

# *The Journal* *of* *Theological Studies*

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## THE REACTION OF MODERN SCIENTIFIC THOUGHT ON THEOLOGICAL STUDY<sup>1</sup>.

1. *The reaction of intellectual progress on sacred studies.* There have been many periods of the past when the tone and character of theological discussion have been directly influenced by the intellectual conditions of the day. The impulse which was given to philosophic thought in the West by Averroes had its effect at Christian seats of learning, and called forth the theology of St Thomas Aquinas. The new enthusiasm for literature at the Renaissance was closely connected with that critical study of the Greek Testament which was associated with the Reformation. It is almost inevitable that the remarkable progress in physical science, which occurred during the nineteenth century, and which has taken such hold upon the popular mind, should react in some fashion upon the study of Theology. The history of intellectual development seems to shew that some force and freshness may be secured in presenting Christian truth, if theologians can in any way adopt the current habit of mind. The new movement may at least indicate a mode of approaching sacred studies which is likely to be invigorating and fruitful.

It is, of course, obvious that the new developments of science may suggest modifications in the form in which Christian truth is expressed. Science has afforded phraseology and illustrations which some writers, like the late Professor Drummond, have used with effect, though not always wisely. But the scientific move-

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ment touches more than modes of expression, and its influence must go deeper. Christianity is a literary religion, which treasures sacred books, and the application of critical methods to sacred literature gave rise to a new learning among sixteenth-century theologians. But Christianity is not only a literary religion; it is also a historical religion, introduced into the world at a definite time and place, and embodied in certain events. The habits of minds which are formed in connexion with the study of other occurrences in time, are necessarily employed in the modern effort to appreciate aright the phenomena of the life of our Lord and of the growth and diffusion of the religion He revealed.

There is, in many minds, a good deal of suspicion of this tendency—a suspicion that is by no means unnatural. Those who believe that it opens up a real step in progress, may yet be ready to admit that in this, as in all progress, there is loss as well as gain. The coming of the Kingdom of God was marked by the fall, as well as by the rise, of many in Israel. At every other step in advance there are double results. Both the good and the evil of progress were manifested at the Reformation. The changes which then occurred in habits of thought tended to the disintegrating of religious institutions, and the loss of the old ideal of the religious life, but they also made for the consecration of secular life and the stimulating of religious activity. Both the good and the evil of progress have been exhibited in the past, and both are doubtless involved in the movement of the present day. It is not possible for us to assess the loss and gain of any contemporary change; but we may at least attempt to consider where the gain is to be sought for, so that we may avail ourselves of it to the fullest extent.

2. *The modern scientific spirit.* The great scientific movement of the last two hundred years, and especially of last century, has shewn itself in the direction of accumulating and co-ordinating experience. Empirical science takes facts as ultimate—the particular observations of particular minds—and sets itself to check and confirm their accuracy by reference to the particular observations of other particular minds. The multiplying of laboratories has been due to the desire to train the rising generation of students in habits of careful observation and experiment, and to

the feeling that, even for purposes of learning, we need actual demonstration and manipulation—personal experience—where it may be had ; not mere book knowledge of opinions and theories, but actual contact with observed fact—so that the student may be in a position to interpret other phenomena in the light of his own experience.

This is the positive aspect of the scientific movement, but it has also a negative side. In order to attain its object, as completely as possible, each empirical science is compelled to concentrate, and to discard lines of enquiry that have no direct bearing on the matter in hand. For the purpose of progress in physical investigation, it is unnecessary to raise any of the deeper philosophical questions as to the nature of the universe or the validity of human knowledge. Science takes for granted that apprehension, by the individual mind through the senses, is a sufficiently reliable instrument for attaining knowledge as to the relations between different physical phenomena. We can assume, too, that the conditions necessary for such investigation remain similar throughout the whole period of human life upon the globe. We may take for granted that the data observable within that time enable us to penetrate, with a high degree of probability, to eras when no direct human observation or experience was possible. The range of enquiry thus opened up is large enough to absorb the energies and kindle the enthusiasm of the most eager and active minds. They do not feel that it is their business to go into philosophical speculations about the matters that lie to hand, or that such speculations can advance their enquiries. It may be admitted that one solution of the ultimate problems is better than another, but to attain a solution at all seems to be one of the luxuries of thought, and does not assist in the prosecution of particular research. Hence it comes about, that science as science—what we may call the scientific spirit—is, in its negative side, indifferent to philosophy and to religion, as lying outside its sphere ; it is, properly speaking, agnostic. That many scientific students are, as men, intensely interested in philosophical and religious questions is another matter. I am speaking of the characteristics and limitations of the habit of thought which has been increasingly dominant among educated people during the last half century.

