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The Faith Of An Ex-Agnostic

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FOREWORD

The following essay is not an attempt to depict my journey from agnosticism to faith. To do so would be quite impossible. I can echo the words of John Henry Newman: "For myself, it was not logic that carried me on: as well might one say that the quicksilver in the barometer changes the weather. It is the concrete being that reasons; pass a number of years, and I find my mind in a new place; how? the whole man moves; paper logic is but the record of it." My philosophy is not so much the record as the result and rationalization of an inward change which touched depths of the personality unplumbed by conscious reasoning. Such a change often emerges upon some trivial occasion; and one is as much at a loss to explain why one seeks and loves the Supreme Value now, as why one never sought or fully loved before.

Having made the moral commitment to a belief in God, I had then to satisfy the demands of intellect for a credible philosophical basis for such a belief. I had to reconcile my scientific caution to the necessity of living by the truth of the unprovable. I had to change the habitual naturalistic assumptions of my thinking. And finally I had to restate religious ideas in terms meaningful to me before I could return with appreciation to the traditional Christian language.

This essay, then, is an attempt to set down the main results of my search for a meaningful philosophy of religion. Philosophy is more afterthought than agent in conversion to religious belief. Nevertheless, an inadequate philosophy

can be a tragic stumbling-block to those who are seeking or those who could seek the primary religious experience. Those who cannot believe that there is a pearl of great price will not seek it, or recognize it if perchance they come upon it. Hence I offer this philosophical essay in the hope that it may help some troubled seekers to a view of the nature of things that will encourage rather than deter their seeking.

Failure Of Science As Savior

. . . Whereby we may be enabled to operate wonderful things by a natural power.

English translator's introduction to Agrippa's
Occult Philosophy, 1651.

When, on a Sunday morning, we come home from church and open our paper to see a heading like this: "Science in Review: Astrophysics Applied to the Task of Devising Rockets that will Outdo the German V-2," it is very apparent that whether or not God's in his heaven, all's not right with the world. Our faith in optimism and progress has ground to a stop. We are frightened — of what? Ourselves? The "system"? The forces lurking in the bosom of the atom? We have rubbed the Aladdin's lamp of mass production and smother to death under a flood of goods. Our psychologists have concocted Dr. Jekyll's magic potion and we behold our dark and irrational nature in the hairy shape of Mr. Hyde. We have evoked the genie of nuclear energy and are unable to stuff it back into the bottle. The sorcerer's apprentice has forgotten how to end the spell. "Why art thou cast down, O my soul, and why art thou disquieted within me?"

In this sad morning-after of our civilization, what shall we do? Take some of the hair of the dog that bit us, or try something different? Can we think our way out, or fight our way out, or perhaps pray our way out? But before we decide what to do, we must see with what we have to do. What are the characteristics, vital or lethal, of our Western culture? Lewis Mumford in his survey of the condition of man speaks of the rise of mammonism and mechanism. The medieval cathedral gave way to the ideal of the well-drilled army, the clock-work mechanism, the

production-line. And in the well-ordered Utopia the inventors should be the first citizens, for, according to Francis Bacon, the “real and legitimate goal of the sciences is the endowment of human life with new inventions and riches.” This goal was a material, a utilitarian one. As Mumford says, the dogma of the religion of utilitarianism “is the dogma of increasing wants.” (*The Condition of Man*, p. 304.) Thus science served appetite under the guidance of reason. Mercier, in his 18th Century Utopian dream called *The Year 2440*, exclaimed ecstatically, “Where can the perfectibility of man stop, armed with geometry and the mechanical arts and chemistry?”

This was certainly too good to be true. Both science and appetite have grown beyond the powers of unaided reason. Appetite escaped from social taboos to set up an insurgent regime of blood and guts, and — with the aid of biological and psychological science — has defied the cosmic authority of reason. Science, in conquering Nature for reason, has imposed too great a burden of power on reason. We have thought to run the world by a mixture of reason and power, but power has over-powered reason.

In 1930 William Pepperell Montague was still able to write (in *Belief Unbound*, p. 60): “But they (the early Christians) did not know, and could not know, the kind of courage that has come to us, unworthy though we be, through science. Ours is the easy courage born of confidence and well-grounded hope. It is the reasoned faith that we can use the world if we cannot conquer it, and by harnessing the forces of nature to the demands of intelligence, transform an ancient foe into a patient friend and ally.” Ah, what an air of lavender and old lace this has! Those were the days when we thought that nature could do us no harm when tamed to our purposes. But nature is, as Emily Dickinson said of the locomotive, “docile and omnipotent,”

and dangerous as well. Nature is as ready to destroy at command as to safeguard. Our optimistic wishful thinking has led to the ruins of Hiroshima. The atomic physicists were the first to be frightened at the results of their own research. One can measure the distance between 1930 and today by comparing Montague's statement with the letter of Prof. Norbert Wiener, who refused to furnish any more scientific information for fear it might be used for destructive purposes. This is how far we have come from the belief in human progress through the dissemination of knowledge.

“. . . Unworthy though we be . . .” says Montague. Exactly. Nature's too-ready docility charges man with the responsibility for her misuse. Henry Adams saw many years ago that “our power is always running ahead of our mind.” But it is not a want of cleverness that has caused our downfall, it is rather a lack of maturity. In Mumford's words: “The very increase of scientific knowledge, however, only increased the need for moral discipline. To encourage a mature technique for controlling the external world and enlarging all of man's physical powers, whilst permitting man himself to remain at an infantile level, was to place dynamite in the hands of children.” (*Condition of Man*, p. 244.)

We have neglected growth of character in our pursuit of growth of power, or, in the case of the disinterested scientist, the growth of knowledge. Our culture is one which has glorified the youthful passion to *know* rather than the maturer passion to *be*. It is mentally in the stage of the enquiring college youth, and has not attained the adult stage when the expression of moral beauty in one's life becomes the goal. We have pursued knowledge so hotly that we have almost forgotten that knowledge has its moral requirements, that knowing depends upon being.

The mystics realize this; as a Chinese Buddhist scholar said, the success of the contemplation necessary for insight presupposes morality. And the great scientists have known that Truth must be wooed with moral and intellectual integrity. The scientist must have what von Hügel called “endless docility to fact,” the counterpart of the religious man’s “Thy will be done.” But how long will scientific integrity last in this mad struggle for power fought with mercenary armies of ex-Nazi scientists? For the mechanism brought forth by scientific knowledge is still the servant of mammonism.

And this shows the other outstanding characteristic of our culture — the preoccupation with instrumental or economic values. Ask anybody when is a thing said to be “valuable” and he will reply that a thing is valuable when it is needed for some purpose. Coal is valuable for making steel, and airplanes are valuable for getting places. These are the values that serve men. The bent of our minds is away from those ultimate values which men must serve, which are ends rather than means, and their own excuse for being. Such a value is Truth, the dispassionate search for which is the ideal of science. Yet the atmosphere of a scientific culture, as we have seen, is one of using Nature’s powers for the ends of man.

