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THE SCIENTIFIC PRESUMPTION AGAINST PRAYER.

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In that remote and picturesque district of northwest France, Brittany, there is a popular legend of an imaginary town called Is which was swallowed up by the sea long ago. The fishermen say that the tops of its church spires can be seen in the hollows of the waves when the sea is rough, and in calm weather the music of its church bells may be heard above the waters. The famous critic, Renan, whose early life was spent in this region, says, "I often fancy that I have at the bottom of my heart a city of Is with its bells calling to prayer a recalcitrant congregation." He adds, "I feel that in reality my existence is governed by a faith which I no longer possess." Such an antithesis in individual experience is by no means uncommon. It is typical of the present situation of many earnest minds. Dogmas fall into discredit before the critical faculty even while the sense of God and the eternal things keeps its place. Those bells of Is ringing even in Renan's last years in the depths of his being—what are they but the echoes of the spiritual sphere still caught by the ear of a living faith through the clamors of the skeptical reason? the bond of the unseen world, strained perhaps, but still unbroken? I do not

undertake to say how far one may go in the denial of intellectual propositions on religious subjects without losing the vision of God, which is the essence of faith.

A number of specific questions about prayer arise now-a-days to perplex devout and thoughtful minds and make praying difficult at times. There is, for example, the great conception that God is spirit, immanent in all things and persons and processes, and that they that worship him must worship in spirit. But the very elevation of the conception is its difficulty for practical praying. Omnipresent and universally diffused spirit loses sharpness of personal outline and vividness and immediacy to the man who tries to "lift up his soul to God". A suggestion of the relation of Jesus to this conception is made below in another connection.

Again, "Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask Him." Does He require me to ask for the mere purpose of having me duly impressed with my dependence? And when I am urged to pray for others, does He require my suggestion of their need, with which He must certainly be acquainted? And why should I, an unworthy member of His Kingdom and poorly versed in the riches of blessing which it will bring, beseech Him that it may come and that His will may be done on earth? He has not lost concern for the establishment of the reign of righteousness. He has not ceased to press forward the cause of goodness and truth, that such as I should presume to recall Him to a neglected obligation. To the intelligent Christian this is perhaps the most troublesome of the questions about prayer, for it seems to involve a sort of compromise of the moral character of God.

There is yet another question, the question whether any intelligent man is able to pray at all to-day, in the presence of the reconstruction of our view of nature through the revelations of the science of the period. Is any room left in the closed system of natural law for a disturbing and disorganizing agency like prayer, which operates only as it changes the pre-arranged order of events? Is not the scientific presumption against prayer too sweeping to allow any ground to the belief

that God inclines His ear to hear and really makes a new sequence of events in answer to human petition? It is this question to which the present discussion restricts itself. And only the most general considerations will be presented. It is taken for granted, even in case this presumption against prayer is removed, that the modern man cannot pray for some things which in the pre-scientific period were common objects of prayer. Science enforces discrimination here. An intelligent Christian cannot now pray for the cessation of the pull of gravitation or for anything which, in his view, would clearly violate a natural law. And it may be admitted further that some of the subjective results of prayer are explicable on purely psychological principles. See Strong, *The Psychology of Prayer*, 1909.

Within the limitations indicated, we may now address ourselves to the supposed presumption which the progress of natural knowledge has raised against the possibility of prayer as a practically efficient communication between the human and the divine spirit. Our general view will be cleared, if at the outset we look briefly at the essential nature of religion itself.

The first fact which meets us is this, that religion is a natural phenomenon, as much at home within the natural order as the sunrise. For in human experience religion is universal, that is to say, it arises out of the nature of things. I am aware that years ago Mr. Herbert Spencer and Sir John Lubbock maintained that there were tribes so low in the human scale as to be destitute of religion. More recently, however, all students of the subject hold that there are no tribes of men devoid of religious sentiments and religious opinions. An eminent authority curtly dismisses Spencer and Lubbock with the remark, "Neither one of the gentlemen ever saw a savage tribe." Religion is, in fact, more distinctive of man than the structural and functional peculiarities commonly relied upon to differentiate him from the animals next below him. It is grounded not only on the nature of man, but also by implication in universal nature; and its rise and history, its elements and varied expression in cult and creed are capable of being

reduced to the orderly coherence and precision of science. We are at last justified in recognizing the science of religion.

In order to get at the fundamental thing in religion as a natural phenomenon, it is necessary that our view include all types of religion from the lowest to the highest. They will be found to tell all of them, in the last analysis, the same story. We cannot refuse to accept the mass of ethnological evidence now in hand pointing to the identity of mental construction and action from the earliest and rudest type to the latest and most advanced. The laws of growth which develop the physical man into the type of the species operate also in the realm of his mind to bring its products into a like conformity. This simple fact explains the striking similarity in primitive religious ideas. We have no need to invoke either historic connection or tradition from a common ancestry. The mind of man reacting in practically the same way to the same stimuli will everywhere reach fundamentally identical conceptions.

