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THE APOLOGETICS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

I

PERHAPS the most outstanding characteristic of the thought of the modern era, which distinguishes it from that of the Middle Ages, is the appeal to *experience* as the means by which a particular truth can be apprehended or by which it can be verified.

The medieval scholar—provided with a good library—was not obliged to go any further than his own study in order to explore any particular field of human learning, as the books before him contained most of the desired information, and therefore all he had to do was to cultivate the art of collating his authorities in order to possess himself of truth. His modern counterpart, however, has no such facile task, for he realizes that truth cannot be so easily acquired. Instead, he feels that the path to truth lies not through an appeal to other authorities, no matter how weighty, but through the avenue of experience alone, though, of course, he would not deny that for practical everyday purposes the appeal to the authority and veracity of others both must and can be retained.

Consequently, if we indicate the method of making some aspect of truth the object of direct immediate experience in order to test and verify it, we would seem to come near defining the intellectual temper of our era. And generalizing as this is, it at any rate helps us to understand a variety of mental attitudes which are not confined entirely to the scientific realm but are almost equally prominent in the religious and metaphysical spheres as well. Hence the question of experience can be looked at from either the secular or from the religious point of view. The results of modern science bear witness to the worth of the experimental method in the world of secular thought, so that few would deny to it the right of pride of place within that world. And it is a method which exercises an extremely powerful appeal to the seeker after truth because it rests ultimately neither on a second-hand authority nor on mere speculation, but on that certainty and assurance which springs from the immediate impact of a truth upon the consciousness—an impact the directness of which alone can produce the almost absolute conviction that truth has been apprehended.

On the other hand, theological thinking would appear to be in anything but such an advantageous position. For is not

religion primarily authoritarian in principle, based on the authority of Church and Bible, and does it not involve an element of faith quite foreign and unacceptable to the experimentalist? As the man in the street might express it, the experimental method can be "tested" and "proved", whereas religion must be left as a pure matter of faith. Thus the question of experience illuminates a tremendous gulf between the secularist and the Christian theologian, and on the one side the secularist treats the claims of theology with suspicion, while on the other the professional theologian tries to fight shy of attempting to meet the secularist on the field of experience. For if the former refuses to accept anything not backed by an appeal to direct experience, the latter at present is not prepared to admit the validity of such an appeal as constituting a "point of contact" between the one world and the other. Thus we find that dogmatic theologians of quite different shades of opinion tend to reject religious experience, at any rate as forming the basis for a sound Christian Apologetic, and in some respects their position is understandable. For does not the term "religious experience" cover everything from a mere consciousness of the aesthetical on the one hand to mysticism on the other, and does it not therefore represent either sheer subjectivism or ecstatic flights to the absolute, which render an objective historical revelation secondary and unnecessary except as a symbol?

Certainly there is much in modern theology which justifies this suspicion. Schleiermacher, for instance, with his principle of identity of subject and object, and his stress on the "feeling" of dependence and the "feeling" of redemption, made religion a subjective affair; while Ritschl, remaining true to the Kantian dualism of "spirit" and "matter", according to which the intelligibility and meaning of the phenomenal world had to be traced within the categories constituting consciousness, refused to deal with "brute" facts as they are in themselves and would look at them only from the point of view of value-judgments. Under the double influence of Schleiermacher and Ritschl it is not surprising, therefore, that modern dogmatics was given a subjectivist twist and religion became essentially the creation of a particular consciousness within the individual.

But if all this be admitted it can be argued nevertheless that the neo-orthodox reaction to this Liberalism has swung far too

much in the opposite direction in so far as it rejects religious experience as forming a suitable point of contact for apologetic purposes. Thus we find that the God of Barth, Brunner, Gogarten and Heim who confronts us as a power in the second person—a “thou”—cannot be turned into an object of experience without becoming an idol, a “not-God”. God cannot be thought, He can only be addressed, and therefore an apologetic of experience is frowned on by the neo-orthodox.

