

On Religion

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Orage characterises religion as an ancient science that possessed the now lost art of self-observation. He concludes that self-knowledge is "an implied prerequisite of the main aim [of religion] which appears to be the understanding and service of the Creator, God."

Suppose that a remote posterity, unversed in mathematics and the scientific research equipment of our age, should inherit one of our current science manuals. There they would read, or rather, decipher, such statements as that light travels at the rate of 186,000 miles a second; that the sun is 92,000,000 miles distant from the earth and that the light of the nearest star takes four and a half light years to reach us. What would they make of it all? Some of them, it is probable, would hold that their forerunners must have possessed a faculty lost to themselves, and in consequence would attach a mystical significance to the unverifiable dogmas; they might even repeat these dogmas as possibly magical formulas. But undoubtedly the best common sense of the day, in the absence of the means, or any conception of the means, of verification, would dismiss the statements as being childish guesses or, at best, as barbarous abracadabra. Only a very few would suspect that perhaps we were not such fools as we appeared, and give us suspended credit for a method behind our madness. But our method itself and the instruments we employ would be still to seek.

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The foregoing picture may serve to illustrate what may possibly – let us say no more than possibly – be our very own situation in regard to the ancient 'science' of religion. We have inherited a few of the text-books once circulated among the illuminati of more or less extinct civilizations, and we find them to contain statements of equal exactitude and incredibility concerning things of which we have no verifiable knowledge, as that there is a God Who is a trinity of Persons, Who created the Universe according to Reason, and Man in His own image, and Who placed us in the world with potentialities of consciously becoming like unto Himself. Some of us today are disposed, like our imagined descendants, to take these traditional statements mystically; to repeat them as magical formulas; and to assume that a lost faculty, the so-called religious sense, was possessed by our ancestors of ancient Egypt, India, Persia and Syria. So relatively powerful, in fact, are these that their attitude towards the inherited dogmas of ancient religion is still the standard of respectability. The weight of common sense, however, is slowly but surely making itself felt; and the day is not far off when the intelligence of our civilization will explicitly decline even to be interested in grandiose statements apparently unsusceptible of proof. Only a few, a very few, will continue to suspect that perhaps the Egyptians, the Buddhists, the Pythagoreans and the Gnostics were people very like ourselves in respect of faculty and unlike us in the same respect in which we shall differ from a remote posterity without our science, namely, in the possession, not of a lost faculty, but of a lost method or technique. And for these few, too, the method or technique is still to seek – or perchance only to recognize.

Let us assume that we belong to these few and that we begin, at least roughly, to define the conditions essential to our hopeful quest of the lost technique. The first, obviously, is the discrimination of Religion from the subjects with which it has been associated in the course of time. As certainly as our descendants would, if they were so much interested, at least give our Science the distinction of being concerned about some definite field of possible or, maybe, impossible knowledge, and discriminate between our Science and our Ethics, or Science and our Sociology, our Science and our popular customs, so we undoubtedly can at once begin to distinguish in the traditional religion of our ancient forerunners certain characteristics unique and peculiar to the subject. Whether verifiable or not, whether even intelligible to us or not, it is clear that the statements concerning Religion contained in the surviving texts assume certain specific generalizations as to the World and Man and, either as cause or as effect, certain specific attitudes and rational obligations laid upon Man himself. Still roughly, they can be said to be as follows: that the Universe is an intelligent and therefore intelligible Cosmos; that the obligation and, at the same time, the highest possible aim of Man is to understand and to co-operate with the intelligent law that govern it; that in order to accomplish this a special way of life or technique is necessary; and that this technique consists primarily in a method of 'divinizing', that is to say, of raising to a higher conscious level Man's present state of

being. Everything essential, it seems, to an elementary definition of Religion, as the subject has come down to us, is contained in this brief summary. There is the cosmological element, for instance, missing from our Sociology and Ethics. The cosmology, moreover, differs from the cosmology of our Science in assuming universal psychological values; everything is God, and therefore intelligent and potentially intelligible to Reason. Man has a unique and designed place and, therefore, function, in the cosmological scheme. In other words, he enters into obligations by being born. At the same time, his awareness of his place and function is not a gift of nature: he must acquire it by a special effort and by a special method. Finally, both his development and his own greatest happiness depend upon his discovery of his function and his conscious discharge of it.