In this, science is the heir of magic. Whatever the personal motivation of individual researchers, science as a whole does not contemplate Reality as does the artist or the lover or the worshipper, for its own sake. There is a sense in which cold, stern science is not so disinterested, not so self-transcending, as art or religion. The scientific spirit is torn between Truth, or the ideal of knowing, and Utility or Instrumentalism, which leads to the ideal of doing. This tension shows in our philosophies and in our theories of education. We feel that somehow knowing is futile and pointless unless we do something with our knowledge, and

even that we can only learn by doing. Yet what shall we do with our knowledge, and how can we act without first knowing? We turn restlessly from one pole to the other, and the only goal we can conceive for our doing is to increase knowledge, and the goal for our knowing is more feverish activity.

Here again the world has forgotten the importance of *being*. The ideal of being a certain kind of person unites knowing (which has moral requirements) with doing, which must issue from an inner strength. Indeed, being is itself a kind of doing; a beautiful personality has a kind of actinic effect on all who are around. And this suggests a goal for our knowing and doing — the furtherance of being.

We feel, then, that mankind is tragically imperfect in spite of geometry and the mechanical arts, and that only a redirection of our efforts toward the cherishing of human personality can renew either the integrity of research or the zest for remaking society. Until this is done, “Put in whatever other ingredients ye can, and still there will be death in the pot. . . .” (From a letter of Richard Shackleton to Edmund Burke.)

The question now is, how shall we persuade mankind to concentrate on inner growth? It is easy to lead a horse to water, but not so easy to make him drink. Shall we try statistical exhortation? Tell every citizen that a certain percentage of slum children become delinquent, or that the rate of mental illness is increasing by such and such an amount: maybe that will spur him to effort. Or maybe he will merely exclaim, “How awful!” and turn the page. Or let us appeal to psychiatry. This is science’s homage to the importance of the human soul. Here is a way to help oneself, improve oneself. But why improve oneself? It might be more comfortable to wallow in one’s neuroses. The motive for self-improvement must be something more than self. Those who scorn self-culture and “soul-combing” are right in that

what is needed is to help someone outside of ourselves. We must be part of some larger cause. Altruism, not selfishness, is the principle that will save us. It is morality that stands for the universalizing of the law of self-development. Perhaps morality can save us.

Failure Of Simple Morality As Savior

. . . And if there is not a hunger and thirst after righteousness, we may be sure the mind is distempered. . . .

Thomas Ross (1709-1786)

Morality is not only inspiring, the social philosopher thinks, it is useful. Conscience is the first line of defense against disorder. But at its highest, morality means striving toward a better world. It means the mutual respect of men as ends in themselves in a kingdom of ends. Nevertheless, it would be of little use in reforming society if its authority were derived only from the traditions of society. Nor could conscience retain its primacy in human character if morality proved to have a purely instinctual basis, for while it is comforting to think that some of our natural instincts are socially useful, there can be no reason for preferring one instinct over another unless there is found to be some higher and non-instinctual authority behind our judgment.

There are a number of ways of explaining — or explaining away — human morality and the moral consciousness. It has been said that morals are a product of evolution and hence purely relative. It is obvious that human conceptions of moral conduct have evolved, but this does not mean that there is no eternal truth which men increasingly perceive, any more than the growth of our chemical knowledge implies that there is no real science of chemistry.

Again it is said that morals are crystallized folkways, and their authority that of social pressure. Examine anybody's conscience and you will of course find a large accretion of tradition and taboo. In fact a good deal of our mental contents have been accepted unthinkingly from teachers and parents. But we know that in the case of mathematics, for instance, though we may passively absorb the usual and traditional instruction, all the teaching in the world could not make a man recognize mathematical necessity who did not already have the ability to see and appreciate it. Socrates showed his disciples by demonstrating a geometrical proof to an uneducated slave boy that the appreciation of a priori necessity is not acquired through learning.

It is the same with the moral imperative. The commands of logical, mathematical and moral necessity come to us with the same magisterial grandeur, and none are the inventions of a society that has only too often been morally more obtuse than its best members. There need be no reason why moral necessity, like the other kinds, should not be considered somehow part of the meaning of a rational cosmos. How and why Reality is characterized by this sort of necessity is the question man must eventually ask. We cannot be satisfied with panning the stream of life for such nuggets of moral value that may glitter at us; we must press on to seek the mother-lode.

It will be objected that this is mere metaphysical speculation; what we must do is practice morality, inculcate morality, save society with morality. But can an unexamined morality long remain the motive power of human effort? As one surveys the endeavors of pure ethical culture, what Lawrence Hyde has called a "combination of resourceful planning and vaguely directed goodwill," three principal failings become apparent. In the first place, while

it is necessary for perfect righteousness not to slight any good, and to know the consequences of all one's decisions and actions, in the bustle of practical living men must decide quickly before all the evidence is in. To be a vigorous moralist, all must be either white or black; to attempt to discriminate shades of grey, or to make certain of the ultimate consequences of one's act is to become paralyzed with conscientiousness. This moral dilemma is very obvious in the decisions involved in the pacifist stand. One may refuse to defend oneself, but is it right not to resist when a friend is being murdered? To what extent can one participate in a society built on violence? If non-resistance means the victory of a militaristic conqueror, how far away will eventual deliverance be, and how responsible is the non-resister for the intervening years of rapine? It is easy for those unsympathetic to pacifism to make the pacifist stand look very silly. But the moral dilemma is not pacifism's fault. Any moral decision can be made to appear equally ridiculous. Indeed, the conscientious man of goodwill must in the end be reduced to despair. In the words of the Bhagavad-Gita, "Wretched are they who work for results." All morality needs some further supplement, some more fundamental ground than anxious calculation to give men the courage for action.

The second principal failing of secular morality is its "outwardness"; that is, it looks to the outward act rather than the inward man, from whom the impulse to the act must proceed. As far as outward behavior goes, the plain man may well protest that he is doing the best he can; that all this indictment of a bankrupt civilization leaves him cold, because he knows that neither he nor his neighbors are really wicked. But he will admit that he lacks inner strength and stability. He has heard from the psychiatrists, who are discovering afresh the age-old knowledge of human

nature, that many apparently good deeds are done from neurotic motives. The plain man himself has long suspected that reforming busy-bodies had better reform themselves before attacking society.

There are many imperfect do-gooders in this world. Lawrence Hyde gives a good clinical description of the occupational disease of the reformer (in *The Learned Knife*, pp. 211-212): “. . . While he is actually laboring for the particular cause to which he has devoted himself his spirit . . . may enjoy some degree of serenity. But during those necessarily extended periods of time in which he is not actually at work he is confronted by an alien and oppressive universe. . . . as he himself sees the matter . . . he is . . . either helping to reform the world, or doing nothing that can be regarded, in terms of his own philosophy, as being of particular importance. The consequence is that he is always being ‘interfered with’. . . And when he is thus, as it were, cut off from his base, he becomes irritated, dejected, or merely perplexed, the inhabitant of a world which is perpetually presenting itself to him as being hostile, meaningless, or overpoweringly dreary in nature. He has no true internal stability, but alternates continually between the dangerous excitement of working for an abstract aim, and the depression which is awakened in him through contemplating the features of a world which appears even more ugly and sordid to him than it does to others. . . .” Secular moralists, in the end, fail to find meaning in their lives as a whole.

And this leads to the third failing of ethical culture, namely, the lack of a strong motive to be good. This is indeed disappointing. We thought to find in morality the altruism and sense of duty which pure science has failed to provide. But while the sense of duty has some motive-power, it is notorious that to the average man, joy is divorced from duty;

sin is fun, and morality is usually drudgery.

