

## THE CHURCH, SCIENCE AND THE COMMON PAGAN

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NOTE: The following article by the Warden of the Residential College for Adult Education at Urchfont Manor, Devizes, was occasioned by the writer being invited to open the discussion after the lecture on science as a substitute for religion by Dr Sherwood Taylor, published in the last issue of *BLACKFRIARS*. Writing quite evidently from a non-Catholic standpoint the author makes his suggestions with the authority of experience, for he deals constantly with the average man-in-the-street whose suspicions of religion and whose faith in science have turned the present era into a post-Christian age. There are forty million, or 80% of the population of England and Wales, who accept this point of view without question, so that the suggestions on how to meet them in such a way that they may be willing to listen to the Christian point of view are among the most urgent of the day. Catholics still seem a little dazed at the immense avalanche of desertion from Christianity and they often lack experience of the other point of view since they hold on to their own faith with such praiseworthy tenacity. It is therefore with gratitude to the author and with a plea to the Christian reader to consider his words deeply that we present the article as a continuation of the discussion begun by Dr Sherwood Taylor in the last issue of *BLACKFRIARS*.—Editor.

A GOOD deal of time has been spent in the last few years proving that the central doctrines of Christianity are not in conflict with the main theories of modern science. There has, of course, been much genuine conflict between Christianity and the social or philosophic implications, usually materialist, which some scientists have read into their work. But, put quite simply, it must be clear that genuine discoveries of any of the laws by which the universe really works cannot conflict with a right belief in the Creator of the universe and of the laws which govern it. It has been in many ways little short of disastrous that such a strong impression of conflict should have grown up, particularly in the nineteenth century; and, in my own view as a layman, some parties in various Churches were not a little to blame for this in appearing to assert, as a matter of religious principle, propositions about the age, origin and development of the

universe which it was the business not of religion but of science to ascertain and test. While the direct conflicts have largely ceased, while most good scientists would admit that a religious interpretation of the neutral facts is perfectly admissible, the memory and impression of conflict remain, and do great harm.

The harm is there because most modern English people believe in science almost implicitly and with far greater assurance than they believe in God. This is perhaps natural. That water, in the right conditions, boils at 212deg.F. is a fact of observation which can be verified any day; that God exists is more like a hypothesis, and its implication is, to many minds, much more ambiguous. Science has a great validity today, and there is a natural tendency to say that if religion conflicts with it, so much the worse for religion. I believe that it is of immense importance that the Church should fully recognise and fully accept this vague 'scientific' attitude of ordinary people. To fly in the face of it is to build unnecessary obstructions in the way of converting a largely pagan world. Moreover, it is at least permissible to hold that modern science is the one great achievement of modern (post-Renaissance) western civilisation. It has in it great virtues—chiefly the disinterested search for truth. Its revelations of the workings of the universe have increased rather than diminished our sense of awe and wonder. That such an achievement, though in a limited field, should be either belittled or accepted grudgingly cannot be creditable either to the good sense or to the magnanimity of the Churches, and it is probably the cause of much of the hostility or suspicion with which the Churches are regarded.

The Church cannot afford to forget the very close associations between religion and 'superstition'. Christianity in its early days, as one of many competing religions, was naturally emphatic in its condemnation of all the others; and it is probably chiefly due to Christian thinkers and writers that until very recently the other religious manifestations of the human spirit have been so heavily condemned. But this condemnation has rebounded to damage Christianity itself. As historians and anthropologists have revealed the astonishing similarities of early religious thought and ritual in many parts of the world, two possible attitudes can occur. One would be to infer the added probability of the truth of religion since so many different seekers have come so near to the same point—an attitude which the Church in the more sophisticated

parts of the world, where there is no serious religious rival to Christianity, might do well to encourage. The other would be to conclude that Christianity should be regarded with extreme suspicion owing to the bad company it keeps. The Church, by emphasising the badness of that company, has, if anything, strengthened the latter attitude. It was natural to do so when the main enemy was religious heresy; it is unfortunate when the main enemy is not heresy but secularism. Science as it developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came as a new broom to sweep away the cobwebs of superstition which obscured the light of truth. It was such an idea which caused Dryden to refer to 'all those credulous and doting ages between Aristotle and our own times'. A good deal of superstition still clung around even Christian believers; and to the modern mind, in a world in which the ordinary man has drawn such great material benefits from scientific invention, any idea that the Church is embattled against science puts the Church in the bad company of other superstitions which reigned before Newton.

