

RELIGION, SCIENCE and UNITARIANISM

A Sermon Given by Dr. F. M. Berger
at the
Unitarian Church, Princeton, N. J.
on November 20, 1960

One of the basic conflicts of our age has been the conflict between religion and science. We must ask ourselves whether the new knowledge, which has been brought to light by science, does in fact conflict with the fundamental beliefs of religion. The answer to this question may affect not only our religion but also our attitude to society, our morals, and our happiness. This morning I would like to discuss this important question.

First, I would like to clarify the terms of reference and start by defining the meaning of the words religion and science. Then I would like to discuss how the discoveries made by biologists and psychologists during the past 100 years have affected certain fundamental religious doctrines, such as the idea of a personal God and the idea of revealed morality. After that I would like to reaffirm the need for religion and show that there is no conflict between modern religion and science. To close, I would like to show that Unitarianism is part of an ancient religious movement that existed under many names even before Christianity, and show how this movement always rejuvenated itself by keeping in step with progress.

Religion, in the classical sense, is the belief in and worship of God or Gods. A broader and more progressive frame of reference defines religion as our attitude to the universe and our role in it. Religion gives expression to three basic human needs:

first, our need for protection from disaster and fate, which is expressed in the idea of God; second, our need for moral rules of conduct, which is ethics; and thirdly our need to think about the ultimate destiny of man and of the world (eschatology).

The word "science" comes from the Latin root meaning knowledge. Science is essentially a method used to describe things around us, and to try to discover how they work. Nowadays the term "science" is usually applied only to knowledge of nature which has been acquired by sensory observation or by intellectual or mathematical reasoning. Science gives expression to the basic human need for knowing the truth. It differs from religion in not considering the world as a whole, but rather by selecting part of the universe and studying it. Thus, science proceeds by fragmentation. Although the tendency is growing for the scientific disciplines to overlap, there is as yet no universal science, but still only many different sciences dealing with restricted fields of knowledge such as psychology, archeology, anthropology, pharmacology, biochemistry, entomology, etc. There is some question whether a universal science ever could be developed.

The most important contribution of science has been the development of the scientific method with the help of which many

fundamental problems can be clarified. This method proceeds in stages. First, observations are collected and classified; then a hypothesis is formed that links the observations together; and then the truth of the hypothesis is tested by making additional observations. If the hypothesis cannot be confirmed, it is discarded as untrue. If it can be shown to be true, it is utilized in the examination of further observations and in making predictions which can be used to form new and broader hypotheses. There are, however, several major areas of knowledge, such as art, literature, or philosophy, that are inaccessible to scientific treatment.

Let us consider now how certain fundamental religious doctrines have been affected by some of the scientific discoveries of the past 100 years. The scientific concepts that were of particular importance were the recognition of the evolutionary process, the development of scientific determinism, the effect of modern psychological knowledge on the idea of a personal God, and the idea of basing ethics and morality on social considerations instead of on revelation.

The discovery of evolution had a revolutionary effect on religion. Evolution is a concept that contends that plants and animals pass through a series of forms to attain their actual

shape. The geologists and biologists demonstrated that man developed from lower forms of life and that his place in nature is very different from that taught by religion. The theory of evolution was not only supported by the discoveries in the fields of geology, paleontology, comparative anatomy, embryology, and astronomy, but also by the great discoveries in the field of psychology. Modern psychology considers the mind to be a manifestation of the brain and traces the gradual development of the mind from the lowest form of life to the highest intelligence. These findings contradict the story of creation as told in the Bible.

Another scientific development that greatly affected religion is the concept of scientific determinism. Determinism, as you know, is the denial of free will. Determinism holds that in the whole world of reality every event is necessarily determined by the preceding material event. The concept that mental events may be determinate, that is, predictable and determined by the preceding events, had a profound effect on religion. Among other things it made the occurrence of miracles unlikely and the response to prayers improbable.

What does science think about the existence of a personal God? We have all been brought up to think of an external, supernatural, personal and spiritual Being which we call God.

Modern psychology believes that the idea of God is made up from man's wish for protection, and from his spiritual and intellectual aspirations. It is brought alive by man's tendency for personification and it is perpetuated by his desire to have some sort of explanation for things and events. Thus a personal God appears to be a creation of the human mind. As to the existence of a higher intelligence responsible for the majestic orderliness of the heavens and the beauty of nature, we must reserve judgment. Nature is not only majestic and beautiful but also, to use John Stuart Mill's words: cruel, reckless, indiscriminate and frustrating to man's best efforts. This may not be the best of all possible worlds.

