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The Impact of Modern Scholarship On Christianity

A. CAMPBELL GARNETT*

IN this paper I use the term "scholarship" broadly to include not only historical studies but also the whole range of science and philosophy. By "Christianity" I mean the religion which received its early formulation in the New Testament and the ancient Christian creeds and which has ramified thence into many forms.

All religion, I think we can agree, is rooted in something powerful but elusive in human experience which, if man pays attention to it, tends to make him believe that his life has a significance beyond that of the things revealed by his senses, and which drives him to formulate a view of that meaning and to seek to direct his life by that view. This effort to formulate a view of the meaning of the distinctive religious experience, which we may call religious thinking or theology, does not, however, pay attention to the religious experience alone. Man cannot isolate this phase of the meaning of his life from other phases. If religious experience involves a meaning going beyond the things of sense it nevertheless occurs in the same life with the things of

sense and the two are relevant to each other. Religious thinking therefore has to interact with that philosophical thinking which interprets the world revealed to the senses. But, furthermore, no present thinking can be done in isolation from past thinking. At every stage, therefore, religious thinking is done under the influence of, and with the help of, a tradition. Religious thinking is therefore always an interpretation of religious experience in the light of (a) the past tradition, and (b) a current philosophy of the sensible world.

Now the Christianity of the New Testament and the ancient Christian creeds is the formulation of an interpretation of the religious experience of a group of men whose religious experience had been deeply and positively influenced by contact with the life, personality and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth—a contact which was direct for the first group, and indirect, through an oral and written tradition, for others. Let us call this the Christian religious experience (a religious experience deeply and positively influenced by the life, personality and teaching of Jesus). Then Christianity is the formulation of an interpretation of this experience in the light of (a) a tradition, (b) a philosophy.

In the circumstances of time and place in which the Christian religious experience arose it was inevitable that the tradition, in the light of which its interpretation was formulated, was almost entirely that of the Hebrews, and the philosophy predominantly that of the Greeks. The world at that time contained no finer tradition and no finer philosophy. The Christian interpretation therefore rightly used both, the elements incorporated from Greek tradition being minor (and not improvements) and the Hebrew

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philosophy being increasingly overlaid and replaced by the Greek as the world view was more and more systematically elaborated.

Today, however, it is clear that we are called upon to re-think the meaning of the Christian religious experience from its source and in completely new terms. The impact of modern scholarship has completely shattered Greek philosophy and has radically changed our understanding of much in the Hebrew tradition. The bottles into which the new wine of the Christian religious experience was poured have proved to be old bottles, and they will no longer hold water, let alone wine. It is no use trying merely to cut out a few pieces and patch the old wine skins. We must construct new ones. We can still have the Christian religious experience in all its fullness—not that of those who saw and heard him face to face, but that of those who received their reports. In reading the New Testament we can have as close and full an experience of him as most of those who wrote it. But our religious experience, as affected by the reports of this life, personality and teaching, we must interpret in the light of the changes which have come over both philosophy and tradition in our own day.

The most vital change that has been wrought by modern scholarship in our view of the Hebrew and Christian traditions, up to the writing of the New Testament, is that we have learned to see the miraculous element in that tradition, not as history, but as myth. The study of sources, and our psychological knowledge of the fallibility of honest human testimony, the growth of rumor, and the deceptiveness of abnormal psychological experiences, make it impossible any longer to claim reliability for any testimony that bears witness to miracle. Nevertheless the selective belief in miracle and its incorporation in myth has not entirely lost its significance. It has rather acquired a new significance which we are learning how to read. Myths are accepted and transmitted, not out of mere baseless credulity or an appetite for the mar-

velous, but because they create insight into, and bear witness to, some great idea to which those who accept the myth have been led by their spiritual experience. The mythical and miraculous element in the tradition therefore comes to us today, not as history with metaphysical implications, to be incorporated, both as history and metaphysics, into a creed, nor as testimonial to the divine authenticity of dogma, but as bearer of the meaning of the religious experience that has laid deep impress upon the past, and therefore as bearers of a meaning to be given great weight in the interpretation of the religious experience of the present.

