

# SCIENCE AND THE SEARCH FOR A RATIONAL RELIGIOUS FAITH

*by Donald Szantho Harrington*

## PROBLEM OF POWER WITHOUT PURPOSE

Modern man is confronted by many dilemmas. Paramount among these is his achievement of incredible power over the material universe without any corresponding certainty of purpose as to how that power should be used. The same science which has produced an explosion of material power has also undermined the foundations of the religions upon which man previously had depended for his sense of purpose and value. Power without purpose is the modern age's principal problem.

A parallel problem derives from man's achievement of facilities for communication which will ultimately require the organization of all the nations and peoples of the world into a single system of human relationship or government, without the necessary corollary achievement of the human motivation to overcome the national and religious divergencies which separate and divide mankind.

It is important that we understand the cause of our current spiritual uncertainty on a world scale, for this is at the root of our problem. It is derived, in its essence, I believe, from a deep philosophic schizophrenia suffered by most of contemporary man which has caused the paralysis of his moral sense and capacity for choice. It stems from the split that took place back in the beginning of the modern age when, with the rise of science, the unity of civilization and culture enjoyed briefly by the medieval world was split asunder. From that point on, religion and science have gone their separate ways, occupying separate halves of the split mind of man. The result is a human being today suffering a sense

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of severe alienation from his universe, fearful of the material forces he has let loose, suspicious of many of his fellowmen, and uncomfortable with most of his past. This has resulted in an all-pervasive anxiety which has turned the hour of man's scientific triumph over the material universe into dust and ashes in his mouth.

Modern man exhibits many of the symptoms of the schizoid personality. He feels a certain bewilderment before the two unrelated worlds of science and religion which he inhabits, never sure which one is real, but often finding preferable the one he suspects to be unreal. He suffers alternately from apathy and a deep, violent urge to escape from a state of mind and from a society so divided that it knows not where it is going. He experiences moral paralysis and unending fear in the face of the resulting void of meaning permeating his life. How well W. H. Auden has caught the contemporary mood:

We are afraid  
Of pain but more afraid of silence; for no nightmare  
Of hostile objects could be as terrible as this Void.  
This is the Abomination. This is the wrath of God.  
Alone, alone, about a dreadful wood  
Of conscious evil runs a lost mankind.<sup>1</sup>

With the coming of universal education, and with the spread of science to all parts of the world, we can only expect more and more people, and ultimately all the people of the world, to find themselves in this same predicament. Therefore, a new type of faith, capable of speaking in the scientific idiom of our time, and capable of reconciling the religious values of the past with the scientific knowledge of the present, is the issue of the hour for which an answer must be found.

### THREE APPROACHES TO RELIGION

There are, in general, it seems to me, three ways in which modern men have sought to deal with this problem of spiritual alienation and paralysis.

*The first approach* is through the dogmatic reassertion of the position of *revealed religion*. This accepts the split between the realms of science and religion as inevitable and necessary, required by the very nature of things. Science and religion are seen as dealing with wholly different kinds of truth; employing different kinds of language; and appealing to different, and mutually exclusive, sources of authority. In this view, science deals with facts, religion with values, and values are not derived from facts but are supernaturally revealed.

The problem with this point of view, of course, is that a scientific generation finds it more and more difficult to accept the mythology, the doctrines, and the ceremonial practices of revealed religion.

*The second approach* to the solution of the problem has been that of many who speak in the name of *science*. They have come to the conclusion that traditional religion has failed and can no longer speak to the modern mind in an idiom that it can understand and, therefore, must be abandoned as a form of superstition that has been outmoded. Those who follow this approach would say that our task is to take the knowledge we have gained through science and from it develop a scientific religion, develop a world view and system of values derived from the knowledge of science, and let this scientific consensus be our religion. There have already been some tentative efforts in this direction for a considerable period of time, but they cannot be said to have achieved great success. Somehow, scientism does not seem to be adequate as a religion. It has failed to produce any world view capable of moving and stirring the hearts of men deeply and transformingly, and has failed thus far to discover any ethical consensus capable of commanding men's lives and unifying their fragmented world.

