

# Faith and Thought

A Journal devoted to the study of the inter-relation  
of the Christian revelation and modern research

Vol. 91

Numbers 2 and 3

Winter 1959  
Summer 1960

---

REV. A. GARFIELD CURNOW

## Faith's Debt to Scepticism

### PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

- (1) *How scepticism is to be understood*
- (2) *Scepticism to be distinguished from—Atheism, Indifferentism, Secularism, Logical Positivism*
- (3) *Scepticism not necessarily anti-religious*
- (4) *Lecky's 'inductive reasoner'; The Book of Ecclesiastes*
- (5) *Peril of scepticism: Permanent suspension of judgment (J. S. Mill)*
- (6) *T. H. Huxley and Goethe's 'active scepticism' Function of scepticism transitional (Kant)*
- (7) *The New Testament 'locus classicus'*

### PART TWO: INVESTIGATION

*Scepticism has rendered service to Faith*

- (1) *In combating dogmatism*
- (2) *In encouraging humility before mystery*
- (3) *In contending for intellectual honesty*
- (4) *In countering superstition*
- (5) *In opposing fanaticism*
- (6) *In attacking obscurantism*
- (7) *In protesting against inadequate conceptions of God*
- (8) *In criticising the concept of an external spiritual authority*
- (9) *In pleading for toleration*

### PART THREE: SUMMATION

- (1) *Scepticism has called faith to a reconsideration of its own nature*
- (2) *Faith's lack of recognition of the debt it owes to scepticism*
- (3) *And of the cost of scepticism to many sceptics*
- (4) *Disquieting features of modern life; anti-rational tendencies in theology*
- (5) *Grounds for confidence in the future; outcome of sceptical enquiry illustrated by two recent examples*
- (6) *Signs that faith's debt to scepticism is at last being admitted*

## PART ONE

## INTRODUCTION

## (1)

Scepticism, like many other words commonly used in philosophical and religious discussion, is one that needs careful definition. In this essay it will be used in its original, classical, etymological sense. The word is from the Greek *σκέπτομαι*, *I consider*, and denotes 'the condition of the mind when reflecting, examining, or pondering subjects of thought. . . . Among the Greeks a *skeptikos*, "sceptic", was a thoughtful, enquiring person.'<sup>1</sup>

But this primal meaning of the word became lost in the course of time. Soon the notion of 'disbelief', which is quite a secondary meaning of the term, became associated with it, and before long in common parlance a sceptic came to signify an infidel, and scepticism infidelity.

In recent times there has been a welcome tendency to revert to the original meaning of the word. 'Scepticism', says A. W. Benn, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, 'was formerly used as a rather polite word for the more or less complete rejection of religious belief, but is now with great advantage being restored to its ancient signification of doubt and suspension of judgment as distinguished from complete denial'.<sup>2</sup>

## (2)

It would be idle, however, to claim that this restoration is as yet complete. It is all too true, as the latest edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* says, that 'in general acceptance scepticism suggests denial of current or customary beliefs'.<sup>3</sup> Because of this 'general acceptance' it is necessary, in any fairminded consideration of scepticism, to enter a caveat against such a negative conception of its nature and function. Genuine scepticism must be distinguished from militant atheism and from supine indifferentism; from secularism, with its implacable hostility to theological doctrine; and from the attitude of the scoffer

<sup>1</sup> *Chambers's Encyclopaedia*, s.v. Scepticism.

<sup>2</sup> *English Rationalism in the Nineteenth Century*, vol. i, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> s.v. Scepticism.

and the scornful, 'that cheap and flippant unbelief which is worse than earnest credulity'.<sup>1</sup>

Most of all, in view of the prevalence of this type of thinking at present, it must be distinguished from the scepticism inherent in Logical Positivism. Most logical positivists, or empiricists as some of them prefer to be called, hold a position identical with epistemological scepticism, according to which knowledge (except of sensory objects) is impossible. Others of the same school profess a more limited nihilism, doubting or denying only the possibility of knowledge of ultimate reality, or God.