True, it may be objected that at least one neo-orthodox writer—Canon Alan Richardson in his *Christian Apologetics*—has already made the attempt to bridge the gulf between the secular and the religious realms by employing precisely this concept of experience. But it seems to me that a closer examination reveals an idea of experience quite foreign to the modern empirical. For his notion of “key-categories” in the “human” (i.e. existential, not objective) sciences, which enable us to order the datum of the factual and explain it, simply confronts us with the same dualism we find in Kant—i.e. the subject with its categories gathering into an intelligible whole the factual. In other words, Canon Richardson is doing nothing more than re-publish Ritschlianism in a new form.

Yet the question remains: will every such attempt to formulate an apologetic of experience fail or can some point of contact be established? Before we can address ourselves to this question we must first enquire briefly into the *nature of experience*.

II

What is the nature of experience? We might reply by saying that it is the direct and immediate apprehension of some aspect of the external world through the senses. But, true as this is, it does not make allowance for the complexity of each experience. For each experience can only be received as part of a mental pattern, already in the mind, constructed from previous experiences. Thus when I see a steeple it *appears* merely a few inches high, though I know it to be much more because previous experiences have taught me the meaning of perspective and have been built up into a suitable mental context for this particular experience. Hence the problem of experience widens out into the question of epistemology.

Now, as every student of philosophy knows, there have been two attitudes towards the fact of experience throughout the history of metaphysical thought, which may be described as the "subjectivist" and "objectivist" respectively. In classical thought we find these two attitudes represented by Plato and Aristotle—the former with his concern for the idea and his description of knowledge as mere recollection, and the latter with his concept of experience as the encounter of the subject with concrete particulars and his interpretation of knowledge as the capacity to apprehend "form"—while in Christian dogmatics these two lines of thought have had their representatives in every period. Thus the earlier scholasticism of John Scotus Erigena, Anselm and Bonaventura reflects a neo-Platonic idealistic approach (subjectivist in the sense that reality is seen from the point of view of the subject) to the twin problems of experience and cognition and which, incidentally, linked itself to a theology of religious experience that was thoroughly mystical in character and found expression in conceptions like ontologism, the direct unmediated knowledge of God, the "Beatific Vision" and so forth. On the other hand Thomism and post-Thomist scholasticism, making use of the re-discovered Aristotle, gave dogmatics, as might be expected, a strongly realistic bent.

But in the modern era, thanks to Descartes's Copernican-like revolution in philosophy, the gulf between the subjectivist and objectivist angles on experience—between the attempt to subordinate the object to the subject and the attempt to subordinate the subject to the object—has been considerably widened. Whereas formerly both the idealist and the realist could agree that an idea was true because its validity depended upon something outside of the human subject and could agree to the notion of "Truth as it is in itself", such agreement has no longer been possible. What then did Descartes accomplish? We reply: his great formula, "*Cogito, ergo sum,*" symbolized an exaltation of the subject which initiated an analysis of experience restricted within the circumference of the human consciousness.

Beginning thus with the subject, Descartes paved the way for later thinkers who subordinated even more completely the world of objectivity to the world of the ego and of consciousness. For, once the step had been taken of regarding the subject

in isolation from the object, it became possible for a Locke to make secondary qualities dependent upon the consciousness and for a Berkeley to extend the line of thought to cover even primary qualities, thereby depriving objectivity even of weight and shape independently of mind. Consequently Kant simply brought to its logical conclusion this process of "subjectivisation" in affirming that man cannot really come to grips with the world of "things-in-themselves", of brute facts—the world of pure contingency—but must concern himself merely with the phenomenal world, that is, the sphere in which "facts" have received intelligibility, rationality and value, thanks to the categories which constitute the understanding. This is obviously the very antipodes to a realistic interpretation of experience and much can be said against it. It may be—and surely must be—objected that it is a one-sided emphasis on the subjective side of experience; i.e. it holds the activity of the subject in an unreal isolation.

