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# THE CAUSES OF MODERN UNBELIEF

By

Rev. A. GARFIELD CURNOW

*(Langhorne Orchard Prize Essay, 1952)*

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THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE

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# THE CAUSES OF MODERN UNBELIEF

By Rev. A. Garfield Curnow

## SYNOPSIS

The causes of modern unbelief may be grouped under three heads.

(I) *The Uncultivated Mind.* Reaction against reason in our day. Seen not only in the uneducated but also in the "intelligentsia." References to religion in books often uninformed.

The naïve assumption of the adequacy of science to pronounce on matters outside its province. Psychology particularly open to criticism in this connection.

(II) *The Defective Perception.* Thomas Hardy's reaction to the War of 1914.

The sundering (*a*) of the "liberal" values from their roots in religion; (*b*) of religion from its roots in revelation.

The attempts to discredit religion (*a*) because of its lowly beginnings; (*b*) because of man's insignificance in the universe.

The obsession in material interest which marks our day, and the false humanism based on it.

(III) *The Undisciplined Will.* There is sometimes a moral reason for unbelief. The deepest causes of contemporary degeneration lie not in man's environment but in his own nature, and especially in his will.

Unbelief as a shelter from some moral challenge. Intellectual difficulties often "rationalizations." The place of intellect in Christianity not primary. The main appeal of Jesus was to the will.

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IN the modern world, it has been said, "everything tends to be dragged down to the level at which it is intellectually understandable or emotionally satisfying to the man who has neither purified his perceptions, disciplined his will, nor cultivated his mind."[1] There is all too much truth in this statement; but, without necessarily taking it at its face value, it suggests a convenient three-fold division of our subject. The causes of modern unbelief, looking at them from the standpoint of the unbeliever, and changing the order of the quotation, may be said to be (1) the uncultivated mind, (2) the impure (perhaps "defective" would be a more suitable word) perception, and (3) the undisciplined will.

Needless to say, such a division is by no means exhaustive. Many causes of modern unbelief will fall outside its ambit. But as some limitation of our subject is inevitable—for a full treatment of it would require a treatise rather than a brief paper—the division proposed, with due acknowledgment of its inadequacy, may serve as a not altogether misleading framework for this essay.

[1] Lawrence Hyde, *The Prospects of Humanism*, 16.

## I. THE UNCULTIVATED MIND

(1) " We often hear," writes Dean Matthews, " that Christian faith is out of harmony with modern thought, but it would be equally true to say that it is out of harmony with the lack of modern thought."[1] The " lack of modern thought," much more than " modern thought," is a prime cause of the indifference to religion which marks our day. Every now and again we find ourselves confronting some startling manifestation of it. When, for instance, we read in a recent book that " it is reported that one of the world's best-known air-transport companies demands from its pilots, in addition to the usual tests and examinations, the production of a horoscope,"[2] we can but regard it as a deplorable illustration of the reaction against reason, and the consequent growth of superstition, which is infecting modern life. A hundred years ago Kierkegaard, in an unfortunate phrase, asserted that " the crucifixion of intelligence is the condition for entrance into the kingdom of God."[3] Nowadays it would seem that the crucifixion of intelligence, or something very like it—the stultification of intelligence, at any rate—is a chief means of keeping people outside the kingdom of God.

One of our periodicals recently gave a classification of English Sunday newspapers into " clean Sunday newspapers " and " papers of shame."[4] The circulation of the former was said to be about 6 million, that of the latter over 22 million. From which it would seem that the less desirable of our Sunday papers, reckoning two readers to each copy, are read by practically the entire population of the country. This throws a lurid light on the mentality of the populace. If the sort of pabulum served up in these prints represents the chosen week-end reading of the bulk of the people, if it indicates their mental attainment and their general outlook on life, then we cannot wonder that there is so little interest in spiritual concerns in general, and in Christianity in particular. The unbelief which marks our day is very largely an outcome of unintelligence.

(2) But it is not only a matter of the unintelligence of the mass of the people; we have also to take into consideration the unintelligence of the " intelligentsia." Here let us adduce another popular form of present-day reading: the novel. Most modern novels by-pass religion altogether, as if it is not even to be considered as a feature of modern life. And of those who do refer to it, what do we find? " Few of our high-brow novelists . . . can leave religion alone, but their references to it are often quite pitiful in their crudity. . . . Many men criticize and even oppose Christianity without ever having taken much trouble to discover what it is all about. . . . It is remarkable what nonsense is spoken about it even by men of the highest distinction in departmental fields of knowledge."[5] " Nonsense " is not too strong a word. Some of these writers, it has been

[1] *Daily Telegraph*, February 23, 1952.

