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## RELIGION AND BELIEF

by  
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It is a great privilege to be associated with Professor Blanshard in this venture of philosophic exchange. I have been asked to participate as a "practitioner", which I assume suggests that I "do" both philosophy and religion and should make personal responses on both topics, emphasizing the religious aspect since therein lies my chief competence. As a modern person I am, of course, in basic agreement with the thesis that religion needs reason and that belief should be made as rational as possible. How far reason can establish or disprove religious belief is another matter, but with the statement that it is necessary to guard against error and too-easy belief I am in complete accord. Further, I am particularly pleased to accept the thesis that it is an ethical responsibility to believe the truth. I understand Professor Blanshard to be saying that even when false beliefs do not lead to harmful effects they are still ethically wrong and reprehensible because they violate the obligation to seek the truth which, because he is rational, every human being has. In so far as error can be identified or the truth known it behooves all men to avoid the former and hold to the latter.

Turning now to the paper itself, my first point at issue is that of the meaning of the word "belief". Exactly how it is being used seems to me somewhat unclear. Much of the time it appears that "belief" for Professor Blanshard carries with it the assumption of certainty, so that one holding a belief in religion, for instance, is convinced beyond doubt or question that the belief is true and therefore he should resist any rational investigation of it. In the latter part of the essay, it seems that dogma is identified with belief. Further, Professor Blanshard states at one point that he would have no objection to the beliefs in religion if they were considered to be hypotheses and probabilities, but that is not how religious men consider them. Let us look briefly at these points.

As normally used, the word "belief" does not imply certainty, for when certainty is achieved, we have knowledge, not belief. A good dictionary definition of belief is: "confidence in the truth or existence of something not immediately susceptible to rigorous proof." In believing, then, one accepts, he has confidence, but he knows that what he accepts is less than certain and is not fully demonstrated. If, as the paper suggests we should do, one accepts only as far as the evidence proves and never beyond it, there would be no belief, only certainty. The biblical statement, "I believe, help thou mine unbelief" illustrates the point sufficiently.

It follows, therefore, that belief and dogma are not identical. The former is an assertion of acceptance or confidence, but beyond certainty; the latter consists of doctrines or creeds asserted to be true and accepted as such on the basis of authority. Belief always includes an element of tentativeness, a recognition of less-than-complete certainty. If this is a valid statement, then beliefs, even for the one holding them, are in fact hypotheses and probabilities and are known to be such even when one has taken the "leap of faith" into them. It is true that dogma does not admit of such tentativeness and the references to the early Church Fathers have

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to do with dogmas that may not be rejected. But to consider this question further would be to change our subject from the ethics of belief to the ethics of dogma.

Faith also, like belief, contains an element of tentativeness and uncertainty. To state 'this is my faith' is very different from saying 'this is certain'. As indicated in Professor Blanshard's paper, faith has belief at its center but is a more inclusive term, containing also trust and commitment. Faith is an act both of the mind and the will.

It is several times stated in the paper that the rational, ethical man should not believe beyond the evidence, whether in religion or elsewhere. Might one properly inquire whether the very nature of science is not such that it holds beliefs and that it is these which make for its creativity? True, the beliefs of science, which we call hypotheses, are held tentatively. Yet this is frequently forgotten, since so long as no evidence to the contrary is discovered, the hypotheses are held to be "laws" and accepted as "true" much as religious men hold to their beliefs. In fact, is it not also true that there is no single "law" of science which is known to be certainly and finally valid? In asking this, I am not losing sight of the fact that science stands ready to change its theories as soon as evidence requiring the change is found. Evidence in religion that clearly contradicts its beliefs is much harder to come by. My point, in spite of this, is that if we must follow the evidence only so far as it takes us, then we have no basis for speaking of final "truth" either in religion or in science. Both yield only beliefs of differing orders of probability, for none of what is believed can be held to be certain without qualification. Carrying the point to its extreme, is it not true that there is only one statement which can be accepted as true without qualification, and that this is Descartes' "cogito," which is possibly best stated, as William James does, as "the truth that the present phenomenon of consciousness exists"? If all this is accepted, then the assumption that we *do* have sufficient evidence for truth, so that reason can move forward smoothly without ever getting beyond the evidence, is found to be a demand that can never be fulfilled, either in religion or in areas of other knowledge. Man finds no resting place in his constant search for that certainty which he longs to grasp.

