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MODERN THOUGHT AND THE EVANGELICAL STANDPOINT

THIS is not an attempt to deal with the whole field of modern thought in so far as it impinges upon the evangelical standpoint : it would be manifestly impossible to do this within the limits of a magazine article. At the same time, the writer has been struck with the bearing various movements in modern thought appear to have upon certain aspects of evangelical truth, and believes that this is not without a very definite importance in modern Apologetics. It is true, of course, that modern thought is generally regarded as hostile to our religion. We may claim that this hostility is more apparent than real ; that it is due to the imperfection of scientific knowledge ; or to the fact that hostile critics of Scripture are more ready than its defenders to marshal scientific facts to their aid. Nevertheless the fact of general hostility remains. There is therefore the feeling that Scripture is attacked from every conceivable quarter. If one deals with a single aspect of the assault then he is conscious of the clamant needs of the other sides of the question ; whereas, when the defence decides to attend to the general assault it is made painfully aware of the increasing magnitude of the task.

In this situation there is one fact which is not generally recognised, but which is nevertheless fraught with vast possibilities. Although these branches of Science are at the moment used to dethrone the inerrancy of Scripture, and therefore to undermine our faith, they have in themselves the elements that are best calculated to defeat this end. In some cases where modern thought is most advanced and even revolutionary, it has some most surprising points of contact with truths that have been associated with our religion for thousands of years.

I

Present-day Science is different from that of former years in that it comes into touch with the everyday life of the common man. Civilisation is realising more and more the value of the lives and the health of rich and poor alike. With much effort it has eliminated the pestilences that used to sweep over the nations like a destructive blight every third or fourth generation.

Health clinics have sprung up in every town. Laws of health are broadcast. Dieting is receiving an attention it never got before among Gentile nations.

We may ask, was there any other civilisation known to us which gave a similar attention to these matters? Certainly plain living characterised the palmy days of the Roman Republic, just as, during the days when Hellenic civilisation was vigorous, great attention was given to bodily development. But obviously these tendencies only catered for one aspect of the complex needs of individuals and communities. Besides, we know very little about how far they permeated the common people. When, however, we go back to the age of Moses we cannot but be struck with an outlook which was, *ceteris paribus*, strangely similar. There was the same insistence upon personal and communal hygiene, the same importance given to dietetics and the same realisation of the need of publishing the rules of hygiene and dietetics so as to teach the common people. Modern science has advanced enormously along these lines. It is in no spirit of detraction we say that it has advanced almost as far as Moses.

Almost as far! The conditions under which people have been living and under which many still live and which are being slowly eliminated at such a cost, would have been impossible in a civilisation such as the laws of Moses adumbrated. This is not an appeal to go back to the laws of health promulgated in the Pentateuch; that has already been largely done by medical science. Nor does the writer lose sight of the supreme religious significance of these laws. But the facts are mentioned so as to point out how closely associated this branch of modern thought is with the parallel aspect of Revelation. In this connection it is interesting to note that no less an authority than Sir William Arbuthnot Lane has recently publicly stated his belief that the comparative immunity of the Jews from such diseases as cancer and tuberculosis is largely due to their strict adherence to the Mosaic dietary.¹

II

The most interesting development of medical thought in recent years is its growing insistence upon the importance of psychological factors. A healthy body, it says, cannot house an unhealthy mind. And the health of the mind, like the health of

¹ *Vide* the daily press, April, 1932.

the body, depends upon the treatment it receives. The subconscious mind is seething with unknown powers of destruction and these powers must be regulated if the mind and body are to be what they should be. They are like the elements seething and surging underneath the volcano: block their natural outlet and there is disaster. And so the psycho-analyst endeavours to deal with what has unconsciously been suppressed so as to bring orderliness back to the deranged mind.

Now there is no doubt that all this is often accompanied with the extravagances that always accompany a new orientation of thought. The time will come when what is known as psycho-analysis will, like all successful theories, be modified, and perhaps very radically modified. Yet we are persuaded that it has enduring elements. And some at least of these elements establish a parallel between it and certain aspects of our Faith. For example, its insistence upon the great part played in our lives by primitive or, as we would term them, sinful impulses has been considered very revolutionary. And the extraordinary thing is that this psychological doctrine has been received and acclaimed in quarters where the theological doctrine of the total depravity of man would be derided. Anyone can see that these two doctrines, despite important points of difference, are by no means poles apart.