Not quite so obvious, but even more salutary and far-reaching, is the effect upon theology of the abandonment of the thought-forms of Greek philosophy and the rethinking of religious experience in modern philosophical terms. The result is a return to something nearer the Hebrew modes of thought than the Greek; something closer to everyday common sense, though no longer naive and unsophisticated. The most distinctive thought-forms of the Greek philosophy are (a) the concept of reality as eternal, in the sense of timeless, rather than temporal, and (b) the concept of substance as the basis of inhering attributes and thus the ultimate determiner of distinctions of quality. In the typical thought of today these concepts are completely abandoned.

Today we have learned (to use Samuel Alexander's phrase) to "take time seriously." Time, process, change, is our only reality. Its course is seen as everlasting, infinite in both directions. The paradox of the infinite regress, which was the basis of the assumption of the reality of the timeless, has been analyzed and found unobjectionable. The concept of the uncaused cause has been found meaningless. That of the timeless eternal has been recognized as the hypostatization of an abstraction. Whereas to the Greek the timeless eternal alone was real, and the course of particular events but an image, an imperfect

shadowing forth, of the eternal upon which it in entirety depends, to the contemporary philosopher the course of particular events alone is real, and the idea of the timeless is a conceptual abstraction.

Similarly with the Greek concept of substance. To the modern thinker the physical world is a postulate elaborated for purposes of prediction and control of the environment. At most it is a very partial description of something that exists and determines the course of our experience except as subject to our control. The changing appearance of qualities is determined by changing relations of events. In animate nature there is no fixity of species rooted in substantial forms. Even in inanimate nature the uniformities are statistical, not fixed and substantial. Between man and other forms of life there is therefore no longer an impassable distinction of kind. Between the mental and the physical the distinction is vague. It is now usually recognized as too sharp for a reduction of the mental to the physical, but it is, at most, a distinction in kind of event, with interrelationship between the unique kinds of event, rather than a distinction of eternally fixed substantial forms.

Let us now consider the impact of the changes in these thought-forms upon the interpretations of religious experience—both of religious experience in general and of the Christian religious experience in particular. This requires that we should first state broadly the character of these experiences. I have above described the general religious experience as “something powerful but elusive in human experience which, if man pays attention to it, tends to make him believe that his life has a significance beyond that of the things revealed by his senses, and which drives him to formulate a view of that meaning and to seek to direct his life by that view.” I should like now to add that this experience contains a distinctively moral element in the form of a felt demand that one should concern himself impartially with the welfare of others—a demand which we may describe as

the critical conscience, in distinction from the traditional conscience which spells out the demand of the critical conscience, more or less wisely and consistently, in the form of specific traditional rules.

The distinctive Christian religious experience is that of one who has the general religious experience illuminated and influenced by the story of Jesus of Nazareth. This is the story of one who had, not a Christian, but a Hebrew religious experience of a very intense character, which he interpreted in the light of an extraordinarily clear and strong critical conscience (the felt demand for impartial concern for the welfare of others) and expressed in an emphasis on the loving Fatherhood of God, the Golden Rule, the sayings about the Sabbath as made for man and the source of defilement as lying in what comes out of the mouth rather than what goes in, and in the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. All this is part of a distinctly Hebrew religious consciousness—the critical conscience working on the Hebrew tradition. The distinctively Christian element arises when the story of this man goes on to tell how, in loyalty to his mission to preach the truth as he saw it, he refused to be silent and faced the death of the cross. Favorable attention to this story illuminates and directs the general religious experience to accept as essentially true Jesus’ interpretation of the Hebrew religious experience, and further to see in him the fullest possible manifestation of the divine in human form and, being drawn to him in love and loyalty, to find in that relation a power to cleanse and heal the human spirit. Under the influence of the element of the miraculous in the Hebrew and Greek traditions these insights were expressed in the Christian myths of the Virgin Birth, the physical Resurrection and Ascension, and in the doctrines of the atonement, and of justification by faith. Under the influence of Greek philosophy they were further formulated in the trinitarian creeds.

The last paragraph has sufficiently sug-

gested what is involved in demythologizing the interpretation of Christian religious experience, i.e., in restating it in terms derived from our modern understanding of myth and the rejection of the miraculous. It remains to show how the early Christian interpretation was affected and distorted by the forms of Greek thought into which it had to be cast, and to see how it needs to be restated in the thought forms of contemporary philosophy and science.

