

6. Positivism and the Science of Religion

I

It is difficult to over estimate the impact of science and the empirical method on the study of philosophy and religion during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One need only mention the names of Auguste Comte, John Stuart Mill and Charles Darwin to get some sense of the growing trend away from the ideal world to the empirical world. The image of the empirical world was also changing. The static universe of the eighteenth century, which had been widely challenged, received a death blow in 1859 with the publication of Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. The sense of development or evolution, when combined with the growth of the sciences and the rejection of metaphysical inquiry, produced thinkers who looked more to science than religion or speculative philosophy to solve human problems. Some of the leading thinkers during this period were not philosophers in the usual sense of the word. They were physiologists, biologists and social scientists. Some were narrowly positivistic and some were less so.

A spirit of optimism accompanied these developments and in some places new organizations developed which were intended to replace traditional forms of religious worship. The London Positivist Society, for example, was formed in 1867. It was modeled on the Positivist Society established by Comte in 1848 for the purpose of promoting what he called the religion of humanity. The meeting place of the London society was decorated with the busts of the saints of humanity. Regular services were held where a positivist liturgy was observed, positivist hymns were sung and positivist sermons were delivered. The London Positivist Society was much involved in the social and political issues of the time and lasted through the end of the first world war.

W.K. Clifford (1845–1879), whose name appears frequently in recent philosophical discussions of religion, may help introduce us to this more positivistic approach to the study of religion. Clifford was a distinguished mathematician with wide interests in philosophical topics in epistemology, metaphysics and ethics. He was appointed Professor of Applied Mathematics in University College, London in 1871 but died as a result of tuberculosis a few years later. A high Churchman and a student of the work of Thomas

Aquinas in his younger days, he later came under the influence of Darwin and Spencer, held Christianity to be an enemy of humanity and substituted what he called the kingdom of humanity for the kingdom of God.

Clifford is best known in the philosophy of religion for his essay, "The Ethics of Belief," to which William James offered a forceful reply in, *The Will to Believe*. Clifford begins his essay with the story of a ship owner about to send a ship to sea. He has some doubts about its sea worthiness, but says to himself that it had gone safely through many voyages. He also put his trust in providence which, he reasoned, could hardly fail to protect the sailors and their families. On its voyage, however, the ship sinks and the sailors do not survive. This prompts the question, what do we think about the ship owner? To this Clifford answers, that he is guilty because he "*had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him.*"¹ Further, argues Clifford, the ship owner would be no less guilty had the ship made the voyage safely, for the question of his guilt or innocence has to do with the origin of his belief rather than the belief itself. He sums up his position in the often quoted sentence, "It is wrong, always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."² For Clifford our beliefs have public consequences and just because of this we have a moral obligation not to hold a belief in the absence of sufficient evidence.

Clifford does not believe that this view leads to universal scepticism, doubting everything to the point where we cannot act until we have personally tested the evidence. He recognizes that there are times when we have to act on probabilities and that there are some cases where an action and the observation of its fruits produce evidence that may justify future belief. It is obvious, says Clifford, that we do this when we believe that the fire that burns us today will burn us tomorrow. The real question is, "How far and in what manner may we add to our experience in forming our beliefs?"³ In answering this question, Clifford argues that no evidence can justify our beliefs that is contrary to or outside the uniformity of nature. That is, we are justified in going beyond our experience only when we can draw inferences from that experience based on the assumption that what we do not know is like what we do know.

Clifford's general analysis of the nature of belief provided the basis for his rejection of traditional religious beliefs. Such beliefs, he argued, must also be founded on evidence and if they are not so founded, we have no right to hold them. But he went further than this, holding Christianity in general and priests in particular enemies of humanity. It would be impossible, he claimed, for a person of intellectual honesty, who carefully tested every belief before he accepted it or conveyed it to others, to be in agreement with the Biblical texts, "He that believeth shall not be damned," and "Blessed are they that

¹William Kingdom Clifford, *Lectures and Essays*, 2nd edn. (London, Macmillan, 1886), p. 340.