But what of the emotional experiences which have lodged in the subconscious and caused a festering sore there? Psycho-analysis recognises a natural tendency to ignore them. We deny even to ourselves that these tendencies are ours. "They therefore become foreign bodies in the mind, technically termed 'dissociated complexes,' which function independently of the main ego complex."¹ Thus an unhealthy area is established in the mind. How, then, does psycho-therapy deal with this? It says: Acknowledge these evil tendencies. Bring them out and face them boldly, and do not allow a desire for self-satisfaction to relegate them to the subconscious. Surely that language is very familiar. The acknowledgment of sin is one of the very earliest religious exercises in Scripture, and it has remained throughout the ages one of the great essentials of our religion.

Thus a little thought will enable us to see how the modern thinker, even when he thinks he is most advanced, is painfully groping his way back to a truth that was already very old when

¹ V. M. Firth, *The Machinery of the Mind*, p. 88.

David confessed his sin before God. Confession is as firmly established in the faith of the Psychoanalyst as it is in the faith of the Roman Catholic ; and confession, not in the sense in which either the Romanist or the Psychoanalyst regards it, is one of the most important as well as one of the most salutary duties of Evangelical Religion. And this can be said without losing sight for one moment of the principal significance of confession—its relationship to repentance for sin.

III

But it is not only in the medical sciences that there has been a violent re-orientation of thought in the last decade or two. The world of physics has probably experienced the greatest revolution of all. Einstein will probably be to the twentieth century what Darwin was in a different sphere to the nineteenth, and what Newton was to the eighteenth century. Einsteinism is one of the many aspects of the science of physics that have served to tone down the somewhat crude dogmatism of recent generations. In face of the new world of matter which has been revealed by modern science, even the most hardened materialist must confess himself at a loss.

For instance, the linking up of time with the other properties of space into something in the nature of a Fourth Dimension has opened up most fruitful avenues of thought, and it must be confessed at once that these avenues lead us to problems too tremendous to be fully grasped. The infinite space of the older physicists was a conception that staggered the imagination : but when Einsteinism indicates that space, whatever it is, may be finite, we realise that here we face a conception that is infinitely more amazing. Away beyond the bounds of human thought—infinitely beyond the ken of the farthest star, millions of millions of light years from this infinitesimal speck we call the World or the tiny dust-cloud that is our Universe—space, ever-widening, comes to an end. But where, and how ? What is beyond space ? How is it bounded, and what mysterious thought of God begins when space ends ? To us these are meaningless questions because they deal with matters infinitely above our highest thoughts.

Link up this conception of space with time as a fourth dimension and further stupendous possibilities spring up. Time, indissolubly associated with three-dimensional space, obviously

runs counter to our ideas of time ; especially when we remember that we conceive of time and space as being, to all intents and purposes, infinite. Just as space cannot be divided on a *directional* basis, so it is difficult to conceive of time, thus closely associated with space, as being divided in the same way. To put it somewhat paradoxically, modern thought postulates the timelessness of time. Or, in language more familiar to our ears, Eternity is timeless.

Now it is quite true that this is by no means a new conception. It is a conception familiar to philosophy almost as far back as we can go in that science. Only at the present day physics has adopted and promulgated this idea that was until now considered to belong altogether to the sphere of metaphysics. Our main interest in it lies in the fact that it is a conception even more familiar to Theology than to Philosophy. Two thousand years ago our Saviour could claim, "Before Abraham was I AM."¹ Some fifteen hundred years before then God made Himself known to Moses and the children of Israel under the same name of I AM.² Thus the timelessness of the Eternal One is set before us in Scripture just as the timelessness of Eternity is set before us in modern physics. One could wish that there was space to point out the close and indeed necessary relationship between this idea of the timelessness of God and Eternity and what Theology calls "Predestination" and Philosophy "Determinism" or "Necessitarianism." We will merely point out that here is still another ancient truth appearing in modern guise.³

IV

It is true that this conception of the timelessness of time is a very old one even in the history of human philosophy, but even then human thought could not wean itself from the *inevitability* of time. Time was an onward flowing stream—a self-existent entity, divorced from anything that would modify our conceptions of it as such. And so science laughed at the idea of the sun standing still upon Gibeon or the moon in the Valley of Ajalon, or of the shadow going backwards ten degrees upon the sundial of Ahaz. This, we were told, was a violent interference with the laws of physics. Time could not stand still ; much

¹ John viii. 58.