## (3)

The majority of sceptics were critics of the effete systems they found cumbering the ground, rather than actual doubters of the possibility of knowledge in general, or of religious knowledge in particular. The notion that a sceptic is necessarily anti-religious is completely mistaken. The title of a book by Paul Elmer More, *The Sceptical Approach to Religion*, is very suggestive. There is a sceptical approach to religion as well as to irreligion. As has been well said, 'it is certainly not less possible to disbelieve religiously than to believe religiously'.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, again and again in the course of history the sceptic has been most nearly the true believer, repudiating the palpably false in his quest of the true. And thus it comes about that 'scepticism, as history has repeatedly shown, may be the basis of orthodoxy as well as of heresy'.<sup>3</sup>

## (4)

Lecky, in his *History of European Morals*, in describing 'the inductive reasoner', gives a veracious picture of the best type of sceptic. 'He looks with great favour upon the condition of a suspended judgment; he encourages men rather to prolong than to abridge it; he regards the tendency of the human mind to rapid and premature generalisations as one of its most fatal vices; he desires especially that that which is believed should not be so cherished that the mind should be indisposed to admit doubt, or, on the appearance of new arguments, to revise with impartiality its conclusions.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Silvanus Thompson, *A Not Impossible Religion*, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> John Morley, *Compromise*, p. 184.

<sup>3</sup> Basil Willey, *More Nineteenth Century Studies*, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Vol. ii, p. 192, 1911 edn.

It is interesting to note that scepticism, as thus understood, has its representative in the Bible in the anonymous writer of c. 200 B.C. who calls himself 'Qoheleth', the Preacher, and whose arresting tract is known as the Book of Ecclesiastes. 'He is no atheist, or scoffer at holy things', says Professor Dodd, 'but he has observed life coolly, and whether as a whole it justifies the assertions made by contemporary teachers of religion, he takes leave to doubt.'<sup>1</sup> Here is the essential note of genuine scepticism, and it is significant that the compilers of the Hebrew Canon of Scripture should have included this fascinating piece of writing in their corpus of books. May we not infer that they, at any rate, recognised the value of the sceptical spirit in religion?

## (5)

But even genuine scepticism has its perils. 'The danger of doubting is not only that it may become a fixed habit, but that interest may centre in the process itself as severed from the complex of normal mental activities and healthy enthusiasms and become a mania. . . . Its symptoms are a state of persistent intellectual unrest, a devouring metaphysical hunger, a morbid anxiety for mental satisfaction, accompanied not infrequently by a Hamlet-like paralysis of the will.'<sup>2</sup>

The danger indicated in this impressive warning—the nemesis of the *quid novi* of the Areopagus<sup>3</sup>—is a real one. But it must by no means be regarded as an inevitable feature of scepticism. It is true that some eminent sceptics do not seem to be alive to it. For example, John Stuart Mill declares that 'the rational attitude of a thinking mind towards the supernatural, whether in natural or in revealed religion, is that of scepticism, as distinguished from belief on the one hand, and from atheism on the other'.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that scepticism is a half-way house between belief and atheism, and apparently regards the half-way house not as a temporary lodging but as an abiding home. In other words, scepticism, according to Mill, consists in a permanent suspension of judgment, and leads to nothing beyond itself.

## (6)

Other sceptics, however, are fully conscious of the danger of which Mill seemed not to be aware. T. H. Huxley is an example. 'When I say

<sup>1</sup> *Authority of the Bible*, p. 184.

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, s.v. Doubt.

<sup>3</sup> See Acts xvii. 21.

<sup>4</sup> *Three Essays on Religion*, p. 242.

that Descartes consecrated doubt', he says in one of his lectures, 'you must remember that it was the sort of doubt which Goethe has called "the active scepticism, whose whole aim is to conquer itself"; and not that other sort . . . whose aim is only to perpetuate itself'.<sup>1</sup> We may be grateful to Huxley for giving publicity to this pregnant phrase of Goethe's. 'The active scepticism, whose whole aim is to conquer itself', is the scepticism which through the ages has played a noble part in the building up of faith. 'The serious thinker would always repeat the words of Kant that, in itself, scepticism is "not a permanent resting place for human reason". Its justification is relative and its function transitional.'<sup>2</sup>

One of the foremost of living poets corroborates this point of view. After saying that 'every man who thinks and lives by thought must have his own scepticism', Mr T. S. Eliot goes on to specify three varieties of scepticism: 'that which stops at the question, that which ends in denial, or that which leads to faith and which is somehow integrated into the faith which transcends it.'<sup>3</sup> Mr Eliot's third variety may be equated with Goethe's 'active scepticism' as the attitude which has had such a profoundly beneficial result in the age-long elucidation of truth.