This outline is formidable enough to daunt the rational seeker after the rationale of ancient Religion. Without prepossessions for or against these specific dogmas of our forefathers, but with, nevertheless, a benevolent curiosity as to the possible method involved in them, how are we even to begin our search? Certainly there is little in modern science, or in any branch of it, to provide us with even a hint of a method of verification. Of any means of knowing if an intelligent God exists, our Science is completely and indifferently ignorant; and naturally and consequently all the lesser branches of knowledge, springing from the same trunk, must equally dispense with the hypothesis of God's existence. Equally too, our current working conceptions must dispense with unproven potentialities such as are assumed in the religious statements concerning Man's possible conscious divinization by understanding, becoming and service. What may be, may equally not be; and our Science deals only with potentialities actualised, neither with Reality nor with Potentiality metaphysically, but with Actuality, that is to say, the physical. No exception can be made either in the case of Philosophy or in the case of Psychology. Both are too good pupils of the scientific school to resist for long the full employment of the actualistic method. There linger, it is true, medieval ghosts in both fields who speculate hither and thither in the hope of finding pasture for their souls, but with the increasing chemicalization of psychology, everything dependent upon psychological processes, such for instance as speculative philosophy, will more and more lose scientific value, as being insufficiently radical. Sooner or later, the question in regard to every philosophical or psychological opinion will be not its value as an objective statement but its value as merely a symptom of personal chemistry.

With no sure guide in the religious traditions themselves and with not the least glimmer of light from modern Science, our quest for the possible or not impossible technique employed by our ancestors in formulating their 'dogmas' seems doomed on the threshold of failure. And rationally it must be so. If we cannot accept on faith the doctrines and assumptions specifically associated with Religion, nor can find in modern Science even the end of a clue that promises to reveal it to us, our case is lost from the beginning. And we must reconcile ourselves with Science as we

have it and remember only as an ancient dream the faith of our forefathers. By the same token, our dreams of the future must similarly be shepherded through the Gates of Horn. For, with the admission that we neither have discovered nor can begin to discover the yet not impossible technique of religion as formulated by our ancestors, we must deny ourselves the scientific hope of discovery in the future. If modern Science can throw no light on the Religion of the past—on Religion, that is to say, as defined above—neither can it promise us a Religion in the future.

The field of Religion, chimerical or not, can no more be changed than the field of any other department of Science, actual or so-called. Religion, like Ethics or Physics, is by definition what it is and always will be. By declining to be so much as interested in the question of a technique of Religion, Science declares itself bankrupt of Religion for ever.

Things however, are seldom as black as rationalism paints them; and scientists fortunately are not all as scientific as their science. In short, there are loopholes of escape from our impasse; and one of the most promising is to be found in modern psychology; precisely in fact, in the latest conquest of the scientific method, the field of Behaviourism. Behaviourism, there is no doubt, has come to stay. It is true that Behaviourism is still in little more than the elementary stage, that we have still much to learn and certainly some surprising discoveries to anticipate; but the method that has begun to collect and verify the data of human psychology at its source, that is to say, in observable behaviour beginning with the earliest infancy, is assuredly destined to supersede the pseudo-scientific methods of introspection and psychoanalysis. Henceforward for Science there is only one possible approach to psychology, the approach of observation, verification and experiment. Every other approach is now medieval.

The question, however, is what and whose behaviour we are to observe; or, without prejudice to any other field, the legitimacy of a field of observation which, as we have said, on the face of it appears to promise some light on our inquiry concerning a technique of Religion. To be explicit, is self-observation, together with the unusual sequel in the scientific method—verification, hypothesis, experiment and demonstration—equally legitimate with the observation of others; and, if it is, can we devise a method to ensure its rigorous pursuit? Are we ourselves, as behaving organisms, a valid subject for our scientific research—assuming of course, that we employ the same objective means as we should employ in the case of others? Is self-knowledge at least as possible scientifically as the knowledge of anything else? There can be no doubt of the reply; and Behaviourists in fact, have admitted it. Though at the outset, self-observation as a scientific method of research into human psychology labours under both acquired and natural disabilities, as for example, association with introspection and the presence of the personal equation in its most intimate form, neither its past nor its inherent difficulty can reasonably be said to disqualify it. All that would be necessary would be to be doubly on guard against subjectivity and to

be all the more rigorously and objectively scientific in sight of the snares of misunderstanding and self-deception.