3. *Biblical science as closely analogous to other sciences.* It is natural that men of our generation, who have formed this habit of thought, should retain it when they turn attention to such fields of interest as the phenomena of religious history in general and of the beginnings of Christianity in particular. There is a tendency to treat theological study as a department of science which deals with the phenomena of sacred literature and religious institutions, so that it may be pursued on the same lines as any other branch of science. When we press the analogy, we may feel that we can, and perhaps that we ought, to lay aside all the opinions and feelings which might bias our investigations, and view the records of the life of our Lord and the beginnings of the Church as so many literary and historical phenomena to be interpreted in accordance with literary and historical experience. The pursuit of Biblical Science on these lines yields many interesting results as to the composition of the sacred books. The date when any author, sacred or profane, wrote is a literary problem, to be settled by critical methods which do not necessarily involve a special sympathy with the matter of the books, or much interest in the subject of which they treat. Similarly, we may feel that skilled analysis is needed to detect the precise form of any teaching that made a stir in bygone days, to distinguish it from other doctrines that were then current, and to trace the influences which favoured its genesis and diffusion. It seems as if skill in handling literary and historical evidence were the only equipment which is needed in order to pursue sacred studies on the lines which are proving fruitful in other branches of empirical research, and that in order to reap the results of the modern intellectual impulse, we have only to set ourselves to apply ordinary methods of investigation in a new field. This appears to me to be the position taken by Canon Henson, and others of my friends; but it does not satisfy me. There is a danger of merely imbibing the scientific spirit in its negative aspect and accepting its self-imposed limitations, and of missing the stimulus of its positive example.

4. *The importance of laboratory work.* We shall miss in sacred studies the full benefit of the impulse which has come from scientific progress, unless we are encouraged to take a further step. Empirical science is not content with discussing the

experience of other people ; its power and vigour lie in the stress it lays on actual personal experience—on the constant checking of accepted results, and the testing of principles in different conditions. It is not mere book knowledge that is valued, but knowledge that has moulded the personal faculties of the student, and taught him what to look for and how to observe ; he has to do with knowledge that is verified and tested as a practical thing under his own eyes.

Personal experience gives a sense of the actuality of the objects of study that can never be obtained from books. For the sake of convenience of study it is necessary to isolate particular aspects of phenomena, and to study them apart ; empirical science, that is merely a thing of books, necessarily retains this division into subjects ; but the fields of the various sciences cannot be really marked out by hard and fast lines. Chemical phenomena do not exist by themselves, nor do physical phenomena ; all natural phenomena are to be investigated in their chemical and in their physical aspects. In books these topics remain apart and isolated ; it is in the laboratory that the interdependence of various factors, which we find it convenient to study separately, is seen, and that the actual character of the object of study, in all its complexity, and divested of false simplicity, comes out.

Actual investigation in a laboratory has also an educative effect on the student himself ; it quickens his insight and intelligence. It enables him to use the records of the observations made by others more intelligently, to see perhaps the importance of a point to which the observer has given little attention. The great vigour of the empirical sciences lies in the fact that students are consciously and constantly engaged in co-ordinating personal and recorded experience. This is the characteristic mark of the 'live' studies of our time. The increased interest in History is largely due to the fact that it is so easy to co-ordinate current observation of human conduct with the recorded experience of human life. History, as Seeley used to say, is past politics, and politics is present-day history. The depreciation of the study of dead languages, of which we hear so much in current talk, is due to a common failure to see that the classics serve for the formation of literary excellence in

modern authorship; Latin and Greek, to many minds, have no relation with ordinary life, as we live it. Theological study is also liable to be treated as stagnant, and it will not gain the full benefit of the intellectual impulse of the present day, unless it is consciously pursued with the aim and object of co-ordinating recorded religious experience in the past with actual and personal religious experience as it exists to day.