The idea of God as held by Jesus was that of the Heavenly Father, perfect in goodness, creator of all things, who ever was and is and is to come. Restated in terms of Greek philosophy this became translated into that of the timeless, immutable Being, the uncaused cause of all that is, whose eternal perfection is made manifest in the things of time but requires for its manifestation the sin and tragedy as well as the righteousness and joy of human history, a being describable only by negatives, utterly incomprehensible, a being who cannot really love or grieve or strive or sympathize with man but to whom these concepts can only be applied by an unintelligible analogy, an enigma which is so suprapersonal as to be equivalent to the impersonal, though allegedly manifest in three personalities, a mystery before which we may stand in awe but in which we can find no courage, comfort or inspiration, for what in him is analogous to glory is served equally by our suffering and condemnation as by our devotion and salvation.

Equally disastrous was the effect of the concept of substance. Since the manifest attributes are determined by the substance God must be of different substance from man. His substance is manifest in three personalities and that of the human soul in one. Persons are absolutely distinct, not to be fused or confused. Each human soul is an utterly simple unit, an isolated consciousness rooted in an isolated substantial unit. Religious experience required that God be thought of as transcendent beyond man yet immanent in man

and personal in both manifestations, and Christian experience required that God also be fully manifest in the person of Christ. It remained an incomprehensible mystery how three distinct personalities could be united, yet isolated, in one substance. It also was incomprehensible how the third person of the Trinity could be immanent in the personality of man yet no part of the substance of that person. Christian thought faithfully clung to the implications of its religious experience and swallowed the logical contradictions imposed by the attempt to interpret that experience in the terms of Greek philosophy.

The worst effect of this doctrine of substance, however, was the separation it imposed on the thought of the relation of God and man. While man and all creation could be thought as in some degree a manifestation of the divine substance yet the substance, or essence, of the divine nature could not be admitted in man. The created and inferior substance of his soul must be utterly distinct from the divine. A clear distinction between the human personality and the divine was required by man's sense of responsibility for sin. In terms of substance, then, the Platonic distinction between the rational soul of man and the divine had to be maintained, rather than the Aristotelian and Stoic conceptions which would have been more amenable to the doctrine of immanence. Thus Christian thought was forced to assume that the created human soul is of a different substance from the divine. Yet Hebrew thought, as uttered and emphasized by Jesus, was of God as our Father and of man as made in His image. It thought of human life as drawn off from the Divine and bearing its essential form. The image of God in man was as close as the image of the Father in the child. Man was a disloyal and disobedient child, inferior to his Father and often unworthy of him, but he was still a child of God, and the spirit of his Father was alive within him, and he could hearken to its call and return to his Father as did the prodigal son. But now, in the Hellenized form of

Christian thought, human nature and the human spirit are utterly separated from the divine. The inferior, created substance, a creature of time, cannot in any way resemble the timeless and perfect substance of God. What meaning then could be given to the divine Fatherhood and the image of God in man? The divine Fatherhood became a remote metaphor and the image of God in man became merely man's sense of the infinite as the obverse effect of his own finitude.

Fortunately the metaphor of divine Fatherhood remained and was cherished as something closer to reality than the Hellenized theology literally allowed it to be. And the personality of Jesus as Son of God, and even Mary as Mother of God, gave the Christian a sense of kinship of the human and the divine which the metaphysical elements of his theology denied. But the damage done to the concept of the "imago dei," and to that of the immanence of the spirit of God in man, was great. The apostle Paul, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, not much influenced by Greek philosophy, could interpret the "imago dei" by saying "It is God that worketh in you, both to will and to do of his good pleasure." But Hellenized Christian theology could make nothing of the insight of this text and ignored it. Yet it is the most profound and inspiring interpretation of the most basic element of religious experience. Something works within us to will and do something that we do not see as our own good pleasure. It strives and wrestles with our ego and condemns our egoism. We can ignore it, but we do so at our spiritual peril. In the moment of our selfish triumph it returns to trouble us. If we surrender to it it rewards us with inward peace and joy. Says Paul "It is God that works thus within us." Says the Hellenized theology "Yes, yes. Since Paul says so, it must be. But it is incomprehensible how it can be. It cannot be a feature of the universal relation of God and man for the two are in their substantial nature distinct. It must be only by a special and miraculous intervention that the

Spirit of God enters into and wrestles with the spirit of man."