A phrase in an alumni bulletin I received is significant of the joylessness of life: the writer urged alumni to revisit the college to get “a fresh grip on the daily grim business of making life enjoyable for yourselves and others.” Surely it needn’t be so bad as all that! Well, how are we going to put some pep into virtue? Lectures by the Ethical Culture Society will not be enough; no lecture can make a man really feel that “any man’s death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind.” Shall we try abolishing poverty? Remove all economic injustice and men will automatically be good! Certainly this would remove much bitterness and desperation, but economic security does not guarantee angelic behavior, or the wealthy would long ago have emancipated the poor and Utopia would have arrived. Shall we try character-training? Perhaps men could be trained to virtue as dogs are trained for a certain conditioned reflex. But men refuse to act like animals. They are creatures who seek for *meaning*. They have what animals do not have — reason, and the capacity for idealistic love.

These characteristics are at the root of the trouble. Perhaps they can also rescue us from the difficulty. For the reasons why secular morality fails as a motive-power are that such morality is not clearly integrated with cosmic reality, and it offers no adequate object of devotion. Only that which can answer the demands of thought and of love can salvage the human situation.

In the first place, morality needs some assurance of cosmic backing. If there is no guarantee that good is more basic than evil, that men’s moral values will not perish in the void, then men’s hopes will not survive the many defeats that moral enterprises suffer on earth. Man, being a rational animal, wants to know the meaning of the cosmos of which he is a part, so that he can work with the grain

and not against it. The ends he suffers for must be real and not will-o'-the-wisps. But even with some assurance that moral ideals are more than a dream, men need to feel that their fellow men are worth the cost of self-sacrifice. We cannot grimly resolve to be altruistic; we must be moved by a genuine love which is forgetful of self.

Prof. R. W. Sellars has advocated the replacement of religious worship by "active concern for the furtherance of human values with clear-eyed appraisal of the human situation." But he gives us no prescription for increasing our devotion to human values. He can offer us nothing to be devoted to save humanity or its future, and, frankly, neither looks very promising. Some men are natural lovers of people, but most of us find it hard to love all the people all the time. Our enthusiasm for others beyond our immediate circle of friends must be reinforced by a common bond of likeness or a common task which draws us together. Humanity is too vague a concept. From the naturalistic standpoint it seems to imply the minimum in common between men. It throws Harry Emerson Fosdick in with Rudolf Hess. It is too mixed a bag to have character. If there is anything to the brotherhood of man, it must be a closer relationship than common descent from *Dryopithecus*.

Most people continue to prefer their own nation, "this land of such dear souls, this dear dear land," to the empty generality of Humanity. Why should we love mankind? Are we worth it? Apparently our culture has given an adverse judgment. As the late Prof. A. A. Bowman said: "The tendency to conduct human affairs more and more upon the basis of class-organization is one of the striking phenomena of our modern civilization, and reflects man's profound distrust of his neighbors, and the failure of the social systems based on man's regard for man." (*Studies in the Philosophy of Religion*, v. II, p. 130.) Our love of mankind

depends on our view of what we essentially are. What are we, anyway? We need faith in our ideals, in the universe, and in ourselves, and to obtain that we must look beyond morality itself.

Beyond Morality

. . . Faith in a universe not measured by our fears, a universe that has thought and more than thought inside of it . . .

O. W. Holmes, Jr.

Disregarding the subtleties of the schools of philosophy, there are two ways of looking at the cosmos in which we live, move and have our being. One is naturalistic and the other religious. Both points of view must be asked to give their answers to the questions morality raises, and these answers will be judged on their adequacy, leaving until later the question of whether the satisfactory-sounding answers are also philosophically credible.

Let Naturalism first take the stand. Its statement as to the goal of the moral effort is that the goal is human happiness, and that whatever ministers to this is of value. In its more materialistic form this hedonism tends to the view already discussed that desire creates value. It arose from the old-fashioned rationalistic psychology which thought that men aimed at pleasure, whereas it is truer to say that the process is not so calculating; pleasure is the by-product of a satisfaction sought for its own sake. In short, the old hedonism arose from the sort of utilitarian thinking of values as means rather than ends, which is basic to a major ailment of our civilization.

However, happiness, once discovered and analyzed, might still be the goal of rational morality. Just what do we mean by happiness? I propose to describe it as the assent

of one's personality to environmental conditions. It may be partial or (perhaps only theoretically) complete. A hedonistic ethics would aim at the enlargement of this "pacified area" in all human personalities. Such a condition of the psyche would surely not be despised by any ethic; the trouble comes when we ask, What parts of the personality is it most important to satisfy? Is it just a question of quantity? Do ten satisfied instincts outweigh one prick of conscience? Shall we prefer to be pigs satisfied than Socrates dissatisfied? It is fairly obvious that what is sought is a *quality* of happiness, and it is therefore the quality, not the happiness, which is the distinguishing factor. But happiness, as assent of personality-elements, is too valuable a signpost to neglect. A signpost is not a destination, but it is useful none the less. Happiness is an indication of finding meaning in life; for, as we have seen, men demand meaning. Naturalism has been of service to us in championing happiness, but can it give us the meaning we demand? Can it give us faith in ourselves and in the nature of things?

In placing moral values in the universe, naturalism is in a dilemma. As long as it conceives values to be the products of natural desires, it can explain them naturally, but this conception of values is inadequate. If, on the other hand, human aspirations are admitted to be more noble and disinterested, it is impossible to explain them naturally in a naturalistic world. Many naturalistic thinkers have drawn a picture of "man against the universe," not explaining why Nature should spawn such rebellious absurdities as men of ideals.

And this leads one to ask, What is the naturalistic view of man? On this point we find a wavering between cynical materialism and starry-eyed humanism; between viewing man as an insignificant animal and viewing him as the

legitimate heir to the throne of Deity. The first view destroys our faith, and the second offends our good sense. It is told that the philosophy department at Harvard proposed as an inscription on Emerson Hall, "Man is the measure of all things," but that the suggestion returned from the President's office changed to, "What is man that Thou art mindful of him?" The truer view of mankind will be one in which mercy and truth are met together; a view expressed in terms of growth as well as present condition, potentiality as well as actuality. We must look on ourselves with both hope and humility. In religious language, we are sinful, but we are children of God, made in the image of God; a little lower than the angels.

The answers of naturalism to the inquiry for meaning are inadequate and even incoherent. If we may judge from its hopeful yet realistic view of human nature, perhaps religion has a better answer. When we consider the saints and the really God-intoxicated men, we seem to enter a different world from that of moral struggle in a disintegrating culture. Here joy and duty mingle; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. In the dying words of the Quaker James Nayler: "There is a spirit which I feel that delights to do no evil. . . ."

How many of us feel virtue to be positively delightful? Compare with the previous description of the harried social reformer these words of Thomas Kelly: "It is the beginning of spiritual maturity, which comes after the awkward age of religious busyness for the Kingdom of God. . . . The mark of the simplified life is radiant joy. It lives with the Fellowship of the Transfigured Face. Knowing sorrow to the depths it does not agonize and fret and strain, but in serene, unhurried calm it walks in time with the joy and assurance of Eternity. Knowing fully the complexity of men's problems it cuts through to the Love of God and ever cleaves to Him." (*A Testament of Devotion*, p. 73.)