In these historical circumstances I believe that it ill behoves the Churches to adopt either an aggressive or a defensive attitude to science. I have often heard a Christian, at bay, ask a scientist to explain some phenomenon, such as human consciousness, knowing that the scientist will be floored. But the result, on the audience of such an argument, is not always favourable to the Christian. For the wise scientist will answer, 'We do not know—perhaps we shall know one day. Why are you so pleased to pick holes?' To the audience such an answer shows both a humility and a confidence which may well seem more sympathetic than that of the fault-finding Christian. The attitude, I suggest, should be one of willing acceptance and even—why should we not say?—admiration. If, indeed, Einstein has discovered some short equations which symbolise the relationship of the main physical forces in the universe, should not this be regarded as a work of God in Einstein? The pronouncement of the Archbishop of Canterbury on this occasion—'Einstein found it but God put it there', seemed to me, though true, to be a little less than welcoming.

Moreover, a time has come in the development of many different sciences when the possibility of an easy transition from the last step in science to the first in religion is more obviously there than

at any time in the last 400 years. The work of Jung has brought psychology within the same field as that of religious thought: the physicists have reduced matter to a system of 'energy' on which various forms have been imprinted: biologists, in speaking of instinct, have to express themselves in terms of some essential quality or essence which is passed on in heredity from parents to offspring as an extra to all the purely physical characteristics carried on the genes and which manifests itself, not as a physical character, but in the behaviour and quality of the animal as a whole. Medicine could take up this story, pointing to the critical importance which mind or the 'unconscious' or 'the psyche' can have on bodily well-being. Philosophy, pointing to the patterns of energy woven in the brain, can speak of the function of personality to imprint form upon energy in the creative imagination, thus giving an almost literal paraphrase to such phrases as, 'the universe is a thought in the mind of God', 'if you had faith you could move mountains', and to the first chapter of Genesis.

In talking to very mixed groups of adults I at least have found that an approach to religious thought through one of the sciences—or indeed through any branch of knowledge *other than* direct religious knowledge or quotation—is not only the most effective but often the only possible approach. It is a question of moving from what is felt to be known to what is unknown; rather than asking at the outset that some tremendous assumptions should be made (for the assumptions of science—that the world is orderly, etc.—are not felt). Indeed, if Christianity is felt genuinely to be an embracing philosophy of the universe and of man, it must follow naturally that all branches of knowledge, followed truly, will end in a religious conclusion. If phrases such as, 'In his service is perfect freedom', can come naturally, inevitably, as the obvious culmination of a discussion on political freedom, Bentham and the Welfare State: if 'In his will is our peace' leaps to the mind as a short statement of the theme of three lectures by a psychiatrist on neuroses—then the audience, who have themselves almost supplied this closing phrase, led on the string of an argument whose terms they can follow and in whose assumptions they believe, will suddenly see the meaning of these phrases and connect and relate them to their other knowledge about the world.