There is another Pauline text, however, to which the Greek philosophy was more hospitable. It is that which told how the Gentiles who know not the law have the law of God written in their hearts, their conscience bearing them witness. This was easily identified with the Platonic conception of the immanence in the human reason of the idea of the good. It did not assert a kinship of any part of the human spirit with the Spirit of God, but it asserted the power of the human reason to discern a true moral law and was formulated in the well-known Catholic doctrine of "natural law." It asserted what might be called the immanence of a divine idea rather than the immanence of the divine spirit or will. It gave a conviction of absoluteness to the voice of conscience as the voice of God which made the Christian thinker sensitive to the moral demand within him as the demand of God, but it made him look upon that demand as purely a confrontation by a Power beyond him, losing the significance of the fact that it was also a healing and uplifting Power within him. It also left him without means of discrimination between the specific rules, which conscience has traditionally endorsed, and the moving power of impartial love toward men, which gives only a tentative and critical endorsement to moral rules, and which alone can be identified with the Spirit of God in man.

In brief, the religious experience which Paul so aptly describes as the Spirit of God working and striving within us as a will to the impartial love of our fellowmen, a will that both critically endorses and critically transcends the traditional moral law, that sees only "as through a glass, darkly," but whose essence is faith and hope and love—this experience of the immanence of the divine spirit as a will to love, that is ours and yet opposed to our will, and more than ours—this experience, when interpreted in terms of Greek thought, becomes an insight of reason

into what ought to be, but an insight that lacks the power to realize its own end. As such it fails to inspire the hope, faith and love that man needs; and it gives to him instead an arrogant assurance of the correctness of his own specific moral judgments, though such judgments at best can be but a more or less enlightened interpretation of a more or less enlightened tradition. This traditional conscience, with its specific moral absolutes, certainly cannot be recognized as the voice of God. Yet it is the only form in which Greek thought is able to make intelligible the idea of the divine immanence. The critical conscience, expressive of an impartial love for one's fellow men, is, however, another matter. It involves no undue rigidities or self-contradictions which would belie its divine origin. For the critical conscience is not an idea. It is a desire and a demand. It is impartial love for human kind with a claim to authority over all other desires. It is an interest process come to consciousness of the nature and reach of its own end and, even though a weaker drive than other interests, asserting its authority over them. In the terms of current philosophy it is much more easy to identify this interest, this interest of creative love within us, with the interest of creative love which is the source of our being, the mind or will of God.

Before I pass to the reinterpretation of the Christian religious experience in the terms of contemporary philosophy there is, however, another bad effect of the combination of Greek philosophy and the tradition of the miraculous upon Christian thinking to which I wish to point. This has to do with the idea of revelation. The tradition of the miraculous suggests that special revelations have been given to man by interventions of God in history. This has been modified in current theology to the view that such revelations are in the form of "mighty acts," not words, and only take the form of doctrine through human interpretation. Both these views of special revelation recognize that the special revela-

tions can only be recognized as such by means of another, general, revelation, a "witness of the spirit within" which affirms the "mighty acts" or "words" to be of God. But even in the more modest contemporary form claims are made that through the special revelation we know much more of divine truth than we could know by the general revelation alone, and some theologians seem to think that the significance of the "mighty acts" is sufficient to justify a reassertion of practically all of their traditional creeds.

One primary objection to this should be obvious. Since we cannot know that a "mighty act" or "word" is of God except the "spirit within" (i.e. the general revelation) bears witness to it it is impossible for a special revelation to reveal more than does the general revelation. All a special revelation in history can do is call attention to the witness of the spirit within, which otherwise we are inclined to ignore. This is the proper and the essential function of the prophet and the Christ. Man is not left without the knowledge of God's will if he will pay attention to the Spirit of God working within him. It is because we will not do so that we need, for our "salvation," the stimulus that comes through the great figures through whom God is revealed in history.