## (7)

The essential principle of the active scepticism which leads to faith, its motto and marching orders, is in the apostolic words: 'Prove (i.e. test, examine, δοκιμάζω) all things; hold fast that which is good.'<sup>4</sup> The point to be noted is that the testing is not an end in itself, but a means of arriving at 'that which is good'. This *locus classicus* may be described as the New Testament's recognition of scepticism, and its encomium upon it.

<sup>1</sup> *Collected Essays*, vol. i, p. 170.

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. Scepticism.

<sup>3</sup> Preface to Everyman Edition of Pascal's *Pensées*, xv.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Thess. v. 21.

## PART TWO

## INVESTIGATION

Having thus stated how scepticism is to be understood, we will now enquire in what precise ways faith's debt to scepticism may be traced. It will be convenient to group our investigation under a number of headings which, while broadly distinguishable, are not mutually exclusive, for in a subject so extensive, and with such intimate inter-connections, some degree of overlapping is inevitable.

## (1)

*In combating dogmatism.* By dogmatism we do not mean that intensity of conviction on moral matters which is sometimes understood by the term, but rather 'the seemingly arrogant cocksureness with which some Christians appear to claim to lay hold on God . . . the slick, glib dogmatism of religion'.<sup>1</sup>

Such over-confident self-assurance, leading to assertions which purport wholly to exclude the possibility of error or inadequacy, has been common in the history of theological thought. Scepticism has rendered valuable service in pointing out that such assertions not only ignore the limitations of our human knowledge, but are, indeed, incompatible with real faith. For 'faith is not a matter of rational demonstration . . . were it so, it would cease to be faith . . . and become compulsory knowledge'.<sup>2</sup>

'None of our beliefs are quite true', writes Bertrand Russell; 'all have at least a penumbra of vagueness and error. The methods of increasing the degree of truth in our beliefs . . . consist in hearing all sides, trying to ascertain all the relevant facts, controlling our own bias by discussion with people who have the opposite bias, and cultivating a readiness to discard any hypothesis which has proved inadequate.'<sup>3</sup>

These are the methods of scepticism which, in puncturing the pretensions of dogmatic self-assurance and protesting against its extravagances, and by judicious reminders of the extent of our human ignorance and the relativity of our knowledge, have done much to preserve the essentials of truth, and to extend its frontiers. Pascal, the

<sup>1</sup> Geddes Macgregor, *Christian Doubt*, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> Basil Willey, *More Nineteenth Century Studies*, p. 100.

<sup>3</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Sceptical Essays*, p. 155.

greatest of Christian sceptics, was profoundly right when he affirmed that 'each must take a part, and side either with dogmatism or scepticism'.<sup>1</sup>

## (2)

*In encouraging humility before mystery.* Closely allied with the service of scepticism in combating dogmatism is its insistence on the necessity of conserving the element of mystery in Christian belief; its conviction that reverence and intellectual modesty, awe and wonder, are indispensable equipments for all who would spell out the secrets of the Deity. In this it was up against the grim and arid outlook which demands that everything shall be rigidly defined, reduced to cold prose, confined within the strait jacket of iron-bound systems.

Keats, in a famous passage, complains that

Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,  
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,  
Empty the haunted air, the gnomed mine,  
Unweave a rainbow.<sup>2</sup>

The crassly prosaic type of mentality here lampooned has had a banal effect on religion. One thinks, for instance, of books that discuss the most sublime themes with cool detachment and airy complacency and desiccated dryness, without a hint of the reverent shrinking from what Rudolf Otto calls 'the Numinous', which is mortal man's only fitting attitude to the Eternal. It is scepticism which, again and again, has rebuked such an approach to the things of God, in the spirit of the words of the Old Testament: 'Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.'<sup>3</sup> In thus emphasising that an indispensable factor in true religion is profound humility before mystery, scepticism has played an important part in the formation of a vital Christian faith.