Science also teaches us that events around us are due to natural causes. If events are due to natural causes, they cannot be due to supernatural causes. This is in essence what science has to say about the existence of a personal God.

What does science have to say about Christian morality and ethics? Christian morality is believed to have been revealed. It is based on the authority of God. God is pictured as a patriarchal figure who imposes the law by threats of punishment or the promise of reward. This authoritarian ethics takes away from man the responsibility for his actions and discourages him

from making value judgments.

But ethics must not be a collection of immutable rules. The need of our age is for a flexible ethic that can be revised in the light of new circumstances. We need a new morality that is not revealed and that does not eliminate responsibility and value judgments. Morality should not be based on religion; rather, religion should be based on morality. Ethics should not be based on revelation, but on social utility. The test of right conduct is surely that proposed by Dewey; namely, the harmonious satisfaction, not only of one's own desires but also of the desires of all those who may be affected by one's conduct and ultimately of the human race.

It has been stated, and is frequently repeated, that our society and civilization are based on Christian ethics and that all would be well with our society if we would only be better Christians. This statement should not go unchallenged. Christianity has been the dominant influence in Europe for more than 16 centuries. It greatly influenced not only the masses of the common people but also their rulers. Let us then briefly examine the historical record of the Christian religion and civilization. There were periods in history when nations rose to the peak of civilization (as measured by art, wealth, welfare,

and culture) such as happened during the Augustan Age, the Renaissance in Italy, or the age of Louis XIV. These golden ages of history were all marked by a considerable growth of skepticism and rationalism.

On the other hand, let us recall a few contributions of the Christian religion to Christian civilization. Let us remember the acts of the Spanish Inquisition and let us remember the massacre of the Albigenses where more than 100,000 men, women and children were slaughtered for defying Rome. This slaughter was ordered by the greatest of the Popes, Innocent III, and you will remember the admonition he gave to his soldiers: "Slay all. The Lord will know his own." Let us remember the record of Martin Luther, and let us not forget that Michael Servetus, one of the founders of Unitarianism, was put to death at the instigation of John Calvin. Let us remember the evil lives and designed cruelties of many Popes. Let us not forget the many attempts made by the Pope and clergy to come to terms with Hitler and to form an alliance with him in spite of the many outrages he committed against humanity, including not only the Jews and Czechs and Poles but also many German monks and priests.

You may say that from these acts the spirit of Christ has

wholly departed. Maybe it has. But I was not discussing the spirit of Christ. I was discussing the historical record of Christianity. I discussed some typical and official exponents of Christianity such as Torquemada, Luther, Calvin and the Popes, Innocent III and Alexander VI. What will the future of Christian civilization be if "the past is but prologue", as it says on the building of Archives in Washington?

Let us return now to our basic question: are science and religion really two rival interpretations of reality or do they differ from each other in kind? The answer to this question will depend on how we define religion. If we define religion as the belief in a supernatural being there certainly is a conflict between religion and science. If, however, religion is defined as an attitude to life and to the world, then there is no need for a conflict between them. Science and modern religion should not be in competition because they relate to different subjects. Religion relates to the universal questions and science to specific problems.

There is no doubt that science made certain basic doctrines of Christianity difficult to maintain. Think of the doctrines of the Trinity, the doctrine of inherited guilt, eternal punishment, vicarious atonement. All these and others have

been abandoned by Unitarians. Modern religion, such as Unitarianism, has grown with the development of science and is not in conflict with it.

Religion, if defined as a belief in and a worship of God, has lost most of its meaning for modern man. Is then religion still necessary, and if it is, what is the purpose of it? It is my belief that religion still has a vital part to play in our civilization. It formulates our attitude to the universe and it is a way of life. It is a way of life which follows from holding certain things in reverence. It is a way of life which believes that certain things are sacred. The things that are held sacred by most men are things that concern life and human destiny. All the permanent facts of human existence are within the sphere of sacredness and religion. They are birth, marriage, reproduction, death, comradeship, mutual aid, suffering, and physical and moral growth.