But on the other hand this very defect has so concentrated modern thought on the subjective aspect of cognition that it is now almost impossible to deny the part that the subject plays in forming each experience. Consequently we cannot afford now to treat the mind as a mere *receptacle* of ideas communicated from without; and therefore, whatever the place or independence we ascribe to the object, the very existence of idealism reminds us of the work of the subject in ordering every particular experience into an intelligible whole. If there is rationality in the universe, there must be a principle of rationality in the mind which apprehends, and all *analysis* of the universe (for example, into its rational and non-rational elements) presupposes a previous *synthesis*.

In short, then, whatever else experience may mean it must mean the *fusing together of various elements into intelligible unity*. Thus in an experience of the beauty of a work of art or of another human person, we apprehend objectivity in an organic unity, and it is not only what might be called the "material" aspects of the given particular which we group together (such as colour, sound, etc.) and which would appear more directly to impress the senses, but the *non-material* elements as well, e.g. personal qualities, the value, beauty itself, etc. Analysis—the attempt to distinguish (say) the mental elements from the "material" physical organism or beauty from its

material media, oils and canvas—may come at a later stage, but it presupposes this earlier synthesis in the act of experience.

Of course the term “synthesis” as we use it here covers the assimilation of each experience into already existing memory-patterns, and thus we accept that which is congruous with previous experiences and reject that which is not. On this side of the subject’s work modern science has cast a new light. The neurologist can now give us some idea of how experiences build up into electronic “patterns” in the brain. Psychology, on the other hand, has had much to teach us about the “infallible memory” of the subconscious mind, and in the light of these scientific attitudes it is now more possible to understand the fact that a direct experience of an entity carries with it an almost absolute conviction and certainty. *For that is convincing which fits in with the patterns of previous experiences and harmonizes with them.*

But does all this mean that we must adopt an idealistic or subjectivist interpretation of experience rather than a realistic one?

Certainly, even on purely scientific grounds, a good case might be formulated for idealism. Science is no longer confident that it can pierce below the surface of phenomena to an understanding of a “thing-in-itself” while the universe which physics has disclosed, of atoms and molecules, has proved quite unlike the perceptual world of actual consciousness.

Yet something has still to be said on the other side. For all that we call intelligibility, “order” and “value” in our perceptual world is determined by the constitution of the external physical world. One “form” may differ from another simply because of a difference in the oscillations of the light wave refracted from it, but nevertheless the difference is quite independent of the subject—we do not inform our world, we merely interpret form already there. Again, the universe of modern science is essentially a universe of “patterns”. For instance, the atom is now best thought of as a “pattern” with its electrons and nucleus—and it is the pattern of each atom which makes each element what it is. Similarly the molecule has been described as the “pattern of patterns” and we have already referred to the new angle on our very thoughts as “electronic patterns” in the brain, of which even graphs can be taken.

Now the very existence of such a "universe of patterns" places realism on a sounder footing than ever. One might almost say that the idea of pattern approximates roughly to the Aristotelian and scholastic notion of "form", though it is perhaps a more dynamic conception. We are now able to formulate something like a definition of experience.

On the subjective side each experience means the synthetic apprehension of the various elements which compose some aspect of objectivity given through the senses. On the objective side each experience is determined by and is dependent upon the pattern (or form) of the particular existent which makes a direct impact on the subject, but in itself is independent of it.

Each experience produces conviction or assurance in so far as it assimilates with the patterns of earlier experiences. Thus its own pattern, received from without, is its own witness to itself in relation to other patterns already received, and therefore it is in a sense its own witness to itself—it is *self-evidencing*.

But can we claim that religious experience has exactly the same character, or is it merely playing with words to employ the term "experience" in the context of religion at all?