We have been looking for moral motive-power, and here is apparently something that gives a veritable passion for goodness, an “enthusiastic temper of espousal” in William James’ phrase. Moreover, religious goodness is inward goodness — as Thomas Kelly said, “a passion for personal holiness.” To an inward morality, adultery is not just an outward act, it is lust in the heart. Secret malice is as wicked as overt murder. Spiritual discipline precedes outward conduct. Somehow or other religion seems to provide the life and power that makes moral perfection possible. In spite of its reputed “other-worldliness” religion can and does bring powerful aid to the moral struggle.

What is religion and what are the beliefs that have fruition in peace, joy and love? Religion is “anticipated attainment” (Hocking) — the good eternally triumphant now because it is the law of the cosmos. It is the “redemption of solitude” (again Hocking) — the awful intimacy of God’s priviness to our thoughts. It is our attitude to the Determiner of Destiny (J. B. Pratt); the response of the whole personality to reality as a whole (Cyril Valentine). It is a “sense that there is *something wrong about us*,” and that “*we are saved from the wrongness* by making proper connection with the higher powers” (William James). Its answer to the moral difficulties is that the motive power behind the categorical imperative is love, the supreme object of devotion is Perfect Love, and that the moving principle of the cosmos is not only the moral law but is also redemptive in nature.

Let us take these one by one. The religious man will tell us that morality, like happiness, is not to be aimed at directly, but comes as a result of that passionate unselfing which is love. Love is its own reward, as virtue is not. Love brings altruism naturally; it alone awakens the instinct for self-transcendence which can act so much more powerfully than self-esteem. Virtues are those qualities

displayed by a lover to his beloved, for whose sake he perfects himself.

The object of one's love, the religious man will continue, must be adequate for the last full measure of one's devotion. One cannot give this devotion to any human being. To submit one's moral independence to another, to hold one's life intrinsically of less worth than another's is to bow down before an idol. Idolization either demoralizes or leads to disillusionment. Nor is a good cause adequate for devotion. When analyzed, love for a cause is seen to be concern for the welfare of human beings, and we have seen how hard it is to become devoted to men *en masse*. The religious man gives his devotion to a divine reality which he conceives to be, like a personality, an end in itself; but unlike a human personality, it is worthy of moral obedience, and the love given it enriches rather than displaces love for humanity. The full measure of love can only be given to Perfect Love, and it is the tendency in religion (if not always in abstract philosophical systems) to think of Divinity as loving as well as loved; in Thomas Traherne's words, "What can more agree than that which is infinitely lovely and that which is infinitely prone to love?"

The effects of devotion upon the religious man are these: he performs his duties as acts of worship; he feels the brotherhood of man because the Fatherhood of God endears men to him and develops his capacity to love; and his personality becomes integrated through a love which unites his mind, his heart and his strength. His life wholly lives, as wholly full of God. All love adds meaning to life; it is not surprising that the religious life becomes totally meaningful.

If one asks the religious man what is the cosmic justification of the worth of life, he will reply that just as love includes and transcends morality in the self, so there

is a principle which transcends morality in the cosmos. The operation of a cosmic moral law or Karma is just, but no more than just. It is retrospective; it registers and punishes every transgression, thereby limiting a man's future by his past. The great religions have had faith in a creative element, a redemptive principle, a Way, Truth and Life which releases men from the wheel of life, or forgives their trespasses, giving men the assurance that they need not be limited by their past misdeeds, but can, by the grace of this power, grow into blessedness. Thus the religious believer has the great hope that man does not have to be what he is.

Such is what religion declares, (in the language of the Buddhist Sutras), to be "the truth, lovely in its origin, lovely in its progress, and lovely in its consummation." It must be the next object of inquiry to see whether this lovely vision has indeed any possibility of being true.

Basic Philosophical Considerations

Be it life or death, we crave only reality.

Henry David Thoreau

The religious outlook on the nature of reality must be tested not only by its adequacy as a moral incentive, but by its ability to meet the demands of man's fund of reason and experience. We must ask: Is religion true as well as useful? Here we approach the boundary-line of metaphysics, and it will be well to provide ourselves with a map and a few guiding principles before venturing into this territory.

What we ultimately have to do in criticizing the truth of religious assertions is nothing less than to pass judgment on the nature of the universe as a whole — thought, things and thinkers together. Is it basically good, bad, or

indifferent? Is it a divine creation or not?

It must be admitted at the outset that we cannot prove any final conclusion we may reach. The nature of the universe is itself the background of argument, the basis of proof. In this universe we live, collecting scraps of information, knowing only in part. From this partial experience we try to draw conclusions as to the nature of the whole. But the facts differ in apparent meaning in the light of different presuppositions. All facts are grey in the dark of pessimism. All things seem to work for good to the optimist. To the atheist the facts of human psychology show that God is a creation of the subconscious; while the Hindu acosmist dives into the subconscious to find that Nature is a delusion and only God is real.

We must beware of reading our tacit conclusions into the evidence, and of mistaking a sample for the whole cloth. One flower in the crannied wall is not the entire universe, though it can help us to understand the universe. By the study of life and mind and the way the world wags, we can accumulate a consistent body of evidence creating an overwhelming probability in favor of a certain view of the nature of things. Science must be satisfied with such experimental certainty, and it is not unreasonable to hope that religious experience can likewise provide a faith to live by.

When we gather our evidence and interpret it, we must beware not only of bias, but of hasty theorizing. Our logical reason is all too prone to oversimplify the complex, to deny seeming inconsistencies without waiting to see whether some wider or deeper view does not reconcile the diverse aspects of our experience. "It is by my not denying as false," wrote Baron von Hügel, "what I do not yet see to be true that I give myself the chance of growing in insight." (*Essays*, Series I, p. 14.) We must "sit down before fact as a little

child”; we must have respect for mysteries, surds, and paradoxes, neither ignoring them nor despairing of their solution.

This waiting attitude is especially important in studying the many aspects of man’s dim perceptions of cosmic and religious realities, where we are aware of possessing a vague datum, like the sense of the Holy, something to which we can point before we can define, a *that*, we do not know just *what*, still less *why*. We are like the blind men of the parable feeling the different limbs of the elephant, and trying to infer the nature of the whole. We obtain paradoxical reports of fear and fascination, immanence and transcendence, the One and the many. We can, after the traditional manner, try to abstract the common quality from the observations. This furnishes pretty thin fare; it reduces the solid body of the metaphorical elephant to the common element of tough skin. Such a method does not do justice to the richness of an organic whole. It is far better to accept all the diverse aspects in their variety, no matter how paradoxical they may seem, as functions of an organic whole, just as the tusks and trunk and tail of the elephant are related to and by the unity of the whole elephant. This is the appropriate method for studying the quality of the ultimate as sensed in philosophy and religion.

Perhaps, at the dawn of history, when the first philosopher sat down to think, some unpleasantly bright child asked him, “How do we know that we know anything?” At any rate, the problem of knowledge has always been a thorn in the side of philosophers. Hence it becomes necessary to say something about the importance and trustworthiness of the mind and its way of knowing.