*A third approach*, which we may call that of *naturalism*, combines elements of both of the other approaches, but also rejects elements of both. This approach affirms that science is right when it insists that science and religion are dealing with the same reality, and not with two different and mutually exclusive realities. It refuses to accept the permanent separation of fact and value but insists that values must be derived from facts, the "ought" from what "is." But it also affirms that traditional religion is right when it insists that religion has a different function from that of science. Science is essentially informative where religion is primarily celebrative. Where science develops knowledge of the nature of reality, religion celebrates that knowledge and makes it a moving force in the life of human beings, something not merely known, but also deeply experienced—feared or enjoyed—and employed as a guide to living. Science may map the realities which must be encountered by man in his struggle for meaning, while religion is the vehicle for the encounter.

It is possible, then, according to this third alternative approach, for science and religion to function together in a complementary way, dealing not with separate realms but with a common realm of experienced existence, each exercising its properly different function and employing its necessarily different methods and forms of language. The

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modern man who would be a whole man will have to learn how to orient the functions of both realms: the search for truths about reality of science and the guide to living in it from religion.

The further development of this third alternative approach to reality is, it seems to me, liberal religion's great new task. When I use the term "liberal religion," I mean, of course, not just Unitarians and Universalists but the far larger numbers of liberal Christians of all kinds; Reform Jews, liberal Hindus and Buddhists, Ethical Culturists, and all who employ an open and rational approach to religion. Nevertheless, in what follows I speak critically primarily of my own tradition, which has been Unitarian.

### SOME FAILURES OF LIBERAL RELIGION

I call this a *new* task because, while we liberals have been talking about the challenge to refine, reform, and perhaps reinforce our religious faith with new substance drawn from the sciences, we have not been very systematic about it, and far too often have been neither well-informed scientists nor literate religionists. As a matter of fact, our liberal gospel, for want of a sterner and more disciplined effort on our part, has become thinner and thinner as the vividness of the old-time religion has faded; and at the same time our scientism has remained spiritually sterile. It is worth our taking a few moments to acknowledge just how meager our liberal gospel has become.

In its definitive period of development in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, liberal religion sought to make the traditional religious concepts and doctrines which it had inherited from the past more rational, more logical, and more compatible with current scientific knowledge through a process of weeding out the irrational or unscientific elements in the myth. It also tried to return Judeo-Christianity to a solid, historical base. Neither of these efforts can be regarded as having been religiously successful, and for reasons that are only now becoming clear to Unitarians.

Sensing our failure to make traditional religion wholly rational and to find the historic Jesus to whose religion we could return, though without acknowledging our failure, we religious liberals during the last two generations have been slowly turning away from trying to do this. We have instead taken up two new lines of endeavor which have, thus far, turned out to be almost equally empty and unsatisfying.

The first has been to put most of our emphasis upon the delights of the free mind, upon the enjoyment of our freedom to kick over the traces of traditional dogmatic belief. This has too often meant cele-

brating, in the name of loyalty to truth and integrity of the human spirit, what we have deemed as our right to believe and do anything we damned please, or nothing at all. Far too often we have permitted our belief in freedom to become an end in itself and an excuse for never taking a position on anything significant, and for never seeking any community consensus in either the spiritual or social fields. As a matter of fact, we liberals have become so enamored of freedom that we have failed to achieve even as much of a consensus of belief concerning the nature of things as has science. Now at last we have begun to discover, I hope, that freedom is not an end in itself. By itself, it is a desert, as the children of Israel discovered once they had crossed the Red Sea. Freedom is a place to get lost in, and it comes to have meaning only if it is regarded as an opportunity to seek out some holy mountain upon which one can find or achieve some great, true law of life.

Freedom by itself can become an emotional, moral, and intellectual abyss, "the Void," unless the assumptions about human nature and the human situation upon which it is based are acknowledged and unless that freedom is used by each individual and by the free community itself to grow in personal religious faith and responsible communal consensus in the fulfilment of that faith.