²*Ibid.*, p. 346.

³*Ibid.*, p. 360.

have not seen and yet have believed." Religion is said to be immoral to the extent that it calls upon persons to worship a God whose actions are a magnified copy of what evil men do. "If God holds all mankind guilty for the sin of Adam, if he has visited upon the innocent the punishment of the guilty, if he is to torture any single soul forever, then it is wrong to worship him."⁴ Clifford is here judging religion by what he in several places refers to as the common morality. He holds that human experience reveals a sense of duty in the constitution of our nature and inherent in that sense of duty, he says, is the prompting of a wider self than that of the individual. He is aware that some might draw an inference from this to the idea of God as an external conscious being. But he believes this to be a false inference. Ethics, he argues, can be put on a scientific basis by treating the ethical maxims as hypothetical and deriving them from experience based on the assumption of uniformity in nature.

Clifford calls the voice of conscience our "Father Man" who is within us. It is the accumulated instinct of the race in each of us. There is, he observed, a considerable moral agreement among persons of the same race at a given time although moral codes differ in different races and times. The concept of conscience makes it clear that Clifford is not appealing to the morality of the individual. The idea of the individual is, for Clifford, an abstraction. Persons are tribal selves, social beings and their social instincts are set going by their relations with others. The union of persons working together for a common object is the true school of virtue. Clifford believes that traditional religion works against the moral development of humanity, but he is not without his substitute for religion which is captured in Henry Sidgwick's phrase, cosmic emotion. Cosmic emotion is directed both to the universe which surrounds us and the universe of our souls. We experience cosmic emotion in the feelings of vastness associated with our efforts to understand the whole of the external universe. It has the character of awe, resignation, veneration and submission. But we may also experience cosmic emotion when we consider the totality of our actions and conceive in the highest and most general terms the character of those whom we call good or virtuous. In Kant's terms, it is our experience of the stars of heaven and the sense of law that fosters this cosmic emotion.

Cosmic emotion is not something disconnected from our conceptions of the nature of reality. It depends on what we think the world is. It is the theory of the universe appropriate at the time that arouses the appropriate feelings. This means for Clifford, that as knowledge progresses and our ideas of the cosmos change, our cosmic emotions change. It also means that the world of the poet, the world in its emotional aspect, always lags a bit behind the progress of science. In his own time, it was the doctrine of evolution and the understanding of molecular and molar motions that provided the conception of the world upon which cosmic feelings are dependent. The doctrine

⁴Ibid., p. 373.

of evolution “may be made to compensate us for the loss of the immutable and eternal virtue by supplying us with a general conception of *good* action, in a wider sense than the ethical one.”⁵ In the evolution of the social organism Clifford saw the coming of the “kingdom of man,” where persons would act freely for the good of others, where such virtues as courage and prudence are encouraged to the extent that they contribute to the social good. Those most fit to survive are those whose self interests are subordinated to the good of others.

Karl Pearson (1857–1936) succeeded Clifford as Professor of Applied Mathematics at University College, London and shared much in common with Clifford regarding the range of the scientific method and the limitations of metaphysics and religion. Pearson rejected the label, positivism, because he understood that to mean that the relation between finite and infinite was beyond solution by the scientific method. On Pearson’s account all problems, including the problems of morality and religion are capable of being solved by the scientific method. In *The Grammar of Science*, he says that one of the most remarkable features of his time is the startlingly rapid growth of the natural sciences and their far reaching effects on the comfort and conduct of human life. He agrees with Clifford that scientific thought is not merely a condition of progress, but human progress itself. It is the classification of the facts, the recognition of their relations and relative significance, and the habit of unbiased judgment based upon the facts that is needed in the life of ideal citizens. The field of science is said to be unlimited, its material endless. “The goal of science is clear – it is nothing short of the complete interpretation of the universe.”⁶

