

Faith  
Knowledge  
and  
Cosmopolitanism

*An Inaugural Lecture  
Given in the University  
of Rhodesia*

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# Faith Knowledge and Cosmopolitanism

*An Inaugural Lecture  
given in the University of Rhodesia  
on the 6th May, 1971*

by  
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## SYNOPSIS

### FAITH, KNOWLEDGE AND COSMOPOLITANISM

1. Faith and knowledge as mutually dependent.
2. Generalisation and its limitations.
3. The inadequacy of radical reductionism.
4. Basic scientific presuppositions are analogous to the religious presumption that there is an underlying correspondence between man and reality.
5. The famous conflicts between science and religion (notably, re the sun's centrality and re evolutionism) were really clashes between old and new doctrines of nature.
6. Important is the distinction between questions of the *why* type (resulting in purposive explanations) and questions of the *how* type (resulting in mechanistic explanations).
7. The subjective sense of certainty in personal convictions needs objective (rational) corroboration.
8. Generation (creativity) is logically prior to decay and death.
9. Moral progress signifies a surrendering of brute force to persuasion, of narrow tribalism to the breadth of cosmopolitanism.
10. Exclusivism runs counter to the experiential basis of all religion, an experience that has its common foundation in a sense of our common dependence on the saving grace of forces that far exceed our own.

## Faith, Knowledge and Cosmopolitanism

THE familiar opposition between faith and knowledge is quite unsatisfactory when the terms are taken to represent mutually exclusive means of cognition. Knowledge involves faith and faith involves knowledge. A person cannot have faith in something of which he is not aware, and he would scarcely claim to identify a certain object unless he had faith in the reliability of his powers of apprehension. Some such truth would seem to apply to the systematic refinements of knowledge, as well as to rudimentary forms of awareness, for both science and scholarship have their unproved presuppositions which constitute indispensable conditions in any research enterprise. Recognition of this circumstance can serve to check the tendency to slip into excessive dogmatism and help to preserve mental flexibility. Cocksurenness is usually born of narrowness — habitual concentration on our successes in the way of demonstration to the neglect of what we fail to demonstrate. We have been conditioned to prize tidiness in our thinking and perhaps find it disturbing to attend to the existentialist possibility that no set of generalisations can explain any individual entity in its concrete uniqueness. Our prompt reaction might well be to dismiss such a disquieting notion as expressive of mere romantic obscurantism. We might harden our minds in resistance, settling down more securely in an assurance of the sufficiency of our generalisations.

So it comes to pass that the systematic thinker, professionally preoccupied with so-called universal truths, can easily develop a blind spot for possible signs of the limitations inherent in his approach and for chance indications of

the schematic character of his general assertions. And it is here submitted that, besides being on his guard against temptations to indulge in academic pretentiousness, he should continually seek to preserve any native sensitivity to the possible presence of dangerous generalisations in his questionings — as, for instance, when it is asked whether the structure of language is revelatory of the structure of reality.<sup>1</sup> Grammars vary considerably, and in putting such a question we may be myopically postulating that our own mother tongue is the type for all languages. And what could be more misleading? For example, no distinction of gender appears in the language of the Chocktaws, but it would hardly be sound anthropology to deduce therefrom that members of the tribe concerned do not react to perceptions of sexual difference, that for them humanity is unsexed!

The partial blindness to which we are referring can induce the sort of oversimplification that arises from equating our own particular point of view with that of a supposedly absolute and eternal contemplator. Such confusion sometimes breeds the facile reductionism that would somehow charm away all in human experience that cannot be directly translated into terms of physics and chemistry, reducing man to the status of a monstrous mechanical contrivance. Reductionist philosophies are of various kinds, but they all argue on the same lines:<sup>2</sup> thoughts are merely concomitants of bodily processes, physiology being a branch of chemistry; the world is merely a dark concourse of senseless particles in dancing motion; expressions of political opinion are merely the consequences of economic pressures; poetic inspiration is merely fantasy-fulfilment of a frustrated sexual urge — and so on.