The problem is difficult because we cannot jump outside of ourselves to see if our sensations and ideas really

correspond with reality. Yet we cannot be resigned to imprisonment in our own minds. For the sake of sanity, we must believe that our minds do not bar us from reality, but put us in touch with it. We see, we do not merely dream. If this is so, is it not a mistake to think of the mind symbolically as a closed figure, or a sort of bag, with contents “inside” and reality “outside”? With such an image, the only way to connect inside with outside is either to stuff the world into the mental bag, or, on the other hand, to empty the mental contents into the “outside,” perhaps even to the point of denying the existence of the mind altogether.

Here the common-sense, if paradoxical, feeling that we have both mental activity and direct contact with reality may be a help rather than a hindrance. To put a thing into the mind is not necessarily to take it out of the real world. The tree that we see and think about is not just a private mental picture which we can never connect with the real tree that grows “outside.” Perhaps one may find a clue to the relationship of mind and world in a phrase from Conrad’s story *Youth*: “. . . Where men and sea interpenetrate, so to speak. . . .” Mind and things interpenetrate, interact, in functional, organic relationship.

Thus we are again led out of our minds into all reality, to find reality entering into mind, and the stuff of mind in the structure of the universe. The flux of experience is found to have meaning for mind; it is analyzable into ideas or concepts, or universals, such as “roundness,” “redness,” “goodness,” or “beauty.” These qualities have logical inter-relationships whose validity is somehow independent of existence in time and space. For example, geometry shows the necessary laws applying to figures that may be only hypothetical. But, though independent, ideas enter into reality to give definitions and connectedness to the multitudinous things and events in our cosmos.

Now to suppose that these essential qualities are invented by the human mind and alien to the flux of existence is to divorce meaning and rational coherence from real things and events. The universe would not necessarily be knowable and we would again be shut up in our own logical dreams. In order to rescue us from this it has often been supposed that rational concepts and universal qualities belong to an eternal “realm of essence,” independent both of mind and temporal existence — homeless ghosts, qualities with no eye to see them, and no substance to give them body. Here again common sense will serve to keep speculation tangent to reality. We do feel ideas to be mental, yet we also feel that ideas and qualities are not subjective in the sense that dreams are. We feel that our neat categories fail to do justice to the spectrum-like continuity of reality, where qualities merge into each other as color varies through red and purple into blue. Yet surely qualities are not invented or imagined, but found in functional relation to existing things. Red is real and not reducible to blue, but it is hardly real apart from that which is red. Conceptual meaning links mind to existence, mind links existence to meaning, existence joins meaning to mind — all in functional unity.

But is this linkage really complete? Is everything defined and connected to everything else? Surely there are imperfections, and tragic and inexplicable breaks in the rational order. If these have meaning, the meaning has not appeared in our minds. Surely, too, there is room for growth and for added meaningfulness, such as the creation of new embodiments of value — of the beautiful and the good. Until our ideals are realized, they appear to be only in our minds, and a gulf again threatens to open between mind and world.

Are ideals separated from reality, or are they real and acting upon reality? Ideal perfections may be seen immanent in imperfect existences which are alive and

growing, and ideals act through minds which are consciously purposive. In a living, growing organism we see an "ideal," a norm, which is not just a possible perfection but the organism's plan of development, the unity behind its successive states of immaturity, the very law of its being. The butterfly-to-be is the present determiner of the caterpillar's destiny. In purpose, a mind envisages an ideal plan, assays the material at its disposal, and bends the will to the action necessary for realization. It is in this survey of its material that the mind receives a hint that its ideal is not alien to existence. The ideal must be a possibility in the material; the purposer must be able to say, "It can be done." Where the material is living, it is even more important to see its potentiality and work with it. The physician must see the health which is the normal condition of his patient, and the educator must see the bent of the child.

This insight into a being's inarticulate perfection is love, a love which is not mere emotion, but a way of knowing. Yet it is equally important for the purposer to see the present imperfection or unfinished-ness in his material; he must say, "This needs to be done." The physician must see not only that his patient can be well but that he is now sick. This bearing-in-mind of both the norm and the need for change is the creative attitude, and when applied to fellow men it is creative love.

This is the growing edge of the universe — here where growth and purpose lay down fresh deposits of value and significance. As we look back upon the totality of meaning, we ask, What growth or purpose, if any, is responsible for all this? How was it possible? What is the meaning of meaning itself? And we feel that an answer to these questions will show us where to turn for help in our search for the ultimate worthwhileness of life.

Freedom and the Self

Son of man, stand upon thy feet, and I will
speak unto thee.

Ezekiel II: 1

The human self unites growth with the highest mental activity of any known living organism. Here if anywhere purpose, which requires intelligence and conscious will, should be found in creative action. Perhaps human minds create all the meaning there is. Or, on the other hand, it may be that men are mere puppets of a world of cause-and-effect, unable to originate any action, merely carrying out the orders of nature. Purpose would then be an illusion, and mind a helpless spectator of inevitable processes. Man finds it so hard to believe in or to understand his own marvelous existence that he wavers from one view of himself to the other. Yet he senses dimly both a certain independence of and a certain unity with the cosmos. Perhaps a brief analysis of selfhood will help us to understand what sort of beings we are.

The selves we know have a close union of mind and body. As far as we can see a mental reverberation follows from every bodily state, and research shows many effects that mental states have on the body. The general tendency among scientists has been to believe that body is ultimate in this relationship and mind is its function. Some idealist philosophers have reversed this priority. But the fact that two things always go together does not show which is the prior factor. Perhaps they are both functions of an inclusive whole.

At any rate there are certain reactions which cannot be explained by physical causes alone. The reaction of someone who has made a startling inference from observed facts, or has come to the realization of some new theoretical

truth, may be physical in effect; but is inexplicable without the logical connection which only mental activity can make. Nerves and body chemistry alone know nothing of inference from ground to consequent. Thus there are reactions in the self determined by physical causes and there are bodily events determined in part at least by the laws of thinking.

But does the self as a whole have any independent determining power of its own? What is its relation to its constituent parts and to its environment? If it is no more than a collection of its parts — its body, impulses, and experiences, it is determined by them; the self is they, and when they die the self ceases to exist. This is what materialists believe. On the other hand, there are those who feel that the self is an unchanging soul or Atman which is distinct from the mental states which it possesses, and is basically unaffected by its transient relationships. Again we must be bold enough to accept the truth embodied in both apparently contradictory views. A self is nothing without its parts, which are its activities, and a self is affected by its relationships both with its parts and to its world.

Yet the self is more than its activities, it is the unity to which they are referred, and its basic identity is unaffected by the relationships into which it enters. We must conclude that the self both *has* and *is* its experiences. The thinker is more than the sum of his thoughts. Such experiences as conversion bring home to a person vividly how profound a change can take place in the personality without disturbing continuous identity. The self, like the elephant of the legend, like the universe, can only be understood as an organic whole. Such a whole is not so much made up of and determined by its parts as it is the organizer and determiner of them. Its parts depend on the whole for their usefulness and their very life — and, it might be added, for their death. A single living cell never dies

unless attacked from outside, but as part of a body it dies when the whole dies, even though itself remaining uninjured.

A self, then, is a psychic organism, to some extent self-determining, whose unifying principle is immanent in and transcendent of its members. It is free to the extent that it determines its choices according to the law of its own being. Freedom is not whim or chance, for its choices would then have no consistent relation to the characteristic plan of the individual self. The self, therefore, has a power of local self-government. But its government often suffers from weakness or anarchy, and its factions become the cat's-paws of foreign powers.