² Exodus iii. 14.

³ See, however, Bergson's *Time and Free Will*, where this aspect of the question is acutely dealt with.

less could it flow backwards. Time must perforce go on from moment to moment, from hour to hour. These objections appear foolish when we come across such an interpretation of the Time-Space Theory as the following from the pen of Sir James Jeans: "The fundamental laws of nature in so far as we are at present acquainted with them, give no reason why time should flow steadily on: they are equally prepared to consider the possibility of time standing still or flowing backwards."¹

Thus time and space are conceptions that modern science has taught us to approach with open minds. It is safe to say that at no other period in human history have these conceptions been fraught with more fateful possibilities. Looked at separately they reveal qualities and hint at possibilities that simply stagger the imagination. Looked at conjointly the actualities and possibilities of such a union are still more marvellous. In any case there is a closer union between them than the older scientists ever dreamed of. And this new union is a separate entity more independent than either of the elements of which it is composed. "From henceforth space in itself and time in itself sink into mere shadows, and only a union of the two preserves an independent existence."²

Now the conception of four-dimensional space is not new. Very few revolutionary conceptions are. As far back as 1903 Minkowski had formulated the theory more or less as we know it today. But a century and a half before then d'Alembert wrote: "A brilliant man of my acquaintance believes that one may regard duration as a fourth dimension."³ We believe, however, that in the Scriptural idea of God we have a conception that approaches amazingly close to this idea of the union of time and space to form a separate entity. The Scripture doctrine of the timelessness of the Eternal One has already been discussed in this paper: He is the great "I AM." But He is also "the Lofty One that inhabiteth Eternity."⁴ Nay, more, He is One whom "the Heaven of Heavens cannot contain."⁵ The timelessness as well as the infinity of Eternity and the infinity of Space are here united in one Being, and the union is closer than even Einstein would have the courage to make it. It is intriguing to

¹ Jeans' "Mysterious Universe," p. 20.

² Minkowski, quoted by Eddington: *Time, Space and Gravitation*, p. 30.

³ *Vide* article "Dimension" in the *Encyclopædia* (1754).

⁴ Isaiah lvii. 15.

⁵ 1 Kings viii. 27.

think of what Spinoza would have made of this amazing parallelism. Even the ordinary mind can see the danger of allowing the theological conception to be swallowed up by the physical one, thus resulting in a Pantheism more universal and complete than even the "God intoxicated" Jew could conceive.

V

So time and space cannot be dissociated; and they cannot be measured according to our rules of measurement. Time-space is all around us, but who can tell aught about its properties? "We, poor creatures of a day, break into thens and whens the eternal Now,"¹ and the eternal Now remains what it is, undisturbed by our attempts. But this one thing another branch of modern science has taught us: somewhere in space and somewhere in time there is a record of the lives of men. Matter can be destroyed and matter can be created; recent physics have taught us that. But the words and actions of men are not destroyed. They flash from pole to pole with the speed of light, and somewhere in the infinity of space-time their records are kept. Just as the words uttered a few seconds ago are echoed back from some mysterious sounding board far beyond the reach of the measurements of man, so it may be possible some day to tap space-time and hear and see what was said and done a few minutes or a few centuries ago. In any case the marvels of wireless telegraphy and television have taught us that no word or action is ever lost.

But in teaching us that, it only teaches us what our Faith has taught us long ago. We know that the secret things of men will be brought to light. We know that we must yet give an account of everything done in the body. And we know all this because we know also with the modern scientist that a record is kept of the actions and words of men. The scientist says that they are written in the mysterious realms of space-time, but nearly nineteen centuries ago John saw the dead judged out of the things written in the books of God's memory, according to their works.² There is more than a parallel here. So nearly identical are the two standpoints that they can almost be regarded as one. Science has travelled far towards our position; it will travel further.

¹ Tennyson, *The Ancient Sage*.

² Revelation xx. 12.