III

When we attempt to speak of religious experience we must, of course, use the phrase in some quite definite and clear-cut way. Consequently we must restrict ourselves considerably to one part of a very wide field. But upon which part of the field are we to so concentrate? Mysticism not only covers a very large tract but is also difficult to deal with from the point of view of *Christian* dogmatics, for mysticism is not confined to the Christian tradition—it can accommodate itself quite easily to very different systems like neo-Platonism or Hinduism. We must then narrow down the phrase "religious experience" to that which is specifically Christian, i.e. Biblical, in origin.

But what does a "specifically Biblical religious experience" mean? This, it will be remembered, was the burning question raised by the Reformation, for whatever else Reformed theology may have been, it was above all else a theology of religious experience. As a movement the Reformation began, not when Luther nailed the ninety-five theses on the church door at Wittenberg, but when he arrived at his experience of divine

grace by reading the Epistle to the Romans. And in spite of their other many and great differences, the other Reformed theologians like Zwingli and Calvin appear to have made precisely the same experience basic to their thinking.

In character this experience of grace is *objectivist in essence*, in so far as its source is claimed to lie in the objective facts of the historical Person of the Redeemer, His finished work and the grace of God communicated by the written Word of God, which the Reformers unhesitatingly identified with the words of Scripture. In other words, we have an experience here which, to say the least, closely resembles experience—or experiment—in the sense we have tried to define it above. It does not involve a flight beyond the sensorial nor does it treat the concretely factual as merely symbolical (as in mysticism). On the contrary it is solidly anchored in that which is objectively factual and which is sensorially apprehended, that is, it is rooted in the concrete facts of the Incarnation and the Atonement as made known in the very concrete fact of the “visible” letter which is the Word of God, read or heard. But is this merely an apparent resemblance to experience as the secularist understands it? Might it not prove on closer examination that the so-called experience of grace was simply a quite unjustifiable sense of assurance founded on the mere secondhand witness of the New Testament writers to facts which cannot now be verified and that therefore it is merely the re-affirmation of that authoritarianism so objectionable to the modern mind?

To answer these questions we must attempt to show that the main characteristics of the evangelical experience of grace are identical with those of any other experience of objectivity, and that in other words it has its synthetic-subjective side and also involves an element of direct encounter with the intrinsically intelligible object.

Now, in order to clarify our position, let us propound the question: how can a supposedly supernatural revelation make contact with already existing experiential patterns in the subject? There is a problem here only to those who deny any point of contact between the revelation of God and human personality. But on the other hand we can claim both the Biblical doctrine of man and the main Christian tradition on our side in affirming that a very real point of contact exists in the fact that man is made in the image of God. That is to say, we claim that the

full Biblical doctrine of man confronts us with a strange duality of personality which the *individual in various ways experiences for himself*. That man is made in the image of God is no mere dogmatic concept, therefore, but really corresponds to the aspirations for higher things (beauty, truth, goodness) which man genuinely experiences as well as his consciousness of some spiritual power beyond himself and his "sense of the numinous", etc. On the other hand the Biblical doctrine that man is a *sinner* corresponds to man's equally real experience of his own moral incompleteness, ethical failure, spiritual need, consciousness of guilt, etc.

But it is just in this experience of being made in the image of God as well as being a sinner—the self-consciousness of the duality of one's nature—that we find a pattern to which the content of divine revelation (God's grace, forgiveness and mercy) corresponds and is complementary. The sense of one's creation in the image of God and of one's sinfulness gives us that with which the truth of God's love can harmonize, thereby completing the subject.

It is to the man who realizes the truth about himself that the Gospel can genuinely *mean* anything. Nevertheless this going home of the grace of God to the need of the soul does not take place *in vacuo* but in, with and through, the visible letter of Scripture. The "meaning" of redemption, which completes and thereby satisfies the ethically inadequate subject through assimilating with the patterns of previous experiences, comes directly *in* the letter. In other words the evangelical experience of grace is as thoroughly synthetic as any other. For the meaning of the Gospel—its saving significance for the sin-diseased soul—is apprehended *together with* the letter of Scripture. As with every other word the letter can only be ideally distinguished from the "Spirit" but not *actually* so. A meaningless word is a contradiction in terms.