The second new line of endeavor to which religious liberals have turned during the last two generations has been the effort, previously described, to create a wholly new religion of science, abandoning the concepts, symbols, language, books, ceremonials, and sometimes even the memory of our religious past, in favor of beliefs derived from scientific discovery tested out and authenticated in the laboratory. We have a good many liberal churches that have made this effort; have laid aside the Bible; abandoned use of the traditional religious words, like "God," "worship," "prayer," and "salvation"; and where the services are more like forums, worldly discussions, but where there is little of the dimension of "encounter with reality" or a transforming experience of dialogue between an "I" and "Thou." Yet, if we are honest, I think we will have to acknowledge that this effort to make of religion a monologue of man or even a dialogue between man and man has been in vain. It has not struck fire in the human heart. Our humanistic churches, despite our rationalizations about being an upper-crust, intellectual elite, have not been meeting even the intellectuals' deepest needs; and I know of few whose services are crowded.

This effort to create a scientific religion divorced from the religious past has failed because we cannot really cut ourselves off from that past which produced us without blinding and impoverishing ourselves. We

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cannot even understand why we hold the beliefs we do, or where our social institutions came from, or why we are moved by emotions and attitudes which we carry incarnate, except as we understand the religion that has guided and motivated our culture and out of which these things have sprung.

### A POSSIBLE NEW SYNTHESIS

Having failed, then, in his effort to make traditional Judeo-Christianity rational or to return to the religion of the Jesus of history, and having found the mere celebration of freedom and the effort to create a religion confined to the knowledge of science unsatisfactory, what is the religious liberal to do now?

I should like to proceed to a conjectural discussion of the kind of experience I think we may have as we seek to employ the correspondence of science and religion in the formulation of a synthesis capable of restoring a sense of purpose, morality, and religious direction to this society that has come into being by virtue of modern science. I suspect that the principle of evolution may provide the key to the long-sought new synthesis. I was greatly interested in the summer of 1964 at the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science to hear Dr. Theodosius Dobzhansky speak of his qualified admiration for the work of Father Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. In this work we have the effort of a man of science and theology to develop hypotheses employing the insights of both disciplines. Father Teilhard suggests that the principle of evolution is not just one of the great universals, but the great universal, the key that unlocks the meaning of the universal powers. In *The Phenomenon of Man*, he writes:

It was only in the middle of the nineteenth century, again under the influence of biology, that the light dawned at last, revealing the *irreversible coherence* of all that exists. First the concatenations of life and, soon after, those of matter. The least molecule is, in nature and in position, a function of the whole sidereal process, and the least of the protozoa is structurally so knit into the web of life that, such is the hypothesis, its existence cannot be annihilated without *ipso facto* undoing the whole network of the biosphere. The *distribution, succession, and solidarity of objects are born from their concrescence in a common genesis*. Time and space are organically joined again so as to weave, together, the stuff of the universe. That is the point we have reached and how we perceive things today.

Psychologically, what is hidden behind this initiation? One might well become impatient or lose heart at the sight of so many minds (and not mediocre ones either) remaining today still closed to the idea of evolution, if the whole of history were not there to pledge to us that a truth once seen, even by a single mind, always ends up by imposing itself on the totality of

human consciousness. . . . One after the other all the fields of human knowledge have been shaken and carried away by the same underwater current in the direction of the study of some *development*. Is evolution a theory, a system or a hypothesis? It is much more: it is a general condition to which all theories, all hypotheses, all systems must bow and which they must satisfy henceforward if they are to be thinkable and true. Evolution is a light illuminating all facts, a curve that all lines must follow.<sup>2</sup>

May we not then move on to ask whether we can find in the character of the evolutionary pattern that lost criterion of value for which the modern age has been seeking? What is the pattern? What is the character of evolution? It seems there is a succession of organisms ever more complex, ever more highly differentiated in the functioning of their various parts, yet ever more highly integrated as units capable of adaptation or survival in the reality in which they live. This capacity, derived from the integration or ordering of organic or social elements to provide for the viability of the living system as a whole, endows us with our freedoms and responsibilities to take up consciously the creative program of evolutionary progress.

This pattern of the evolutionary process, this increasing internal integration of structure and behavior to adapt to the requirements of environing reality, would seem to be a constant. It, curiously, is the result of a process of unremitting competition within and between individuals and species. It is one of the paradoxes of this tremendous story that an essentially competitive process has produced more and more highly integrated beings capable of producing a more and more harmonized order of life.