According to Pearson, if one says that there are such fields as metaphysics that lie outside the scope of science, that is to say only that they lie outside the realm of knowledge. Metaphysical systems are built upon quicksand. Either they are based on no facts at all, or they raise a superstructure before they have adequately investigated the facts. Science is concerned with the whole range of phenomena, mental as well as physical, and once the science of psychology is fully developed, argues Pearson, it will answer many of the problems judged by many to be metaphysical problems. The day has gone when theological and philosophical dogmas are able to set boundaries to the investigations of science. Yet he warns us, in the Preface to the second edition of *The Ethic of Freethought*, that freethought has not advanced as far as it should have, and that a Society of Freethinkers is needed to counter “the recrudescence of theological disputation,” and “the renewed outbreak of ‘reconciling’ metaphysics.”⁷ The freethinker is one who advocates the scientific method of investigation, a rational basis for the physical, intellectual, and moral worlds, and who allows no myths to fill in the gaps of ignorance.

⁵Ibid., p. 409.

⁶Karl Pearson, *The Grammar of Science*, Part I (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1901), p. 14.

⁷Karl Pearson, *The Ethic of Freethought* (London: Charles Adam and Black, 1887), p. vii.

The problem of religion, argues Pearson, is the problem of the relation between the finite and the infinite. But, according to him, this has to do with the relation of the self and the universe, a matter that is slurred over in most existing systems of religion where imagination and myth are substituted for scientific explanation. Science shows both the individual and the universe to be in a process of becoming. But there is an enormous disparity between the life of the individual and the life of the universe. The life of the individual is subordinate to the universe and by comparison is infinitesimal. There seems to be no comparison between them. One is finite, temporal and limited and the other is infinite, boundless and eternal. It is the freethinker, who knows most about the relation of the finite and the infinite, and we should follow him in rejecting the world of mythical thinking (which he calls enslaved thought) and search for explanations in accordance with the scientific method. The freethinker is the religious person in the highest sense of the word and he speaks optimistically of what he calls the religion of free thought. The free thinker frees us from negative and pessimistic attitudes. She sees all problems of life to be in a gradual process of solution. As master of the life of reason, the freethinker will become the "lord of the world."

Pearson showed no patience with traditional arguments for the existence of God and spoke of natural theology as an absurd science. Speaking of George Stokes' Burnett Lectures on natural theology, Pearson wrote, "Poor Scotland! What with yearly Burnett Lectures and three Gifford Professors of Natural Theology, her people will be driven into blatant atheism or have their mental caliber reduced to the level of a Bridgewater treatise."⁸ The only conclusion we can safely draw from an apparent order of natural phenomena, he says, is that sensations invariably occur to us in similar groupings. Our knowledge of this invariability is the result of experience and hence is at best based upon probability. Pearson much prefers theologians who appeal to revelation alone and do not try to strengthen their faith by appeal to science or philosophy. Such theologians are said at least to take responsibility upon themselves for asserting the unthinkable.

Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919) was a biologist at the University of Jena who was given credit by Darwin for propagating the theory of evolution in Germany when there was early hostility to the theory and particularly to the inclusion of human beings. He shared many of Clifford's and Pearson's criticisms of theology and the practice of religion. But he went beyond their more positivistic and anti-metaphysical views to develop a general monistic world view based on evolutionary theory. He intended this monistic world view to fulfill the need for religion. His book, *The Riddle of the Universe*, found a very wide audience at the turn of the century and he founded what was called the Monistic League to spread his views of religion.

⁸Ibid., p. 46. The expression, Bridgewater Treatises, refers to a set of treatises written by scientists in the 1830s following the intentions of the Earl of Bridgewater to "explain the power, wisdom and goodness of God, as manifested in creation." Some of these were ridiculed and said to go far beyond the imagination of William Paley.

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