But curiously enough, an extreme reductionism really leaves no room for the investigator himself, an individual animated by purposes and concerned among other things

(1) Cf. Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca, New York, 1962), pp. 1ff.  
(2) Cf. Aldous Huxley, *Science, Liberty and Peace* (London, 1946), pp. 35ff.

about accuracy in his theoretical formulations. The fact is that serious research proceeds by way of abstraction; nature is far too rich in its intricacies to be explained all at once. Phenomena have to be studied piecemeal, and for the controlled conditions of experiment in the natural sciences, artificially simplified situations are frequently created, situations divested as far as possible of factors irrelevant to the purpose in hand. Amid the welter of impinging complexities abstraction is needful, but error is likely to result when it is claimed that a theory appropriate to certain aspects of things is equally appropriate to all aspects or when qualitatives are allowed to be swallowed up by quantitatives so that real differences in spatio-temporal modes of organisation are explained away.

Despite its abstractions and its piecemeal mode of procedure, scientific investigation nevertheless entails total assertions concerning the constitution of the world — as, for example, the faith that natural processes exemplify an intelligible orderliness. Such assertions are not demonstrated as particular hypotheses are demonstrated. They are presupposed in the scientific activity, and it is in this connection that an analogy is discernible between the scientific and the religious attitude. For religious experience would seem to involve a certain identifiable kind of assumption concerning the nature of the world, a quasi-philosophical outlook apparently engendered by a deep feeling of fundamental harmony between the finite individual and objective reality. Just as the natural sciences include something more than empirical hypotheses, namely, faith in the world's adaptation to human intellection, so religion always seems to include something more than an ethic, namely, faith in the actual or potential favourableness of the world's encompassing forces to human aspirations. Of course, the vague cosmological faith presupposed in the religious response to the surrounding universe is usually specified and elaborated in terms of current empirical knowledge, and this accounts for the fact that the famous conflicts between science and

religion in recent centuries have in truth largely been conflicts between old and new doctrines about nature, its structures and ways of functioning. Nowadays it is widely held that a form of theism such as we find in Judaism, Christianity and Islam does not have to ally itself with a geocentric astronomy (the scope of God's purpose is much wider than was suspected in ancient times) and does not have to set itself in opposition to evolutionary theory (God's creation is a continuing process). Again, as is well known, biblical theism is associated with the notion of a three-storied universe, but the repudiation of that view does not necessarily require the repudiation of theism as such; belief in a purposive Creator could be valid despite the outmodedness of much biblical cosmology.

Furthermore, there apparently exists in man a deep-seated inclination to express cosmological beliefs in terms of purpose, and this seems to have been a contributory factor in the modern tension between science and religion. Unsophisticated people may still continue to think of causal relations generally as resembling their own personal transactions with their environment. Thus if a phenomenon cannot be explained by reference to the intervention of a human will, they tend to refer it to the intrusion of an invisible volitional agency, divine or satanic. The physicist in modern times, however, has stressed so-called proximate causes and offered explanations in terms of impersonal forces.

This is sometimes put by saying that, whereas science answers questions of the *how* type, religion answers questions of the *why* type; and such a distinction has usefulness provided it is not construed as implying a sheer incompatibility. Thus an engineer could give a systematic account of the functional interrelations obtaining among the parts of a machine (answering *how*) and also explain the purpose of the designer in constructing the machine (answering *why*). Again, as primary Buddhism, for instance, seems to show, the elaboration of a religiously grounded cosmology

need not have its culminating point in the idea of a divine purpose that is being progressively realised in the historical course of events. And a theism derived from the biblical tradition need not subscribe to the naive teleology found in certain scriptural passages, namely, the view that infra-human creatures were expressly created for the purpose of satisfying human needs. Sheep were not made for man, but man survives because he is able to live on sheep.<sup>3</sup> This, so the modern theist might argue, is ultimately derived from the circumstance that creation is a prolonged and arduous business involving experimentation, a sort of cosmic application of the method of trial and error.

