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# IDEALISTIC AND PRAGMATIC INTERPRETATIONS OF RELIGION

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## I

Historically idealism has been of religious significance in two ways. First, by its teaching that all existence is essentially a being known by some mind, it has maintained the ultimate spiritual character of the universe and sought to make man feel at home in his environment. Secondly, by its doctrine of the Absolute, the Infinite Bearer of all Experience, the Ultimate Solver of all Problems, the Absolute Mind that looks before and after and knows the infinite time-span in one completed whole of thought, it has developed a majestic conception that seems to be a logical elaboration of religion's vision of the God of the universe. With these conceptions it has undertaken, as one writer puts it, "to substantiate the extreme claims of faith—the creation of matter by spirit, the indestructible significance of every human person, and the unlimited supremacy of goodness."<sup>1</sup> It has specifically declared its fundamental interest in religion and its faith that by means of idealistic categories it has explicated the inner meaning of Christianity. Its pages abound with the language of inspiration. It speaks much of the infinite and the eternal, the fair perfection of the whole to which our temporal finite eyes are dim; and it proclaims in arguments of endless variety that things are not what they seem.

It is possible to sympathize with the aim of idealism to bring courage, hope, and inspiration without agreeing with the method by which it seeks to arouse these attitudes. As a

<sup>1</sup> Perry, *Present Philosophical Tendencies*, p. 164.

matter of fact it has developed through several generations of minds with an outcome such as to lead to serious doubt whether the result arrived at is that which was originally intended.

One is led to ask, in the first place: Does the notion that the physical universe is ultimately spiritual because it is a system of *known* objects really help us religiously? No one urges more vigorously than Royce that the world of ideas is just as obdurate and unyielding as the world of physical nature conceived by the materialist. It is still there as a stern fact. We may call it a system of ideas in the mind of the Absolute. But the attitude logically called forth by such a eulogistic view is simply that of humble resignation. The suggestion is that the core of the religious spirit is essentially humility, adoration, worship, the acceptance of things as they are. It is significant that it is the *worship* element of religious experience for which men like Josiah Royce, William Ernest Hocking, and George Plimpton Adams seem most solicitous. The non-pragmatic participation in what is already there is the note that is sounded. Despite all appearances to the contrary our world is through and through spiritual.

Now it is not to be denied that the attitude of acceptance, acquiescence, adoration has played a great part in the older religious conceptions. Especially was it cherished by the western world in the Middle Ages. But it is a fact that the indubitable progress of science has introduced the concept of control. It has now become a question whether religion can remain essentially a worship function. Room must somehow be made to recognize that change and control of the environment, amelioration of its conditions, are actual achievements. It is difficult to see how we can rest content with simply proclaiming that the world is idea and therefore to be accepted as it stands.

With reference to the Absolute as maintained by the older idealists the objections are many. As simply a knower it is too intellectualistic. Its timelessness disagrees with its

immanence, for, as timeless, it transcends finite struggle. Its all-inclusiveness makes mere appearance out of evil, for evil must somehow have its place in the Absolute's view of the timeless whole, and, as having a place, must be somehow good. As the Ultimate Being in which all problems are solved and all contradictions resolved it reduces the finite world which is the nearest concern of struggling, toiling humanity to an unintelligible puppet-show. Evolution as taking place in time becomes mere appearance.

But it is not necessary to dwell on the standard refutations of standard idealism. The question is: Do the more recent protagonists of idealism develop from it conceptions which are more congruous with the categories which the development of modern life are thrusting upon us?

Adams in *Idealism and the Modern Age* shows clearly that he recognizes where the issue lies. Again and again he reiterates that whereas Platonism, Christianity, and Idealism have stood for attachment to ideal structures which call for recognition, knowledge, and love, the modern age emphasizes control, mastery, activity, the progressive remolding of circumstances in the interests of democracy. It is significant that Adams indulges but little in phrases drawn from the older idealism. One finds no talk of a monistic Absolute but rather of the pluralistic "significant structures." No space is taken up with proving that the physical universe is the expression of an Infinite Cognitive Consciousness. Rather the word idealism seems to be taken in the more familiar sense of devotion to ideals. It is the great system of ideals developed in any age, whether ancient or modern that calls forth the attitude of loyalty—a more secular expression, perhaps, for the attitude of religious devotion. Loyalty, reverence, contemplation, these are the ethical and religious values of idealism which Adams is concerned to conserve without holding too much to the trappings in which they have been traditionally enveloped.

Ultimately his position resolves to this: There are some things in the universe which man himself does not make but which he appreciates and accepts. These are the ideal structures of his age. To these he gives his loyalty. We cannot accept as final either the idea systems of a past age nor those of our own age. But the idea systems of all ages imply one underlying system which may be envisaged as the good. This last rather vague and abstract conception is apparently Adams' equivalent for the Absolute, though he does not use the term.

