

"SOME PRAGMATIC DEFENSES OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS."

A CRITICISM.

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COINCIDENT with the weakening of the absolutistic premises in philosophic thought, has come the adoption of the pragmatic method as a modern apologetic for characteristic beliefs of the Christian religion. The adaptive capacity of pragmatism for this particular task might be claimed to inhere in the genius of the philosophy. The utility for religious faith of the theses for example embodied in James, "The Will to Believe" is entirely apparent and the fuller application of pragmatic principles to religious problems naturally followed. An excellent idea of the manner of procedure may be obtained from Professor Drake's critical examination of the subject in his "Problems of Religion."¹ The author points out with convincing detail the serious fallacies underlying the pragmatic contentions that we must trust a belief—1. "Because its untruth would be intolerable;" 2. "Because our hearts vouch for it;" and 3. "Because it works."

Examining the positions in the order named, Professor Drake reminds us that we have no right to assume "that the universe is constructed so as to comfort and inspire us."² Human hopes and desires have been thwarted too often to leave us any deep-rooted certainty that our interests, however precious, are unalterably subserved in the nature of things. Indeed much that is tragic in life inheres in this very state of affairs. It is to be remembered also that few, if any beliefs of mankind, have such unique value that their negation would be continuously intolerable. It is generally recognized today that the beliefs of men vary profoundly in accordance with their socially inherited world-views and extreme

¹ Durant Drake: *Problems of Religion*—Chap. 21.

² *Ibid*, p. 333.

caution should be observed in investing any belief with the quality of absolute indispensableness. If some of life's appalling experiences are best described in the words of Guyau, "that there is no help against the inexorable, and no pity to be asked for in a matter that is in harmony with the interests of the totality of things" would not man give far nobler proof of his essential spiritual nature in some Russellian attitude of resignation or defiance than through a pragmatically supported evasion of the forbidding elements.³

The second demonstration of a belief's validity as quoted above, involves the heart's indorsement as a criterion of truth. The exact meaning of the concept of heart and the nature of its prerogatives in the problems of faith might be legitimately demanded. If the notion voices a protest against the old-fashioned exaltation of reason as an isolated, independent faculty of discernment, the position will evoke sympathetic response. Additional support for this second apologetic might be found in a paragraph from Professor Hoernle in which he reminds us that austere, negative beliefs are not necessarily any more in harmony with reality than the hopes of brighter hue and he sees no reason for us always to clothe cosmic desires in sack-cloth.⁴ The practical value of the attitude commends itself, but it does not fully exclude an obvious danger often latent in the "will-to-believe," that is, an indisposition to use the resources of investigation and criticism when the easier ways of decision by feeling stand invitingly open. In a few human problems perhaps the heart so-called may remain as the only arbiter but these situations should not be needlessly multiplied. If the bases of intellect are found to rest upon responses essentially emotional, the deliberative and judicial characteristics of the mental process are not consequently denied or its authority questioned. The hypotheses of the heart therefore will be seen to need aid from other sources. Professor Leuba has written in this connection: "All human needs have the same function in the discovery of factual truth: they constitute merely demands and incentives. It is the intellect which passes upon the validity of each proposition affirming, in the interest of any need, objective existence."⁵

The third reason stated, that is, the workability of a belief as its best rationale, is most deserving of comment because of its char-

³ J. M. Guyau: *The Non-Religion of the Future*, p. 535.

⁴ R. F. A. Hoernle: *Studies in Contemporary Metaphysics*.

⁵ J. H. Leuba: *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 9, p. 409. Quoted by Drake.

acteristic expression. Professor Drake admits that the assertion of the principle in its baldest form may represent "distortions or excesses of pragmatism," but he insists that the distortions have been responsible for much of the attractiveness of the doctrine for the popular mind.⁶ In an incisive analysis, the author takes prayer for an example and argues: "If a man prays, believing that God hears him, his belief comforts him and his prayer inspires him, whether his belief is true or an illusion."⁷ Giving a theological belief the status of a hypothesis, he contends that "a hypothesis is not proved true simply because it is a conceivable way of explaining certain facts" and notes that many explanatory scientific theories apparently well grounded have at length been forced into discard through the introduction of new facts.⁸ The author finds another difficulty in the recognition of "mutually contradictory faiths that have worked successfully" and inquires if the startling success of Christian Science is a proof of its truth.⁹

At this point perhaps the crux of the whole matter is reached and we believe that a solution may be discovered in a simple, though frequently overlooked explanation, of the reason that religions of the most diverse aims and contradictory claims have often been found to work. While account may be taken of the elements of some truth in the content of practically all religions, may not the greater emphasis be put upon two other aspects of the question, namely, the way in which a given religion has met the emotional demands of a human situation and the manner in which the message has been delivered. In reference to the first aspect, the words of Mr. G. Lowes Dickinson may be appropriately quoted, "the fact that beliefs afford a solution of the riddle of the world which to many minds is satisfactory does not in itself show anything about their truth or falsehood. It shows merely the tremendous bias under which criticism has to act."¹⁰ In other words, the avidity with which a belief is grasped and the objectivity of its content ardently affirmed, may be in direct proportion to the stubborn facts and the chilling reality which contradict it. Pragmatic proofs of this type are seen therefore to be far from assuring. The second aspect of the question receives amplification in recalling some of

