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Popular Cosmologies

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IT has been acutely observed, I think by McNeile Dixon, that the progress of civilisations is dependent, to a degree largely unrecognized, upon the power of metaphor. Pictures presented to the imagination exercise over the minds of the vast majority of men and women a far greater power than the cold logical reason. Where reason and imagination are in conflict, imagination wins.

I wish to suggest that popular cosmologies, that is the imaginative pictures of the world whether true or false, which exist in the minds of the people, exercise a powerful, even formidable influence upon all their thinking, including their thinking about God, and that anyone who wishes in our day to present the Christian Revelation in a way that is relevant to their condition, must take account of these cosmologies. The power of these imaginative pictures lies not least in the fact that the people themselves are *unconscious* of them. They are the constant presupposition of all else, a fancy which folk share as the common stock of their age and completely take for granted. But Christ's minister and teacher must not be unconscious of them. He must be utterly alert to the popular cosmology of his day, and must be equipped not only to point it out to his people, but, also to correct it and to show how the Christian message of redemption is relevant to *this* kind of universe and to such people as *us*.

I. In the early years of the Church's growth we have an excellent example of this process of adaptation. The great imaginative picture of the world, shared by nearly all Eastern Mediterranean peoples was that which was finally delineated and developed by the Gnostics. Their leading thinkers developed and embellished the ordinary popular cosmology which was largely unconscious and taken for granted. The picture was of a world completely out of the hands of God. *The* God was the Unknown God, unknowable, self-enclosed, changeless, remote and indifferent. The earth was created and governed by a Demiurge. Human Beings were in reality Spirits encaged in their mortal bodies. Salvation consisted in escape from the body, and the whole earthly sphere, by the motion of the soul through the upper air, which was peopled with myriads of divine beings often identified with the stars and planets, to the Unknown God beyond. This salvation was attainable only by an esoteric Knowledge.

Clearly, those whose thinking was determined by such generally accepted presuppositions about the nature of the created universe were not in the right frame of mind to accept the Christian doctrine about God and Jesus Christ. Therefore part of the essential preparation for the proclamation of the Christian message was the correction of the falsely-assumed world-view. There were two different methods by which great theologians of those early centuries met the challenge.

(a) Irenaeus and Tertullian found a comparatively easy solution.

They pointed their readers and hearers away from the false philosophical and speculative systems to Holy Scripture. If you want to know what the world is like, they said, that knowledge which is permissible to us is to be found in the book of Genesis. In the Old Testament God has revealed to us that He Himself created the world (He is no hostile Demiurge !); He has shown us how sin entered into His perfect creation (this for the Greek mind was always the great problem); and He has told us simply the purpose of creation. The Christian doctrine of redemption was shown to be ideally relevant in a world of this kind. The whole business was of a piece. Creation, the Fall, Original Sin, Incarnation, Redemption and Judgment were presented as a vast, impressive and closely articulated system of theology in harmony with the unconscious presupposition of popular thinking.

(b) Clement of Alexandria and Origen offered a different solution. Instead of roundly overthrowing the old cosmology, they found in its more purified and scientific form elements of truth. They therefore sought to cleanse it of baser elements, to correct them and then to present to the world that true form of *Gnosis* which is the Christian way of salvation. This was a much bolder method, but it not unnaturally evoked the charge of heresy, and remained in Christian doctrinal history the beginning of a movement which has always existed but never become popular. It was indeed for the masses of the people too intellectual.

But in both answers to the Gnostic challenge it is noteworthy that Christian thinkers provided (i) a better cosmology, and (ii) a doctrine of redemption which was of a piece with that cosmology.