## (3)

*In contending for intellectual honesty.* John Morley refers to 'the treacherous playing with words which underlies even the most vigorous efforts to make the phrases and formulae of the old creed hold the reality of new faith'.<sup>4</sup> A lamentable blot on much religious apologetics

<sup>1</sup> *Pensées*, Everyman Edition, p. 434.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus iii. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Lamia*.

<sup>4</sup> *On Compromise*, p. 157.

is here indicated. There is no need to condemn all attempts to 'modernise' the Christian creeds—to interpret their archaic language in harmony with advancing knowledge. But nothing can justify the sophistry, the juggling with words, which has characterised some of these attempts, and scepticism has been prompt in its protest against this 'theological thimble-rigging', as C. S. Lewis calls it.<sup>1</sup>

Scepticism's stern demand for intellectual honesty finds its Scriptural prototype in the Book of Job. 'Job cannot find the moral interpretation of his own sufferings and sorrows, and he will not allow his friends to put an interpretation on them at which his integrity revolts.'<sup>2</sup> In other words, we see in Job that call for honest speech and straightforward thinking and mental integrity which has been one of the marks of scepticism through the ages.

## (4)

*In countering superstition.* 'Beliefs, in the absence of intellectual scrutiny', says a modern writer, 'may easily degenerate into superstitions'.<sup>3</sup> This might have been stated more strongly. The tendency on the part of the uninstructed and uncritical believer to lapse into some form of superstition is evidenced on almost every page of the history of religion. Indeed, A. N. Whitehead goes so far as to say that Christianity itself 'would long ago have sunk into a noxious superstition, apart from . . . the effort of Reason to provide an accurate system of theology'.<sup>4</sup> And many who cannot see Christianity ever meeting this fate would agree with an equally eminent writer who says that 'sceptical enquiry' is the only certain way of 'protecting ourselves against dogmatic superstition'.<sup>5</sup>

But superstition is a peril to others than the unsophisticated believer, as may be seen from the case of Cardinal Newman. Sir Geoffrey Faber, in his sympathetic treatment of Newman in *Oxford Apostles*, says that 'he displayed a naive credulity', and refers to his 'puerile love of supernatural and miraculous stories'.<sup>6</sup> How could this be true of a mind of the calibre of Newman's—one of the keenest and subtlest of all time? Perhaps the key to the answer may be found in the rhetorical question

<sup>1</sup> *Miracles*, p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> Denney, *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 213.

<sup>3</sup> Elliott-Binns, *English Thought 1860-1900*, p. 360

<sup>4</sup> *Adventures of Ideas*, Pelican Edition, p. 157.

<sup>5</sup> F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> pp. 23, 442.

which Dean Inge quotes from one of his books: 'What is intellect but a fruit of the Fall?'<sup>1</sup> A man who could so regard the highest human faculty—for is not Reason the image of God in the human soul?—would *a priori* rule out of court, would indeed be incapable of, that open-minded enquiry, that critical investigation, that demand for and scrutiny of the evidence for all alleged facts, which has ever been one of the distinguishing marks of the spirit of scepticism.

## (5)

*In opposing fanaticism.* Fanaticism is described by a forthright writer as 'the curse and shadow of zeal, and from age to age the bane and shame of religion'.<sup>2</sup> Like many other bad things, it is the excess of a good thing. Enthusiasm, zeal for righteousness, passionate conviction leading to whole-hearted endeavour, neither heeding the wounds nor counting the cost—religion would have fared very badly in the world apart from this, its main driving power.

But close upon the heels of wholesome enthusiasm we trace, in every generation, the sinister approach of its attendant shadow. The *γλωσσολάλια*, or speaking with tongues of apostolic times; the crusades of the early centuries; the burning of witches in the middle ages; the gathering of excited crowds on hill-tops in the eighteenth century, instigated by predictions of the second coming of Christ; the various forms of corybantic Christianity in the nineteenth century—here are some instances of this fantastic and apparently ineradicable human weakness.

