



Mysticism
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The warfare between science and theology has been of a peculiar sort. At all times and places - except late eighteenth-century France and Soviet Russia - the majority of scientific men have supported the orthodoxy of their age. Some of the most eminent have been in the majority. Newton, though an Arian, was in all other respects a supporter of the Christian faith. Cuvier was a model of Catholic correctness. Faraday was a Sandymanian, but the errors of that sect did not seem, even to him, to be demonstrable by scientific arguments, and his views as to the relations of science and religion were such as every Churchman could applaud. The warfare was between theology and *science*, not the men of science. Even when the men of science held views which were condemned, they generally did their best to avoid conflict. Copernicus, as we saw, dedicated his book to the Pope; Galileo retracted; Descartes, though he thought it prudent to live in Holland, took great pains to remain on good terms with ecclesiastics, and by a calculated silence escaped censure for sharing Galileo's opinions. In the nineteenth century, most British men of science still thought that there was no essential conflict between their science and those parts of the Christian faith which liberal Christians still regarded as essential - for it had been found possible to sacrifice the literal truth of the Flood, and even of Adam and Eve.

The situation in the present day is not very different from what it has been at all times since the victory of Copernicanism. Successive scientific discoveries have caused Christians to abandon one after another of the beliefs which the Middle Ages regarded as integral parts of the faith, and these successive retreats have enabled men of science to remain Christians, unless their work is on that disputed frontier which the warfare has reached in our day. Now, as at most times during the last three centuries, it is proclaimed that science and religion have become reconciled: the scientists modestly admit that there are realms which lie outside science, and the liberal theologians concede that they would not venture to deny anything capable of scientific proof. There are, it is true, still a few disturbers of the peace: on the one side, fundamentalists and stubborn Catholic theologians; on the other side, the more radical students of such subjects as biochemistry and animal psychology, who refuse to grant even the comparatively modest demands of the more enlightened Churchmen. But on the whole the fight is languid as compared with what it was. The newer creeds of Communism and Fascism are the inheritors of theological bigotry; and perhaps, in some deep region of the unconscious, bishops and professors feel themselves jointly interested in the maintenance of the *status quo*.

The present relations between science and religion, as the State wishes them to appear, may be ascertained from a very instructive volume, *Science and Religion, A Symposium*, consisting of twelve talks broadcast from the B.B.C. in the autumn of 1930. Outspoken opponents of religion were, of course, not included, since (to mention no other argument) they would have pained the more orthodox among the listeners. There was, it is true, an excellent introductory talk by Professor Julian Huxley, which contained no support for even the most shadowy orthodoxy; but it also contained little that liberal Churchmen would now find objectionable. The speakers who permitted themselves to express definite opinions, and to advance arguments in their favour, took up a variety of positions, ranging from Professor Malinowski's pathetic avowal of a balked longing to

believe in God and immortality to Father O'Hara's bold assertion that the truths of revelation are more certain than those of science, and must prevail where there is conflict; but, although the details varied, the general impression conveyed was that the conflict between religion and science is at an end. The result was all that could have been hoped. Thus Canon Streeter, who spoke late, said that "a remarkable thing about the foregoing lectures has been the way in which their general drift has been moving in one and the same direction.... An idea has kept on recurring that science by itself is not enough." Whether this unanimity is a fact about science and religion, or about the authorities which control the B.B.C., may be questioned; but it must be admitted that, in spite of many differences, the authors of the symposium do show something very like agreement on the point mentioned by Canon Streeter.

Thus Sir J. Arthur Thomson says: "Science as science never asks the question *Why?* That is to say, it never inquires into the meaning, or significance, or purpose of this manifold Being, Becoming, and Having Been." And he continues: "Thus science does not pretend to be a bedrock of truth." "Science," he tells us, "cannot apply its methods to the mystical and spiritual." Professor J. S. Haldane holds that "it is only within ourselves, in our active ideals of truth, right, charity, and beauty, and consequent fellowship with others, that we find the revelation of God." Dr. Malinowski says that "religious revelation is an experience which, as a matter of principle, lies beyond the domain of science." I do not, for the moment, quote the theologians, since their concurrence with such opinions is to be expected.