[2] G. S. Spinks (ed.), *Religion in Britain since* 1900, 182.

[3] Quoted by J. K. Mozley, *Some Tendencies in British Theology*, 141.

[4] *Daily Graphic*, June 7, 1952.

[5] John Baillie, *Invitation to Pilgrimage*, 13.

said, seem to have derived their knowledge of theology from their washerwoman; and it would be still nearer the mark to say that the source was their washerwoman's grandmother. Bishop Gore puts this point forcibly but with restraint: " It is . . . much to be lamented that those who stand out in current literature as the critics and repudiators of the Christian tradition, so often appear to have confined their study of Christianity to the theology of a hundred years ago. . . . This is a criticism which applies to really distinguished men. They exhibit an ignorance of Christian thought at its best, whether ancient or modern, the like of which in the treatment of science would expose a theologian to well-merited ignominy."[1]

This " ignorance of Christian thought at its best " on the part of those who have no excuse for such ignorance, and who are regarded as authorities by the undiscerning readers of their books, results in the acceptance of superseded aspects and antiquated categories of religion as still valid. " Balaam's ass and Jonah's whale," says one writer, with genial grimness, " have established themselves in the memories of hundreds as the symbols of a religion they have never been taught to think out, and of a faith they have never been encouraged to explore."[2] More serious evidences of the same tendency come readily to mind. Quite a few novels take for granted that the doctrine of hell-fire, in its crudest form, is still proclaimed from a large number if not from the majority of the pulpits of this country. Again, the article of the Apostles' Creed concerning " the resurrection of the body " is frequently interpreted with a complete lack of understanding of what it really means. This lamentable absence of acquaintance with modern Christian theology, as represented by its sanest and best-equipped exponents, is reflected in much modern unbelief, which is really a healthy reaction against a spurious presentation of Christianity—the contemptuous rejection of a counterfeit without any recognition that anything better than the counterfeit exists.

(3) The uncultivated mind, as a cause of unbelief, may also be seen in the naïve assumption of the adequacy of science to pronounce on matters altogether outside its province. We live, as we are often reminded, in a scientific age, but one feature of it is the thoroughly unscientific belief in the infallibility of science not only in its own proper domain but also in all others. " There is a popular fallacy that an expert in one realm must be listened to with reverence on all subjects. But the fact is that a great physicist is not by his scientific eminence thereby qualified to talk wisely on politics or literature or religion; rather, so far as *a priori* considerations are concerned, he is thereby disqualified."[3]

An interesting and indeed piquant recognition of this truth may be quoted from one of the great scientists of the nineteenth century. Tyndall once animadverted on the illustrious Newton's incursion into certain theological themes. The opinions Newton expressed were favourable to religion. But, urged Tyndall, " the very devotion of his powers, through all the best years of his life, to a totally different class of ideas . . . tended

[1] *Philosophy of the Good Life*, 269 (Everyman Ed.).

[2] Author unknown.

[3] Fosdick, *Meaning of Faith*, 163.

rather to render him less instead of more competent to deal with theological and historic questions."[1] Exactly, and the fact that Newton's views were favourable to religion of course does not affect the point at issue, which is that engrossment in science tends to rob a man of competence in fields other than his own. If Newton's views had been of an opposite character from what they were, Tyndall's criticism would have been equally valid—though one may surmise, in passing, that Tyndall could hardly have realized this, or he would have seen that when he himself expressed views unfavourable to religion, as he sometimes did, he was hoist with his own petard.

The disqualification of the expert outside his own field arises from the fact that the tendency of scientific specialization is to shut out the appreciation of life's other values. The expert reaches his eminence by denying himself an all-round culture. The consequence is that, however valuable the judgment of specialists may be on their own specialities, their judgments on anything beside are "much less valuable even than ordinary men's."[2] But those judgments are accepted as trustworthy by the uncultivated mind of the general reader, often to the undermining of confidence in the spiritual foundation of the universe.