Against all these forms of misdirected zeal and exaggerated enthusiasm the voice of scepticism has been raised in steady protest. It has stressed the importance of that 'sweet reasonableness' (*ἐπιείκεια*)<sup>3</sup> which St Paul recommends to his converts, and which one of the best known of modern sceptics, Matthew Arnold, recommended to his nineteenth-century readers.<sup>4</sup> It has urged that visions, ecstasies, raptures, *et hoc genus omne*, belong to the abnormalities of religion, and that 'the fundamental religious experience is unspectacular'.<sup>5</sup> How much this sustained protest of scepticism has done to prevent the faith being

<sup>1</sup> *Christian Ethics and Modern Problems*, p. 120.

<sup>2</sup> Hensley Henson, *Christ and Nation*, p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians x. 1.

<sup>4</sup> See especially his *Culture and Anarchy*.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, p. 14.

swamped by eccentricities and burlesques it would be difficult to say, and probably impossible to exaggerate.

## (6)

*In attacking obscurantism.* Obscurantism, the sin of the closed mind, consists in the deliberate refusal to consider doubt; in regarding the amount of knowledge already attained as a fixed scheme, supernaturally certified and guaranteed against addition; in 'a shrinking deference to the *status quo*, not merely as having a claim not to be lightly dealt with, which every serious man concedes, but as being the last word and final test of truth and justice'.<sup>1</sup>

Some of our novelists have done good service by meeting it with ridicule. 'Whenever they tell me an idea's new', says a character in Sir Hugh Walpole's *The Cathedral*, 'that's enough for me: I'm down on it at once.'<sup>2</sup> There certainly is an amusing side to this sort of thing, but there is nothing amusing in the part obscurantism has played in the history of religion. It has been a terrible drag on the wheels of progress, and its consequences have often been tragic.

Sir Julian Huxley speaks of 'the incredible conservatism of the human mind in presence of new facts'.<sup>3</sup> This conservatism, as manifested by religious leaders in face of the discoveries of science, is as lamentable as it often has been ludicrous. When Newton first proclaimed the law of gravitation, the artillery of orthodox pulpits was levelled against him in angry consternation. Lightning rods were denounced by many preachers as an unwarrantable interference with God's use of lightning. Anaesthetics were forbidden to the lying-in room on the strength of the recorded sentence on errant mother Eve, and negro slavery was justified by reference to Noah's curse of Canaan.

So the sorry story proceeds from century to century, and scepticism has never intermitted its protest against such blindness, and its emphasis on the vital importance of open-mindedness, which has been well described as 'the fundamental religious disposition'.<sup>4</sup>

## (7)

*In protesting against inadequate conceptions of God.* The intelligent reader of the Bible will remember that what we have in the Old

<sup>1</sup> John Morley, *On Compromise*, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> p. 136.

<sup>3</sup> *Essays in Popular Science*, p. 164.

<sup>4</sup> Geddes Macgregor, *Christian Doubt*, p. 52.

Testament is a developing conception of God, beginning with the elementary and the imperfect, and gradually becoming more and more adequate as men's minds responded increasingly to the patient processes of the Divine education of the race.

It is all too true that 'when Scripture is sacrosanct, primitive errors are esteemed divine'<sup>1</sup>—as illustrated on the preceding page. But it is also true that when the Bible is seen in its own light and not in the light of false claims, these primitive errors, and in particular the early and inadequate conceptions of God, are seen for what they really are—mistakes and misunderstandings, the *disjecta membra* of obsolete notions and superseded ideas.

The work of one of the most celebrated of modern sceptics, Bernard Shaw, should here be mentioned, particularly his book *The Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God*. In this book, says Mr Maurice Colbourne, 'Shaw takes us through the Bible . . . pointing out . . . the successive revelations of God from the "Omnipotent Bogey Man" . . . to a braver idealization of a benevolent sage, or just judge, and affectionate father.'<sup>2</sup> Why this laudable endeavour should have led to the book being so fiercely assailed it is difficult to see. It is true that Shaw is unfortunate in some of his remarks, needlessly provocative, and sometimes in questionable taste. But, as Mr Colbourne says, 'it was the Almighty Fiend that Shaw and other free-thinkers offered to challenge'.<sup>3</sup> And in that they were abundantly justified, and have earned the gratitude of the many who, because of their efforts, have arrived at a truer conception of God.