One of the dominant interests of today is in sociology. Here again, if a modern 'pagan' can come to see that Christianity has

a real, applicable comment on social problems, the effect on him is immense. This means something much more than the vague comment that we ought to be kind to each other, tell the truth, and pay good wages. It involves a much more profound comment in the realm of political philosophy. If Christianity has a profound theory of the nature of man and of the right principles governing human society, then it has a comment on the centralisation of power (even in the Welfare State—perhaps especially there); on the exploitation of nature, on the effects of State services on family responsibility, on the ideas of economic equality and ‘social justice’ which are current in our time. Most people feel uncomfortably that our present industrial civilisation has been heading for catastrophe; but, looking for a solution in terms of the very assumptions which have brought us where we are—for example, that a high standard of living is our primary target—they naturally find no solution but a more intense movement in the same direction. Christianity has other assumptions. But unless its teachers can familiarise themselves with the problems and the jargon of modern sociology, so that the argument can be conducted in terms familiar to the audience and with an obvious appreciation of the practical issues, Christianity will not be treated as a practical criticism of economics but as ‘pie in the sky’—a beautiful ideal unfortunately weaker than the ‘inevitable trend of economic forces’ in which so many believe and by which they are, therefore, bound.

It is not to be forgotten that there is a world system—Marxism—which does offer a complete and detailed comment on social and economic problems, and a comment which is felt to be the logical extension of its basic philosophical assumptions in to the social field. Marxist philosophers have no doubt that it is their business to be familiar with all current affairs and to have a very definite and radical comment upon them which is worked out into terms of practical economics and administration. I do not think that the Christian Church can afford to be less well informed, less critical, or less practical. What distinguishes the Marxist among a group of British workmen is that he is better educated in current affairs and that he speaks from principle, not from opportunism. If every Christian were as competent and clear about his principles as are most Marxists, their effect on society would be incalculable.

We may now turn to the question of terminology. I believe that a very great deal of Christian teaching is failing of effect for the simple reason that *men do not understand the language of the clergy*. For one thing, it is full of technical terms. To a lawyer, 'estoppel' means something; to a layman, nothing. To the theologian, 'grace' has a full meaning; to the layman it may have none. The situation is the more difficult because, while we all know that the technical terms of law need explanation, the terms of religion have been in use so long, are so familiar in common speech, that most of us imagine that we understand them. Nor does it occur to the preacher that in using words such as 'grace', 'redemption', 'atonement', he is making sounds which are almost meaningless to most of his audience. Once, perhaps, religious England really understood some of these terms: now a pagan England largely does not.

Moreover, each such term implies in the audience a *belief* in many other parts of religion. The atonement is accepted only if the listener agrees that there was some need for atonement; if he has some idea of the very difficult doctrine of the Fall. A very large number of people to whom I have talked think of the Fall vaguely as some historical event—'when Eve ate the apple'. If pressed, they might agree that this was allegory, and that 'the Fall' perhaps took place at the first sexual union of man and woman. If asked how that squares with their acceptance of Darwinian evolution, they would probably become completely confused. This illustrates both the vagueness of most men's religious education and the fact that their 'religious knowledge' is apt to be kept in a quite different compartment of mind from their other knowledge. Probably most of us have heard sermons which slip neatly from one technical term to another without once leaving the circle of religious assumptions. Yet if those in the highways and hedges could be brought in to listen, hardly a word would be really meaningful, though all was in good English: and many of those in Church today, a small minority of the nation, would be hard put to it to say what they had understood. This is preaching to the half-converted.

Once again, it may be a question of approaching a religious truth through a secular argument—a system which Jesus adopted continually. It is very hard for those who went from school to theological college and thence to ministry to understand how

little the traditional phrases of religion mean today. As Jung has remarked:—‘You cannot preach to people who do not understand your language. . . . I have to seek the patient and I have to learn his language and to think his thoughts.’