5. *Religious experience, as recorded.* Actual experience gives us knowledge of the relations between different physical phenomena, and actual experience has also brought into light a knowledge of other relations which concern us. Experience affords the subject-matter of religion as well as of science. There are two great realities in the Universe, as each of us knows it—the thought and will of which we are each conscious within, and the Thought and Will which expresses itself in all that is. There are relations between each human personality and the Eternal Thought and Will, from which all come, to which all go, ‘in whom we live and move and have our being’. It is the part of the Christian religion to bring these complex relations into consciousness, and thus to render personal religious experience full and deep. There is a sense of sin—the knowledge of human frailty, as it stands out against a background of infinite righteousness. There may be, too, a sense of pardon, of changed relations with the Eternal Will, a participation in the blessedness of the man to whom the Lord does not impute his sin. And the individual apprehension of these relations, and of changes of relationship between the individual and the Eternal Will, constitutes a body of personal religious experience.

It is well to remember that the Bible, and especially the Gospels, do not claim to be a mere chronicle of events by dispassionate observers; they are rather records of personal religious experience—of the occasions and events through which certain men attained to new conceptions of the relations between God and man. This fact comes out in regard both to the writers’ qualification for their task and to the object they set before themselves in undertaking it. Men who had personal experience of divine things—of the power of Christ’s words, and the import of the signs He shewed, put it on record that after generations might try to cultivate religious experience, substantially similar to that

which the Apostles enjoyed. *These are written*, as we read in the Fourth Gospel, *that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye may have life through His name.* This is the purpose these writers had in view, not merely to put certain interesting discourses and marvellous events on record to satisfy the curiosity and rouse the admiration of future ages, but to diffuse a knowledge of the relations between God and man, so that all men, who read their writings, may enter into the same conscious and close relations with the eternal God, as they had themselves attained by means of their companionship with Jesus Christ. They had come to believe in God, not merely as the patron of their race, and the God of their battles, but as the Father of each and every one of His children. They had taken Jesus Christ, as not only their Master, but their Lord and their God, and they relied on the help of the Holy Spirit for guidance and comfort. We of this generation cannot see what they saw with their eyes, or hear the gracious words that proceeded from the mouth of the Lord. The tones of His voice and the expression of His countenance—that which gives most meaning to our intercourse with friends—are lost to us for ever. But for all that, it was the conviction of the sacred writers that after generations might share in the same spiritual experience which they themselves enjoyed. The same consciousness of an intimate, complex relationship with God Himself, the same hope for this life and the next, which they cherished, is possible for all mankind.

6. *The validity of religious experience.* It is true that religious experience, like other experience, has an intuitive force, which carries conviction with it at the moment, and makes doubt of the truth conveyed impossible. But this prevailing conviction may not always be maintained in the minds of those who reflect on the feelings and impressions of past years, and it cannot be transferred directly to the recorded experience of others. We have all need to reassure ourselves as to the validity of religious experience. The question must arise—May it not, after all, be a subjective feeling of remorse, or a subjective feeling of peace? What reason is there to believe that such states of consciousness testify to real relationships between God and man, and are not mere feelings and fancies of ecstatic individuals?

It is obvious that the difficulty which arises, as to the validity of *any* experience, must be felt in regard to religious experience. But it is noticeable that Christian experience has always claimed to be tried by the very tests which we apply to all experience. We ask, in regard to other conscious states, whether the results reached are true for all intelligences alike? Now this is precisely the test to which Christian experience makes its appeal. *O taste and see that God is good*, is the confident invitation it echoes. It holds that for all human minds and wills there is a possibility of the consciousness of sin, in its guilt and shame, and that for all, too, there is a possibility of pardon and conscious union with God. The very claim of Christianity to be a universal religion, appealing to all men—of all races and all temperaments alike—is another way of stating the case for the validity of the Christian experience of each.

Another indication of the character of Christian experience—as no mere subjective impression—is to be found in its practical working in the world. The convictions which are rooted in religious experience—and I am not speaking of Christianity only—have an active influence. The moulding of human character, the creation of human institutions, which has gone on under the stimulus and guidance of religious conviction, is at least a testimony to potency from generation to generation, which is not easily compatible with the opinion that religious experience is merely a subjective illusion. Religious experience is valid, because it is creative in the realm of morality, and finds expression in human institutions of many kinds.

7. *The differences between religious and other experience.* Even if religious experience be approved as valid, when tried by the tests to which all personal impressions are subjected, there can be no doubt that it is fundamentally different in many ways from other experience. The data on which the theologian builds are different in kind from those which are co-ordinated in science—and this difference renders the methods of investigation, which we apply in one case, unsuitable in others.

