

Others there are—those who believe in some revealed religion—whose eyes are directed not down, but straight before them, following a beam of light that springs from a sun still below the horizon, but one, as they believe, which is about to rise. So dazzling is this beam that the land all about it appears to be shrouded in thick darkness. Only in the path of the light is anything to be seen, where it illumines a mountain-top, gleams on a far river, or gilds what perhaps may be the distant sea. Thither the travellers hasten, without fear or doubt, counting as nothing the hardships of the road in their certainty of the consummation.

But, again, there are others who see no such light to follow, but who yet refuse to walk in the beaten track. Desiring, not merely to pass through, but to explore the strange land, they look freely above, beneath, around them, in an uncertain glimmer of starlight often obscured by clouds. All about them are dangers which they note but cannot gauge, formless terrors, inexplicable sounds, stirrings, ambushes, contacts. But also, here and there, are suggestions of unutterable promise—an unexpected clearing in a wood, a footprint or a sign left by some friendly traveller gone before, pale flowers beside a brook, the note of a nightingale, a peak of snow like a cloud in the sky, the rising of a new star, and always the tremulous hope, "In the east is there not a crystal gleam? does not a violet lustre begin to burn upon the grey? does not the planet hanging there throb more passionate and pale? The sun we saw set, will he not rise again?"

These latter it is who have the religion of agnosticism; by which I mean, not a conviction that knowledge is impossible, but an uncertainty as to what may be its deliverance—an uncertainty, not of indifference, but of sensitive, passionate desire. Only the advent of knowledge can put an end to that uncertainty, can dash or confirm the audacities of hope, dissipate or establish the forebodings of fear. One way or other by knowledge the character of religion will be determined. But, in either case, religion will still be possible, and, for those who possess the instinct, necessary. What depends upon knowledge is not reli-

gion; it is approbation or condemnation of the world. That issue we cannot shirk; we can only settle it, if at all, by science; and the attempt to find in revelation a short-cut to the solution does but divert our efforts from the only fruitful method of inquiry.

CHAPTER IV

FAITH

IN the preceding chapters I have attempted to state my view as to the relation of religion to knowledge. Religion, I have said, does not give us truth. And as this statement to some of my readers may have seemed paradoxical, I propose here further to explain what, in my opinion, is the relation of religion, and in particular of what is sometimes called "faith," to knowledge.

My point, perhaps, may be put most clearly thus: If a man says "Religion gives me truth," I would reply, "Then why not call it knowledge?" For truth, though it be truth about God, is still truth; and truth that is known is part of knowledge. But there is only one method of knowledge, *viz.*, experience, and legitimate inference from experience. Theology, therefore, if it is a branch of knowledge, must differ from other branches, not in its method, but in its object. If we know the truth about God, that truth is scientific, in the broad and proper sense of the term. It is arrived at by a method which can be explained and criticised, and it is subject to constant revision as experience develops and intellectual capacity increases.

This much, I dare say, would be admitted, perhaps even eagerly asserted, by many theologians. My next point takes me into a more difficult region. What, I would ask, is the kind of experience on which knowledge about God and other objects of religious belief can claim to be based?

There would seem to be two possible answers, not incompatible with one another. First, the experience may be historical.

It may depend on a record of the past. And such record is, of course, part of the theoretical basis of Christianity. On this point I have nothing to add to what I said in a previous chapter. Historical truth must be ascertained by historical methods. But it is my own personal opinion that such methods will never give us the kind of certainty which has hitherto attached in practice to religious beliefs; and that men will become increasingly unwilling and unable to base their scheme of life on data and inferences of that kind.

I pass, therefore, to a position which seems to me to have more importance for the future. "Whatever," it may be said, "be the deliverance of history, there is, quite apart from that, in the direct experience of men, a perception of the Being we call God." Such a statement is one of the most interesting and important that could be made, if it be made sincerely. But it is pre-eminently one that ought to be challenged. And that, partly because of its importance; partly because of the indefiniteness that attaches to the word "God"; partly because of the probable complexity of the assertion that is in form so simple. For, if a man says, "I know God by direct experience," what is it he knows, and how? Has he had a "vision"? Possibly! Such visions do occur. But in themselves they prove nothing. Everything depends on whether or no there is any real object corresponding to them. And that is a matter for scientific inquiry. Probably, however, visions of this kind are not what is meant. When a man says he has a direct knowledge of God, he will probably mean that he has a sense, somehow, that there does exist a Being who is good, and loving, and powerful, and wise beyond all experience of ours. Such a sense, I suppose, many people do have, genuinely and constantly. And there is no reason *a priori* why it should not correspond to a reality. But, once more, whether it does correspond or no is a matter for science. The sense in question, if it is to yield knowledge, must be analysed and tested by a very complicated and difficult process. And I cannot doubt that, were such an analysis to be made, the original and apparently simple impression would be found to include a number of

heterogeneous elements—elements of tradition, elements of desire, elements of inference. Thus, the man's idea of God will surely be derived, partly from the religion in which he has been brought up, partly from his own reflections upon life and the world; and, almost certainly, it will have been affected by his needs and desires, by what he profoundly wants to be true. And as soon as this analysis has been made, it will become clear that the single and apparently simple sense or impression which he calls his direct experience of God has no more validity as a deliverance of truth than the elements of which it is composed. If truth is to be elicited from it, the tradition must be sifted, the inferences tested; and above all, the element of desire ruled out as *prima facie* irrelevant; unless, indeed, and until it can be shown—as, for example, the new philosophy that calls itself "pragmatism" endeavours to show—that truth is in some way determined by our desires. In other words, any truth that finally emerges from the process will be scientific or philosophic truth; and if it is to be called religious, should be called so only with relation to its objects, not to its method. And that is what I mean when I say that religion does not give us truth, but that truth is only given by science.