⁶ Drake, p. 348.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

¹⁰ G. Lowes Dickinson: *Religion, a Criticism and a Forecast*, p. 43. Quoted by Drake.

the basic cravings of the human spirit and certainly the demands for the authoritative in religion has been one of them. Coupled with this, the religious imagination has yearned for the *explicit* and when formidable bodies of divinity have been proclaimed with absolute undeviation and exuberant detail, men have invariably responded to the ultimacy of truth whose most paradoxical characteristic has often been its inability to outlast the believer's span of years. The past is too replete with wrecks of absolute systems that survived but for a season, to make temporary workability the criterion of truthfulness when the main reasons for the successful functioning are otherwise manifested. That pragmatism may have valuable contributions to make to a philosophy of religion, we do not question, but services of the nature thus far outlined are apt to become more devitalizing than helpful in the long run. Far better for religion to stand on foundations wholly naive, than to accept aid so specious.

Pragmatists of the Schiller type would in all probability strenuously object to the concept of objectivity being associated with religious belief and the believer's experiences, cut loose from all ontological considerations, would be made the one and only needed test of truth. Mr. Joseph Roy Geiger in a recent publication commits himself to precisely this position. He writes, "Furthermore it is not essential to the reality of the religious mode of experiencing to demonstrate its ontological status by any sort of dialectical proofs or apologetics. Religious realities are their own best and only evidence. There is then, no occasion for vouching for or for vindicating their ontological integrity."¹¹ Absolutistic philosophies, contends Mr. Geiger, have been responsible for religion's *mésalliance* with ontology. Religion, he continues, "left to work out its own attitudes and activities, has been concerned with the realization, preservation and promotion of concrete human values."¹² But this is so obviously only one side of the story and fails to do justice to the larger aspects of the case. Professor Adams presents the other view needed for a sound historic perspective: "The religious mind . . . has, from primitive religion through all of the historical religions, laid claim to possess something of cosmic and universal import: it has supposed itself authorized to make some assertion about the environment of human life and experience, and about some response which reality makes to the energies of our minds. Religion has

¹¹ Joseph Roy Geiger: *Some Religious Implications of Pragmatism*, p. 37. University of Chicago Press.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

claimed to be true as well as relevant to the interests which come to light in the life of mind and of reason. It thinks of itself as having not only a function within the domain of experience, of man, and of society, but also as pointing to and disclosing qualities and existences of the real world. Of all life's interests, religion has been the most obdurately metaphysical and realistic. Speak as you will of its pragmatic sanction, its utility, its character as symbolic of feeling and emotion, or of its functions in man's struggle for existence, if this other side of religion has escaped your analysis, then you have missed the heart of it."¹³ Social or sectarian communities, organized on the basis of definite relations with an unseen order, have given powerful reinforcement to the idea of the independent, objective existence of the supra-mundane powers or personalities supposed to constitute the transcendent realm. The persistence of religion in the race with its ever-recurring phenomena, the dramatic rise and fall of ethnic faiths, the historic theodicies and hierarchies with their varying fortunes, all unreservedly imply a supra-terrestrial regime. The soul-stirring discussions of the nature of Christ, the relation of the historic Jesus to the Trinity, the method of Atonement, together with the depravity and destiny of man, all contained tremendous, irresistible assumptions of the existence of God, a fact so patent that proofs of his actual being occupied relatively small space in the ponderous systems of divinity. May not the association of atheism with a feeble mind find its rationale in the conclusion that only a fool can doubt in the presence of so much to believe. Mr. Bertrand Russell has somewhere said that it takes a long training in philosophy to convince a man that the chair he is sitting on is not really present. Similar difficulties may be predicted for the pragmatist in his contact with unsophisticated religionists. Of course, if the latter never get disillusioned they will continue to furnish data upon which Mr. Geiger may try out the new psychologic technique he is so anxious to have us perfect. Might not the prophecy be made that when the ontological framework of religion is discarded, that men will not feel inclined to give social values religious labels, but will gladly adopt these values upon their own intrinsic merit. Religion might indeed furnish a mythologic background and coloring for the values and thus touch morals with poetry. Yet we cannot be certain.

The place of religion in the future economy of human interests

¹³ G. P. Adams: *Idealism and the Modern Age*, p. 42.

affords speculation at once difficult and fascinating. The persistent credulity of man in the face of the most contrary evidence, supports the supposition that the older religion may yet have a long future marked out for it; indeed its roots may be ineradicable. Further we must remember that the religious possibilities of an imaginative naturalism have been largely left undeveloped. Cosmic emotion might in time become no more of an esoteric possession than the more rarified mysticisms and Santayana has reminded us that the Dante of the Copernican cosmology must yet come forth. Religions have by no means been unadaptive in the long perspectives of their histories and great years may await those religions that will take their place in allied ranks, modernly accoutered and unabated in zeal, yet modest and chastened in the wisdom of a sobering past. In writing of this better day, Professor Dewey says: "The religious spirit will be revived because it will be in harmony with men's unquestioned scientific beliefs and their ordinary day-by-day social activities. It will not be obliged to live a timid, half-concealed and half-apologetic life because tied to scientific ideas and social creeds that are continuously eaten into and broken down."¹⁴

¹⁴ John Dewey: *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, p. 210.