

RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY—CONSTITUENT GROUNDS

II.

IN an earlier paper we distinguished the classes of experience which may be regarded as grounds of religious authority as four. These were: (1) Historical data, (2) the experience of the external world, (3) the moral conflict, and (4) religious experience in the restricted sense. It will be our object now to discuss these grounds separately and in more detail. Restrictions of space make it necessary that this discussion should be rather condensed.

The attitude of theologians towards the historical data of Christianity has undergone a curious change during the last century. At one time they were regarded as the principal support of authority in religion; now this support has been so undermined by a more scientific and critical attitude towards evidence that it is comparatively neglected for apologetic purposes. Both attitudes appear to err by being too one-sided. It must be admitted that no evidence for anything that is supposed to have happened in the distant past can be sufficient for an absolutely certain proof. But if we are content to balance probabilities and to establish a presumption one way or another, then facts of this kind may be of considerable value.

It can hardly be doubted that the religious tenets of individuals are, in fact, in a very large number of cases, founded in a considerable measure on the uncritical acceptance of historical evidence. The difficulties in the way of justifying such acceptance of historical evidence may be illustrated by a consideration of the question of miracles. It is clear that any attempt to prove a religion with certainty by the evidence for the reputed miracles of its founder must necessarily be futile. If we ask whether the miracles of Jesus Christ did, in fact, take place, we cannot be guided by the historical evidence alone, or even very largely. The weight of presuppositions provided by other types of experience will be in all cases so much larger than any specifically historical evidence, that any idea we may have that we are guided by this alone will be an illusion. The historical evidence is, in fact, judged by its conformity with the religious experience of the person making the judgment, and with his other experiences of the world. Its use as evidence must depend largely on this conformity.

The experience of actual eyewitnesses of the events of Christ's ministry, which forms the narratives of the Synoptic

Gospels, or at least of those earlier documents or traditions on which the Gospels were based, is of supreme importance for the purpose of this discussion. Here, however, we meet with the difficulty that the exact nature of this experience of the contemporaries of Our Lord is the subject of a controversy amongst historical critics which is not yet settled.

A certain number of things do emerge unquestionably from the Gospel narrative, and if we turn to early Christian thought the evidence is clearer. Jesus was regarded as God by St. Paul (as *θεὸς* not *ὁ θεὸς*). The Gospel of St. John is considered by some theologians to be full of symbolism referring to the Church and its sacraments. Whether or not this can be substantiated, it is clear that very early the Christian community became conscious of itself as a community, and that its sentiments began to centre round its system of rites. In this system, the Eucharist began to take a place which the study of comparative religions teaches us to recognize as that of the sacrifice. The death of Jesus from the time of St. Paul has a special significance for the problem of evil. It is regarded as an atonement for sin, and His bodily resurrection is insisted on as a guarantee of the ultimate triumph of good.

These are the data of historical Christianity, as obtained by an uncritically empirical method, which must be evaluated by their compatibility with other types of experience.

There is another kind of experience, closely related to the class of facts just considered, which is of importance as a possible ground of religious authority and as a possible challenge to it. This is the connection between traditional Christianity and non-Christian religions which is demonstrated by the science of comparative religion. While certainly disposing of any claim which Christians may have made that their religion is independent of all others, it does not necessarily follow, as Tylor and many more recent writers seem to suppose, that the mere enumeration of points in which Christianity is related to more primitive religions is sufficient to discredit it. It may, indeed, be argued that the similarity of any particular rite to the rites of more primitive religions shows the universality of the need to which it ministers, and that the similarity of dogmas shows the universality of the experience which they embody. That form of religious authority whose rites and dogmas show most relation to those of non-Christian religions may therefore claim that it is grounded most deeply on human experience.

Two of the traditional arguments for the existence of God, the cosmological and the teleological arguments, are essentially intellectual expressions of the constant tendency of the human mind to build up its religious beliefs in part by rationalizing

its experiences of the external world. In the theories of anthropologists, the savage is supposed to personify the force which moves a particular stone or river, and becomes a fetishist; while other primitive people explain the general experience of potency in objects by ascribing to them the possession of a vaguely conceived impersonal force—the Mana of the Melanesians. Similarly, in the cosmological argument, civilized man infers God as a necessity to account for the beginning of the chain of causal sequence; and, in the teleological argument, to account for design and adaptation to an end in the forms of organisms.

