

Gains for Religious Thought

By Borden Bowne

There is matter for congratulation to every thoughtful man when the spiritual ideas which underlie life and society become more fully illuminated, or recover from some temporary eclipse. The present is such a time. Religion has a far better rational standing today than it had a generation ago. We were then in a state of intellectual uneasiness, and there was a general suspicion that the foundations of religion had been undermined, if not destroyed. The new wine of science and evolution had gone to the head, and produced both woes and babblings. New facts also crowded upon us daily, and new interpretations were demanded. Great correlation of the physical forces, and the doctrines of evolution also, both biological and cosmical, demanded great changes in our way of thinking. Mental chaos resulted and everything seemed to be uncertain.

It was inevitable that at such a time religion should seem to be imperiled. To the unreflective mind, every truth seems dangerous until it becomes familiar. A new idea often demands changes in both thought and action. It may therefore be a source of confusion, and dislike as well. The millennium could not be suddenly brought in without arousing great hostility from the multitudinous vested interests which would be endangered thereby, and multitudes would find their occupation gone. So if the final truth were suddenly presented to us, it would meet with antagonism from the mind that is opposed to the pain of a new thought and also from the vested mental interests that dread new departures.

The great source of the disturbance of that time, apart from the horror of change natural to some minds, was the lack of adequate philosophical equipment. The new facts were interpreted on the basis of a crude sense realism, and this view has always had in it a strong tendency toward materialism and atheism. but, now that we have a better philosophy, we have come to live in peace with the facts once thought destructive, and even to welcome them as valuable additions to knowledge. As a result of this clearer thinking, we seldom hear of conflicts between science and religion, and evolution is ceasing to be the solvent of all mysteries, and the source of all knowledge.

Hence religion itself is now cordially admitted as a great human fact, and not an adventitious outcome of animal needs changed by association. This latter view was long maintained by the empirical philosophers, but it has finally passed away. It was formerly held by the empirical school that if we would understand what a thing is, we must see what it has come from, and we must trace its earliest beginnings to get its essential nature and meaning. When this was applied to the higher moral and spiritual conception of man it led to the claim that animal sensations as being the earliest temporal manifestations are the raw material out of which all else is built. And then the conclusion was drawn that religion is essentially sublimated animalism, and has no occasion to be proud of itself, and would not be proud if it understood its lowly origin. But these good people were the victims of picture-thinking and mistaken physical analogies. In the case of any growing thing, where there is a real evolution, the true nature is never to be sought at the beginning, but at the end. Its latest phases and products are the truest revelation of its nature. Not in the seed but in the full grown tree does the nature of the tree find adequate expression.

This consideration definitely sets aside all of those supposed deductions of the religious nature from animal selfishness. Such deductions, when criticism is awake, are merely descriptions of the temporal order of the unfolding of human nature. This order of unfolding cannot be understood through the earliest manifestations, but only in the highest results to which developing humanity has grown. Not the roots, but the fruits, it is said, tell what the thing is. And the roots which are to produce these fruits must be roots which are already under the law of the fruits. We may then accept with entire composure anything which is historically established respecting the earliest phases of the religious life, or of any of the sciences, but in all of these cases we regard the latest outcome as the most characteristic product of the human nature which is in process. If, then, we would know what mind is, we need not, as Mr. Mill advises us, "look into the mind of the infant as it lies in the nurse's arms", but into literature and science and civilization. Equally, if we would know what the religious nature is, we need not grope, except as a matter of curiosity, among the dreams and superstitions of the earliest men, but should rather look into the great systems which religion has developed. On these accounts we no longer look upon religion as an adventitious annex to human life, but rather as its summit and crown, as that for and toward which humanity moves, and in which it finds its highest development and glory.

Religion, then, is one of the great human manifestations or products of the cosmic movement. It is to be studied therefore without prejudice and with an open and sympathetic mind. In bringing about the better understanding of this matter, one helpful thing has been the partition of territory between science and philosophy. There are two distinct fields of inquiry respecting the facts of experience. Science discovers, describes, and registers the facts, with their spatial and temporal laws; philosophy studies their causality and significance. There are certain uniformities in experience, and these can be discovered only by observation and experiment. If we would know the arrangement of the geological strata we must look and see.

Whether we like such facts or not, and whether we can make anything out of them or not, there they are, and there they will remain no matter what bends or breaks. These facts are not matters of authority or of like and dislike, but of observation and experiment and evidence. Such facts are indeed stubborn things, and no gates of ecclesiastical councils or general assemblies can prevail against them. If authority denounces such facts, sooner or later authority has to surrender, with dishonor. Moreover in this work of studying the experienced order, science does invaluable service for it is just this knowledge of the way things hang together that gives our control of nature and makes civilization possible. We cannot then overestimate the importance of science in its own field. But in all this science is only descriptive not truly explanatory. For final insight and explanations we must pass into the philosophical field of causality and meaning. Both questions must be asked and answered for the full satisfaction of the reason. Neither question has yet been fully answered, but by keeping them distinct, and seeing the equal legitimacy of both, science and philosophy may dwell together in peace.