The self's freedom is normative rather than actual. This means that the self has the basic freedom to choose freedom and, under certain conditions, the power to achieve freedom. Most of us are content to live at a deterministic level like the animals, pushed or pulled by our desires, shuffling off our responsibilities onto our environment or our physical limitations, considering ourselves unable to transcend circumstances. But we can, to use a phrase from the Dialogues of the Buddha, have our hearts in our power and not be in the power of our hearts; like St. Paul, when we are weak we can be strong.

If we need not be passive creatures of circumstance, how can we be made free? Shall we try to recreate ourselves? It is not so easy to pit the self against the self. Listen to the experience of St. Augustine:

"The mind commands the body, and it obeys instantly; the mind commands itself, and is resisted. . . . It commands itself, I say, to will, and would not command, unless it willed, and what it commands is not done. But it willeth not entirely: therefore doth it not command entirely. For it commandeth only so far as it willeth; and what it commandeth is not

done only so far as it willeth not. For the will commandeth that there be a will; not another, but itself. But it doth not command entirely, therefore what it commandeth, is not. For were the will entire, it would not even command it to be, because it would already be." (*Confessions*, XIII, ch. 9.)

How can a fractured will pull itself together? Some new factor must come to its aid. The free will comes from the integrated self, and the self can only be integrated by a total response to a worthwhile reality other than self. A love and devotion to something or someone greater than self can draw the scattered parts of the self together in its magnetic field. For the most complete integration there must needs be something capable of appealing to mind and heart and strength.

Religion claims that there is a beloved Reality, such that service to it is the way to obtain perfect freedom, and that only those mastered by God have strength to master themselves. Those who have attained greater freedom by religious devotion and used self-denial for self-liberation, have demonstrated the power of a free self to make an unconventional and unexpected response, a response that is more than natural, to conditions which usually discourage or crush the spirit. The saints have showed that deprivation need not produce sullen absorption in appetite, and that poverty can purify rather than degrade.

Human selves can achieve a certain originality of response, can act purposively, and can build systems of rational meaning or of value. Are they the creative agents of the universe? Is whatever we see of unity, significance, love and beauty a human artifact? What, then, created human selves? To what do we owe the conditions that made self-hood possible? Man has a cosmic background, and cannot be understood or accounted for outside his context.

This is where Humanism fails to be philosophical, and

where it is vulnerable to the attack of the materialist, who deflates our self-esteem by reminding us that we are creatures, not creators, that our virtues and our activity are related to the nature that gave us birth, and that all our ideas are not so much spun out of our own substance as given us by outside stimuli. We shamefacedly feel that there is much truth in this. Our creations are but re-arrangements of the Given, and our powers are not our own. We are, after all, part of the universe, the universe is not part of us. We must confess, with George Macdonald, that “Man bows down before a power that can account for him, a power to whom he is no mystery as he is to himself.” But the world of the materialist, the world of stars and electrons that blindly run, can offer no explanation of man.

Basic self-respect forbids man from seeking unity with this sort of universe. We feel ourselves in danger of being sundered from the rest of reality by an “unplumbed, salt, estranging sea.” How shall we realize that we do belong to a whole? Let us, like the mystics, look into ourselves, not to see ourselves as isolated miracles in a dead universe, but to find the Beyond which is also within, the creative reality of which we are but faint images. Man is important because his nature points to what is more than man.

Our greatest personalities, our most creative artists and thinkers, are revered because we feel — and they themselves feel — that they are rather acted through than acting, revealers rather than originators, showing forth some cosmic meaning that is greater than themselves. Christians have looked upon Jesus Christ as the supreme example of manhood precisely because he appeared to reveal most fully the worth of a more than human Reality.

As study of the mind leads back into reality, so study of the self leads to the revelation of some power not ourselves but partially revealed in us in our most creative moments.

The Divine Activity

Thus when God doth work, who shall let it? and
this I knew experimentally.

George Fox, *Journal*

The universe appears to have a value-producing activity which can act through men or upon them. Its action has often been described by those who refuse to believe in any deity who transcends the world of science and of history. This activity appears in the evolutionary process, in history, in the enhancement of value, and in the moral effects of prayer.

The facts of evolution have been much bandied about in controversy. When viewed without scientific or theological axes to grind, the evolution of life seems to be directed to something more than mere survival — to a certain quality of life. Life has been growing more adaptive, more sensitive, more fragile, more aware of values not instrumental to its survival.

Some thinkers have found in history a similar ongoing process, inevitable in the sense that men can further or impede it but never defeat it. To religious men the process is the working of Providence; non-theistic thinkers often conceive it more vaguely and impersonally as a “dialectic,” which proceeds through the clash of preliminary contrasting stages or patterns of society to a final stage which combines or synthesizes the elements of society on a new level. This is not unlike the way a new and more complete theory grows out of the clash of opposing insights, or the way in which paradoxes should be resolved.

The Marxists have most strongly insisted upon the working of a dialectical process in social history, a class-struggle ending in a classless society. It is noteworthy to

find supposedly anti-religious thinkers believing in an other-than-human power working toward greater justice. Marxism has a certain religious sense, a metaphysical insight, perhaps because Karl Marx inherited some of the traditions of the ancient Hebrew prophets. But Marxism is not metaphysical enough. It fails to give a truly cosmic explanation. It is too narrow because it concentrates exclusively on human society. It does not link up the forces in human society with the mysteries of what William James called the “vast, slow-breathing Kosmos with its dread abysses and unknown tides.” It is too humanistic to explain humanity; too this-worldly to give a complete explanation of this world. Even as a description of human society it is too narrowly based on economic needs, forgetting that man made economics, not the other way round. It would be better to look for the divine activity in the periodic outbreak and stubborn survival of great spiritual and ethical insights, and in the dialectic of love rather than the dialectic of conflict.

Another non-theistic thinker, Prof. Henry N. Wieman, has revealed an aspect of divine working in his description of what he calls the “creative event,” which is at work when a mind has its world of values enriched by new values or relationships contributed by other minds. Beauty, truth and goodness are heightened and the worth of life increased by a creative synthesis which purely human efforts cannot bring about. For it to occur men must fulfill the right conditions of living in commitment to this “event” rather than to their own narrow purposes. It does not provide the heart’s desire so much as transform men’s desires in the new and often unpredictable outcome. Prof. Wieman is a keen empirical observer, but he has no adequate explanation of the “creative event”; it is creation without a creator.

Worship and prayer provide another channel for creative cosmic action. A consideration of the much-discussed effects of the practice of prayer will throw further light on the activity of this superhuman power. We must dig through layers of theology and psychology to the rock-bottom fact that the universe permits personal growth and transformation through prayer. We need not decide at this point whether what goes on in prayer is describable in terms of psychology, or natural law, or Divine Grace. The fact remains that a certain attitude on the part of the worshipper, when sincere, always brings a certain result. This is as much a law of the universe as gravitation is. Furthermore, persistence in prayer perfects the worshipper's response and magnifies the result. I use the word "response" because a man's psychic states are not unrelated to the world; they are responses to stimuli. Ultimately, prayer is not only an opportunity for the working of the righteous cosmic power, but is initiated by it. The effect of this power on the worshipper is analogous to the action of sunlight. Sunlight not only illumines, it is germicidal and actinic. Similarly, prayer brings the illumination of self-knowledge, it purifies the heart, and brings moral energy and strength. Prayer gives both humility and the hope of growth, thus giving the worshipper a creative view of himself. Whatever is at work in prayer apparently fulfils the function of creative love.