Now, what is the fundamental and therefore universal reaction of the human mind in the midst of the manifold forms and ordered activities of the natural world? What is the bottom assumption common to all religions? It is "the recognition that conscious volition is the ultimate source of all force"; the recognition that behind the phenomenal world and accounting for it is the invisible, immeasurable power of conscious Will, of Intelligence, of a Universal Mind analogous to the human mind. A corollary of this fundamental assumption, and of the highest importance, is this, that the human mind is in communication with the Universal Mind.¹ In other words, *prayer is of the essence of religion*. This recognition is at the foundation of all the spontaneous or primitive religions and, with the curious exception of Buddhism, which is less a religion than an ethical philosophy, likewise of the founded religions. From this point of view, the significance of Jesus lies in the personal revelation which He made of

¹Cf. Brinton, *Religions of Primitive Peoples*, p. 47.

the abstract universal Intelligence as being in sympathetic neighborhood to human need, and in His clearing the way for freer commerce with the Unseen. His companions and first interpreters felt that they had heard, had seen with their eyes, and had handled with their hands somewhat of the eternal life, and that through Him they had a freshened fellowship with the Father.²

But associated with this essential religious experience, one finds everywhere the tendency to speculate about it. It is of the first importance to distinguish between the religious experience itself and this effort to account for it in terms of intellect. The religious element proper recognizes and opens correspondence with the world of the Unseen Powers, and is no more to be identified with the body of religious theory than is the world of plants to be identified with the science of botany. Of course, religious speculation finds much of its material in the existing stage of culture, and takes form and color from it. In one case this system of speculation issues in fetichism, at a higher stage in mythology, at a still higher stage in what we know as theology. The pre-scientific theology ranged over well nigh the whole world of fact. It involved cosmogony, ethnology, and history. It had its theory of the earth and of the heavens, of disease, of language, of education. But all these matters were within the scope of science; and when the new science, clear-eyed and victorious, arrived upon the scene a revision of the body of opinion which had grown up under the sanction of Christianity was inevitable. The so-called religious crisis of the past eighty years was precipitated, and many felt that religion itself was compromised in the enforced surrender of the particular intellectual form in which at the time it found expression. But we have learned that revision of the world-view historically associated with Christianity leaves untouched the essential content of the Christian consciousness, and the former trepidation of Christian apologists at sight of the unchecked advance of scientific criticism,

²I John 1:1-3.

is now seen to have been without warrant. In its passage into the wider horizons of modern science with not a little pain and disaster, the gospel has given the latest demonstration of its inherent vitality and its permanent validity. Without question, it has found its place in the new world of science. The fact is attested by the highest science as well as by the latest Christian theologies.

We have now to inquire into what this scientific view of the world is and how it stands related to religion and prayer. Of course, the new view of the world is the product of the rapid and marvelous extension of natural knowledge. But it cannot be maintained that the modern world-view has been consistent throughout the modern scientific period. Indeed, one of the notable facts of the period is the change of feeling on the part of men of science, within the last thirty or forty years, respecting the ultimate reality, the deeper meaning of the universe. Accordingly, on the threshold of the inquiry we need to distinguish clearly between the earlier scientific view of the world and the later.

The earlier view put the emphasis upon the mechanical side of things, went far, indeed, toward restricting the term "nature" to the phenomena of the physical world, the phenomena which were reducible to a mechanical routine, which were measurable and predictable. Maxwell insisted that the clock, the foot-rule, and the balance were the symbols of modern science. The French mathematician declared that a sufficiently developed intelligence supplied with the status of the atoms at any particular moment would be able to predict all future history. And so, the universe was held to be a closed system of inviolable sequence, impersonal, and its sufficient cause. There was no trace in it of intelligence or free will. God was thrust over the last ledge of mechanical fact, the realm of the supernatural was rolled up as a scroll and flung over the edge of the world into the abyss, and, there being no ear anywhere to hear, prayer became an absurdity. Science was flushed with its recent conquests, it was in high conceit with its omnipotent method. It was already well advanced

in the work of plucking the heart of mystery out of universal nature, and but a few years more of the unflinching application of the laws of physics and chemistry would finish the business up and set men free from the thralldom of the last superstition. It was dogmatic and arrogant.

But somewhere about 1880, shall we say, this confident and supercilious bearing began to relax. Men began to recognize with increasing clearness that they had been occupied with surface problems whose solution merely led them in to the central mysteries, and before these they stood in helpless impotence. Even in the sphere of physical nature, investigation invariably broke down when the crucial problem was reached. Your chemist can record the sequence of events in his test-tubes, but he does not know what determines the sequence. Your physicist has a glib definition of force as vibrations in the ether, but he does not know what ether is, or what makes it vibrate. He can get no further than Lord Salisbury's definition—ether is the nominative case of the verb to undulate. Your biologist beams with delight when he looks up from his microscope where life is advertising its marvelous powers, but he does not know what life is. Your psychologist has a nimble wit and speaks great swelling words about the parallelism of the thought-process and the nerve-process, but he knows next to nothing of either process and of why they should be parallel, if, indeed, they are. It is precisely at the crucial point in every line of research that the scientific method breaks down. The further the man of science pushes his questioning of nature, the more oppressed he becomes with the limitations of science, and the word most familiar to his tongue is "I do not know". The torch of science grows brighter with each passing year and shoots its beams deeper into the enveloping darkness, but the enlargement of the sphere of light multiplies the points of its contact with the unknown. One secret guessed brings to view two deeper ones. Science springs more questions than she solves.