## (8)

*In criticising the concept of an external spiritual authority.* The basal question in all philosophical discussion of the nature of faith concerns the ultimate principle of authority in religion. What is this ultimate principle? The two great historic beliefs in this connection both held that the authority is external—the Infallible Church and the Infallible Book. It would be a mistake roundly to condemn, or even harshly to criticise, either of these positions. Both may be regarded as serving for a season the purpose of God. And, indeed, Church and Bible have still a part to play as courts of appeal in theological and religious matters. The voice of the Church through the ages, as a repository of Christian

<sup>1</sup> Dougall and Emmett, *The Lord of Thought*, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> *The Real Bernard Shaw*, p. 165.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 30.

experience, and the testimony of the Bible, as the record of a thousand years of divine revelation—both are of immense weight, and of abiding importance.

But in the last resort, as Bishop Butler says, 'Reason is the only faculty we have wherewith to judge concerning anything, even revelation itself'.<sup>1</sup> This has been the unwavering testimony of religious scepticism through the years. It has steadily maintained that the ultimate spiritual authority must be sought, must have its 'seat', to use James Martineau's word, in the conscience and reason of man; enlightened, of course, by every external aid that may be available. It has fearlessly proclaimed that any external authority, unchecked by the suzerainty of reason, is bound to degenerate in the course of time into a mere talisman, with all the attendant dangers of magic and superstition. It has pointed out that revelation, while divine in its origin, has been mediated through reason—through the mind of man whether in the fellowship of the Church or in the writers of the Bible—and must be interpreted, tested, and understood by reason. 'The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord.'<sup>2</sup>

## (9)

*In pleading for toleration.* The celebrated appeal of Cromwell to the clamorous disputants about him, 'I beseech you in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken', was the authentic voice of scepticism. Believing that truth is a many-sided jewel, and that no man can see all its facets, it urges all controversialists to see their opponent's point of view.

J. A. Froude says of John Keble: 'He could not place himself in the position of persons who disagreed with him, and thus he could never see the strong points of their arguments.'<sup>3</sup> The excellent qualities of men like Keble—devout, spiritually intense, saintly—must not hide from us the fact that many of them were bigots. They were so overwhelmingly sure of the rightness of their own beliefs that they were convinced of the wrongness of all those who differed from them. The results of this outlook are plainly written on some of the darkest pages of history.

A modern philosopher declares that 'tolerance is as serious an evil as exclusiveness if it cuts the nerve of effort to try to distinguish between

<sup>1</sup> *Analogy of Religion*, part 2, chap. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs xx. 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Short Studies on Great Subjects*, vol. iv, p. 267.

the more true and the less true'.<sup>1</sup> Tolerance of this sort—undiscriminating tolerance—has never been a feature of the best type of scepticism. It has always been keenly aware of the difference between the more true and the less true. But it has always refused to treat with contumely the sincere holders of 'the less true'. And it has always set its face against any and every form of persecution because of a man's beliefs or lack of beliefs. It holds that 'the faith of a living Church must be strong enough not merely to tolerate but to encourage varieties of emphasis and expression'.<sup>2</sup> The good effect of this persistent witness of scepticism is being seen today in a better understanding between the Churches, and between the Churches and science.

## PART THREE

## SUMMATION

## (I)

Lecky, in his best-known book, describes what happened in the middle ages when the long night of medievalism was drawing to a close. 'The spirit of ancient Greece had arisen from the tomb. . . . The human mind, starting beneath her influence from the dust of ages, cast aside the bonds that had enchained it, and . . . remoulded the structure of its faith. The love of truth, the passion for freedom, the sense of human dignity, which the great thinkers of antiquity had inspired . . ., blended with those sublime moral doctrines and with those conceptions of enlarged benevolence which are at once the glory and the essence of Christianity, introduced a new era of human progress . . . and created a purer faith.'<sup>3</sup>

This eloquent passage is a faithful delineation of the influence of scepticism through the generations, as indicated in outline in the previous section of this essay. Scepticism has performed for faith the supreme service of recalling it to a radical reconsideration of its own nature.