Thus in the experience of grace the non-material element—the saving significance of divine grace—is directly apprehended synthetically with the visible letter.

But what precisely is the meaning or significance of the Gospel? Briefly, the Gospel means grace, the loving favour of God bestowed upon the sinner, manifested originally in Christ and embodied in the words of Holy Scripture—"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." Redemption

means a definite divinely given pattern which is intrinsically intelligible precisely because it is a pattern. We are not implying that the "pattern" of the Gospel is distinct from the facts of the Gospel, such as the Atonement, for each fact *is* an im-patterned unit of energy. And this of course is true of any fact, whether it be the Battle of Hastings or the Crucifixion.

We maintain that a real analogy between what the secularist terms experience and the Christian experience does exist. For if experience in the former sense is the direct impact upon the subject of some impatterned particular possessing its own intelligible form, then it can be used in a directly parallel way in the religious context. The "experience of grace" is therefore a phrase which denotes the impact of the pattern or form of God's act of redemption upon the subject which is fully capable of receiving it through having come to know itself (as made in the divine image and yet as sinful). Consequently the words of Scripture do not constitute a mere witness to revelation; rather they *are* that revelation in the sense that they embody it. Our assurance is therefore not based upon the second-hand testimony of others but arises from the immediate self-evidencing "pattern" of redemption directly apprehended in the Word. In other words, the Word is not a signpost pointing away from itself; instead it is more like a mirror which reflects in itself the divine truth. The "letter" expresses the "spirit" and does not conceal it (as in Barthianism). The difference between this and mere authoritarianism can best be seen by an illustration. If I say that Shakespeare's poetry embodies beauty, another person may accept my statement at second-hand but he will have no immediate apprehension of the beauty expressed in a Shakespearean play. But if, on the other hand, I recite a typical passage from Shakespeare to him he can appreciate for himself, assuming that he has the capacity, the beauty embodied in the lines. The verse patterns formed by the actual words of the author communicate the self-evidencing beauty. Similarly the "word patterns" of Scripture carry with them their own intrinsic intelligibility to the man who has eyes to see or ears to hear. The words of Scripture are integral to the self-evidencing revelation of God.

It is thus that the self-evidencing authority of the divine Word can arouse an assurance that is absolute and convincing.

The limitations of space prevent us enquiring into every aspect of our subject, but we must at least suggest that a sound

theological formulation of religious experience, as something communicated sensorially by the objective agency of the Word, involves *some* theory of verbal inspiration. The "spirit" and the "letter", the "idea" and its "medium", the eternal saving significance of the Cross and the concrete Word of the Cross, can only be ideally distinguished. In actual fact they belong together in inseparable organic unity. Meaning cannot be separated from the "written" word without reducing the latter to unintelligible characters.

Hence, a thorough and consistent thinking out of religious experience, which aims at being loyal to the facts, forbids us to treat Scripture as merely the witness to the Word. If a theology of religious experience is to be true to itself, then we must go further and identify the divine Word with the words of the Bible and this involves obviously a thoroughgoing view of inspiration.

F. D. Maurice once wrote—and with his words we shall close—"When you speak to me of verbal inspiration, though I do not like the phrase. . . . I yet subscribe most unequivocally to the meaning which I suppose is latent in it. I have no notion of inspired thoughts which do not find for themselves a suitable clothing in words. I can scarcely, even in my mind, separate the language of a writer from his meaning. And I certainly find this difficulty greater in studying the Bible than in studying any other book; the peculiarities of its language seem to strangely significant."

S. W. CAMERON.

Hebburn-on-Tyne.