### II

Let us next briefly investigate the bases of religious belief. Religion, we find, is related to a very different reality than is science, for in religious and philosophical terminology, science studies the dependent and contingent world, the world of constant change, the created world, while religion is concerned with the Creator, God, the independent and necessary Being, the ground of all, and with His relation to man. God is not an object, but is the foundation of values and ideals and the source of man's possible happiness. Science and religion exist, then, on two different planes and the sort of evidence and the methods of acquiring evidence appropriate to the one are not applicable to both. The knowledge of science begins in what the senses make available to thought, and without the senses there could be no thought or knowledge. We are told that nature answers "yes" or "no" to our questions. It is we, the investigators, who ask the questions of nature and exercise control over it as we achieve knowledge. But just as God is other than nature so is religion other than science, although it, too, starts in experience. As ultimate,

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eternal, creative Being. God stands in the superior position in relation to us in our search for truth about Him. Humility and openness are required on the part of man. We learn of our fellow human being only as he "opens" himself to us and "reveals" in that openness the kind of person he is. As a person, he cannot be studied as an object of physical nature might be examined. Our knowledge of God is gained in a somewhat similar way. Only as we are in the proper receptive attitude before Him and as He reveals Himself to our minds and wills can we arrive at genuine experience of Him. And again, as our ability to know another person depends to a large degree upon our own spiritual qualities and our sensitivity toward him, in a similar way God's revelation to man will depend partly upon man's own capacity for "taking in" the truths of God. The "I-Thou" relation is a very different one from that of a scientist to a subhuman object.

All of the great religions arise in intense experiences men have had of the Divine. These men are the great prophets and mystics. They become aware of God's reality and in their experience know much of Him, but they know also that the God they experience remains a mystery beyond words, even as experienced. To the prophets comes a message from God to His people, and he and the people are required to give humble obedience. Mystics, on the other hand, find in their sense of oneness with God and their awareness of Him, their center of meaning and value. For both, the ultimate has made Himself known and has shown the way of life which leads to "salvation". Through revelation of God, meaning, demand, and certitude concerning the goodness of being have clearly been made manifest. Man finds that the search for the way to the goal of life has been answered.

The words used to describe such experiences and the effects of these experiences are thus seen to be very different indeed from man's experience of nature. The prophets and mystics are the "seers" of our race. There have been only a few great ones (as there also have been few great philosophers) — men such as Abraham, Moses, the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, Mohammad, the Hindu and Buddhist mystics. If even a score of these men had not lived, human life would be greatly different, for it is they who have provided the foundations of religions and cultures: the Jewish, Christian Muslim, and Hindu, for example. The great majority of men have not received comparable revelation, yet most human beings and possibly all have at times experienced the deep longing, the "restlessness of heart" (which Augustine understood to be man's need of God), the times of deep infilling and inspiration, and the sense of demand being laid upon them, which are sufficiently similar in kind to the experiences of the prophets and mystics to make it possible for these modern men to recognize in the earlier figures their truth and authority.

It is necessary also to point out that each of these men could understand God only in terms consistent with himself, terms which reflected his personality and the influence of his age and culture, for both the God revealing himself and the one receiving this revelation appear in the declaration made by the experiencer. Moses' description of God is not that of the Second Isaiah nor that of Jesus. God did not change, but Moses was not Deutero-Isaiah nor Jesus. Yet they all spoke of God, and spoke truth of Him, even if more or less fully.