Natural science in all its branches has to do with phenomena that are observable by the senses—sight, touch, hearing, and so forth. Theology has to do with experiences which belong to the inner life of thought and will. In the physical sciences, human

intelligence is, from the common-sense standpoint, a mere observer and reporter, looking on at movements which occur beyond it. But so far as religious experience goes, human consciousness is the field as well as the instrument of observation. And not only so; the individual mind serves to co-ordinate sense impressions and the relations of external phenomena to each other, to the satisfaction of the observer. But no human mind is able to attain to more than a very partial and imperfect apprehension of the relations of the individual human will and the Eternal Will. Face to face with Perfect Goodness, and Perfect Knowledge, and Eternal Being, the human mind is conscious of its own limitations, its inability to grasp or express the truth about such Being, and the mystery of His dealings with the changing, imperfect natures that we know. The field of religious experience is different from that of ordinary experience, and the limitation and weakness of human intelligence must be borne in mind all the time.

From this it obviously follows that the methods of investigation which are appropriate in regard to scientific enquiry will not serve in the new sphere. Religious experience takes us to the very heart of things, and places us in direct relation with the power that moves in all that is. It gives us a standpoint from which we no longer look on the world merely from outside. It brings a man into closest intercourse with the very meaning of things: he may find there within himself the working of spiritual powers accomplishing the impossible, breaking the bands of those sins which he had by his frailty committed, controlling the sequence of cause and effect as we find it in the world of mere phenomena. And in the light of that experience he will see the world of phenomena in a new light. He will recognize the creative power of the Spirit of Life in quickening human aspiration and raising men to newness of life; he will recognize the power of the Divine Ideal, that has appealed to him from the cross of Calvary; he will trace a Fatherly hand presiding over all, disciplining individual lives, shaping the destinies of principalities and powers, and giving a worthy meaning and object to all the ages that went to the preparation of an earth that furnishes a stage for the drama of human existence.

From this point of view, the personal religious experience of the Christian man—in all its complexity—is the type in the light of which the worth of all the simpler and tentative forms can be

seen. As Christians we have the norm, the idea, of religious truth; the recorded phenomena of religious growth are illustrations and confirmations of that which we know, not, as in natural sciences, the basis on which our knowledge is built. The methods of inductive research, by which the hypotheses of the physicist are proved or disproved, are inapplicable in the sphere of religious experience. The hypothesis of a supernatural life is not one that can be proved or disproved by empirical methods; it may be illustrated and confirmed, but not established.

Though the methods of investigation are necessarily so different, the process by which progress may be secured is the same. Advance is to be hoped for by the careful effort to co-ordinate actual and personal religious experience with religious experience as recorded in the past. We must go on from the mental attitude of the student in a museum to that of the investigator in a laboratory. Theological students will do well to cultivate personal religious experience as preliminary to, and correlative with, the study of the experience that is recorded in literature and history. It is in the conjunction of the two sides that the student may attain to greater insight in the interpretation of recorded experience, and greater power of apprehension in the present. Empirical science with its rapid advance, and its constant recourse to actual observation and experiment, is a standing warning against any divorce between these two sides. If we are content to analyse religious experience in the past, by itself, and apart from actual religious experience now, we may be ingenious, but there is at least a danger that our conclusions will be superficial.

8. *The growth of experience and the aims of sacred study.* The more we look upon sacred study as the investigation of a living body of religious experience, and the co-ordination of present-day with recorded experience, the more easily shall we grasp the truth that theological study is not only alive, but growing. This conviction will safeguard us against the danger of supposing that our studies are exhaustive, or that we have reached a statement of knowledge that is at all final. The manifestation of the Eternal in time, is not and cannot be, complete and exhaustive. The data furnished to us are not complete, God's Spirit is working in the world, and leading with a deeper knowledge of God.

We dare not, therefore, limit the field of religious experience to any particular era in the past. Unless we keep this clearly before us, we are in danger of turning to the Bible, as if we could find in it exhaustive knowledge of God's dealings with men. There are several distinct aims we may keep before us in the study of the Bible, and though all the ways of reading it may be good, they are not all equally good.

There may be the careful study of the letter, so as to get the precise shade of meaning which any sentence conveys; the first impression as to what the words mean may be quite true so far as it goes, but there is a depth of thought and a delicacy of expression in every part of the Bible, that makes it well worth pondering so that we may appreciate the precise significance and full force of every phrase.