I think that one reason why so many theologians have sought to find so much more in the special revelations of God than in the general is that they have found so little in the general. If the "imago dei" is merely an impression of the infinite which is the obverse of our sense of finitude then it is not enough for men to live by. If man's immediate knowledge of God's will is a vague body of moral rules such as are supposed to be comprised in an intuited "natural law" then its vagueness and conflicts are, again, not enough for man to live by. But if the will of God operates in man as an interest in human welfare asserting its authority over other interests and constraining him to "love his neighbor as himself" then the "witness of the spirit within,"

the "general revelation," contains "all the law and the prophets." All we need is that the "mighty acts" of God through his devoted human servants should call us to pay attention to God's working within us. The interpretation of those "mighty acts" and noble "words" does not need the elaboration they find in the creeds. They have, as Jesus said, quite sufficient elaboration in the two great commandments, and to these the general revelation of the Spirit within bears witness.

Enough has been said in criticism of the historic interpretations of the Christian religious experience in the terms of Greek philosophy and under the influence of a traditional acceptance of the miraculous. I must pass on to an attempt to show how, without reliance upon the miraculous, an understanding of our religious experience that is much simpler and yet more adequate and dynamic can be found when it is interpreted in terms familiar in contemporary philosophy.

The predominant tendency of contemporary philosophy is to interpret the world in terms of the three ultimate categories of event, quality, and relation. Qualities are not attributes inhering in a substance; but, appearing together, they constitute an event to which language attaches a substantive and designates the qualities themselves by adjectives. There is nothing timeless, though certain of the properties of relations may be considered in abstraction apart from time. Objective events are the appearance and disappearance of qualities in relation and changes of their relationships. For scientific and practical purposes (purposes of prediction and control) we also postulate a further series of events, describable only by spatial and temporal relations, but not given in the form of sensory qualities. These are the quanta, atoms, and so forth, of physics. It is a moot question whether it should be assumed that these non-qualitative events actually exist and have the spatial and temporal relations ascribed to them, it being recognized that the description of the relations, anyway, is always relative to

the observer. Decision of this question, however, is not relevant to the interpretation of religious experience.

Another moot question in this predominant contemporary philosophy is whether there also exists an event of another kind, the intentional act, distinct from the appearance and disappearance of qualities and the changes of their relations, and also distinct from the physical events postulated to predict and control the appearances of qualities. As distinct from the objective qualities and physical events intentional acts are described as subjective and mental. They involve attending, expecting, retrospectively, interpreting, referring, liking, disliking, striving, choosing and deciding. Such activity is apparently clearly present to ordinary consciousness but tends to elude attempts at special introspection. Many philosophers have therefore attempted to deny its distinctive existence and explain its apparent occurrence as a phase of objective qualitative and physical events. This pan-objectivism, however, is, I believe, increasingly coming to be recognized as unwarranted and unsatisfactory. For the interpretation of religious experience it is particularly so. That experience is one in which intentional activity, effort, decision, is predominant and of supreme significance.

This mental activity must not, however, be taken to imply distinct mental substance, or any substance. The intentional act is an event, temporal but having duration. It is an interest process, and it may endure and be effective even when not conscious. Every interest arises from an antecedent interest process, and interest processes thus arising are more or less systematically interconnected. A mind or personality, as distinct from a body, consists of an integrated growth of such interest processes, an organized system of intentional activity. Such organized intentional activity, at least in the minimal form of semi-conscious or unconscious feeling-striving, must be regarded as continuous in every living organism and from the parent organ-

ism to its offspring. In the lower animals its attention is confined to the body and its immediate physical environment. In man it blossoms forth into inter-subjective intercourse, art, science, moral decisions, and the search for eternal truth.

Since intentional activity, as known to us, always has its origin in antecedent intentional activity, and since it is incomprehensible how it could arise from the qualities which constitute its objects or from the physical events which are postulated to predict and control their appearances, it is reasonable to suppose that it has its origin in a wider form of intentional activity other than that manifested in what we know as living organisms. This opens the speculative possibility of terrestrial life and mind having its source in a life and mind of the universe, which has prepared this part of the universe as a home wherein finite minds might find a sphere of activity and a medium of development into the intelligent form we call man. This speculative possibility, however, though reasonable, and probably much the most reasonable of any speculative explanation of the origin of life as we know it, is far from proof.