Before going further, let us try to be clear as to what is asserted, and as to its truth or falsehood. When Canon Streeter says that "science is not enough," he is, in one sense, uttering a truism. Science does not include art, or friendship, or various other valuable elements in life. But of course more than this is meant. There is another, rather more important, sense in which "science is not enough," which seems to me also true: science has nothing to say about values, and cannot prove such propositions as "it is better to love than to hate" or "kindness is more desirable than cruelty." Science can tell us much about the *means* of realizing our desires, but it cannot say that one desire is preferable to another. This is a large subject, as to which I shall have more to say in a later chapter.

But the authors I have quoted certainly mean to assert something further, which I believe to be false. "Science does not pretend to be a bedrock of *truth*" (my italics) implies that there is another, non-scientific method of arriving at truth. "Religious revelation ... lies beyond the domain of science" tells us something as to what this non-scientific method is. It is the method of religious revelation. Dean Inge is more explicit: "The proof of religion, then, is experimental." [He has been speaking of the testimony of the mystics.] "It is a progressive knowledge of God under the three attributes by which He has revealed Himself to mankind - what are sometimes called the absolute or eternal values - Goodness or Love, Truth, and Beauty. If that is all, you will say, there is no reason why religion should come into conflict with natural science at all. One deals with facts, the other with values. Granting that both are real, they are on different planes. This is not quite true. We have seen science poaching upon ethics, poetry, and what not. Religion cannot help poaching either." That is to say, religion must make assertions about what is,

and not only about what ought to be. This opinion, avowed by Dean Inge, is implicit in the words of Sir J. Arthur Thomson and Dr. Malinowski.

Ought we to admit that there is available, in support of religion, a source of knowledge which lies outside science and may properly be described as "revelation"? This is a difficult question to argue, because those who believe that truths have been revealed to them profess the same kind of certainty in regard to them that we have in regard to objects of sense. We believe the man who has seen things through the telescope that we have never seen; why then, they ask, should we not believe them when they report things that are to them equally unquestionable?

It is, perhaps, useless to attempt an argument such as will appeal to the man who has himself enjoyed mystic illumination. But something can be said as to whether we others should accept this testimony. In the first place, it is not subject to the ordinary tests. When a man of science tells us the result of an experiment, he also tells us how the experiment was performed; others can repeat it, and if the result is not confirmed it is not accepted as true; but many men might put themselves into the situation in which the mystic's vision occurred without obtaining the same revelation. To this it may be answered that a man must use the appropriate sense: a telescope is useless to a man who keeps his eye shut. The argument as to the credibility of the mystic's testimony may be prolonged almost indefinitely. Science should be neutral, since the argument is a scientific one, to be conducted exactly as an argument would be conducted about an uncertain experiment. Science depends upon perception and inference; its credibility is due to the fact that the perceptions are such as any observer can test. The mystic himself may be certain that he *knows*, and he has no need of scientific tests; but those who are asked to accept his testimony will subject it to the same kind of scientific tests as those applied to men who say they have been to the North Pole. Science, as such, should have no expectation, positive or negative, as to the result.

The chief argument in favour of the mystics is their agreement with each other. "I know nothing more remarkable," says Dean Inge, "than the unanimity of the mystics, ancient, mediaeval, and modern, Protestant, Catholic, and even Buddhist or Mohammedan, though the Christian mystics are the most trustworthy." I do not wish to underrate the force of this argument, which I acknowledged long ago in a book called *Mysticism and Logic*. The mystics vary greatly in their capacity for giving verbal expression to their experiences, but I think we may take it that those who succeeded best all maintain: (1) that all division and separateness is unreal, and that the universe is a single indivisible unity; (2) that evil is illusory, and that the illusion arises through falsely regarding a part as self-subsistent; (3) that time is unreal, and that reality is eternal, not in the sense of being everlasting, but in the sense of being wholly outside time. I do not pretend that this is a complete account of the matters on which all mystics concur, but the three propositions that I have mentioned may serve as representatives of the whole. Let us now imagine ourselves a jury in a law-court, whose business it is to decide on the credibility of the witnesses who make these three somewhat surprising assertions.