(4) The modern science of Psychology, even more than the various branches of physical science, lays itself open to criticism in this connection. Many psychologists freely assert that whatever is not substantiated by their methods does not exist, is not true. The average individual is all too prone to regard these omniscient assertions as justified by the facts of the case. He does not remember, indeed is not aware, that many of the psychological explanations of religious phenomena are no better than hypotheses—some of them quite fantastic, all of them tentative; and that in no field of thought is the habit of a rapid hardening of an hypothesis into a theory, and of a theory into an assumption, more frequent. Still less is he aware that many things are attested as real and true on other planes, through other activities of our personal equipment. Above all, he does not discern the fallacy lurking in the contention—a common one on the part of psychologists—that all reasoning in defence of Christianity is merely an *a posteriori* attempt to justify by argument opinions dictated by irrational likes and dislikes which lie hidden in our subconsciousness. The fallacy is that all theories based on the irrationality of mental processes destroy themselves. "A brilliant young psychologist," writes a popular but well-informed Christian apologist, "spent some time demonstrating to me the necessarily irrational nature of all my beliefs. He said they . . . were merely the result of purely irrational desires and repulsions in the subconscious. . . . I asked him if the same was true of his psychological theories; were they also irrational outcrops from the subconscious; and, if not, why not? He had, of course, no answer. He had already successfully destroyed the basis of all rational discussion."[3]

[1] Tyndall, *Fragments of Science*, II, 150.

[2] Fosdick, *op. cit.*, 164.

[3] Peter Green, *I Believe in God*, 35.

But all this is far from being realized by the untrained and unreflecting reader of certain varieties of psychological treatises, and the outcome is that he comes to think that psychology has demonstrated that there is no objective reality in religious experience, and tends to abandon his religious beliefs as not only explained but explained away.

It is over fifty years since the late Lord Balfour published his *Defence of Philosophic Doubt*, in which he formulates and develops a protest against " the principle that everything which cannot be proved by scientific means is incapable of proof, and that everything inconsistent with science is thereby disproved."[1] Modern science in all its branches, and Psychology in particular, would do well to bear this protest in mind, for it is as relevant to-day as when it was written.

## II. THE DEFECTIVE PERCEPTION

(1) In the biography of Thomas Hardy reference is made to the effect of the war of 1914 on his mind and outlook. " The war destroyed all Hardy's belief in the gradual ennoblement of man, a belief he had held for many years. . . . Moreover, the war gave the *coup de grâce* to any conception he may have nourished of a fundamental ultimate wisdom at the back of things."[2] With all respect for one so eminent in literature, and so distinguished in character, as the great novelist, it must be said that if such was his reaction to the war, and such its result upon him, it shows that he was gravely defective in historical perception.

An instance of another and entirely different reaction to the same catastrophe will make plain the point at issue. It is quoted from the memoir of one who died in 1918. " His sense of the burden and horror of the struggle was as great as that of any of his brethren, yet he does not seem to have been convinced that the war had added any new perplexities to faith. Probably this was due to the historical character of his mind. He knew that the world had experienced similar catastrophes before; that the records of humanity were full of cruelty, oppression, treachery, greed, and innocent suffering. He had long ago faced the difficulties which such things present to the believer in the God and Father of Jesus Christ: and he found nothing that was novel in the terrors of the latest strife. I think that he was puzzled to understand how men of historical knowledge and imagination should have their faith destroyed by being required to face in their own time such facts of human sin and anguish as they had always known to be part of the story of mankind."[3]

The fact is, " men of historical knowledge and imagination " would not find their faith destroyed by such happenings; and when, as in Hardy's case, faith is destroyed, the inference is obvious. An adequate philosophy of life, derived from an acquaintance with the long story of mankind, would prevent such a result. But there is no doubt that large numbers

[1] Blanche Dugdale, *Life of A. J. Balfour*, I, 50.

[2] Florence Hardy, *Later Years of Thomas Hardy*, 165.