But now let us turn our attention again to religious experience, and let us seek to interpret it in the thought-forms of this contemporary philosophy. That experience, as we have seen, involves a moral element in the form of a demand that one should concern himself impartially with the welfare of others. It involves a striving of the ego with this moral demand, a surrender of the ego to it as to something higher and worthier than the ego, a discovery of inward peace and joy in that service so far as it can be consistently maintained, and also a certain influx and growth of the power to maintain it. Attention to such experience means that we are led to affirm unhesitatingly the reality of the intentional act, of decision, and of responsibility. The self is readily understood as a system of interest processes, egoistic in its individuality. But the self is seen as unable to

find its satisfaction or completion in its self. The individual personality is not its own beginning, nor can it be content to make itself its own end. It finds itself organic to a larger whole which is also personal. It finds within itself a will that is other and higher than its own individual ego, and this higher will it finds impartially concerned with the welfare of others. It finds in others that same form of higher will, making all men spiritually kin, in spite of the egoistic tendencies which set them in opposition, each seeking his own.

But in a volitional system the ultimate end is set from the beginning; the intermediate forms of will are subsidiary. The higher will, in which the ultimate end is found, is therefore the basic form of will from which the whole system springs. Thus the individual finds his own ego subsidiary to a will whose basic form is creative and impartial love. Such a will is the source of his being and the end in which alone his self can find unity, strength, peace and lasting joy. It is the *alpha* and *omega* of his being. What speculative philosophy could only suggest as reasonable his faith affirms with understanding joy. His own personality, as a system of interests, has its ultimate source in another personality, or system of interests, whose essential nature is creative love. And this basic form of will lives on in him, the image of the spirit of the Father in the child, for him to become conscious of it in his maturity and find the consummation of his being in its service.

There are other questions which faith can leave to earnest but speculative enquiry and decide as best it can upon the evidence. One of these is that of the relation of that Mind, which is the source of terrestrial life, to the physical world, and the measure of its control over the course of physical events. Those events can be viewed as answering to the control of the Divine mind so far as they serve the purpose of creative love, and no further. There is no need to insist arbitrarily that the divine is the source of both what appears as good and what appears as evil. Another ques-

tion is as to man's ultimate destiny, but whatever the details of the answer it must fit the everlasting purpose of creative love. Another question is as to how there came to be that great son of God in the light of whose life and death and teaching the Christian has come to see the full meaning of the divine creative love. There is no need to resort to miracle to explain him. But his place in history and the power of his personality are such that we cannot but reverence and love him; and we do well to honor him humbly as our Savior, for in him, as in no other, there is a power to break the shackles of spiritual pride and set the sinful spirit free to grow again in grace and in humility.

These then are the results, as it seems to me, of the impact of modern scholarship upon Christianity. It frees our religion from the magic and miracle which make it unacceptable to the modern mind. It makes the myth intelligible and helpful—as myth, but not as creed or history. It frees us from the logical puzzles which make theology a tissue of mysteries and contradictions and cast the suspicion of a responsibility for evil upon the name of God. It enables us really to believe that God is our everlasting Father, whose heart is

full of compassion and all-encompassing love. It makes us see that all men, saints and sinners, friend and foe, of every race and creed, are literally his children, and our brethren. It enables us to understand and recognize the Spirit of God working within us, convicting of sin and bringing healing and salvation to our souls. It enables us to see that God is manifest in the flesh in the person of Christ, that he is present in his church and in the lives of all good men, and working through these human agencies. It is true that many things we still can see only “as through a glass, darkly,” and that we must walk by faith and not by sight. But the puzzles and enigmas and intellectual barriers to faith, which have been growing increasingly serious with increasing scientific and historical knowledge, can be swept away. If we will but re-think our experience of God in the new terms available to us we can set aside the historic creeds that now divide us and that in part distort the mind of God they seek to reveal to us. We can instead make God more **real**, more intelligible, and closer to the life of our own generation than he has been to that of any generation before us.