VI

In many respects the most intriguing part of the controversy between modern science and religion centres on the theory of Evolution ; but this opens up a field far too wide for full discussion here. Suffice it to say that biological facts are cropping up every year which increase the difficulties of the Evolutionist ; so much so that most recent utterances, even by its most distinguished protagonists, have been self-admitted confessions of faith rather than statements of scientific facts. The *how* and the *why* of Evolution are no longer discussed with the assurance that characterised these discussions twenty years ago, but the Evolutionist still says that Evolution is a fact, though he cannot now explain how it came about—a faith almost pathetic in its simplicity.¹

All these difficulties are on the biological grounds—the field on which the battle has been mainly fought for the last half-century. There are, however, other aspects of the question now coming to the front, and these cannot be ignored in a treatment that professes to deal with the bearing of modern thought upon the problem. And they are interesting for our purpose because they provide still another example of the parallelism between modern thought and the Evangelical “creed out-worn.”

Many years ago Sir J. W. Dawson pointed out that if man took thousands of centuries to bridge the gulf between the Neanderthal Man and Homo Sapiens, then countless ages were needed before the Neanderthal Man himself was developed.² Since then, biology as well as astronomy and geology were prepared to grant this. There was no reason, we were told, why the universe should not be substantially as it is today millions of millions of years ago. Practically infinite time was postulated and granted. Geology, at the moment the most haphazard of the sciences, is still ready to grant this, but both astronomy and physics have receded from that position. Lemaitre’s theory of an expanding universe is a development of Einsteinism that is almost universally accepted in some form or other, and it is definitely hostile to the granting of infinite time for the development of the universe we know. The universe is receding into space. More than that, it is receding at an almost incredible

¹ See the reports of the British Association, Archæological Section, 1931.

² *Modern Ideas of Evolution*, p. 36.

speed, and the further it has receded the greater the speed. Hubble and Humason's discoveries at the Mount Wilson Observatory are of inestimable value in connection with this.¹ In recent months some almost unbelievably distant nebulae have been discovered there, receding at the amazing rate of 15,000 miles a second. This means that astronomy only gives a few thousands of millions of years since development was possible in our universe; before then it was too crowded for development. And this time is altogether inadequate for the needs of the Evolutionist.

At the other end of the scale anthropology is pushing the birth of Homo Sapiens further and further back into time. It has recently been "proved" by a British Museum expedition working in Tanganyika that the Homo Sapiens remains discovered there by Professor Reck in 1913 belong to the Miocene period.² For our purpose the importance of this discovery lies in the fact that Homo Sapiens—fully developed man—existed long before his ancestors and ancestors' cousins which were so laboriously constructed from a few bones at Piltdown, Java, Heidelberg and elsewhere. He evidently flourished at a period anterior to that assigned to the anthropoid apes. Nay, if we are to believe the newspaper reports of this discovery, and if this specimen really belonged to the Miocene period, then he must have flourished when the Dryopithecus—the common ancestor of men and apes—was beginning to wander from his native haunts in Northern India.³ Thus Evolution is faced with a very real *reductio ad absurdum*.

The position, therefore, is this. On the one hand we see astronomy seriously shortening the time available for Evolution; and on the other we see the birth of Homo Sapiens pushed further and further back in time, thus cutting off the time available at the other end of the Evolutionary period. This serious telescoping of the time available for development faces the Evolutionist with a very difficult problem; but as far as we are concerned it brings us nearer the position that Evangelical Religion has held throughout the ages—that there is no Evolution, partly because

¹ See the Mount Wilson Observatory Records, 1930-32.

² See daily press, December 3rd, 1931. Since the above was written, the International Congress of the Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences, sitting in London on August 2nd, 1932, have rejected Dr. Leaky's views in regard to the age of the Tanganyika man. In view of the fact that the acceptance of Dr. Leaky's views would mean a revolution in archaeological beliefs, it is difficult to imagine what else the Congress could do.

³ Elliot Smith, *The Search for Man's Ancestors*, p. 47.

there was no time available for it in Revelation, but chiefly because we are told that God *created* man.

The whole subject, as we can see, is a very wide one. Treatment within the limits of an article such as this, is bound to be inadequate and unsatisfactory in many ways. And yet one dares to hope that interesting avenues of thought and study may have been opened up. Modern thought is not without interesting possibilities, and there is surely room for hopeful prayer that it may be guided towards the Light.

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