My point is that religious experience is required in order to have religious belief and faith, much as sensory experience is basic to science. Reason enters into

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religious experience in order to examine it, to remove contradictory declarations, to find its relation to other human experience. Therefore, reason cannot hold a veto over religious experience as such. It stands independent even though reason may interpret and relate it. The insight into God arising from experience cannot be reached by reason, yet reason has its highly important work to perform. Those who attempt to interpret rationally and in unified form what has come to us from the "seers" are the theologians who, of course, assume the original revelation to be true as a matter of faith and even of dogma and attempt to give a coherent account of God, the world, man's purposes, an account which is logically relevant to the central truth.

Christianity as it was expressed during the Middle Ages and since can be understood in this way. It demanded that the Scriptures, the dogmas, and the creeds be accepted without question, believing that they carried the essential aspects of the original revelation from Christ. These ruled out error, it was believed, and they provided the a priori basis of thought for those who would study faith by reason. The great thinkers, whether Thomas, Augustine, Erigena, Anselm, or even Ockham, agreed that the faith as thus given was true. Only if they had been prepared to surrender their status as Christians could they have done otherwise, for had they done so they would have separated themselves from the revelation and as theologians would have had no faith from which reason could begin its work. The basic truths of Christianity as thus accepted were not the product of reason but were accepted as given, in and through revelation. This was the ultimate faith of Christians during the Middle Ages.

Each of the great theologians, starting with these elements of faith, had recourse to reason, as suggested above. Some, like Abelard, felt free to reject the interpretations given the scriptures by church Fathers and Councils, preferring their own rational conclusions. The work of these men served to develop the implications of the truths received, to interpret them for daily life, to relate them to the world of man. And I believe it correct to say that never has reason been used with greater care and greater respect for logical accuracy than it was by the Scholastics, and particularly by Thomas Aquinas. To sum up, reason *is* of very great importance to religion and must be used with the greatest responsibility, but reason cannot replace revelation nor can it disprove it — such is the understanding religion has of itself.

### III

Returning again to the main emphases of Professor Blanshard's paper, we ask what *kind* of evidence religious belief ought to seek, in the mind of the paper's author? The question seems not to be answered clearly, although it is clear that the scientific method for finding truth is not the way. The only other likely way of demonstration is the rationalistic method, which is that of logical consistency and coherence. To speak of gaining evidence for belief when this method is used is a far more sophisticated matter and far less certain a one than the kind of evidence welcomed in science. Let us now consider the rationalistic approach briefly.

Rationalism starts with a priori truths — truths considered so evident and so certain in themselves that they require no justification. In a way, these a priori truths hold the position in rationalism which revelation holds in religious thought.

Descartes held as a priori that what is clear and distinct is true. We recall his argument that since the concept of God was to him clear and distinct, and since he as finite man could not have created the concept of infinite Being, therefore God's existence was established. Other rationalists have held to other a priori ideas and rejected that of Descartes. Professor Blanshard suggests that the knowledge that "love is better than hatred, happiness than misery, enlightenment than ignorance is . . . an independent insight which may be had with equal clearness by Christian, Buddhist, and secularist." Most of us, as secularists or as Christians, would very likely agree with this statement, but still might question whether these are self-evident concepts. Certainly not every person does agree that they are self-evident, even among the philosophers. The only proposition that may be considered as undeniably a priori is, I believe, as mentioned above, the "I think, therefore I am" of Descartes or the "I doubt, therefore I am" of Augustine. But this is not an a priori upon which alone any system of thought can be securely constructed.

The rationalist starts from his a priori beginnings and finds the test for the truth of his system in coherence. This test asks whether the system of thought developed by the rationalist does in fact do justice to human experience in all of its many manifestations, and provide organization for these manifestations in terms of their relative importance. Superficially, this appears to be an excellent test for truth, but when we put rationalistic systems of thought themselves to this same test, we find that there is little agreement as to their coherence. Consider, for instance, the three great philosophical systems of Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza. Each of these men had his a priori starting points, each was logically consistent, and each believed his results to be coherent. But could anything be more divergent and contradictory than these systems? If we compare them with the theology of St. Thomas, does it not appear that his great *Summa Theologica* did in fact bring about an amazing coherence which far surpassed that of any of the rationalists? The fact is, of course, that the judgment as to the relative importance of the various aspects of human experience is precisely where men disagree most widely, hence it is at this point where disagreement concerning the degree of coherence will most surely arise. The conclusion appears to be, therefore, that while the test of coherence is a useful one, it is by no means a test which yields certainty. If this is the kind of evidence required to support religious belief, it is a kind which still falls short of proof. To speak of "insufficient evidence" supporting religious belief on this basis is something of a puzzler.