Deep under deep forever goes,
Heaven over heaven expands.

Moreover, it is now seen that the physical principles and tests which have been so disappointing even in the distinctively physical realm are able to yield us little when applied to the personal realm now at length recognized as a part of the natural realm. Socrates and Shakespeare and Saint Francis have clearly a place in the natural order, and a theory of the sum of things must include them in its purview. In truth, personality is the highest thing in nature, and a view which fails to account for it might well be discarded as accounting for nothing. As the late Professor William James remarked, the only form of thing we directly encounter is our own personal life, and the only complete category of our thinking is the category of personality. The surest knowledge we possess is the knowledge that personality conditions events, and the world without us ceases to be intelligible in proportion as it becomes impersonal. In other words, the world cannot be explained except on the supposition, to use Professor Shaler's phrase, that a mighty kinsman of man is at work behind it all. We are finding, with Tennyson,

Nearer and ever nearer Him who wrought
Not matter, nor the finite-infinite,
But this main miracle, that thou art thou
With power on thine own act and on the world.

Science is pushing out into this world of personality, but it has not so much as invented the conceptual apparatus for "explaining" the phenomena of the personal realm. Atom and ion are symbols clearly inapplicable here. We need not look for the secret of genius or the moral imperative in the bottom of a retort. No mathematician has arisen to give algebraic expression to variations in the states of consciousness. The deep affinity which draws two souls together does not vary inversely as the square of the distance and directly as the mass. It is frankly confessed that the central problem in this sphere of investigation can be approached at present only by way of theories known to be inadequate.

Without going further into the illustration of the limitations of science, we must agree that, wide-reaching and noble and beneficent as its work has been, it has not changed materially the conception of the ultimate reality. The scientific revolution has been a radical revolution, but when all is said it must be confessed that it has operated upon the surface of things. After all, the new world is the same old world, a world which presents as the crown of its evolutionary process the marvel of ethical ideals and spiritual aspiration and the interplay of self-conscious personalities, a world of deep mystery and of unexhausted resourcefulness. After seventy years of added scientific progress, we have still preserved to us Carlyle's "great, deep, sacred, infinitude of Nescience, whither we can never penetrate, on which science swims as a mere superficial film". His word of 1840 is true to-day: "This world, after all our science and sciences, is still a miracle; wonderful, inscrutable, magical, and more". And human life stripped to its naked elements is the same as of old. Only its social and economic exterior, the stage on which it moves and its machinery are different. Strip off the veneer of the new knowledge and the conveniences and refinements of civilization wherein the work of science stands recorded, and we shall see that man's fundamental moral relations and needs remain the same. We stand on a broader and higher pyramid of fact than our predecessors stood on, and we see more things than they saw. But it may well be doubted that we see any deeper into things than the Greeks of old days saw.

But this recognition of what appears to be an ineffaceable ignorance does not represent the whole of the present scientific attitude. There are positive declarations on every hand in science circles that the conception of the world as a mechanism constructed on a rigid mathematical plan has no objective reality. Here, for example, is Poincaré, probably the greatest living mathematician, casting doubt upon that boasted test of scientific truth, prediction, in the declaration, "Predicted facts can only be probable. However solidly founded a prediction may be, we are never absolutely certain that experi-

ment will not prove it false".³ All men of science, with relatively few exceptions, are feeling now that a system of things out of which by natural processes mind arose must itself be mental. Just the sphere, in other words, for the appeal and response of the Universal Spirit operant everywhere and the derived and dependent human spirit.

Besides, as Haldane insists,⁴ the medium in which the religious consciousness embodies itself is acts of will and phases of feeling, whereas scientific knowledge belongs to another sphere. Religion is concerned, not with the range and content of thought, but with the attitude of will; not with truth, which is a matter of science, but with imagination and feeling. Accordingly, whatever revolution may occur in the realm of science strictly so-called, religion and its necessary support and expression, prayer, will retain their legitimate place in enlightened human experience. "Close is our touch with the eternal. Boundless is the meaning of our life. Its mysteries baffle our present science, and escape our present experience; but they need not blind our eyes to the central unity of Being, nor make us feel lost in a realm where all the wanderings of time mean the process whereby is discovered the homeland of eternity."⁵

³H. Poincaré, *Science and Hypothesis* (1905), p. 183.

⁴R. B. Haldane, *Pathway to Reality*, II., pp. 204-5.

⁵Josiah Royce, *The World and the Individual*, II., p. 452.