We shall find, in the first place, that, while the witnesses agree up to a point, they disagree totally when that point is passed, although they are just as certain as when they agree. Catholics, but not Protestants, may have visions in which the Virgin appears; Christians and Mohammedans, but not Buddhists, may have great truths revealed to them by the Archangel Gabriel; the Chinese mystics of the Tao tell us, as a direct result of their central doctrine, that all government is bad, whereas most European and Mohammedan mystics, with equal confidence, urge submission to constituted authority. As regards the points where they differ, each group will argue that the other groups are untrustworthy; we might, therefore, if we were content with a mere forensic triumph, point out that most mystics think most other mystics mistaken on most points. They might, however, make this only half a triumph by agreeing on the greater importance of the matters about which they are at one, as compared with those as to which their opinions differ. We will, in any case, assume that they have composed their differences, and concentrated the defence at these three points - namely, the unity of the world, the illusory nature of evil, and the unreality of time. What test can we, as impartial outsiders, apply to their unanimous evidence?

As men of scientific temper, we shall naturally first ask whether there is any way by which we can ourselves obtain the same evidence at first hand. To this we shall receive various answers. We may be told that we are obviously not in a receptive frame of mind, and that we lack the requisite humility; or that fasting and religious meditation are necessary; or (if our witness is Indian or Chinese) that the essential prerequisite is a course of breathing exercises. I think we shall find that the weight of experimental evidence is in favour of this last view, though fasting also has been frequently found effective. As a matter of fact, there is a definite physical discipline, called yoga, which is practised in order to produce the mystic's certainty, and which is recommended with much confidence by those who have tried it.[1] Breathing exercises are its most essential feature, and for our purposes we may ignore the rest.

In order to see how we could test the assertion that yoga gives insight, let us artificially simplify this assertion. Let us suppose that a number of people assure us that if, *for a certain time*, we breathe in a certain way, we shall become convinced that time is unreal. Let us go further, and suppose that, having tried their recipe, we have ourselves experienced a state of mind such as they describe. But now, having returned to our normal mode of respiration, we are not quite sure whether the vision was to be believed. How shall we investigate this question?

First of all, what can be meant by saying that time is unreal? If we really meant what we say, we must mean that such statements as "this is before that" are mere empty noise, like "twas brillig." If we suppose anything less than this - as, for example, that there is a relation between events which puts them in the same order as the relation of earlier and later, but that it is a different relation - we shall not have made any assertion that makes any real change in our outlook. It will be merely like supposing that the Iliad was not written by Homer, but by another man of the same name. We have to suppose that there are no "events" at all; there must be only the one vast whole of the universe, embracing whatever is real in the misleading appearance of a temporal procession. There must be

nothing in reality corresponding to the apparent distinction between earlier and later events. To say that we are born, and then grow, and then die, must be just as false as to say that we die, then grow small, and finally are born. The truth of what seems an individual life is merely the illusory isolation of one element in the timeless and indivisible being of the universe. There is no distinction between improvement and deterioration, no difference between sorrows that end in happiness and happiness that ends in sorrow. If you find a corpse with a dagger in it, it makes no difference whether the man died of the wound or the dagger was plunged in after death. Such a view, if true, puts an end, not only to science, but to prudence, hope, and effort; it is incompatible with worldly wisdom, and - what is more important to religion - with morality.

Most mystics, of course, do not accept these conclusions in their entirety, but they urge doctrines from which these conclusions inevitably follow. Thus Dean Inge rejects the kind of religion that appeals to evolution, because it lays too much stress upon a temporal process. "There is no law of progress, and there is no universal progress," he says. And again: "The doctrine of automatic and universal progress, the lay religion of many Victorians, labours under the disadvantage of being almost the only philosophical theory which can be definitely disproved." On this matter, which I shall discuss at a later stage, I find myself in agreement with the Dean, for whom, on many grounds, I have a very high respect. But he naturally does not draw from his premisses all the inferences which seem to me to be warranted.

It is important not to caricature the doctrine of mysticism, in which there is, I think, a core of wisdom. Let us see how it seeks to avoid the extreme consequences which seem to follow from the denial of time.

The philosophy based on mysticism has a great tradition, from Parmenides to Hegel. Parmenides says: "What is, is uncreated and indestructible; for it is complete, immovable, and without end. Nor was it ever, nor will it be; for now *it is*, all at once, a continuous one." [2] He introduced into metaphysics the distinction between reality and appearance, or the way of truth and the way of opinion, as he calls them. It is clear that whoever denies the reality of time must introduce some such distinction, since obviously the world *appears* to be in time. It is also clear that, if everyday experience is not to be *wholly* illusory, there must be some relation between appearance and the reality behind it. It is at this point, however, that the greatest difficulties arise: if the relation between appearance and reality is made too intimate, all the unpleasant features of appearance will have their unpleasant counterparts in reality, while if the relation is made too remote, we shall be unable to make inferences from the character of appearance to that of reality, and reality will be left a vague Unknowable, as with Herbert Spencer. For Christians, there is the related difficulty of avoiding pantheism: if the world is *only* apparent, God created nothing, and the reality corresponding to the world is a part of God; but if the world is in any degree real and distinct from God, we abandon the wholeness of everything, which is an essential doctrine of mysticism, and we are compelled to suppose that, in so far as the world is real, the evil which it contains is also real. Such difficulties make thorough-going mysticism very difficult for an orthodox Christian. As the Bishop of Birmingham