II. The answer given by Irenaeus and Tertullian determined Christian thinking throughout the Dark and Middle Ages. Indeed, as long as the literal inspiration of Holy Scripture was assumed, this was inevitable. And the picture of the universe given by Genesis and assumed by Christian theologians became the ordinary, popular cosmology. In the Middle Ages this was embellished and coloured so that whether you were a Christian or not, whether an original thought ever entered your head or not, whether you were a Martha or a Mary, you always assumed a universe which was three-storied. Beneath the crust of the earth was Hell, whose jaws were the terrible opening of the volcano. The deathly eruptions of lava were a sign of what the wicked might expect after death. The earth of course was flat, and heaven was literally "above the bright blue sky." Nearly everybody took this for granted. That is why it is not utterly misleading to speak of the Ages of Faith. This cosmology to which the Christian doctrine of redemption was excellently adapted was universally held. The Christian preacher was readily understood because he was speaking to his hearers within a common heritage of imaginative presuppositions. He was not, like the modern preacher, speaking out of a strange and alien context.

III. In our day the popular cosmology is fundamentally different and is no longer based on the early chapters of Genesis or on any part of the Christian tradition. And that which is responsible for so fateful a change is the quiet, powerful, penetrating rise of modern

science.* Copernicus stands for a radically new cosmology. And a whole host of distinguished men from the sixteenth century onwards stand for the combination of close and scrupulous fidelity to "irreducible and stubborn facts" with generalisation based on them. Almost all the early men of science were men of faith engaged upon a divine task. And indeed, that faith in the *order* of the universe, which is the essential conviction and motive power behind all scientific effort has been shown by Professor Whitehead to be "an unconscious derivative from mediaeval theology."

But, the results of this epochal revolution went far beyond the dreams and intentions of the pioneers. Such was the working hypothesis of the nature of matter as "an irreducible material, spread throughout space in a flux of configurations", and, such the conception of the normal operation of the world's processes according to fixed, unrelenting and ascertainable laws, that the faith known as "scientific materialism" became congenial and plausible. Disastrously, this faith grew up for the most part *alongside* philosophy and unconnected with it. Its immense influence lay in its strength as a *working hypothesis*. By it the astounding technological advances of the nineteenth century were made possible; and conversely by reason of these advances, the hypothesis seemed to be transformed into an obvious certainty.

The vital observation for us is this. Without realising their responsibility and often vigorously disowning their baneful offspring, the scientists have given to the popular imagination a cosmology. This cosmology is unconscious; it is assumed; it is in the very atmosphere and texture of our age; it is always in the background of popular thought. It may be not inaccurately described thus. People ordinarily think of the world rather in the nature of a great machine. A Creator may have set it in being or it may have come about by some kind of cosmic accident. That does not matter, because in any case there is little room and no need for the action of a God within it now. It functions according to fixed laws. Some we know, others we are learning, the rest we ought to know eventually. There is an inexorable sequence of cause and effect; things happen as they will happen, and if only we had still more advanced knowledge, we should be able to predict the effects according to the causes. And if modern scientists are teaching us to expect the apparently arbitrary and idiosyncratic, yet the great mass of the people have inherited such a view of the universe as makes inevitable the conclusion (whether they draw it or not) that miracles just do not happen in a world like this world. This is the source of most modern difficulties about prayer and Providence; there just does not seem room for the special action of God. What was formerly attributed to His governance is now otherwise and sufficiently explained. Modern folk are left unwillingly in the position of Laplace who, being asked why he had omitted all reference to the name of God in a treatise on astronomy, replied: "Sir, I have no need of that hypothesis."

IV. Confronted with such a popular delusion, the Christian theologian and preacher has the same task which those early champions

*See Whitehead: *Science and the Modern World*.

of the faith so effectively tackled. He must (i) examine this popular cosmology, draw it into the open and present a better and a truer cosmology and (ii) preach the Gospel of Redemption as it is seen to be so distinctly and effectively adapted by God for such a world as ours. Thus the cosmology and the doctrine of Redemption will be of a piece instead of, as now, failing to meet at any point. Only we have to recognise boldly that the simpler method of Irenaeus and Tertullian is for ever closed to us. We cannot build on the scientific accuracy of Genesis. We have to attempt the much more dangerous and uncertain road followed by Clement and Origen, and use the best-attested results of modern science and philosophy, interpreted by the spiritual insights of Genesis.