But it may occur to us that this question of causality is very simple. We see objects about us in space, and they seem the only causes of change. But both scientific and philosophical thought has long since found it impossible to rest in the visible and tangible bodies of experience. Of course we can handle and measure and otherwise deal with these bodies, but their essential nature remains obscure. A material thing is easily described in terms of sensible experience, and in such terms there is no mystery about it, but when we ask what matter itself is, we soon find ourselves groping. According to the physicists and chemists, matter is composed of molecules, which in turn are built of atoms, and nowadays these atoms themselves seem to be particles of something still more minute. And when inquiry is continued we are told of still deeper mysteries, such as vortex rings in an ether and hence we conclude that the things about us are not proper substances, but processes of an energy beyond them.

At last we are led, in the words of Spencer, to recognize the "one absolute certainty that all things proceed." However just this conclusion may be, these facts serve to show that the problem of causation has deeper mysteries in it than we at first suspect. We are still sure that causation is in play as the ground of physical changes, but we seem compelled to locate it, not in the apparent things but in some basal energy beyond them, on which they depend and by which they are coordinated. We need only to reflect upon the facts of wireless telegraphy to see that there is a great realm of invisible energy all about us, and to get some hint of how it is that both science and philosophy have come to regard the facts of the visible world as phenomenal of an invisible power behind them; so that visible things are no longer hard and fast existences, but rather functions of an invisible energy.

In this view, which is fast becoming universal among thinkers, the physical and mechanical causes of crude naturalism disappear altogether, and in their place we have one supreme and all-embracing causality, of which the physical order is but the continuous manifestation. The latter has no ground of existence in itself, but ever depends on the power beyond it, and philosophy has come to see that this power must be theistically interpreted if we would save both. Here we have a result of very great value to religion. Atheism and materialism of the traditional types are definitely and finally set aside as marks of belated intelligence. In naturalistic thought, nature is the rival of God. Nature does a great many things, and God does the rest, if there be any rest. Traditional religious thought has shared the same view, and thus nature was continually threatening to displace God. God was not to be appealed to until nature has been shown to be inadequate.

Hence the dismay in popular religious thought at each new extension of the realm of law, every such extension being regarded as subtracted from the control of God. But this dismay vanishes entirely when it is seen that God is the "Infinite and Eternal Energy from which all things proceed", or that, in the Pauline phrase, "in Him we live and move and have our being." Now nature is no rival of God, but the form of his manifestation. The laws of nature are His modes of working. The facts of nature are the incarnation of His thought.

This is all that religion has ever really cared to maintain. It insists upon Divine causality in the world, but is not concerned to affirm any special method. Let the method be what it may, so long as God is at work. If God creates light by His fiat, it is well and worthy. If he distributes His causality through the ages, it is also well and worthy, and perhaps better and worthier. Religion can adjust itself to either method so long as God is the agent in both.

The form and method of cosmic causality are matters of science. The nature and purpose of causality belongs to philosophy and religion. The religious value of this distinction is seen in the complete disappearance of the alarm long felt over the doctrine of evolution. It was for a time fancied that evolution had shown that something that was not much of anything could produce a method of a causality. Things were not made all at once, or perfect from the start. The only question of religious interest here is: What is the power that is at work, and does the work show a progressive tendency? If the answer be in the affirmative, religion is satisfied. The fancy that biological evolution identifies the higher and lower is illusory: it only means that individuals distant from one another in a line of descent would be so unlike that we should not think of classing them together. But this in no way identifies individuals, or tells us what the power or purpose may be that determines the appearance of individuals in this graded scale of being.

As already said, religion is interested only in the doctrine of causality, and if a Divine causality be maintained it is content to accept any method which the facts may suggest. Many religious teachers indeed have come to view evolution as a valuable aid to faith. The disturbance over this doctrine, which for a time was great, was due entirely to confusing the question of causality with the question of method. Evolution was looked upon as demonstration of atheism. And the principle of the survival of the fittest was used to justify all manner of animalism and inhumanity in individual and social life.

It was not surprising, then, that there should have been alarm over the doctrine. But as soon as the question of method was distinguished from the question of causality, it was seen that the atheistic and materialistic interpretations of the doctrine were baseless, and evolution is now fast taking its place as one of the great evidences of intelligence in the universe. Any evolution that is anything more than mere kaleidoscope change is movement toward a goal and hence teleological. The essential thing in the inductive argument for intelligence consists in this fact, this forward look, observed in cosmic processes. The forward look is the specific and essential mark of intellectual causality which is distinguished thereby from all mechanical causality. The latter is simply a resultant of past conditions, and is not movement toward an end, while the former looks to things to come. When, then, the whole universe is comprised in a movement toward a goal the argument for intelligence is vastly more impressive than the argument from the minor contrivances of Paley.

The same is true in the religious life itself. Here, too, the idea of a fixed order of law which we are to study and obey is working a reform. Religion also has become more wholesome. And we are no longer content to find God only in signs and wonders, but also in the world that He has made in life and history, in reason and science. We find Him everywhere and in all things, but working everywhere according to dependable law.