In man, the evolutionary process becomes self-conscious, self-directing, and highly socialized. There is not only an increasing capacity for co-operation but an increasing liberation for the individual within the co-operative social effort. Man becomes more and more dependent upon the voluntary society to which he belongs and in the formulation of whose course he participates.

Thus, what we see in the evolutionary process is a pattern of ever increasing integration, and I wonder if it would be possible to find any better definition for what we, in human terms, call "love" than this mutual enhancement of part with part for the well-being of the whole. Someone has referred to this internal-external integration of living organisms as "organic ethics," and Prince Kropotkin in his *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* demonstrates the development of the integration of external society into the consciousness of man as follows: "Whenever mankind had to work out a new social organization, adapted to a

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new phase of development, its constructive genius always drew the elements and the inspiration for a new departure from the same, ever-living tendency."<sup>3</sup> The ethical progress of our race, Kropotkin held, was the gradual extension of the mutual aid principle from the tribe to always larger and larger agglomerations, so as finally to embrace one day the whole of mankind without respect to its diverse creeds, languages, and races.

Now, I want to suggest that in this evolutionary viewpoint there is much that is akin to the religious view of life presented in the myth and legend of our biblical past. I see in it the possibility of a revised doctrine of God, man, and salvation. I see in it the possibility of a long-range goal, of a law by which life may be guided and a future foreseen, even a system of ethics.

What kind of God would the principle of evolution give us? It portrays a single, vast, universal process in which each one of us has a part, an evolving process involving an ever changing, dynamic relationship. It is a God incarnate, moving in time from one stage of creation to another, the thrust of cosmic forces defining what can and what cannot be, and thereby bringing a system of growing order and life into the world. This is a Cosmos or God which is struggling and evolving, a God in whose life man participates, a God with a direction or goal in time, of ever increasing harmony and perfection of relationship with living systems. Paul Tillich has suggested that God is not a Being, but Being-Itself. Gordon Allport suggests that God be considered Being-Becoming. Here we have a God considered to be the total evolving process, but whose underlying elements are seen as constant and invariant, requiring that living systems always order their structure and behavior to accord with the requirements of the underlying reality. This is a living God, a God to whom man can relate, a God who grasps man and whom man can increasingly know and obey and thereby find increasing powers for life.

It is a God whose reality man can believe in and experience, a God who cares what man does, and who rewards and punishes him in accordance with his behavior not just as an individual but both as an individual and as part of a group, a relationship from which the individual can never extricate himself. It is a God believable because his reality is based in the scientific understanding of the universe.

It is not too difficult to derive a doctrine of man from such a concept of God. Man is a part of this vast process of Being-Becoming. In man the process has become conscious of itself and is beginning to be capable of planning future evolutionary steps. This does not mean that man



becomes God, master of the very character of the evolutionary process. That character is established and man must fit its pattern, but man is increasingly capable of incarnating the rules for advancing life.

Man's salvation, then, comes in his ability to accord himself with the character of the cosmic evolutionary process, to co-operate with it, and to help it on its way, to make the choices which bring the higher harmonies. Salvation lies in his broadening his empathy and compassionate co-operation with his fellowmen, as this is required for the viability of the living system of which he is a part. Death of the living system and the self with it is the judgment invariably meted out for failure to conform to the requirements set by the cosmos for life.

Man is thus seen to be part of the whole of the process of Being-Becoming, functioning at its growing edge on earth, but always conscious of his own individuality and of his power and responsibility for making correct choices. This is where the search for and commitment to God's law becomes our first commandment—for man cannot be made whole without reference to the Whole, and cannot find his salvation without reference to the pattern of over-all evolutionary development. Here we pick up the emphasis which is so strong in the Book of Deuteronomy upon the necessity of man's choosing whether he will accord his life with God's law, "Behold I have set before you this day life and good and death and evil; therefore, choose life, that you and your descendants may live."