[3] From a letter in *The Spectator*, January 6, 1950.

shared Hardy's feelings with reference to the conflagration of his day, and probably many more were similarly affected by the war of 1939–45. This lack of historical knowledge and imagination, this absence of historical perception and insight, is the cause of much of the unbelief of to-day. Mr. A. J. Toynbee says that " familiarity is the opiate of the imagination."[1] In some matters this is true; but when it comes to the light shed by history on the meaning of contemporary events, it is the lack of familiarity which is the greater danger. The withdrawal from the Churches, and the abandonment of the Church's faith, which mark our time, are based on a misunderstanding of the real significance of the tragic happenings of our day. " Reliance on power, greed for gain, suspicion, hatred, social injustice and national rivalry were the prime causes of the war. . . . The war as the outcome of forces that denied the moral supremacy of God is the greatest demonstration of that supremacy the world has ever seen."[2] Or, as Mr. G. K. Chesterton expressed it, in a characteristic passage, " As for the general view that the Church was discredited by the War—they might as well say that the Ark was discredited by the Flood. When the world goes wrong, it proves rather that the Church is right."[3] But a considerable proportion of people, from intellectuals like Hardy to the average individual, the " man in the street," fail to perceive this, with the result that the Church is discredited in their eyes, and the doctrines of Christianity regarded with suspicion and mistrust.

(2) Another form of defective perception which is a fruitful cause of unbelief is indicated by Prof. Basil Willey: " We seem to discern now that the old ' liberal ' values—Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, the Rights of Man, tolerance, reverence for each individual as an end and not a means —can only flourish if they are rooted in the religion from which they originally sprang."[4] For several generations past the view has been held by large numbers that these values have no necessary connection with religion. Indeed, many have urged that, for their strengthening, they should be divorced from religion. That divorce has been largely accomplished, and the result is that nowadays, when these values are being invoked against the threat of pagan totalitarianism, their evident weakness is giving alarm to all men of goodwill who have the welfare of the world at heart. But the weakness lies not in the values themselves but in the fact that they are uprooted. They have withered because they have been cut off from their parent stock.

How this situation is to be faced, and the problem thus presented solved, would take us too far from the theme of this essay. We are only concerned to point out that this decay of long-cherished ideals, decay which arises because of their separation from their roots in Christianity, is by the imperceptive and unreflecting regarded as a reason for impugning, not the separation, but Christianity itself.

[1] *Civilization on Trial*, 62.

[2] John Kennedy, *The God Whom we Ignore*, 84.

[3] *The Everlasting Man*, 5.

[4] *Nineteenth-Century Studies*, 131.

(3) Another and more drastic " separation from roots " may here be mentioned. It is the suggestion, generally associated in our day with the name of Mr Julian Huxley, that religion itself should be cut off from its roots in revelation. In his *Religion without Revelation* Mr Huxley declares that he is intensely convinced of the value of religion, and wants to save it for men. But what he means by religion is " the sense of sacredness,"[1] and " the art of spiritual health."[2] It has no reference to a personal God. Neither has worship, which he understands as " an opportunity for a communal proclaiming of belief in certain spiritual values."[3] He denies that in worship we are worshipping anybody; in fact he appears to deny that there is such a thing as a personal being outside humanity. Certainly he denies the existence of a personal God. It follows then that Mr Huxley cannot believe in revelation in any Christian or theistic sense of the word, and he is quite sure that religion would be strengthened and made more effective if the idea of revelation were eliminated from it.

But if religion is cut off from the idea of a personal God who reveals Himself to man, what is left is so vague and abstract and subjective that its hold on the mind of man will be of brief tenure. Revelation, understood not as the dictation of writings nor as the communication of information, but as the self-disclosure of a personal God, is the very foundation of anything worth calling religion. And not only is the fact of revelation basic and essential, but also the belief that in revelation " God takes the initiative," that " all knowledge of God starts with His will to reveal ; "[4] or, in still more emphatic words, that " God is for ever unknown and unknowable except so far as He reveals Himself."[5]

To base the claims of religion on its working value, personal and social, as Mr Huxley does, and to say that it should be maintained for its practical utility, is futile. Religion would soon lose its working value if men came to know or to suspect that it is entirely subjective. If God is regarded as only a convenient fiction, the projection of the father-complex or of man's ideal self, the fantasy-embodiment of his unconscious motives, desires, and aims, the idea will not long hold its ground in the mind. Men would inevitably and rightly say, to quote a sentence of Eddington's, " We do not want a religion that deceives us for our own good."[6]

It would be difficult to say with certainty how far Mr Huxley's ideas have influenced modern thinking. His book, which was keenly discussed on its appearance twenty-five years ago, is not often referred to at present, and does not seem to have won for itself a permanent place in the history of thought on its great theme. But quite likely it has counted for more than might appear from its present neglect. Its author's literary and scientific eminence, his obvious sincerity, and also, it may be, memories

[1] Huxley, *op. cit.*, 12.