Or, we may read the volume for the sake of getting at the personality of the author, and noting what were the special features in our Lord's ministry which interested one or another of the evangelists. It may be our aim to get at the man through his writing, and this sort of enquiry is especially interesting in the case of the divine library.

All such study of the Bible is good; but we do not get the best out of it, unless we are eager not only to enter into the thoughts and feelings of the writers, but to make them our own, and live them over again ourselves. We must not merely admire the beauty of Christian teaching, but take it as a principle which reproduces itself in our own words and deeds. It is best to study Christian truth with the hope and aim of trying to verify it for ourselves.

Since religious experience is still growing and the data are still incomplete, we cannot suppose that any interpretation of them, or expression of the truth about God and His relations to man, is complete and final. We must recognize the possibility of continued progress in Theology, the possibility of attaining to a fuller apprehension and clearer statement of truth. The terms we employ change their significance as human thought advances. There is a danger in treating any expression of the relations between God and man as at all complete. St Thomas Aquinas worked out the *Summa* under the influence of revived legal study, and settled each point as he raised it, by references

to authoritative opinions; and thus he built up a self-consistent system enunciating the Voice of the Church. But St Thomas did not say the last word; religious experience has been growing; some of his phraseology is out of date, some of his conceptions have been outlived, for the life of the Church has not stood still. There is room to discriminate between the aspects of his doctrine which were characteristic of his time, and the truths which hold good for all time. He has not given us an utterance which is final.

If there is no completeness in the systematic collection of the authoritative utterances and the interpretation thus given of the data of experience, there is certainly none in the judgement of any individual consciousness. This cannot be all-embracing, complete, final. There are those who hold themselves free to reject any Christian teaching that has not awakened a conscious echo in their own souls. There are diversities of operations, but the same Spirit; the experience of the Body—the Church—is larger and more complete than any individual consciousness can hope to acquire. None of us dare say that we have attained to full knowledge, or to a perfect understanding, of the mysteries of Grace, we can only make it our constant aim to enter personally into a fuller apprehension of the faith of the Church, and to be personally partakers in the life of the Church in a larger manner.

The fact that theological knowledge is growing must be borne in mind, if we are inclined to press the analogies with physical science and lay down lines as to the scope of the subject and to define a group of phenomena which we will sever from the rest. Empirical Science finds it convenient to classify phenomena into groups, according to the senses through which we detect them, or the ideas under which we can classify them. But religious experience cannot be thus isolated and severed. Religion takes into account the 'total reaction upon life'<sup>1</sup>; it deals with the man as a whole, his inner life no less than his outer life, his conscious relations to God, no less than his relations to things in space. Analogies with empirical science there may be, suggestions and illustrations may be drawn from it, but theology cannot be really ranged among the empirical sciences as if it were merely one of them, since it deals with a totality—be it the totality of con-

<sup>1</sup> W. James *Varieties of Religious Experience* p. 35.

sciousness, or of the universe;—and hence, theology, as the schoolmen would have it, is the *scientia scientiarum*.

Nor are we even justified in limiting the field and working of spiritual activity by reference to the principles which may be safely assumed in regard to other human experience. Habitual reference to personal religious experience affords a new criterion of the possible and the probable. There is no forgiveness in Nature, there is no intelligible place for a doctrine of forgiveness in mere Theism. But those who have experience of it as a fact that has made a difference in their own lives, will feel that the creative power of the living God must manifest itself—if it be manifested at all—in a fashion which is at variance with mechanical routine. The record of the miraculous birth and rising from the dead of the man Christ Jesus, becomes intelligible to them, just because it fits in with their own conscious life. *Credo*, such a man may say, *credo quia impossibile*.

The late bishop of London used to insist that the distinctive feature of the English Church, as apart from the other branches of the Church in the West and the East, was that she cherished sound learning; that the love of learning and the determination to test her teaching in the light of learning was a feature which had been marked since at least the Reformation era. But I think it is equally noticeable that she has preserved the tradition, which has been lost in so many protestant bodies, of insisting that her clergy shall habitually cultivate personal religious experience. The daily offices which are incumbent upon her clergy, the weekly celebrations which were insisted on in colleges, testify to the mind of the Church in this matter. Divine learning is to be fostered, but not in a merely secular spirit; it is to be sought for, partly by study, and partly through the clear light of personal consciousness of God's truth.

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