Have we not here the possibility of a world view whose substance is corroborated by science and enriched by it, but which is in harmony with the basic religious intuitions of the past? Implicit in it is a value system to guide man in the essential choices that must be made from day to day, a value system that finds its human expression in love and co-operation and which is buttressed by the myths and symbols of the past. Is it not possible even that in finding such correspondences as these between the realms of science and religion, we may be able to recover a degree of spontaneity in the religious encounter and in our use of religious language, symbols, and forms?

#### SOME PRACTICAL PROBLEMS OF RELIGIOUS EVOLUTION

Now, let me turn very briefly to some description of what such a new religious faith will be like in practice. I do not think it will be possible for us simply to take over all of the old forms of the past. Bishop Pike is right in his feeling that, while some elements of the myth are valuable, some are not; and, while some of the dogmas are illuminating, others are so offensive as to be blinding. Our new religious practice

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will have to be evolved, using the religious past, but not bound by it; adapting, altering, discarding, grafting, using the old forms and images and symbols where they are apt, but infusing them with new life and new content derived from science; and in this modern age we will have to reach out beyond them to derive insights from the other great world faiths as well, which with each passing day and week become more and more a part of a common world heritage which one day will belong to all of us.

I emphasize that this new expression will have to be evolved, rather than devised. Ralph Waldo Emerson was probably right when, in the closing passages of his famous Divinity School address, he warned against trying to contrive a brand new system of worship:

And now let us do what we can to rekindle the smoldering, nigh quenched fire on the altar. The evils of the church are now manifest. The question returns, what shall we do? I confess, all attempts to project and establish a Cultus with new rites and forms seems to be vain. Faith makes us, and not we it, and faith makes its own forms. All attempts to contrive a system are as cold as the new worship introduced by the French to the Goddess of Reason, today paste-board and filigree, and ending tomorrow in madness and murder. Rather let the breath of new life be breathed by you through the forms already existing. For if once *you* are alive, you shall find they shall become plastic and new.<sup>4</sup>

There is, of course, a limit to this process of adaptation, as Emerson learned when he found it impossible to make the communion ritual meaningful to himself and others. Some of the old myths, dogmas, symbols, and rituals will have to be discarded; and some new ones will have to be created to meet the changing religious needs of men. Many of the old forms and rituals can be adapted and modernized, the myths reinterpreted, the dogmas and concepts re-formed. This is what is actually happening in the liberal church at work in the world today where one can find a very free use made of the forms of the past and of the ancient wisdom in adapting them to the needs of modern men. What can emerge is a new faith, a new synthesis in harmony with modern science but equally in touch with the great rivers of religion flowing out of the past. Religious realities from all traditions may be transformed by the new light of the sciences to give us a new world community of faith in our human brotherhood, our moral commitments to the whole society of men, and our hope for expanding horizons of life open to us as we come to know and live by the values ordained for us by the reality in which we participate.

There is nothing more important today than this effort to bring science and religion back into a creative communication and relationship

with each other once again. Modern man, armed with scientific technology but without adequate religious guidance for his attitudes and ethics, is dangerous—dangerous to himself and to all the rest of creation. The modern poet, e. e. cummings, has described him in these contemptuous words:

pity this busy monster manunkind  
not. progress is a comfortable disease! . . .  
a world of made  
is not a world of born—pity poor flesh  
and trees, poor stars and stones, but never this  
fine specimen of hypermagical  
ultraomnipotence.<sup>5</sup>

But I had rather say, pity this busy monster, man of the materialist mind. Hurried and harried, he lays waste his world. Blinded and bitter he multiplies meaninglessness. Confused and corrupted by power, he wanders a wasteland, waiting a spiritual summons worthy his reasoning spirit—in tune with the present, unsundered from the past. That call, when it comes, will reach out to the world's wide circle and bring all men at last to freedom and brotherhood and peace with justice under God's universal law. Those who call themselves liberal religionists have, I believe, the possibility of becoming a channel for such a call, to make a scientifically renewed and reinforced religion a redemptive power once again in this rapidly changing contemporary world.

#### NOTES

1. W. H. Auden, "For the Time Being," *Collected Poetry* (New York: Random House, 1945), III, 411.
2. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1959), pp. 217–18.
3. P. Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (New York: McClure Phillips & Co., 1902), p. 223.
4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Complete Writings* (New York: Wm. H. Wise, 1929), p. 471.
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