[2] *Ibid.*, 55.

[3] *Ibid.*, 56.

[4] C. H. Dodd, *Authority of the Bible*, 271.

[5] Wm. Temple, *Nature, Man and God*, 300.

[6] I cannot specify the book of Eddington's in which this occurs.

of the controversies in which his celebrated grandfather was engaged, won for his theory an attention which it would not otherwise have received, and which on its merits it does not deserve ; and probably have resulted in not a little modern unbelief. Certainly the denial of a personal God is a common feature of the life and thought of our day, and Mr Huxley may be to some extent, perhaps largely, accountable for it.

(4) A third variety of defective perception is what Mr Edwyn Bevan describes as " anthropological intimidation." By this portentous phrase he means the attempt to refute theism by displaying the continuity of the belief in God with primitive delusion. The argument is that the noble conception of Deity gradually arrived at in the course of human thought is discredited because it can be traced back to lowly beginnings in animism and fetishism and the like.

It is an absurd contention. As well say that the modern custom of putting flowers on a grave is discredited because it is traceable to primitive endeavours to placate the spirits of the departed. Indeed, as well say that an oak is discredited because it was once an acorn, or Shakespeare because he started as an embryo. However interesting or valuable a knowledge of origins may be, it is a complete mistake, and a source of infinite confusion, to estimate a doctrine or anything else from its beginnings. It must be estimated, if we are to learn the truth about it, in accordance with the principle of Aristotle's great saying: " The nature of a thing is that which it is when its becoming is completed." But this indefensible and indeed ridiculous habit of looking for the explanation of things in their origins is a snare and a delusion to many to-day, and accounts for much modern unbelief.

(5) Another sort of " intimidation," and one much more frequently met with, demands a larger share of our attention—the astronomical variety. Man's insignificance in the universe is used as a cudgel to browbeat him. We are accustomed to pathetic pictures of the contemptibly puny figure he presents against the background of " the intolerable vastness of the awful homeless spaces." In former ages, when the earth was thought to be the centre of the universe, it was natural and easy for man to believe in a God who cared for His human children. But now, when we know the earth to be but a negligible member of a universe which is itself a negligible member of an infinitude of other universes, it is absurd to imagine that the great Creator of all that is can enter into personal relations with the denizens of this midget planet.

Here again is a case of defective perception. For the truth of the matter is that man's feeling of insignificance as he contemplates the frightening immensity of the universes scattered through space is really an evidence of his greatness, for it is *his mind* that has conceived that immensity. " Astronomically speaking," an American materialist once said, " man is a pigmy—a speck of dust upon a speck of dust." To which a fellow countryman replied: " Astronomically speaking, man is the astronomer." It was not only a smart but a conclusive answer. " The insignificance of our midget planet among the ' 1500 universes ' of Herschel is not so striking

as the fact that a mere speck upon our midget planet was able thus to survey and co-ordinate the whole in an intelligible scheme."[1] "The outward littleness of the lives of men is only demonstrated . . . by the magnitude of man's own intellectual vision."[2] If mental and spiritual values are the real values, all considerations of bulk are irrelevant, and astronomical intimidation a mere bogey. But this is not perceived by the great majority of those who are overwhelmed by the thought of the vast distances of boundless space, and here is a common cause of the abandonment of Christian belief in our day.

(6) Perhaps the most serious and the most widespread instance of defective perception in our time is that, as Mr. Christopher Dawson says, "we have come to take it for granted that the unifying force in society is material interest."[3] Not only so, material interest is about the only allegiance to which humanity as a whole gives its devotion nowadays. What we see in the Soviet Union is to be seen, in principle, all over the world, even in countries farthest removed from Russia in form of government and political emphasis. Marxists, nationalists and humanitarians all seem to agree, though of course with important differences of interpretation and method, in the general view that the world problem is an economic one and can only be solved on economic lines.