Now, I do not pretend to judge what may be the result of the kind of inquiries I have been suggesting above. It is by some such inquiries, in my opinion, that religious truth must be established, if it is to be established at all. But, meantime, it is, I think, true that religious questions are the kind of questions about which many serious and reflecting men do not, in fact, and will not, preserve an attitude merely of suspended judgment. Such men, I think, will prefer to describe their religious position as one of faith rather than of knowledge; and they will, perhaps, feel that it is foolish, and even presumptuous, to expect to attain to knowledge on such subjects. I have myself no sympathy with any attitude which limits *a priori* the possibilities of human endeavour. But, seeing that most men, for a long time, in proportion as they are candid, are likely to be intellectually agnostic on the most vital questions of religion, it seems to be important

to try to ascertain in what sense faith may be legitimate, and what may be the relation of such faith to knowledge.

To avoid, so far as possible, all ambiguity, I wish to make it clear at the outset that, in using the word "faith," I do not wish it to carry all the meanings that attach to it in common usage. The word, for instance, is often used to imply a faculty which has the power to communicate, not only knowledge, but the most certain knowledge to which we can attain. It is not, of course, in that sense that I use the term, as will be clear from the preceding pages. When I speak here of faith, I speak of an attitude which is not primarily intellectual at all, and which is quite compatible with—nay, which depends upon—intellectual agnosticism; for it presupposes that, in the region to which it applies, we do not know. The attitude I would describe is one of the emotions and the will—the laying hold, in the midst of ignorance, of a possibility that may be true, and directing our feeling and our conduct in accordance with it. In its broadest sense, I would say it is an emotional and volitional assumption that, somehow or other, in spite of appearances, things are all right. This general outline, of course, may be, and is, filled in by every and the most varied kind of content, according to the traditions in which men have been brought up, and the course and extent of their knowledge and experience. But very commonly it expresses itself in the form of what is called a "belief in God"; an attitude, however, which does not imply any very definite nor any very uniform conception of God, but is apt, rather, to manifest itself negatively in a kind of distress if the existence of God is denied. And the root of that distress is, I think, the suggested inference that things are all wrong and not all right; or, to vary the phrase, one may perhaps say that faith involves a volitional assumption that things, whatever appearances may suggest, are really "worth while."

Now, if we had positive and complete knowledge on this point of "worth-whileness"; if we knew, instead of merely conjecturing what may be, as we say, the "meaning" of life; if we could see Good and Evil in their true and ultimate proportions,

and finally sum up and judge the world; there would be no room and no possibility for any attitude of faith. Instead, we should have knowledge. But, in fact, our position is very different from this. We know that there is Evil, we know that there is Good; in some moods we may imagine that there is nothing but Evil, or nothing but Good; but, in sober truth, we cannot reasonably and finally, on grounds of knowledge, form a judgment about the "worth-whileness" of life, because of the many important factors of which we are ignorant.

Thus, for example, many men feel, when it is put to them, that the question of the value of life depends very largely on the question whether individuals survive death; and, if they do, on the kind of life into which they pass. It is one kind of universe, they think, if death means annihilation; another kind if it means heaven or hell; another kind if it means a series of progressing lives, and so on.

Such possibilities, many people hold, are of vital importance to us; and these people are apt, in the absence of knowledge, to adopt towards them an attitude, not merely of agnosticism, but also of what I have called faith. They select, that is, among the possibilities, that one which seems to them to give value to life, and concentrate about it their practical and emotional life. The attitude they thus adopt is different in its origin and effect from an attitude based upon knowledge. It is more precarious, more adventurous, more exciting, more liable to ups and downs. But it may be equally and even more efficacious upon life; and it is not, as I shall try to show, necessarily to be condemned as illegitimate.

There are others, again, to whom the fate of individuals after death is either a matter of indifference, or, as they may hold, has been finally settled by science. On this subject, therefore, they will have no faith. But they will almost certainly have faith on some subject. Probably, for example, they may cling to the idea of "progress." And that, although arguments may be adduced in its favour, is a doctrine so far from being established that acceptance of it is, I think, commonly

the result rather of what I am calling faith than of intellectual conviction.