This modern religion, to be acceptable, must be a religion without a revealed God. It must be a religion without theology and it must be a religion without revealed morality and ethics. It must be a religion that is prepared to grow with new knowledge as it becomes available. It must be a religion that can be professed during the working week as well as on Sundays and holidays.

The new religion I am talking about is not really new. It is much older than Christianity but it has no great unifying name. It could be called the religion of science or the religion of humanity. In the past it appeared under many names such as Stoicism, Humanism, Deism, Utilitarianism, Positivism, Secularism, Agnosticism, Universalism, Rationalism, and Unitarianism. It was a way of thinking that inspired many from ancient times up to the present. Let me mention a few of the names of adherents of this religion of science and humanity: Hippocrates, Pericles, Socrates, Plato, Zeno, Cicero, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, Locke, Komensky, Voltaire, Pope, Benjamin Franklin, John Stuart Mill, Auguste Comte, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, Thomas Masaryk, Bertrand Russell and Adlai Stevenson.

Until recently, followers of the religion of science and humanity had no organized churches. Thus there are no architectual monuments to show and no formal followers to count. In spite of this, the religion of science and humanity in the West has gained great prestige because of its alliance with the triumphant scientific movement. This movement was not hampered by dogmata and was able to revise its views in accordance with the new scientific discoveries. Christianity has largely treated the movement as a foe. In spite of this, at least in

modern times, most scientists and many artists, literary men and philosophers became professors of the religion of science and humanity. This has happened because of the intellectual and emotional satisfaction that is achieved if one is able to harmonize one's conduct with one's beliefs. It was also due to the indifferent attitude of many churches to injustice and to the association of some churches with social privileges.

Let us then remember that we Unitarians are part of an ancient and distinguished religion, the religion of science and humanity. Let us remember that our past is honorable, and let us continue in our great tradition. Let us only believe in what is believable. Let us continuously renew our faith in the light of advancing knowledge and let our beliefs be in harmony with our philosophy and conduct.

Let me close with a quotation from Bertrand Russell's Unpopular Essays. He speaks of the value of philosophy, and what he says applies equally to modern religion: "By enlarging the objects of man's thoughts it supplies an antidote to the anxieties and anguish of the present, and makes possible the nearest approach to serenity that is available to a sensitive mind in our tortured and uncertain world."

SOURCES

- JULIAN HUXLEY: Religion without Revelation. Watts & Co., London, 1941.
- JOSEPH MC CABE: A Rationalist Encyclopaedia. Watts & Co., London, 1948.
- CHARLES SINGER: The Christian Failure. Gollancz Ltd., London, 1943.

READINGS

I.

Men say that we ought not to enquire into the supreme God and the nature of the universe nor busy ourselves in searching out the causes of things and that such enquiries are impious; whereas the very opposite is the truth. The Gods cannot like us to be spreading a false report of them.

PLATO. Laws VIII, 821.822

II.

The conflict between Galileo and the Inquisition is not merely the conflict between free thought and bigotry or between science and religion; it is a conflict between the spirit of induction and the spirit of deduction. Those who believe in deduction as the method of arriving at knowledge are compelled to find their premises somewhere, usually in a sacred book. Deduction from inspired books is the method of arriving at truth employed by jurists, Christians, Mohammedans, and Communists. Since deduction as a means of obtaining knowledge collapses when doubt is thrown upon its premises, those who believe in deduction must necessarily be bitter against men who question the authority of the sacred books.

BERTRAND RUSSELL. The Scientific Outlook, W. W. Norton & Co., New York, 1931.

III.

The man who is thoroughly convinced of the universal operation of the law of causation cannot for a moment entertain the idea of a being who interferes in the course of events..... He has no use for the religion of fear, and equally little for social or moral religion. A God who rewards and punishes is inconceivable to him for the simple reason that a man's actions are determined by necessity, external and internal, so that in God's eyes he cannot be responsible, any more than an inanimate object is responsible for the motions it undergoes. Science has therefore been charged with undermining morality, but the charge is unjust. A man's ethical behavior should be based effectually on sympathy, education, and social ties and needs; no religious basis is necessary. Man would indeed be in a poor way if he had to be restrained by fear of punishment and hope of reward after death.

ALBERT EINSTEIN. Religion
and Science, New York Times
Magazine, Nov. 9, 1930.