How this view has arisen it is easy to see. The control which man has won over the forces of nature during the last hundred years, and particularly during the last fifty, has resulted in a new consciousness of power which has convinced our generation that human destiny is in human hands. "Man is the master of things." He is uncomfortably aware that his new mastery is fraught with many dangers, but he is sure that these dangers can only be escaped, in as far as they can be escaped, by the use of his own resources. Everything that can be done at all to bring in a better day—and of course by a better day is meant an economically better day—man can do for himself by his own knowledge and equipment. "Here is the great reason why traditional piety and belief in God make so little appeal to the modern world. Salvation must lie in some political or economic gospel. . . . It is this new Titanism of man which has thrust God out of mind and blinded our eyes to the ultimate ends and issues of human living."[4]

This "Titanism" is not the only cause of the dismissal of God from the minds of men, and of the darkening of their spiritual vision, but the writer just quoted is probably right in seeing in it "the great reason" why the principles of Christianity are out of favour in our day. This false and perilous humanism is almost certainly the major problem of the age, and the greatest menace that confronts us. Unless mankind can somehow be brought to see that its obsession in material interest is a fundamental blunder of the most serious magnitude, fraught with calamitous consequences, the future of the race is dark and ominous.

[1] Alfred Noyes, *The Unknown God*, 227.

[2] *Ibid.*, 224.

[3] *Progress and Religion*, 249.

[4] Quick, *Doctrines of the Creed*, 21.

But this essay is an enquiry into causes and not a discussion of remedies. Suffice it to say that this distorted view of man's essential nature, this conviction of the adequacy of economic well-being to meet all his needs, is one of the chief reasons why the central doctrines of religion are losing their appeal to the human mind.

## III. THE UNDISCIPLINED WILL

(1) The old "faculty psychology" divided the non-material part of man's nature into intellect, emotion, and will—his cognitive, aesthetic, and volitional faculties, his capacities of knowing, feeling, and willing. Nowadays the accepted view is of the unity of his being. It is the one personality that knows, feels, and wills. Certainly the older idea, which tended to regard man's personality as made up of separate departments, marked off from one another, was too sharply divisive. "We must not fall into the common error of regarding thought, desire, and will as really separable. . . . They are three faculties or functions of one individual, and, though logically separable, interpenetrate each other, and are always more or less united in operation."[1] All the same, and so long as we bear in mind their mutual interaction, it is convenient for purposes of study to regard them as distinct entities.

Which of them then is mainly operative in the matter of belief and unbelief? "Which of our faculties," asks Dr Inge, "is the chosen organ of Faith? Is it the will, or the intellect, or that specialized feeling which creates aesthetic judgments?"[2] Dr Inge's answer is that the understanding and the emotion and the will "are all instruments of living," and that we must be chary of saying that either of them is "the most efficient of the three."[3] But while this is so, and we must not make belief and unbelief exclusively an act of the will, that is of the moral sense, the facts of experience go to show that the part played by the will is vital if not crucial. While we must not regard belief as simply and solely a matter of choice, the other two faculties are dependent on the decision of the will for their effective operation. The world, says William James, "puts all sorts of questions to us, and tests us in all sorts of ways. Some of the tests we meet by actions that are easy, and some of the questions we answer in articulately formulated words. But the deepest question that is ever asked admits of no reply but the dumb turning of the will and tightening of our heart-strings as we say, 'Yes, I will even have it so!'"[4]

(2) It follows from this that there may sometimes be a moral reason for unbelief. This is a contention which must be used with great caution, or it degenerates into a reprehensible form of the *argumentum ad hominem*. The history of the word "miscreant" is a warning in this connection. Originally denoting (as by etymology it signifies) a misbeliever, nowadays it means a villain, a scoundrel, without any reference to his belief or un-

[1] Illingworth, *Personality, Human and Divine*, 29.

[2] *Faith and its Psychology*, 140.

[3] *Ibid.*, 144.

[4] *Text Book of Psychology*, 459.

belief. But in the middle ages it was held that a misbeliever was *ipso facto* a scoundrel. It would be impossible to hold such a view to-day. The facts of experience—the number of " misbelievers " of high character and noble life—would make such a suggestion even more ludicrous than shocking. But all the same there can be no doubt that in some cases, however reluctant we may be (and ought to be) in bringing this indictment against specific individuals, the cause of unbelief is some inward unsatisfactoriness rather than any of the external conditions of life. And when we look within for the causative factor it is found, not infrequently, in neither of those we have been considering—neither in an uncultivated mind nor in a defective perception—but in some fault of character, in some perversion of will.