That self-observation has at least an affinity with the subject-matter of Religion is obvious by inspection. A characteristic of Religion is concern with oneself next to God. On closer examination, indeed, this self-concern in every possible sense proves to be one of the leading motives and fundamental suppositions of Religion as it has come down to us. The poignancy of religious phraseology concerning the lot and fate of Man, the hopes and fears of his salvation, the speculations concerning the nature of the individual soul, the promises of divinization, all indicate self-concern not merely instinctive but visceral and cerebral. The individual in Religion is mightily concerned for himself but for himself in every possible and even impossible way. Everything he does, including not only his acts but his thoughts and feelings, may be and from the point of view of Religion, is held to be, at least potentially, profoundly significant. The individual's awareness of and concern for himself in the highest possible degree is assumed as one of the very conditions of the religious life.

We may conclude therefore, that if self-awareness, or let us say, self-consciousness, is not the sole or main aim of Religion as formulated in our texts, at least it is an implied pre-requisite of the main aim which appears to be the understanding and service of the Creator, God. All the commandments, injunctions and exhortations of God's service already imply knowledge of the means of response and ability to control them; and since, in the last resort, all our responses are only forms of our actual behaviour, the knowledge of our behaviour is a necessary condition of our control of it, assuming for the moment that such control may prove to be possible. To know ourselves as we actually are—that is to say, in our current actual behaviour—may not be, and is not, the object of Religion; but it certainly forms a necessary step to Religion, and, as it would seem, the first necessary step. How can God be served if we are ignorant of the actual present behaviour of the servant? Conscious service implies self-knowledge as well as knowledge of the Being to be served. Self-consciousness or awareness of our actuality is in short, an indispensable element in Religion as strictly defined.

How did our forefathers, who founded and practised Religion, set about attaining self-knowledge? The answer to this question would throw the first real ray of light on the nature of the religious technique. But alas, it is not forthcoming, or forthcoming only in such dark sayings as themselves demand a key that is missing. We hear of schools where 'Mysteries' were taught, of long courses of initiation, of difficult exercises of various kinds; of Masters and pupils. We can distinguish in the surviving text, words and phrases having the air of an exact but incomprehensible connotation. How many of the words that today pass as religious had once a purely technical psychological meaning we cannot guess; but unless we are to attribute to our ancestors a mythical religious sense, it is highly probable that time alone is responsible for their present 'pious' associations. In short, if the preliminary aim of

the ancient Religious Schools was the preparation of ordinary men and women for the extraordinary life of conscious co-operation with the Creator, the means employed for the necessary pre-requisite of self-knowledge must have been anything but religious in our modern sense. On the contrary, they must have been practical first and foremost; and in all probability the vocabulary of the technique was chosen from the popular science of the day.

It has been suggested that in the current theories of Behaviourism, ancient Religion and Modern Science meet. Let us add however, that they only meet, they do not as yet mingle. Nevertheless, it is in the vocabulary of Behaviourism that the technique of self-observation can best be stated; and be the outcome of the technique the re-discovery or confirmation of the ancient dogmas or their dismissal as superstitious, the new field and method of psychological research can at least be said to be promising. What, indeed, can more plainly call for rigorous self-examination than the very instruments upon which all our observations of the rest of the world depend? Behaviourists observing the behaviour of others are still at two degrees from the object nearest them; and the result is infallibly, in consequence, a closer and closer approximation to physics and ultimately to the elimination of psychology altogether. Self-observation of one's own behaviour automatically corrects this fatal error of emptying out the baby with the bath water. While observing, however objectively, my own behaviour, I am under no temptation to forget the accompanying sensations, emotions and trains of thought. I cannot overlook or under-rate the psychological element when it obtrudes itself into the very phenomena I am witnessing. And the preservation of my awareness of this concomitant of many forms of my behaviour gives a higher degree of understanding when I apply myself to the observation of others. Once this is realised, the technique of the Behaviourists may be taken straight away and applied without change to our new field. We can accept their classification of forms of behaviour, together, if necessary, with their means of measuring Man. None of their implications, even in the extreme form of organic mechanism, are positively alien to us. If self-observation be the next step in scientific Behaviourism, and it appears logically to be, the second step of Behaviourism may very well prove to be the first step in the technique of Religion.

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A warning, however, is necessary. Careful and impartial observation of one's own behaviour would at the first blush appear to be as easy as the observation of the behaviour of others. Far from this, however, is the usual experience of the curious self-observer. In fact, from the very beginning of the collection of such data about one's own actual behaviour, the path is strewn with difficulties of a hitherto unrealized kind. It would almost seem that Nature resents the attempt to observe her in oneself, so powerful and at the same time so subtle is the resistance commonly experienced. Possibly it was this very discovery that led to the formulation of the

dogmas of ancient Religion. They had tried to meet themselves, Nature and God,
face to face!