Whatever may be the intellectual soundness of these arguments, they are significant for the psychology of religion. They point to the fact that one of the mental roots of religious belief is in an elusive feeling that the world seems as if it had been made by someone, and by someone whose thoughts and feelings we can in some way share. This is the feeling about the world which is expressed in the vague poetry and prose of nature mysticism.

When this feeling is given intellectual form, we have the cosmological and teleological arguments. Their intellectual deficiencies have been plentifully shown by Kant and other philosophers. Kant considered that both arguments only managed to give an appearance of being metaphysical proofs of the existence of God by assuming the unsound and purely *a priori* ontological argument. In other words, they are not, as they claim to be, apodictic proofs resting on experience.

Ought we to dismiss them as mere fallacies, or have they some intelligible meaning for thought at the present day? Before trying to answer this question, we must notice that the attitude towards it suggested by the point of view of this paper is utterly different from that of the religious apologists of the last century. We no longer hope for an irrefragable proof of the existence of a benevolent God which must be conclusive to the most hardened sceptic unless he refuses to follow his reason. Our more modest search is for evidence which may establish a presumption (possibly a very strong presumption) one way or the other.

We may notice that Kant only denies the validity of the claim of the teleological argument to apodictic certainty. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* he recognizes that the emotional attitude towards the universe intellectualized in the teleological argument is, in fact, one of the roots of religious faith. He seems, moreover, to affirm the validity of the step taken by the mind from this experience to religious faith, if this be not considered as a self-sufficient apodictic proof, but merely as one of a number of empirical arguments. For he says that it

would be vain as well as sad to attempt to diminish the authority of the teleological argument, and considers that it may be accepted if it claims to be no more than a moderate and modest statement "of a faith which does not require unconditioned submission, yet is sufficient to give rest and comfort."*

He does not develop this idea, and his meaning is obscure. The interpretation of his thought here suggested, that he recognizes the value of the teleological argument as an empirical argument sufficient to help, in conjunction with other empirical arguments, to establish a certain presumption in favour of religious faith, seems to the present writer to be the best. He is aware that this interpretation would not be accepted by many philosophers.

There are other indications of the possibility of a revivification of the argument from design. The vitalistic interpretation of the evolutionary process finds the necessity for something more than chance variations acted on by a mechanical process of elimination to account for evolution. It is interesting to find that Bergson, in his *Évolution Créatrice*, when trying to speak of this evolutionary force, does so in language which can only be described as "theomorphic."

If facts of the kind which have so far been discussed were the only ones relevant to the formation of religious opinions, the emotional satisfactoriness of the hypothesis of a benevolent Creator would have been very strong. Christian apologists have too often been contented with a shallow and one-sided empirical method, which is content with a complacent enumeration of the more pleasing aspects of our experience, while ignoring facts of an opposite nature. A flood drowns ninety-nine persons, and the hundredth finds conclusive evidence of the existence of a loving God in the fact that he is saved. A truly empirical theology must take into account the experience of the ninety-nine drowned persons as well as that of the one saved in order to form a just estimate of the character of the Ruler of the World.

If some aspects of the world seem to be beautiful and harmonious, there are many others which do not. The disgusting, limbless parasite shows the same admirable adaptation to its environment as the nobler animals over which the enthusiasm of the eighteenth-century apologist was spent. The growth of self-consciousness, which has made possible the higher activities of man, has at the same time increased his power of suffering. Too often we see noble natures twisted or broken by the force of circumstances which seem utterly indifferent to human happiness and to human merit. Man's

* *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1st ed., p. 624.

own intelligence has made it possible for him to inflict cruelties on his fellow-men which cannot be paralleled in more lowly organized creatures.

Thus, the experience of the external world may provide the psychological antecedents of unbelief and rebellion, as well as of religious faith. The attitude of shuddering horror is a possible reaction to the drama of life. The attitude of a genuinely scientific enquirer into the empirical basis of authority in religion must be, at the beginning, neither that of an upholder nor of a denouncer of a particular theory. He must then ask whether the conception of a benevolent God, of a malevolent ruler of the universe, of a blind impersonal force, or of any other possible alternative gives the most satisfactory rationalization of the world as experienced.

It would be foolish in the limits of this paper to attempt an answer to this question, on which the world's thinkers have never been able to agree. The conception of a personal, malevolent ruler of the universe is one which has had so little following that we can afford to neglect it. The idea that the world is merely a chance collection of atoms on which a blind force is struggling to express itself in consciousness (the "immanent will" of Hardy) is one which, in one form or another, has found more favour. To such a belief the good, as well as the evil, in the world is the result of a blind chance.