Of course all due allowance must be made for the influence of the external conditions of life in the shaping of our beliefs and disbeliefs. The *Zeitgeist* has a profound effect upon us, especially in an age like ours. We must recognize that there is something in the very atmosphere of our day which is inimical to spiritual insight and spiritual endeavour. One writer refers to the " vague sense of the meaninglessness and emptiness of existence which underlies . . . so much of contemporary life. There is to be observed everywhere . . . a baffled and frustrated sense of the futility of human life."[1] The truth of this must be granted; and this sense of the futility of life, the feeling that

> Though kingdoms and apples may ripen and fall,
> There's nothing that matters, no, nothing at all,

has a deplorable effect on all that is highest and best in human life. It is but common fairness to admit that " contemporary life with its ceaseless movement and excitement, its concentration on what is external and increasing absorption in the mechanical, conspires to quench any vivid recognition of the spiritual aspects in our experience."[2]

But when the writer just quoted affirms that " the deepest causes of the lost loyalty to the Christian religion in Western Europe should . . . be looked for in the changed conditions of modern life and the new forms assumed by the social order,"[3] we must demur. These changed conditions and new forms are certainly some of the causes of the spiritual degeneration of our day, but hardly the deepest causes. The deepest causes are to be found, in our age as in all ages, within the nature of man, and not in his environment. External conditions may influence but do not determine our conclusions on the great issues of life, or even our reaction to the external conditions themselves. The greatest of all authorities declared that defilement proceeds from within, " out of the heart," and the same supreme teacher affirmed by his whole emphasis that the things that uplift and ennoble proceed from the same inward source, the fount of good and evil alike. The external powers that play upon us, whether " the contagion of the world's slow stain " on the one hand, or the grace of God on the other, are not effective in our lives apart from our co-operation. The decision of a man's own soul, the assent of his personality, the casting

[1] H. H. Farmer, *The World and God*, 7.

[2] F. R. Barry, *The Relevance of Christianity*, 18.

[3] *Ibid.*, 16.

vote of his will—this is an indispensable factor. The Man of Nazareth's teaching that it was by "the power of God," "the finger of God," "the will of God," that healing of soul and body was brought about, did not detract from his reiterated declaration that "your own faith has saved you," and his characteristic enquiry, "*Wilt* thou be made whole?"

(3) To put the same truth in another way, the dividing line between people is not whether they are believers or unbelievers, for in a real sense we are all of us both. Faith and unfaith co-exist in everybody. In every life there are some things most surely believed, and others concerning which we are unconvinced, uncertain, agnostic. "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" is the cry of every honest heart. The dividing line between people is whether we stress our belief or our unbelief, whether we identify ourselves with the one or the other, whether we come down on this side of the fence or that, whether we throw the weight of our personal choice and allegiance here or there, whether we make the one or the other our rule of life. "The φρόνημα of a man—the selection of thoughts he cultivates—is the most characteristic produce of his will."[1]

And so it comes about that an ill-disciplined will, a perverted will, must undoubtedly be included among the many causes of unbelief. In the words of one who has had a long pastoral experience, "We can find reasons and reasons why Christianity cannot be true, if we are looking for them. But they are generally shelters from some moral challenge."[2] Not "generally", perhaps; at any rate we will not press the word. But certainly "sometimes," and, it may be, "often."

We have in mind people who will argue at any length on questions of theology, problems of Providence and social injustice and so on, because they will not face what they know to be the real problem, the problem of their own soul. They drag out ancient conundrums which have been used for ages by those who want to avoid the challenge of the highest, and dodge the pursuit of the Spirit of God. They invent convenient "rationalizations"—plausible but illusory reasons for conduct or beliefs which are really motivated in quite other ways—for the opinions they advance or the positions they maintain.

For instance, a man says the reason he is not a Christian is that he has difficulties about the Virgin Birth, or the Atonement, or the Resurrection, or certain statements in the Creed, or Free Will, or the problem of pain, or economic inequalities, or the number of sects unto which the Church is split up. And we are far from saying that these things do not honestly bother thinking people, for they most certainly do. But in the cases we have in mind they are put forward as shelters from some moral challenge, smoke-screens against the searching light of conscience, camouflage to conceal the real state of affairs, dug-outs for hiding from God.

The real problem, again and again, is none of these things, but rather—something which has got between us and God; some wrong done to another which we will not confess, or some wrong done to ourselves which we will not forgive; some inward resentment, or hidden jealousy, or secret ani-

[1] Gwatkin, *The Knowledge of God*, I, 162.