Finally, speaking as a layman, I believe that the presentation of Christian doctrines has had a particular emphasis which makes it far less easy to accept to the vaguely scientific mind of today. I refer to the emphasis on the transcendence of God and to the way in which the divine nature of Jesus is normally presented. Almost all the hints as to a spiritual basis to the universe from science (to which I referred above) link with belief in the immanence of the Spirit in the creation and in man. The idea of an original Creator, both as the source of the original energy in the universe and as the Person who imprinted form on that energy, laid down the laws for its development, and is still present in it, is one readily acceptable to many. It is also a vital half of the Christian religion, and it is embodied at the very beginning of Genesis—‘the Spirit moved on the face of the waters’. The idea of the Spirit as the very inmost core and quality of humanity, and of the Christian life as one which accepts the true laws of action of the Spirit in bodily and mental behaviour, is one which, with guidance given by Jesus as to the nature of the Spirit’s mode of action within us (love and acceptance of the Will of God), has the full possibility of translation into a complete code of Christian ethics as well as a philosophy of nature and science. The idea of nature as sustained also by the creative energy of God is one which, if accepted, would much modify our secularist attitude toward nature as a passive object of unlimited exploitation by man. It may be that there is a danger of pantheism if this side of Christianity is over-emphasised. Indeed, it is probable that the early Church in a world much given to developed pantheist religions (a religious world, not a secular world like ours) deliberately emphasised transcendence, the divinity of Jesus, the uniqueness of Christian revelation, etc. Among many likes, it was essential for Christianity to be unlike, distinguished, unique. But it would be easy—and stupid—at the present moment to be so concerned to avoid a minor deviation into pantheist heresy as to fail to notice that a vast population does not even really believe in God at all. The time for emphasis on the finer points of doctrine is in a religious world liable to misconstrue a faith generally held. But we live in



a world when the first step is to convert bus conductors, plumbers, M.P.s and radio technicians to a belief in God and to the essential philosophy of Christian conduct, expressed in the teachings of Jesus. No one will deny the emphasis placed by Jesus on the immense power of the Spirit and of its most surprising mode of action—'Consider the lilies. . . . If ye had faith even as a grain of mustard seed. . . .' If men today believed that the Spirit was within them, and was of immense power, how very different the world would be.

Why is this emphasised? Because—and I speak with reverence—the emphasis on the objective, almost solid God, the equality of the Son with the Father (which is so often taken to mean that Jesus *was* God walking about in Palestine between 0 and 30 A.D.), the metaphorical use of human attributes in God (eyes, hands, arms), the emphasis on theological doctrine (the God dying or sacrificed for the health of the tribe, the Fall, etc.), the continual mediaeval representations of God and the Saints, the wording of many hymns and of much teaching—all this emphasises just those elements in Christianity which are closest to rejected superstitions and to anthropomorphic and idolatrous religious feeling, and, thereby, sets up the maximum resistance in the highly secular and suspicious modern mind. Doctrine and precision are necessary and carry the most profound meanings when fully understood. But what is symbolical can easily be taken as literal, what is profound may easily be taken at surface level as arbitrary or superstitious. The full Christian doctrine is, I believe, far too large a mouthful to be taken at once; and it has been just those elements which demand most knowledge, most faith and most difficulty which have for centuries been put in the very forefront of Christian teaching. Might it not be better for the Church to concentrate on teaching God as the creative immanent present Spirit and the words of Jesus as a clue to its nature? It is a large enough task without added stumbling blocks.

I have suggested, in this comment on religion and science, four points. First, that Christian Churches should accept science lovingly and positively. Second, that the Christian philosophy must be translated into a coherent commentary, at a profound level, on modern social and economic problems in terms intelligible to a good Trade Unionist and valid to the intellectual. Third, that the terminology of Christian teaching should be, at



least temporarily, purged ruthlessly of its religious form, and technicality, becoming, in effect, secular argument leading to religious conclusion. Fourth, that an emphasis on the creative immanent Spirit, in which religious ethics and the nature of the material world are seen to be two aspects of one reality, would find a far easier entrance to modern minds than the traditional form and emphasis of Church teaching. These comments come from a layman, in many ways ignorant, often over-simplifying, limited in experience both of the world and of spirit. They are put forward only for what they may reveal of one lay mind (some others will be like it) and from a limited experience of teaching some hundreds of adults in an atmosphere where frankness has been unusually possible. That experience, for what it is worth, is put down in these pages. I hope that it may be helpful.