Believers in this creed must, however, dismiss as illusory the appearance of purpose in the world which so much impressed Paley. A *prima facie* view of the world includes this element, which is rationalized by the conception of a personal God. It must be noticed, too, that this theory requires us to attribute such good as we do find in the world to the effects of blind chance. If we found that our experience of good drove us to a theory about it inconsistent with the idea that it is the product of chance (reasons will be discussed later for supposing that it does), then we should have a very serious objection to this theory of the universe.

If, however, the earlier hypothesis of a personal God has been accepted as the simplest rationalization of our experience of the external world accepted at its face value, we may go on to enquire what further content is given to this conception by the same kind of experience. A *prima facie* view of the world includes the experience of the antagonism between good and evil. A dualism of good and evil is, therefore, a primary element in a religion based on experience, although it may be necessary later to modify it.

This survey of the relation of religion to our experience of the external world seems to show that the purely empirical,

unreflective rationalization of this experience tends, on the whole, to result in the conception of a personal God with a sharply divided kingdom of evil opposed to Him. Both the idea of "personality" in God and this crude dualism may be modified by subsequent reflection and by the influence of other kinds of experience.

The next type of experience for discussion is what we have described as that of the moral conflict. This experience, expressed in its simplest terms, is that the individual "ought" to do certain things, some of which he does not want to do; and that he "ought" not to do certain other things, some of which he does want to do. If he fails to obey these commands and prohibitions, he has a sense of failure which he calls "sin." The consciousness of good and evil in possible lines of conduct is one of those experiences which demand rationalization by religious dogma. This rationalization is provided by the conception of a good God—that is, a God who approves of the attempt to follow the good in conduct, and who is sinned against when the evil is followed.

The moral conflict in the mental life of the individual plays a part in the formation of religious belief in two ways. First, there is the way indicated in the last paragraph. The moral conflict is found to be a part of experience, of which religion, as a mode of reacting to experience as a whole, must necessarily take account. Secondly, the religious motive may deliberately and consciously be put in the balance on the side of goodness against other interests which pull in the opposite direction. The love of God may be presented to the mind as an influence strong enough to counteract the power of sin.

These two modes of psychological reaction to the moral conflict suggest two possible extensions to attempts at the intellectual justification of religious faith on grounds derived from morality. The first mode leads to the arguments for the existence of God from the objective reality of the moral law; the second to a vague kind of ethical pragmatism in which the truth of religion is deduced from its moral value. Although the second of these lines of thought is, without doubt, a powerful influence in a great deal of popular religious thought, it has played no prominent part in the philosophy of religion.

The first is more important. It was employed by Kant in his *Critique of Practical Reason*. He argues that the *summum bonum* is the necessary true end of a will morally determined. This *summum bonum* is a true object, for the maxims of the will which, as regards their matter, refer to it have objective reality. Kant regarded the *summum bonum* as made up of two elements—morality, and happiness proportioned to that morality.

The first of these elements, morality, can be perfect only in eternity; so he is led (by the fact of the reality of the *summum bonum*) to the postulate of *immortality*. The same consideration leads Kant to affirm the possibility of the second element of the *summum bonum*—viz., happiness proportioned to that morality. This must lead to the supposition of a cause adequate to this effect; in other words, it must postulate the *existence of God*.

A different argument on similar lines is developed by Professor Sorley in his *Moral Values and the Idea of God*. He finds, as a constituent of reality, an objective moral order, as well as the order of nature. It is necessary to harmonize the order of nature with the moral order. To a *prima facie* view of the world they appear to be in conflict. "The order of nature intends a result which is not found at any particular stage in the process of existence. It requires an idea of the process as a whole, and of the moral order to which nature is being made subservient. It means, therefore, intelligence and the will to good, as well as the ultimate source of power. In this way the recognition of the moral order, and of its relation to nature and man, involves the acknowledgment of the Supreme Mind, or God, as the ground of all reality."*

Both of these lines of argument proceed, it will be noticed, from the objectivity of moral values. This objectivity, if there be such, is an empirical deduction. It means that our moral experience cannot be accounted for adequately by the assumption that moral judgments are simply judgments relative to the subject making them—*e.g.*, that they are merely statements about his own states of mind when he considers particular lines of conduct, as Westermarck argues.