#### IV

The problem of finding "valid evidence" for the nature of God or for immortality, to be specific, is a very difficult matter from the standpoint of reason. Professor Blanshard's paper both recognizes this difficulty and seemingly minimizes it. Let us take the latter point first. Reference is made to the practice of Henry Sidgwick of withholding his negations concerning personal beliefs in Christian theology from his students in order to contribute to their happiness. His sensitivity toward his students is praiseworthy, but would it not be desirable to know what his doubts were based upon, in order to know whether he had *evidence* to support them? The illustration apparently was used to show that it is sometimes better "to leave ignorance and error undisturbed." But is it not a strange kind of

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judgment that the believing students are considered to be in ignorance and error while the one man who doubts apparently is fully justified in his doubting? Perhaps I have misunderstood the point, but a somewhat similar one appears at the very end of the essay in reference to the death of T. H. Huxley's son. It would appear that the truth of unbelief should need establishing as much as does the truth of belief. In this account, Huxley supports his grief and sense of hopelessness concerning his deceased son by recommending that one "sit down before fact as a little child." This is no doubt excellent advice in evaluating scientific theories, but the implication seems to be that somehow Huxley had faced the "facts," had discovered justifying evidence on the side of unbelief, and was acting nobly when he followed his truth regardless of the pain it caused him. But is it not appropriate to wonder *what* facts, *what* evidence he had obtained which so thoroughly disproved any form of immortality? Others who are familiar with his philosophy seem not to be similarly impressed by his evidence. The ethics of belief must be an ethics that applies both to belief in religion and also to belief in ideas opposed to religion.

Professor Blanshard recognizes the difficulties of finding certainty in religion in the discussion toward the end of his paper, where he allows what seems to me a strange transition to take place. For, if I understand him correctly, he said earlier that religious belief should always be justified by reason as a matter of ethical principle. This he seems to support as a universal rule, applicable to all men as believers. But in the latter part of the paper he writes that the "plain man" is an exception to this, in terms of his own searching for the truth of his beliefs. We are told that he is too busy, too occupied with the work of the everyday. Therefore it is expecting too much to suppose that he is capable of applying himself effectively to these great problems. What, then, can he do? He must turn to the experts, the specialists, who *do* have the time and the ability to probe into these matters. But then it is added that those who speak with authority "notoriously disagree"! The plain man's responsibility therefore lies at the point of his making a choice between them, of appraising their relative weight.

This strikes one as an unexpected turn in the argument, for at first it appeared that one should be held responsible for his own beliefs, but now not only is it said this is not the case, but it is admitted that those to whom we are advised to turn will themselves disagree! But I thought we were looking for a degree of certainty for our beliefs which would justify our holding them! Assuredly if we rely on disagreeing authorities then we are most miserable, caught in all the relativities of scholarly differences of opinion! And not only so, but if a man is incompetent to deal with the issues himself, how then can he be competent to choose the proper authority wisely? Is it not only if he is aware of the possible views and approaches, which his preoccupation elsewhere has ruled out, that he might choose wisely? But this is denied him.

Some years ago at meetings of a theological society at which views of Dr. Paul Tillich were being discussed and criticized, the famous scholar Professor Reinhold Niebuhr prefaced his criticisms by remarking that he believed them valid *if* he understood Dr. Tillich properly! In his response to criticisms, Dr. Tillich replied, "But of course Professor Niebuhr does *not* understand me"! Professor Blanshard may well say the same in response to my comments.