As for the basic religious postulate that human aspirations are rooted in the essential nature of things or that in his moral strivings after greater perfection man has reality somehow behind him, its validity is by no means self-evident, and it cannot be verified after the manner of an ordinary scientific hypothesis, such as Boyle's Law, by the direct scrutiny of a few sample instances. It is of the same general character as faith in the intelligibility of reality, the total assertion implicated as a presupposition in scientific research. Nor is it safe to rely entirely upon the alleged disclosures of immediate intuitions, for the inner light of the religious consciousness could be an *ignis fatuus*. Thus the claims of religious sentiment need to be examined in relation to practice and to our general experience of life in the world. In this connection it could be pointed out that there are signs of the operation of an anti-degenerative tendency inherent in the universe, a constructive principle that has become self-conscious in humanity, so that in his creative moments man may be said to be participating in the work of a productive cosmic agency that makes for increased variety in the patterning of modes of organisation in the evolutionary process.<sup>4</sup>

(3) See Samuel Alexander, *Space, Time and Deity* (London, 1934), vol. 2, p. 344.

(4) Cf. Julian Huxley's introduction to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* (London, 1959), p. 27.

There could scarcely be an adaptation of organisms to their environment were there not an antecedent measure of adaptation on the part of the environment in its relation to organisms. Moreover, if the application of the principle of toleration allows of greater variety within the organised structure of any human society than does the forcible suppression of all who deviate from the prevailing will of established authority, then moral progress may to some extent be assessed in terms of the degree to which the utilisation of brute force gives way to the principle of persuasion. Such development sociologically would be in line within the creative tendency abroad in the world and would mean that an ethic of charity, often characteristic of the prophetic teachings of the great world religions, is not so monstrously foolish as it might appear to be *prima facie*. Perhaps the cruelties attendant upon natural selection in the biological struggle for existence are part of the price that has to be paid in the progress towards a civilisation in which liberal education, charity and universalism come to predominate over brute force, exclusivism and tribalism.

When man is thus considered in relation to the world and when the mind is confronted with the larger issues of human existence, a sense of wonder may be evoked. In such philosophical contemplation thought is raised to a higher plane, beyond the littleness of our familiar day-to-day concerns. Perception may pierce the hardening crust of habit and the mind become increasingly alive to what is transcendent. The inward eye is opened to man's finitude in face of the overwhelming vastness of the universe, and so secondary philosophical reflection and primary religious responses sometimes meet in the mingled fears and hopes of wonder before manifestations of the *mysterium tremendum*. Such openness engenders a healthy humility and needs to be matched on the moral plane by the openness of mind to mind in the mutual exchange of ideas. For it is through dialectical intercourse that the human individual grows in mental stature and that limited personal perspectives are

broadened, merely subjective or private satisfactions giving way to the objective values of a public consensus. From this standpoint it seems clear that in our modern world the great religious traditions of East and West should make haste to outgrow persistent tendencies to that dogmatic exclusivism which is a vestigial survival of the xenophobia characteristic of tribal culture.

Apart from the fact that exclusivism belies much of the prophetic teaching which those religious traditions conserve, it runs counter to the experiential basis of all religion. For it would appear that religion has its common foundation in a disturbing feeling of the precariousness of human existence and its cherished values, of man's ultimate dependence on the saving propitiousness of encompassing powers that far exceed his own.<sup>5</sup> Thus, insofar as they are true to the spirit latent in their existential source, all religions have a common function to fulfil, namely, the promotion of the principle of fraternal cosmopolitanism. Otherwise put, the prophetic ethic of universal charity reaches back to a *sensus numinis* of the community of man in his finitude and commends the cultivation of a dynamic sympathy that cuts across all barriers of race and culture. It motivates efforts for the realisation of more comprehensive modes of human co-operation, for which the whole process of biological evolution may be said to have prepared the way. This dynamic sympathy exemplifies a universalist character that is quite different from the tribalistic morality with which religion has for the most part been associated in the course of its prolonged history.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it does echo the pristine religious insight concerning the oneness of man in his extremity, an insight that coheres with the considered conviction that all men, having emerged on the same cosmic scene, are subject to the same imperious exigencies and have

(5) Cf. R. B. Perry, *Realms of Value* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), pp. 463f.

(6) Cf. Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (London, 1935), pp. 1ff., *et passim*.

to grapple with the same general problems in their endeavours to attain a richer and more stabilised commonwealth of objective values.