While Adams clearly recognizes the modern activist trend and avoids the conceptions that have latterly involved idealism in much criticism, he is still evidently hampered by the tendency to center religion in the act of worship. He deplores the fact that "our age estimates religion in accordance with the presupposition that nothing can be significant for the modern man except that which contributes to his forward-looking interest in control, organization, and activity; in behaviour and the anticipation of behaviour." He thinks that our modern "practical religion" witnesses to "the success with which the biological and economic (capitalistic) interest of men in instrumental power and pragmatic mastery have all but eaten their way into the very citadel of that interest which historically has been the spokesman for possession and contemplation, for the love and worship of some significant structure which alone makes any activity and any mastery worth while." But do not Mr. Adams' very words indicate that the far development of new conceptions calls for a reconstruction which he finds it impossible to make on the basis of his idealism and his interpretation of religion? May it not be that this enemy which he finds storming the citadel is an enemy only of the limitations of idealistic presupposition and that after all it is a champion of a larger and fuller religious life for man. How far can we develop a conception of religion that holds to the values of worship and possession but which

widens its scope to include those of activity and progressive melioration? To get some light on this question we must consider the philosophy of pragmatism.

## II

With reference to pragmatism the complaint is usually made that it is many and not one. It must be confessed that there is a considerable variety among the applications and results of the various writers in the field. The collaborators in the volume on Creative Intelligence are careful to abjure any platform of planks on which the movement stands, modestly content to indicate that the probable common characteristics of all of them are the "ideas of the genuineness of the future, of intelligence as the organ for determining the quality of the future so far as it can come within human control, and of a courageously inventive individual as the bearer of a creatively employed mind."<sup>1</sup> But it is not necessary to canvass the entire circle of pragmatic writers to consider the significance of the method for religion. There are two great recognized leaders in America, William James and John Dewey, and it will be convenient to limit attention to these.

For both James and Dewey intellectual activity is essentially a function of will; experience is fundamentally a striving; and thinking is an instrument in the furtherance of the process. Ideas are not true in themselves but only in so far forth as they contribute to the progressive enrichment of experience. They are significant only if they work, to use the more popular expression. Ideas are first projected as hypotheses and then tested by their actual ability to lead to further significant experience. Along with this instrumental conception of intellect goes the faith that the world is such that it can be transformed and that intelligence can do the transforming. Because this view stresses life and striving it is called biocentric; because it believes in progressive adaptation

<sup>1</sup> Prefatory note, p. iii.

and transformation it is evolutionistic; because it rests upon experience it is empirical; because it believes the whole process can be one of making things better and more suited to human welfare it is melioristic and humanistic.

Of our two writers James is the more concerned to make the specific application to religion. He finds religious faith to be one aspect or expression of the faith function which is everywhere present in all forms of knowing. Among other things which experience presses upon us is the necessity for some kind of attitude toward the universe as a whole. Here is a forced option. Our attitude may be one of theistic belief or not. Agnosticism here leads pragmatically to the same result as atheism and so need not be considered an alternative. Here religious faith is entirely rational and one may have the right to act upon it and help make it true by working to establish the supremacy of the good. Another faith which we may hold as a definite working hypothesis is what James calls indeterminism. It is as allowable, James maintains, to believe that the world is pluralistic and amenable to shift and change and manipulation among the variously grouped parts, as it is to believe that it is monistic, whether taken spiritualistically or materialistically. Upon this view the mood of sheer acceptance and resignation is out of place. One is called upon rather to be up and doing, to bring about organization within experience through one's own choices and through co-operation with God. James's conception of the universe as pluralistic in character enables him to emphatically deny that evil is in any necessary way mixed up with the good. In fact the idealistic Absolute in which all contradictions are resolved and all ills given a seemingly station seems to him a slander upon the name of God. Rather he prefers definitely to reject the omnipotence and infinity of God in order to free him from responsibility for evil. God is not static in some state of Olympian bliss but is the great toiler with much work to do, seeking to eject the evil elements from experience and develop

a progressively purer and more ethically satisfactory cosmic organization. To co-operation in this task is man summoned by religious faith. The summons is urgent because the issue may be doubtful without our help. God has not yet won the victory and we have to face the possibility that he may not win it. But all the more should we recognize that "there is but one unconditional commandment, which is that we should seek incessantly, with fear and trembling, so to vote and to act as to bring about the very largest total universe of good which we can see."