Or, again, a man may be indifferent to the questions both of a survival of individuals after death and of the progress of the race, but may feel that the important point is the existence of God. People who feel this are, I suppose, commonly attached to one of the Churches. But there may be men not so attached to whom, nevertheless, a faith in God is the foundation of their life. It may be a personal God that they conceive; it may be a "tendency in the universe"; it may be something which they prefer to call "Earth" or "Nature"; it may be an "Absolute"; but, in any case, it is something not themselves and greater than themselves, something which, by its mere existence, makes everything supremely worth while, overrides and subsumes Evil, intensifies and universalises Good, and concentrates and satisfies in itself those ideal impulses that otherwise would be broken and wasted about an imperfect self.

The various attitudes towards life thus briefly indicated, different though they be, are, nevertheless, all examples of what I am calling faith. They all involve a volitional assumption, not based upon knowledge, as to the "worth-whileness" of the universe; and their differences are differences as to what it is that constitutes "worth-whileness." If men should ever come, by thought and experience, nearer to an agreement on this point, their faiths are likely to approximate more than they do at present. But, meantime, the point I wish to make is, that faith, in some form or other, seems to be an almost necessary condition, if not of life, yet of the most fruitful and noble life. Almost necessary, I say. For there is a kind of pessimism which is nobler than most optimism; which is, so to speak, active in its character; and implies rather a passionate love of Good than an impotent despair about Evil. But that is a rare condition. And most men, I think, are significant, and find and make life significant, in proportion to their faith. Of the practical value of such faith there can, I think, be no doubt. The only question is whether, from the

standpoint of knowledge, it is legitimate. For it must be remembered that the pursuit of truth is itself one of our highest practical activities; and that it must always be wrong to hamper or pervert that pursuit by a predetermination that certain beliefs shall not be assailed. Faith, in a word can only be legitimate so long as it occupies a region not yet conquered by knowledge, and so long as it holds itself ready in a moment to yield its place so soon as knowledge arrives. Faith should stand always with the dagger of science pointed at its breast. It need not fear. It has its resurrections. And it, too, must be ready, if it would save its life, to lose it. On that condition it may rightly and profitably take its place alongside of, and in anticipation of, knowledge. But, once that condition is neglected, once we begin to say "I believe though truth testify against me," once we echo Tertullian's *credo quia impossibile*, or, with Luther, in our zeal for what we suppose to be religion, assail reason with all the resources of passion and contempt—from that moment our attitude, instead of being legitimate and admirable, becomes one of the most disastrous and the most immoral which it is possible to assume.

Faith, then, in the sense in which I am using the term, is distinguished from knowledge, but it not necessarily opposed to it, though it may easily be misled into opposition. And, being distinguished from knowledge, the kind of support it gives is not, or should not be, intellectual certainty. On the contrary, faith would seem to be an expression of the imagination and the will, rather than of the intellect, though it be from the intellect that it takes its form. It is closer to music and poetry than to science. It is the operation of our passion and our desire, shaping in anticipation the forms and features of the unknown land which we are about to explore. I know no better metaphor for it than that—the passion in the explorer's heart, dictating the vision by which he is led. Because there is an horizon, because there is space, because there is the unknown, therefore there is faith. Columbus had faith. But what he discovered was not the world of his dream. Only, the dream helped him to discover it; and,

spiritually, we are all in his position. We are Columbuses setting forth on our voyage. We need our dream, but we need also our compass. And the confirmation or dissipation of the dream hangs upon reality. But while, in this sense, faith must wait upon truth, it is also true, in another sense, that truth waits upon faith. For the impulse to pursue truth is itself a form of faith. We hope that truth is obtainable; we desire and will to attain it; we dream its attainment as we go in quest of it. And, but for that dream, and that hope, and that will, we should never start at all. Faith is the sense and the call of the open horizon. If we abstract it from the forms in which we clothe it, from the specific beliefs which are, as it were, its projection into the intelligence, it presents itself as the spring of our whole life, including our intellectual life. It is the impulse to grow and expand; and, just because it is that, it has itself no form, but may assume any form. It is a taper burning, now bright, now dim, and changing colour and substance with every change in the stuff it consumes. The frailest thing we know, it is also the least perishable; for it is a tongue of the central fire that burns at the heart of the world.

Religion and Immortality

PREFACE

OF the essays included in this volume, the first two have already appeared in the *Hibbert Journal*, and the last in the *Independent Review*. They are reprinted here by the kind permission of the editors of those publications. The third essay is the Ingersoll Lecture delivered at Harvard University in 1909, and has been previously published in America.

I

FAITH AND KNOWLEDGE

IN the course of the last half-century a change, curious and to some minds disconcerting, appears to have come over the leaders of freethought. They are, perhaps, not less, but more sceptical than they were; but they seem also to be more believing. They question things that an earlier generation never thought of challenging; but they affirm what it would have regarded as superstitions or dreams. George Meredith, for example, while rejecting God and Immortality, demands our worship for what he calls "Earth." Mr. Bernard Shaw, repudiating the whole of our morals and our science, announces a new religion of "Life-Force." Even Nietzsche, after denying all sense to the words "good" and "true," propounds in the end a new ethics, and a new cosmology. Our modern poets and prophets, it would seem, are at once sceptical and credulous. They have no sooner smashed the old idols than they set up new ones in their place. What are we to think of this attitude? What does it really mean?

by the same author

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