Professor Basil Willey, in his *More Nineteenth Century Studies*, in which he deals with a number of Victorian figures whom he describes as 'a group

<sup>1</sup> D. E. Trueblood, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 223.

<sup>2</sup> F. R. Barry, *The Relevance of Christianity*, p. 224.

<sup>3</sup> *Rationalism in Europe*, vol. i, pp. 241-2, 1911 edn.

of honest doubters'—Tennyson, J. A. Froude, John Morley, F. W. Newman, Mark Rutherford, and the seven contributors to *Essays and Reviews*—says that 'if faith today has recovered tone and confidence, it owes this largely to the work of these pioneers, who compelled it to abandon many impossible positions'.<sup>1</sup>

Not only to these particular pioneers, of course. Concerning a more illustrious name than either of them—Voltaire, perhaps the greatest of all sceptics—it has been said that 'he mocked and he destroyed, but he was probably as necessary to the well-being of Christianity as the Reformation'.<sup>2</sup> Jowett of Balliol is equally emphatic. He declared that the famous Frenchman 'had done more good than all the Fathers of the Church put together'.<sup>3</sup>

## (2)

But it cannot be said that faith has been quick to recognise the debt it owes to scepticism. John Morley has all too much reason for complaining of 'the thanklessness of Belief to the Disbelief which has purged and exalted it'.<sup>4</sup> One reason for this is suggested by the reference to Voltaire as a destroyer. The destructive activities of sceptics generally have aroused understandable antagonism in the supporters of religion. Such antagonism is not difficult to sympathise with; it is not easy to see cherished landmarks and ancient bulwarks being swept away. But the champions of faith ought to have seen (a few of them did) that there was a positive aim in the destroying. Sceptics certainly have been destroyers, but those whom we have in mind did not destroy for the sake of destroying.

'The temper which would "utterly destroy" the idols is not admirable', writes Professor Silvanus Thompson; 'better far convince mankind that they are idols'.<sup>5</sup> That is what the religiously minded sceptic sets out to do. Archdeacon Hare said of Arnold of Rugby: 'He was an iconoclast, at once zealous and fearless in demolishing the reigning idols, and at the same time animated with a reverent love for the ideas which those idols carnalise and stifle'.<sup>6</sup> The same thing is true of many others who, like Dr Arnold, were critics and doubters. They demolished the idols in order that the ideas might have a better chance of surviving and flourishing.

<sup>1</sup> p. 5.<sup>3</sup> *Recollections*, vol. i, p. 97.<sup>5</sup> *A Not Impossible Religion*, p. 12.<sup>2</sup> A. Noyes, *Voltaire*, p. 632.<sup>4</sup> *Voltaire*, p. 32.<sup>6</sup> Stanley's *Life of Arnold*, p. III.

## (3)

But while we may feel a degree of sympathy with faith's apprehensiveness of the destructive aspect of scepticism, it is not so easy to forgive its blindness to the *cost* of scepticism to many sceptics. It ought to have perceived that they have often had to pay a bitter price for their temerity in challenging the accepted order of things, and given them credit for their courage and self-sacrifice, even if it considered them mistaken and wrong-headed.

They have had to face opposition, opprobrium, ostracism, persecution, imprisonment, torture and death. And when they have been spared these inflictions, they have often had to undergo the agony of that 'dark night of the soul' of which the supreme instance in literature is in the Book of Job. The phrase denotes that profound despondency, that abysmal despair, into which many an earnest seeker after truth, baffled in his search, was plunged. Harrowing indeed are some of the records of the sufferings of these martyrs of their own integrity. We might have expected that the pathos of such a position would have aroused compassion. But the annals of the past make it clear that it rarely did.

## (4)

Our study so far has necessarily meant an almost exclusive concern with the past. What of the present and the prospects of the future?