These conceptions of the functional validity of religious faith, of indeterminism, and of a finite God are undeniably suggestive. They show how the modern-age emphasis upon volition, control, reconstruction, scientific method, and the democratic faith that the individual counts even in the largest concerns, can be taken up as significant factors into the religious consciousness. But it must be confessed that it is the suggestiveness of a sketch rather than of a completed picture. Difficulties occur to one. For example one reason why religion develops in man is that he tends to seek some expression for his faith that the universe in its deepest nature accords with moral aspiration—that values will be conserved. The conception of God is man's fullest expression of that assurance. But with James's conception of a finite God the whole problem breaks out afresh in the cosmic sphere. If God struggles with his environment after the human fashion, then what is there to guarantee to Him an ethical character to the universe which surrounds Him? If another Being is postulated to meet God's problem then we simply fall into a hopeless infinite regress. Further, as has been pointed out by Eugene Lyman (*The God of the Modern Age*), there is an ethical unsatisfactoriness about the idea of a finite God. In the eagerness to avoid ascribing evil to God there is a danger that we ascribe it to other cosmic forces that are not God, and

fail to bear our own responsibility—which, of course, vitiates the conception from a moral point of view.

When we turn to Professor Dewey we have a thinker who has wrestled with the central problems of pragmatism and sought to carry through the conceptions in a complete and thorough-going fashion. His *Essays in Experimental Logic* are perhaps the profoundest attempt to deal with the fundamental questions of the pragmatic method that have appeared. He is concerned to describe the actual procedure of the mind in the solution of problems, and he works out minutely the way in which difficulties cause the search for hypotheses. Hypotheses are developed in their logical implications to point to further experience, and further experience in turn is used to verify or bring about the rejection of hypotheses. One feels behind Professor Dewey's writings a great wealth of observation of concrete detail in everyday familiar experiences. He sets forth with endless patience the way in which we solve piecemeal our problems, one by one, according to "the situation."

But just because, perhaps, Professor Dewey takes a keen interest in the variety of concrete situations he seems uninterested in the larger massive reaction to the universe as a whole which is involved in the religious attitude. He identifies this religious reaction, unduly no doubt, with the particular attempt of idealism to conceive of the universe as a self-consistent interrelated Whole or Absolute in which all problems are solved in advance. Apparently this leads him to feel that religion is only one of the non-intelligent ways of escaping from the immediate pressure of specific problems. To seek solutions "in general" is simply to satisfy ourselves with sentimentalities, and meanwhile the particular ills of life go uncorrected. He has hard words to utter against the purely contemplative interpretation of intelligence which makes it simply a beholding eye to view the eternal verities of some beatific vision instead of setting it to work to make the social

order better. The implication seems to be that the idea of God is an abstraction which beclouds men's recognition of the true sources of problems in everyday life. In his own words:

The great scholastic thinkers (i.e., of the Christian theology) taught that the end of man is to know True Being, that knowledge is contemplative, that True Being is pure Immaterial Mind, and to know it is Bliss and Salvation. . . . Through this taking over of the conception of knowledge as contemplative into the dominant religion of Europe, multitudes were affected who were totally innocent of theoretical philosophy. . . . So deeply engrained was this idea that it prevailed for centuries after the actual progress of science had demonstrated that knowledge is power to transform the world, and centuries after the practice of effective knowledge had adopted the method of experimentation.<sup>1</sup>

We recognize the healthy emphasis which Professor Dewey lays on concrete problems and the active, instrumental character of intelligence. But with reference to his general attitude toward religion we raise several questions.

1. Among the various concrete situations which confront human individuals, are there not some which we recognize as specifically religious? Despite the fact that we spend most of our time on limited problems and situations, are there not circumstances when the problem of a relation to the whole of things does become specific and urgent?

2. Because religion and the idea of God have been connected with idealisms and absolutisms in the past, does that mean they must always be so, and must be rejected with the discrediting of these philosophic conceptions?

3. Is it necessary to read religion always in terms of contemplation, resignation, mystic estheticism? If God is conceived as the Great Companion in the life of ethical endeavor does not this hearten humanitarian enterprises instead of ignore them? It would seem that both Dewey and the idealists have difficulty because they center religion in the mood of worship as such instead of in its urge toward wider and fuller life.

<sup>1</sup> *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, p. 112.

4. Do not Professor Dewey's own ideals of humanitarian ethics, evolutionism, and democracy imply a profounder basis than he gives? He presents us with a faith in the power of intelligence to change the course of events. But the implications of such a faith is a cosmic ethical tendency which he does not explicate.

### III

In conclusion, our study leads us to feel that idealism is correct in holding to the mood of contemplation and worship as a significant phase of the religious life, but its difficulty comes from conceiving this mood as its most important or even its exclusive aspect. As to pragmatism its emphasis on volition and activity is profoundly important and calls for the inclusion of voluntaristic values in religion. But its religious implications have not been adequately worked out either in James or Dewey. What is called for is a religion in which worship is means as well as end, and ameliorative activity is both an outcome of and an occasion for worship.