Our search for ultimate cosmic worth has led through the network of meaning and value to those nodes of purposive activity called selves, which we thought might be responsible for the growth of meaning, only to find that selves are channels for a larger creative activity. This activity is manifest in the upsurge of developing life, in the struggle of mankind to realize its just ideals, and in the enrichment and transformation of personality. Now that we

know there is such an activity, what more do we need to know? Why not be satisfied to say with John Dewey that God is “the active relation of the ideal and the actual,” and let it go at that? Why seek to construct speculative theories about the cause and nature of this activity? Now that we know we have help, let us roll up our sleeves and get to work.

Nevertheless, certain questions will not down, and will not let us rest from the arduous task of philosophical thought. How basic is this activity to the nature of the cosmos? Is it just one of many forces, or an expression of the principle by which the universe exists and functions? If it is only the former, we must push our thought on to find what is the basic cosmic principle. We can only be satisfied with what makes the rules as well as plays the game. We must reach the ultimate. Certainly growth seems to be the main tendency of the universe — an onward push, upsetting old patterns, creating new integrations, compelling mankind to become mature or perish. There is something in the universe that seems to say: “Be ye therefore perfect....”

But before we yield allegiance to this growth-principle, one last objection must be answered. A Humanist would say: “This cosmic force is very impressive; but you cannot ask mankind, with its unique and valuable development of purpose and selfhood, to bow its head to a blind *élan vital*.” There is cogency in this objection, and we will have to make a further metaphysical step. We can no longer assume that the activity is cosmic but purpose only human. This activity has direction; it is not blind. Being creative it must possess consciousness of actuality and ideal, and it must have will — in short, it has purpose. That we have to do not only with an activity but with a purpose other than ourselves is the daring hypothesis of theism. God is in both life-force and eternal ideal; He is the push from below and the pull from

above. He besets us behind and before, and lays His hand upon us.

The Nature of God

I say, "God". I am not sure that is the name. You will know whom I mean.

Thoreau

Our search for the source of meaning and value has culminated in the conclusion, reached by inference from evidence of creative activity, that a living Will is the law and moving principle of the universe. But even when we infer this much, there are still many puzzles to solve. If will is the unity of the self, then God must be a Self; but to what extent, if at all, can the Law of the Universe be said to be a Person as we mortal men are persons? In what relation do we, as parts of the universe, stand toward Him? How can we understand Him or communicate with Him?

It will be of help to examine man's religious consciousness of divine reality, "our confusedly concrete sense of the infinite" as Von Hügel called it, and to discriminate it from some of the traditions and blind preconceptions which have troubled men's religious beliefs. Religious consciousness gives valuable insights which must not be ignored. It is insistent that God is supremely real, an insight that has received different emphases varying from the Hindu doctrine that only Brahman is real and the visible world is illusion, to the Scholastic teaching that only God has perfect being. Religious intuition also insists on the paradoxical ultimacy and intimacy of Divine Reality. This has been perceived by the writer of the Bhagavad-Gita: "It (Brahman) is far away, and yet It is near." So also St. Augustine wrote of God that He is "most High and most near,

most secret and most present.” By His very ultimacy, God’s relationship to man is more intimate than that of man to man, since He is the Creator and Sustainer of the basis of all relationships and of those to whom He relates Himself. It is important to hold to both of these aspects. By and large, Christian theism has been most true to the religious consciousness in this respect.

Failure to hold fast to the truths sensed by man’s consciousness of God usually leads to questioning and disbelief. Many who have lost their faith are those who imagined God as a distant, thundering Jehovah, a finite being moving around miraculously in the universe, whose sphere is the narrowing margin of phenomena as yet unexplained by science. It is no wonder that some who are oppressed by too limited a notion of God are attracted by pantheistic ideas of the nearness and universality of a Divinity manifesting itself in Cosmic Law rather than by miraculous interventions.

Because of this reaction from a personal Jehovah to the Cosmic Law, the modern mind has great difficulty in thinking of God as at all personal. The idea of personality brings to mind the finite, the capricious, the humanly embodied entity, a denizen of the world, not its ground and origin. When we think of the impersonal we think of the reliability, impartiality, eternity, inescapability and perfect efficiency of natural law. Surely the impersonal in this sense is more like God than the personal.

But personality has further connotations. It is a characteristic of living selves; it is the conscious, qualitative and unique aspect of a self. The true contrary of personality would be the unconscious, non-spiritual, unintegrated and characterless, and surely this is not how we think of God. There is nothing in the essence of personality that requires it to be limited and capricious;

indeed, the more a personality is mature and unified the more reliable and constant its purposes are, as compared with the indecision of the neurotic or the flickering attention and wayward activities of a child. The greater the personality, the less pettily "personal" and the more steadfast it is. When we say we cannot believe in a personal God, we really mean that God is not a man, that He should repent. Though not a man, God has a conscious purpose and will; He is self-determining and so in the highest degree a self. He has moral value, and only a person capable of possessing a good will is a locus of moral value. These qualities surely allow us to think of God as personal. The steadfast lawfulness of the cosmos which has no shadow of turning is the expression of complete self-hood, perfect personality. It is we mortal men, with our imperfect self-control, our derivative, largely uncreative natures, who are lacking in personality.

Summing up this far, God may be thought of as supremely real, both immanent and transcendent, and a Self who differs from ourselves in being more integrated and in being entirely creative.

To this conception Christianity adds the belief that the essence of God is love. How can this be so, and how can we know it? We have seen that creation proceeds from a certain attitude, a vision of both immanent norm and temporary shortcoming. God, as an intelligent Creator, must have this attitude. Now men must discover the norm, and then they may still be unable to summon their will to the creative task, like the slow judge described by Abraham Lincoln who not only took a long time to decide what was right but a longer time to decide to do it.

With God, however, to know perfectly and to will totally is one integral act; to know is to create. We have also seen that a creative insight into men is creative love, which,

when communicated to its objects, brings that sense of hope and humility which gives men strength to become their better selves. We have noticed that prayer brings this sort of healing and growth, and that this looks like the action of creative love. Since God knows us and creates us, He also loves us, and knows and creates us by His love.

Prayer is the time when man is most sensitized to the action of God. In prayer we receive intimations of God's criticism and encouragement. We feel the criticism in the pressure of the moral law, the sting of conscience, which we fail to interpret as the expression of love mainly because it is so often painful. But growth is always painful, and this experience is an imperative to grow. The claim of "You ought" is based on faith that "You can." No one blames the hopeless idiot or the madman; to call a man a sinner implies that he could have done better; it can express one's love of the finer nature he has betrayed. To realize oneself a sinner is to be liberated from the crushing burden of imagined constitutional inferiority. To refrain from judgment, to love one's enemy, is therefore far from being the same thing as offering the excuse that "he couldn't help it." Far better to be a hopeful sinner than a blameless imbecile. God's judgment is His mercy; the obligation of the moral law the drive of His creative love.

The search through the universe from meaning to the Creator of meaning has ended in the God of religion, a Divine Reality of creative and redemptive love. This is the lovely truth that man longs for. Yet there is still one more river to cross before we can rest.