There has been a kind of fancy even in Christian thought that God is to be found in the inner life, pre-eminently in the anarchic and anomalous, instead of in the orderly movements of reason and conscience and the moral will. But with this insight into spiritual law the matter is changed. In the inner life as well as in the outer world we avail ourselves of the order of law and the various means of influence which that order reveals. We no longer view a thing as un-Divine because it is natural, but rather seek through the natural to reach and realize the Divine. This conception, which is comparatively new, will be of vast significance for religious education and the religious living, and for the upbuilding of the Kingdom of God on earth.

The universality of law and its subordination to purpose are to be the keynote of the religious life hereafter. Or we might say that the recognition of the law of cause and effect in religion is to be the keynote. And this great result we owe to scientific study, and when we combine this with the immanence of God, we have no longer law as a banisher but as a revealer of God, while we take in strict literalness St. Paul's words, "in Him we live, move and have our being."

Another factor of religious gain and one scarcely less important is a better philosophy of religious belief. This we now consider.

It is a traditional superstition that nothing is to be believed which is not either self-evident or technically demonstrated. This rests on the further assumption that belief is, or always should be, a product of formal logical processes of the syllogistic type. With this conception it is easy to throw doubt on anything we dislike. For no matter of fact admits of technical proof. It says of our higher religious conceptions that they may be pretty or pleasing, but are not proved. Now in our time the revolt against this has been definite and final. The view has not been unknown in philosophic circles since Kant set forth the primacy of the practical reason, but it has been more extensively and emphatically taught in recent years.

It is now seen that life and action are deeper than logical processes. that immediate premises are behind all inferences. that thought cannot begin until life furnishes the data. and that there is nothing deeper in cognition or life than the fundamental needs interests and instincts of the mind. If these fail us there is nothing left. This is the doctrine of pragmatism. which needs. indeed some guarding lest it deny intellect its full rights. but nevertheless it expresses an important truth. Belief has a vital and practical root rather than a logical and speculative one. Interest is the driving force and guide of intellect. All our thinking rests upon a teleological foundation. It springs essentially from the need of self-realization and self-preservation. and not from any compulsion of the objective facts.

Our beliefs are growths rather than deductions. They are lines of least resistance along which thought moves. They are often simply the vital instincts of the soul thrown into propositional form. They are the principles by which men live and without which they cannot live their best life. The proof of such beliefs rests entirely on the energy of the life they express. and on their power to further that life in practice. They meet our mental needs and they work well in life. This is the pragmatic test of truth. and for concrete truth there is no deeper or surer test than this. Indeed. every theory of knowledge implicitly assumes this test. If we are theists, we can hardly believe that the truth will work mischief. If we are evolutionists and believers in natural selection. we must equally believe that these evolved beliefs are the best adjusted to reality as being the outcome of that evolving and selecting process whose function is to eliminate the false and preserve the true.

This result also has great religious value. It changes the venue in the case of religious belief from the court of logic and speculation to the court of life, action, and history. We now see that we have to trust our nature or instincts in order to move at all. If we distrust our cognitive instincts, science and intellect perish. If we distrust our moral and spiritual instincts, morals and religion perish. And they have the right of way until they are discredited. The only way of reaching living conviction in any concrete case is to throw ourselves upon our instincts and work them out in life, and let the resulting life and harmony be their own justification.

Thus, the old rationalization is finally discredited and religion has a free field for manifesting itself in life and action. The argument is no longer syllogistic but biologic and pragmatic. What is the soul made for as it reveals itself in its history? What does its highest life demand as the centuries of experience show? The decisive evidences of religion are to be sought along this line. Philosophy has done important negative work in clearing the field of a swarm of crude dogmatisms that hinder faith, but we ourselves must do the positive work of incarnating religious faith in the appropriate life. This is now the great need, and for this work the field was never clearer than it is today. Technically, of course, our faith does not admit of demonstration; neither does any other faith or unfaith. But it does admit of being lived, and when it is lived, our souls see that it is good, and we are satisfied that it is Divine.

NOTE: Because the Hibbert Journal began publishing in 1902, this must have been written towards the end of Bowne's life, since he died April 1910.

The references to matter and energy (Einstein 1905) show how Bowne was avid about knowing the latest science, and incorporating it into his views.

I love the science describes; philosophy explain dichotomy.

From the text:

“We cannot then overestimate the importance of science in its own field. But in all this science is only descriptive, not truly explanatory. For final insight and explanations we must pass into the philosophical field of causality and meaning. Both questions must be asked and answered for the full satisfaction of the reason. Neither question has yet been fully answered, but by keeping them distinct, and seeing the equal legitimacy of both, science and philosophy may dwell together in peace.”

Anthropocentric and Anthropomorphic Attitudes Hinder Bowne

References to evolution are interesting for their not taking the evolutionary heuristic to be some grand underlying paradigm working everywhere and in everything.

He does assign a progressive interpretation to evolution, asserting a positive goal toward higher and better things for mankind. He doesn't take this as far as Lyman Abbott, Henry Drummond and President Theodore Roosevelt, but the idea that evolution is of God, favors Christians, and is oriented by an anthropomorphically oriented Deity toward goals of humanlike value is evident.

T.J.L. 11/19/2025