[2] Dr James Reid, *The Springs of Life*, 208.

mosity; some self-indulgence we will not relinquish, or some self-denial we will not accept. In a word, it is a question of *will.*

An eminent theologian of our day, in a candid and moving personal confession, asks and answers the question—which, as he says, every man must answer for himself, and which can be answered only by a very honest self-examination—whether " such doubts as I have had about God have had what would usually be called a moral root. Is it because I did not relish God's commandments that I was tempted to deny His being? " After pointing out that " it has been convincingly demonstrated to us that our thinking, even when appearing to be quite straightforward, is determined by our desires in far larger measure than we had previously been in the habit of supposing," he continues: " Must I then say that my own doubts were of this kind? I fear they were, in very real degree. Part of the reason why I could not find God was that there is that in God which I did not wish to find. Part of the reason why I could not (or thought I could not) hear Him speak was that He was saying some things to me which I did not wish to hear. There was a side of the divine reality which was unwelcome to me, and some divine commandments the obligatoriness of which I was most loath to acknowledge. And the reason why I was loath to acknowledge them was that I found them too disquieting and upsetting, involving for their proper obedience a degree of courage and self-denial and a resolute re-orientation of outlook and revision of programme such as I was not altogether prepared to face."[1]

(4) This factor cannot be ignored in any consideration of the causes of unbelief. Intellectual difficulties concerning the Christian way of life are often the belated " rationalization " of conclusions to which we have already been led by our desires—that is, by the wrong functioning of our will. The place of the intellect in Christianity, however important or indispensable, is not primary. Christianity is an adventure of friendship, and not an intellectual enquiry or an intellectual conviction. Like friendship, it is capable of being intellectually formulated, up to a point at any rate, but primarily it is an experiment in living to be tried. And that experiment cannot even be begun apart from a decision and an effort of will.

The writer of *Ecce Homo* defines faith as " an overflowing attraction towards greatness and goodness, felt in the soul, responded to by the will, and acted upon in the life."[2] The middle term in this definition is all-important. However much an overflowing attraction towards greatness and goodness may be felt in the soul, it cannot be acted upon in the life until it has been responded to by the will.

It is noticeable and significant that the main appeal of Jesus was to man's will, and if that appeal is refused, or unheard; if the high meaning of life is rejected, and those great convictions which ennoble human living have no place in a man's interest or attention, we have not canvassed all the possible explanations unless our enquiry includes the condition of the will, the state of a man's own soul.

[1] Dr John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God*, 54–56.

[2] Sir J. R. Seeley, *Ecce Homo*, chap. 20 (1908 ed., p. 273).

(5) " I stand," says King Magnus in Mr Bernard Shaw's *Apple Cart*, " for the great abstractions; for conscience and virtue; for the eternal against the expedient; for the evolutionary appetite against the day's gluttony; for intellectual integrity, for humanity, for the rescue of industry from commercialism and of science from professionalism." It may be that " great abstractions " have no compelling appeal to the average individual, but the abstractions in this impressive list are not *mere* abstractions—they are practical realities; and it is significant that the list begins with conscience, the organ and expression of the will. What a man " stands for " is to be traced back, perhaps more than is generally realized, certainly more than many an individual realizes, to that point.

An even more impressive list than Mr Shaw's, written from the same standpoint, is quoted by Mr Charles Morgan from Henry James, who said the things Robert Browning stood for were these: " The fascination of faith, the acceptance of life, the respect for its mysteries, the endurance of its changes, the vitality of the will, the validity of character."[1] Here the list, unlike the former, is obviously in an ascending scale of value, the most important clauses, where all are important, being the last two. Will and character are the supreme factors in deciding the things a man stands for, in determining his belief or unbelief.

A third list, and a more adequate one than either of the other two, is given us by one of the greatest teachers of the last fifty years. In it he tells us what, in his view, Christianity really means. " A certain view of the world, a certain way of meeting its calamities, a certain course of meeting its perplexities, a certain kind of valuation of its good and its evil, a certain attitude of forbearance and forgiveness, in short, a certain way of being conquerors over life's ills and antagonisms."[2] Writ large all over this passage we may discern the truth which the whole of life illustrates and enforces: the importance of a disciplined will. When the Christian view of the world is rejected, and the Christian way of life is declined, we have all too much reason for suspecting that the cause may lie, even more than in the intellect or the emotions, in the will.

[1] *Reflections in a Mirror*, 127.

[2] John Oman, *Paradox of the World*, 81.