It must be remembered, however, that moral experience is only a part of experience; so it cannot be expected that we should find sufficient proof of the existence of God in morality alone, or that the conception of God to which it leads us will be adequate to the whole of experience. It is interesting to notice that Kant looked upon prayer as an irrational mode of behaviour. If we regard belief in the personality of God as essentially a mode of behaviour towards Him, rather than as an intellectual opinion, as the mode of behaviour we might adopt towards another person and not towards an impersonal force, then it would be necessary to say that Kant did not believe in a personal God. His belief about God would not be adequate to ordinary religious experience.

The last constituent ground of religious authority which it is our purpose in the present paper to discuss is religious experience. By religious experience is meant the subjective

* *Moral Values and the Idea of God*, by Professor Sorley, p. 513.

emotional experience which tends to result in religious belief or behaviour, or which is the result of them. The moods of restless dissatisfaction which seem to find satisfaction in a felt permanence and unchangeableness which is God; the feeling of having come in contact with infinite goodness or the supreme object of love; the sense of sin and of forgiveness; are all examples of such emotional experience. It may come in answer to prayer, or after having taken part in religious rites, or it may be independent of any conscious act of the mind receiving it. In mystical states of consciousness these experiences become more insistent, and the sense of their "givenness" is intensified, often so much that they take the form of "visions" or "locutions." It must be noticed that, on the whole, the mystics themselves have tended to receive such abnormal manifestations with extreme caution, and to attach much less importance to them than did their wonder-loving followers.

It is possible to rest merely on feeling in religion without attempting an intellectual justification of it. This is the attitude which tends to result from anti-intellectual lines of thought; it is not a satisfactory one unless we are to abandon reason altogether, and allow ourselves to drift in a welter of vague intuitions without any power of deciding between the claims of rival systems of intuitions. If religious experience is to have any bearing at all on authority in religion, it is necessary first to examine the claim that psychological analysis entirely discredits it as a source of knowledge.

There can be little doubt that the authority of the individual's own religious experiences is the sense of "givenness" which accompanies them, the conviction that they originate outside him. For this reason he feels that he cannot argue about them. His answer to the sceptic is simply: "I have experienced, I know."

Yet this feeling of certainty cannot be used as an argument to convince others of the objective validity of his revelation, unless it can be shown that this experience of "givenness" cannot be caused in any other way than by the origin of the experience from an object outside the person experiencing. But, as a fact, this "givenness" is equally the mark of any experience which results from the irruption into consciousness of material from unconscious levels of the mind. The hallucinations of mental ill-health, the moods of terror which sometimes accompany mental disorders, have the same character of "givenness" as the visions of the saints and the waves of cosmic emotion of pantheist philosophers, and have the same authority over the person experiencing them. If we are to find a reason for supposing that the latter result from

a real insight into the highest reality, while the former do not, it must be for some other reason than because the persons experiencing them are sure of their reality, and cannot question their authority.

This does not, of course, give any reason for supposing that such experiences do not, in fact, originate from something outside the subject. It merely shows the weakness of a particularly simple line of defence for religious experience. Actually this line of defence has been used much less than seems to be supposed by the numerous writers who fancy that when they have demonstrated a possible psychological cause of the sense of certainty which accompanies religious experience, they have said all that is necessary about it. We do not find that the mystics justify the authority of their mystical states in such a crude manner. They recognize that their experiences may be illusions, and they rationalize illusory experiences by supposing that they come from the devil. The apparent extra-mental origin of their experiences is not, in itself, supposed to be sufficient guarantee of their authority. Their divine origin must be judged by their moral value, and by their conformity with the teachings of the Church. In other words, they must be judged in part by their conformity with the results of other types of experience.

There remains, therefore, the question of what lines of thought may be pursued in order to develop from religious experience empirical arguments for the truth of religious beliefs. It is possible here to give the barest outline of such lines of thought. A fuller discussion of this problem will be found in *Belief and Practice*, by Mr. Will Spens. The possibility of fitting the results of religious experience into a coherent system, and into a system which is not inconsistent with the theological system of traditional Christianity; the value of the religious solutions of mental conflicts as a means of conserving mental good health; the moral value of religious experience when dealt with in the traditional manner; and the coherence of the system built up from religious experience with the system which is derived from other types of experience, are all empirical arguments which are not open to the criticisms we have directed against the too easy argument from the subjective certainty of their authority felt by the person experiencing them. If we allow due weight to the limitations indicated in an earlier paper of any empirical argument drawn from the power of hypotheses to rationalize experience, then there seems to be no reason for not admitting religious experience as one amongst other supports of religious authority.

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(*To be continued.*)