The Redemption of Evil

. . . In its most characteristic embodiments,
religious happiness is no mere feeling of

escape. It cares no longer to escape. It consents to the evil outwardly as a form of sacrifice — inwardly it knows it to be permanently overcome.

William James

The power of a loving God working in a world of His creation must be finally tested by the encounter with Evil. A Creator of meaning must be the conqueror of all that tears down meaning, all that negates value, all that seems to defeat the pattern of the universe. The vivid realization of evil has prevented many from being able to believe in either a benevolent or a powerful deity. What and why is evil?

It is certainly of no use to discuss what is called the Problem of Evil without being clear as to what we think evil is; and the search for that definition will throw light on what we think is good, and what we expect in the way of fair treatment from the universe. The fact of evil, when faced, makes us search not only our hearts but also our world-view. It will shake us out of any smug and overhasty affirmation of the worth of life. Life must have more than a surface-value, for on the this-worldly plane it is a vanity of vanities. Our unhappiness arises from the fact that we demand more meaning from life than physical existence can give us, an existence ended by death which seems to strike down the personal value we have laboriously built up. Life must have meaning beyond sensual enjoyment, a meaning which is not nullified by death.

Religion affirms that there is such a meaning, but the thorough-going pessimists say that even this deeper and less obvious meaning is an illusion created by wishful thinking. Men want a kind Father in the sky, so this charge runs, a “magic helper” to pull them out of difficulties and make the universe go their way. They want to flee from

hard reality into another world, from social effort into a heaven of ease, from real people to an imaginary divine perfection. To be sure, many people's "religion" is no better than this. It is of the level of a newspaper advertisement: "HOW TO GET WHAT YOU WANT, through 'The Great Prayer' by Dr. Ervin Seale."

But the truest religion is a way of doing God's will, not man's. It is a way of increasing personal responsibility, not of ducking it; a way of finding a true security, not a human protection which should be outgrown; a way of facing suffering, even seeking it. The truly religious man sees the "other world" which justifies this world, not as a haven of refuge, but as far more deeply interfused in the texture of everyday life, where every act can be a sacrament, every thought a practice of the Presence of God. He is not anti-social, because his dependence on God frees him from neurotic dependence on others so that he can love them freely. He is the sanest of men, because he thinks reality worthwhile enough to accept fully, without protests or daydreams. Living in God's world, he needs no private world of his own.

This full acceptance of reality suggests that religion has found at least a practical solution of the problem of evil. Let us follow in its footsteps to see what there is to be found. The first step is to make only reasonable demands on the universe. So many people are unnecessarily bitter about the woes of this world because they demand that the wicked be punished with misfortune, and then accuse God of cruelty because he does not rescue men from the consequences of their folly. It does not make the problem of evil any simpler to damn the universe if it does and damn it if it doesn't.

With a reasonable state of mind, it is easier to take the next step, which is to wonder whether our demands on the universe are just and, indeed, whether we should make

any. If our demands are hedonistic, if they concern our private wishes, they are bound to be disappointed. The cosmos seems indifferent to our comfort. Indeed, we discover that the world is so constructed that some suffering and sorrow is unavoidable. It occurs to us that if it were avoidable, many men's lives would be an undignified scramble for painlessness. It almost seems as if the pain of this world bred us for more manly pursuits — But what are we saying? Isn't suffering evil, and can good come from evil? Perhaps suffering is not always an evil, or perhaps it can at least be redeemed. If we abandon hedonism, then suffering is seen to be evil only when it is morally crippling, and it is crippling only if men have no freedom to make the redemptive rather than the natural and instinctive response to suffering. As the saints have shown, such freedom and such a response can be achieved.

The universe not only makes us abandon hedonism, it makes us abandon our egoistic interests. It defeats our petty purposes, and disappoints our wishes. In the words of Lao Tze, "The world is like a holy utensil and cannot be manipulated." We remember the fairy tales that tell of the sorry consequences of a literal fulfillment of hasty wishes, and conclude that it is fortunate that most of our wishes perish. We realize that it is better that reality should force us to lay aside our narrow aims for some larger Purpose. As J. S. Bixler says: "We cannot bargain with the mysterious or offer gifts in the hope of receiving others in return. It promises nothing, but exacts tribute from us. . . . It does not recognize our claim that a thing is important only as it serves our wants, but hints that certain things must be accepted on their own terms as contrasted with ours." (*Religion for Free Minds*, p. 153.)

Must we not press moral claims on the universe? Yet as we confront the cosmos with our judgments, we become

aware that it is the cosmos which judges us; the moral law is not merely within but beyond us, warning us: “gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee. . . .” We are judged as well as judges, and we repent in dust and ashes. We and all creation are under the pressure of the imperative to grow, and we are more likely to fail God than God’s upward push is to fail us.

Thus we have taken a third step, to attain an attitude not of caviling but of creative cooperation with the universe, and a view of evil that sees it as impediment to growth rather than as frustration of our desires. Now we are in a better position to consider the problem of evil.

We see that with mankind rests the greatest responsibility for that deliberate refusal to grow which is sin, and also for losing many opportunities to redeem by our way of meeting evils that befall us. We have the greatest earthly opportunity either to wreck or to redeem, because we have the most freedom of any creature. Yet not all responsibility or freedom may be ours. It is possible that other creatures than man have smaller allotments of freedom, and that a slow accumulation of many unnoticed wrong choices lies behind the crueller aspects of animal evolution. This terrible and wonderful freedom of man is not infringed upon by God. He presents the highest moral demands, and provides a world of impersonal discipline, but He does not coerce us. Nature stands neutral. Thunderbolts do not descend on the unrighteous. Men must be asked to grow for other reasons than those of physical terror. The wages of sin are more subtle — a slow death of meaningfulness in triviality, boredom, despair. Nor are there material rewards for being good. There is no reward save the best reward — God Himself. We must learn to want nothing but God, and life helps us to learn this lesson, when we are willing, purging us of our lusts, weaning us from our

instrumental values. The final renunciation takes place at death; when we may find that we, whose organisms brought mortality to our constituent cells, are given eternal life by organic unity with the Life of God.

Evil may now be defined as that which takes us away from God. We ourselves are the only forces that can alienate us from Him. To the religious man, neither pain nor sorrow nor injustice, nor things present nor things to come can separate him from God. All these things can be transmuted by the alchemy of devotion. As has been said of Jesus: "When Jesus' transpositions were finished, all the negative elements in life were on the positive side of the equation and had changed their sign: death in all its forms, vice, disease, ignorance, paralysis, had been used as a condition for a fuller and richer life. No part of existence was indifferent to spirit or untouched by it. Not merely water but poison was transmuted into wine." (Lewis Mumford, *The Condition of Man*, p. 62.)

But the religious man does not think of himself as the transformer; to him it is God who triumphs over evil by giving life all its meaning, the only meaning it can have. We cannot always change the circumstances of our lives, but they can be glorified by relating them to our vision of God, or at least accepted with that solemnity which, according to William James, contains an element of intimate consent. Perhaps no philosophy can explain the whence and wherefore of evil, but religion does not stop to argue. Without belief in a Divine Reality, the problem of evil is insoluble. Given such a belief, one can face evil and be more than conqueror of it.

This search for ultimate meaning has now come as far as words can carry it. It sprang from the realization that the unexamined popular philosophy of our scientific culture has been straying down a false trail; that what is needed is