It is often said that the twentieth century is an Age of Unreason. There is much justification for this indictment. There seems to be a recrudescence of irrationalism nowadays, not least in religion. One serious indication of this, of many that might be mentioned, is the anti-rational tendencies in modern theological thought, stemming from Kierkegaard, and seen in contemporary writers like Berdyaev and Karl Barth. These tendencies are perhaps to some extent a swing-over from the callow liberalism of two generations ago, and will in their turn be superseded. Even so, the continued vogue of Barth in particular, the apparently numerous readers of his portentous volumes, is a disquieting feature of our day.

## (5)

But however disquieting some features of present-day life and thought may be, there is no need to fear the future. *Magna est veritas et prevalebit*. A robust characteristic of scepticism is its conviction that

truth need fear no investigation, can stand up to any enemy, and indeed thrives on opposition and attack. In the immortal words of the *Areopagitica*: 'Let Truth and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worst in a free and open encounter?'

That faith has everything to gain and nothing to lose from sceptical enquiry is evidenced by not a few noteworthy individual experiences in recent times. Two may be cited by way of illustration.

Some years ago an accomplished young American scientist, definitely agnostic in his views, set out to write a book which would disprove once for all the Resurrection of Christ. But when he had sifted the evidence he was convinced of its veracity, and the result was Frank Morison's *Who Moved the Stone?* perhaps the ablest defence of the historicity of the Resurrection in our generation.

Viscount Samuel says he wrote his *Belief and Action* 'for the sake of clarifying my own ideas'. And this was the result: 'At the end I found I had come a long way from the negations of my earlier days; was less of an agnostic; definitely anti-materialistic; convinced that the universe is charged with mind and purpose.'<sup>1</sup>

These two contemporary examples of the outcome of sceptical enquiry, when honestly and courageously pursued, call to mind a more famous instance in the nineteenth century, immortalised by Tennyson:

He fought his doubts and gathered strength,  
He would not make his judgment blind,  
He faced the spectres of the mind  
And laid them: thus he came at length  
To find a stronger faith his own.<sup>2</sup>

That the pathway to a strong faith is through doubt; indeed, that doubt (or scepticism, for the two words are synonymous) is an essential element in real faith, must have been the conviction in the mind of a lesser-known poet when he wrote, in a striking couplet, what may be described as the whole philosophy of the relation between doubt and faith:

The man that feareth, Lord, to doubt,  
In that fear doubteth Thee.<sup>3</sup>

(6)

Seeing that these things are so, the protagonists of faith will do well to treat sceptics not as enemies but as friends. They should give heed

<sup>1</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 251.

<sup>2</sup> *In Memoriam*, p. xcvi.

<sup>3</sup> George Macdonald, *Disciple*.

to the wise words of Bernard Shaw: 'A Church which has no place for Freethinkers: nay, which does not inculcate and encourage free-thinking with a complete belief that thought, when really free, must by its own law take the path that leads to the Church's bosom, not only has no future in modern culture, but obviously has no faith in the valid science of its own tenets.'<sup>1</sup>

There are welcome signs that the truth of this pronouncement is being increasingly recognised, even by the Roman Catholic community, if we may judge from a refreshingly candid statement by one of its members in a recent book: 'Heretics were sent, as St Augustine tells us, so that we should not remain in infancy, and those Catholics who never come into their company remain in infancy. The Catholic machine, when it is unchallenged, becomes corrupt, just as much as does the machine of State or party.'<sup>2</sup>

Statements such as this give us hope for the future. The debt which faith owes to scepticism, long ignored, or even undreamt of, is at last being admitted. A lady writer refers rather sarcastically to 'the comfortable medieval conviction that reason and faith are interdependent and that one reinforces the other'.<sup>3</sup> This is no longer a mere medieval notion, outdated and obsolete. That reason and faith are interdependent, and that one does reinforce the other, is a growing modern persuasion.

Long ago an English poet wrote these lines, and an increasing number in our own day would agree that they express the essential truth of the matter:

Reason is our Soul's left hand, Faith her right;  
By these we reach Divinity.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Preface to *St Joan*, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Hollis, *Along the Road to Frome*, p. 227.

<sup>3</sup> *Hibbert Journal*, January 1950, p. 169.

<sup>4</sup> *Poems of John Donne*, Ed. Grierson, vol. i, p. 189.