, personality is the highest reach of being with which our universe presents us, and therefore our supreme standard of measurement, it follows that personality, however inadequate for the purpose, is the least inadequate of all the ways known to us for picturing God,

¹ *Christian Mysticism*, p. 327.

³ Whittier, *Our Master*.

² *Appearance and Reality*, p. 449.

⁴ *Selected Shelburne Essays*, p. xii.

for fashioning the Infinite, for conceiving of reality. God may be supra-personal—a concept which eludes our limited minds—but he is at least personal.

In any case, if theism is anthropomorphism, the attempt to fashion the Infinite in the image of man, then materialism, its rival theory, its opposite number for the suffrages of our mental allegiance, is mechanomorphism, the attempt to fashion the Infinite in the image of a machine. And which of these two attempts to conceive of reality, to 'explain the universe', is the more intelligent, the more adequate, surely needs no pointing out.

(8)

We may then say of religion, in the words of Professor William. Brown concerning mysticism, that 'it is not just a pleasant subjective feeling, but an awareness of an object and a feeling of union with that object. It is not a merely subjective thing, it is the extreme of objectivity.'¹

This is emphatic language, especially coming from one so cautious in his utterance as the eminent Oxford philosopher and psychologist. And if it applies to mysticism, which may be defined as religious feeling in an intense form, it certainly applies to religion in the broader and more inclusive sense of the word. The conclusion to which our discussion in this essay leads us is that we cannot make sense of the facts of experience as we know them without arriving at the conviction that there is an Eternal Being who stands behind all life and calls men into relationship with himself. This relationship is the essence of religion, and the *ne plus ultra* of reality.

G. K. Chesterton, in his *Father Brown Stories*, relates the following little piece of dialogue between the hero of the book and a medical doctor. "I'm afraid I'm a practical man," said the doctor with gruff humour, "and I don't bother much about religion and philosophy." "You'll never be a practical man till you do," said Father Brown.² The retort of the shrewd and lovable little priest goes to the heart of the matter. Religion and philosophy, rightly understood and at their best, are the most practical things in the world, and the foundation of all practicality. As C. S. Lewis puts it, 'God is basic Fact or Actuality, the source of all other facthood'.³

¹ *Science and Personality*, p. 30.

² *Father Brown Stories*, p. 744.

³ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 110.

And so it comes about that in a materialistic age, and in a world whose glorying seems to be in technology and mechanism, the splendid paradox of Francis Thompson is proved by those who, believing in an unseen order, humbly endeavour to adjust themselves thereto:

O World invisible, we view thee,
O World intangible, we touch thee,
O World unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee.¹

¹ *The Kingdom of God.*