says: "All forms of pantheism ... as it seems to me, must be rejected because, if man is actually a part of God, the evil in man is also in God."

All this time, I have been supposing that we are a jury, listening to the testimony of the mystics, and trying to decide whether to accept or reject it. If, when they deny the reality of the world of sense, we took them to mean "reality" in the ordinary sense of law-courts, we should have no hesitation in rejecting what they say, since we would find that it runs counter to all other testimony, and even to their own in their mundane moments. We must therefore look for some other sense. I believe that, when the mystics contrast "reality" with "appearance," the word "reality" has not a logical, but an emotional, significance: it means what is, in some sense, important. When it is said that time is "unreal," what should be said is that, in some sense and on some occasions, it is important to conceive the universe as a whole, as the Creator, if He existed, must have conceived it in deciding to create it. When so conceived, all process is within one completed whole; past, present, and future, all exist, in some sense, together, and the present does not have that pre-eminent reality which it has to our usual ways of apprehending the world. If this interpretation is accepted, mysticism expresses an emotion, not a fact; it does not assert anything, and therefore can be neither confirmed nor contradicted by science. The fact that mystics do make assertions is owing to their inability to separate emotional importance from scientific validity. It is, of course, not to be expected that they will accept this view, but it is the only one, so far as I can see, which, while admitting something of their claim, is not repugnant to the scientific intelligence.

The certainty and partial unanimity of mystics is no conclusive reason for accepting their testimony on a matter of fact. The man of science, when he wishes others to see what he has seen, arranges his microscope or telescope; that is to say, he makes changes in the external world, but demands of the observer only normal eyesight. The mystic, on the other hand, demands changes in the observer, by fasting, by breathing exercises, and by a careful abstention from external observation. (Some object to such discipline, and think that the mystic illumination cannot be artificially achieved; from a scientific point of view, this makes their case more difficult to test than that of those who rely on yoga. But nearly all agree that fasting and an ascetic life are helpful.) We all know that opium, hashish, and alcohol produce certain effects on the observer, but as we do not think these effects admirable we take no account of them in our theory of the universe. They may even, sometimes, reveal fragments of truth; but we do not regard them as sources of general wisdom. The drunkard who sees snakes does not imagine, afterwards, that he has had a revelation of a reality hidden from others, though some not wholly dissimilar belief must have given rise to the worship of Bacchus. In our own day, as William James related,^[3] there have been people who considered that the intoxication produced by laughing-gas revealed truths which are hidden at normal times. From a scientific point of view, we can make no distinction between the man who eats little and sees heaven and the man who drinks much and sees snakes. Each is in an abnormal physical condition, and therefore has abnormal perceptions. Normal perceptions, since they have to be useful in the struggle for life, must have some correspondence with fact; but in abnormal perceptions there is no reason to expect such correspondence, and their testimony, therefore, cannot outweigh that of normal perception.

The mystic emotion, if it is freed from unwarranted beliefs, and not so overwhelming as to remove a man wholly from the ordinary business of life, may give something of very great value - the same kind of thing, though in a heightened form, that is given by contemplation. Breadth and calm and profundity may all have their source in this emotion, in which, for the moment, all self-centred desire is dead, and the mind becomes a mirror for the vastness of the universe. Those who have had this experience, and believe it to be bound up unavoidably with assertions about the nature of the universe, naturally cling to these assertions. I believe myself that the assertions are inessential, and that there is no reason to believe them true. I cannot admit any method of arriving at truth except that of science, but in the realm of the emotions I do not deny the value of the experiences which have given rise to religion. Through association with false beliefs, they have led to much evil as well as good; freed from this association, it may be hoped that the good alone will remain.

Notes

1. As regards yoga in China, see Waley, *The Way and its Power*, pp. 117-18.
2. Quoted from Burnet's *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 199.
3. See his *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