What is this better cosmology? As always the work of construction is more difficult than that of criticism or analysis, and a satisfactory imaginative picture of the world has yet to be painted. I believe we shall accept the method of science with a renewed emphasis on its necessary limitation. We shall welcome its devotion to "irreducible and stubborn fact", but we shall insist on pressing this activity further. For has not science gained such very high marks in the public favour because, having been presented with an examination paper, it has dazzled the examiner's eyes by answering all the easiest questions? We shall insist on the recognition of certain very stubborn facts which do not fit in with all the facile generalisations,—on the fact of the individual and of the personal, on the fact of the spontaneous, on the fact that in evolution cumulative small variations can establish specific distinctness, on the fact of the experience of the saints, on the fact of the meeting of the individual soul with the personal God, on the fact of Jesus. Perhaps the basic recognition is of the fact of the individuality and spontaneity of personality. Here is a "given", not able to be analysed, itself the centre of every process of intuition, analysis and interpretation.

This entails the recognition of at least two ways of knowledge. We insist that devotion to *facts* reveals that the scientific way of knowledge is not the only way. There is that quite different realm of the intuition of values. There is the realm of history, art and religion; we have to take account of the perceptive faculties of the poet and the mystic. We are to recognise a different technique whose results are not so easily verified as those of science because its subject-matter is a more complex, more personal and therefore higher subject-matter than that of science. The Christian preacher and theologian may once again offer release from captivity, this time release from intellectual and moral and religious imprisonment within the closed system of a mechanical world. And therefore the Christian need no longer, as he has done lately, exhibit the slightest complex of inferiority in the presence of the agnostic scientist or throw himself into a closed (traditional) system of his own, and so become aggressive about it in an effort of compensation. We ought now to see the clergy regaining their confidence as they rediscover their message, and therefore becoming the more sympathetic with their hearers and the less easily irritated by their perplexity. This return of confidence will make possible a new evaluation of all our knowledge, and a glad

recognition of all authentic contributions from whatever quarter.* The human mind will no longer be mastered by a single branch of knowledge; but all knowledge will be at the service of the human mind in a hierarchy of values, all interpreted by the fundamental deliverances of the divine Revelation. Thus we shall see Astronomy, Physics, Chemistry, Botany, Geology, Geography as the sciences and the attempted explanations of the *material* universe. And Anatomy, Biology, etc., as the sciences which study man as a *physical* being. Where shall we put Psychology? As a science which studies the behaviour of man as more than a physical being? Yes—but also as a science which cannot escape closest dependence upon other insights into the nature of man. And those other insights—these are the insights of literature and history which view man whole and more accurately as a morally-conscious personality. Then Philosophy, taking account of all these kinds of knowledge, inquires into the fundamental character of the world in which we live and of the kind of life which we ought to live. But the key to the final interpretation must, for those who have been confronted by Reality, necessarily be found in the divine Revelation. So Theology is rehabilitated as Queen of the Sciences and presides because she guards God's self-revelation, because she speaks of God Himself and of the approach of the soul to God and of God's approach to the soul, and of an ineffable mystery where human knowledge at last admits its limitation, and yet alone finds its fruition in the Vision of God. The true Cosmology will derive insights from *all* authentic disciplines and not from science alone.

But when the popular cosmology is corrected and we are clear about the functions and limitations of the various branches of knowledge, we have still to present the Christian message of Redemption. This message will be of God's merciful approach to that which is the real problem, *i.e.* not an intellectual perplexity but that "irreducible and stubborn fact"—the individual, the spontaneous, the personal—a wayward, rebellious human being. And what the world most needs both to demonstrate its erroneous assumptions and to prove the truth of the Christian religion is something more than a corrected cosmology and a relevant doctrine of redemption. The final proof that the laws of science are inadequate as the basis of an interpretation of the universe, the final proof that the world is not to be conceived of as a machine or as a closed system, is the existence before our eyes of the Holiness that is lived in the fellowship of the Spirit and cannot be explained by any known laws. It is the transcendence of law. It is the breaking down of the sequence of cause and effect (that is our modern bondage of the law); it is the breaking out into the freedom of the Spirit. Such lives in themselves prove the limitation of science, and the reality of religion.

*See Sir Richard Livingstone, *The Future in Education*, esp: pp. 71-74