

# MODERN CHALLENGES TO ELIGION

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"Is Natural Science finally committed to materialism? There is no doubt that the theories of science constitute trustworthy knowledge, because they are veritable and enable us to predict and control the events of a Nature. But we must not forget that what is called science is not a single systematic view of Reality. It is a mass of sectional views of reality - fragments of a total experience which do not seem to fit together. Natural science deals with matter, with life and with mind; but the moment you ask the question how matter, life and mind are mutually related you begin to see the sectional character of the various sciences that deal with them and the inability of these sciences, taken singly, to furnish a complete answer to your question. Nature as the subject of science is a highly artificial affair, and this artificiality is the result of that selective process to which science must subject her in the interests of precesion. The moment you put the subject of science in the total of human experience it begins to disclose a different character. Thus religion, which demands the whole of Reality and for this reason must occupy a central place in any synthesis of all the data of human experience, has no reason to be afraid of any sectional views of Reality".

- Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. I

## I

August Comte (1798-1857), the French Positivist, maintains that the world of thought naturally runs through three stages. The first stage is theological; events are explained by referring them to divine powers and agencies. The second stage is metaphysical; events are explained by referring them to separate energies. The third stage is the positive stage, where events are explained by referring them to causes, known by observation of the laws

of phenomena, without attributing them to either spirits, gods, or abstract forces..

So far the prediction of Comte has not been proved true. In the modern era, despite the tremendous progress of science and of the knowledge of causation, and comparative inactivity of metaphysical speculations, so great is the religious vitality, that it defies any notion of its extinction by the development of Positivistic Philosophy of Science. It has been, as a matter of fact, on an increase, so much so that the feeling today is that it must either be opposed, or studied and encouraged.

That religion is a part of the pre-scientific world-view, and, there fore, is bound to fade away with the growth of sophistication or of scientific knowledge is no longer maintained anywhere in the Western world (except perhaps in the U.S.S.R.). But at the same time it will be wrong to suppose that religious thinking has solved all the problems, or has provided adequate explanation to all the questions of the modern world. On the other hand, it has added some more questions, and has to face some new challenges. That there is more religious vitality today is a happy augury, and we can look forward for better understanding of religion in the near future. But we must not overstate the case.

The problems that religion faces are many and multifold. My intention in this article is to examine a certain view point in some of its manifestations in Philosophy, Psychology and socio-economic systems.

The view point that I refer to is that of secularism — generally speaking — i.e., an attitude permeating the social, economic, political and intellectual pursuits of the modern man. In fact it is the secular character of our civilization which distinguishes it from earlier civilizations. Religion today is supposed to be a personal affair depending upon one's choice, rather caprice, which does not, or at least might not enter into the political arrangement of the day, or affect the freedom of economic, artistic, or general social intercourse. A distinction based upon religion is looked down

as primitive, and a cohesion based on such grounds is considered to be barbaric and 'uncivilized' ; whereas in the "age of faith" the only unifying and uniting factor, as well as the only factor of differentiation was faith. It had been the cause of war and peace, and religious sanctions of conduct were every where acknowledged. Now, one feels shy of referring to them, and any difference due to creed alone is immediately suspected of narrow-mindedness and bigotry.

That a secular foundation of human experience can be rightly upheld and maintained is doubtful in the first instance, and a gestalt point of view of experience makes it well nigh impossible. The reason that the experience as a whole can never be meaningfully understood, or interpreted if all references to religion are forbidden and a purely secular attitude is maintained. Take for instance the case of one of the recent movements in philosophy which tries to interpret experience in purely non-metaphysical and non-religious terms. Logical empiricism, or positivism, as it is usually called, proceeds with a declared abhorrence of metaphysics, and because of that, of religion. A sentence which deals with any religious phenomena is neither tautological nor empirical. Hence it is nonsensical. This may be termed as one of the extreme forms of secularism, as it totally denies any reference to any fact beyond sensuous experience of the individual. It is not the Question of relevance of one experience with the other, neither of their mutual independence, but of a total negation of the meaningfulness of such an experience — although as a matter of 'fact' it cannot be denied totally. It exists, and persists, and even if it is an illusion it is such a constant and continuous illusion in the history of human experience, that it has got to be 'explained' rather than discarded, which is very conveniently done by the votaries of this school. Professor Ayer summed up the whole situation like this: "We conclude that the argument from religious experience is altogether fallacious. The fact that people have religious experiences is interesting from the psychological point of view, but it does not in any way imply that there is such a thing as religious knowledge, any more than our having moral

experience implies that there is such thing as moral knowledge. The theist, like the moralist, may believe that his experiences are cognitive experiences, but, unless he can formulate his 'knowledge' in propositions that are empirically verifiable, we may be sure that he is deceiving himself."<sup>1</sup>

A detailed criticism is not intended here as it has been attempted elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> but one can't help asking, as to what right a logical positivist has to make a *normative* claim, that propositions *ought* to be empirically verified. Can this proposition "All propositions that are not empirically verifiable are false or non-sense" in itself be verified empirically, and if not, can we be sure that the logical empiricist while he is making such a claim is in fact not deceiving himself? Even if for the sake of argument we accept the thesis of logical positivists that such propositions should be empirically verifiable, we do have to admit that not only the sensuous, but every experience is verifiable in as much (or as little) as it is the experience of the individual. If sense experience is ultimately nothing but our own states of consciousness, and verification consists only in testifying one state of consciousness with another of the same individual then religious experiences, moral experiences, and aesthetic experiences, are all verifiable very much in the same way as others are.

And if a logical empiricist is not a thorough going believer of his own creed like a logical *positivist*, then a cognitive object of experience can be posited exactly in the same fashion in a '*non-sense*, experience, as it has been in a sense-experience, as a naive realist does, and a logical positivist has no 'logical' right to make a distinction between the two types of experiences — i.e. sense experience on the one hand and religious, moral, and aesthetic experience on the other.

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<sup>1</sup> Ayer A. J., *Language Truth and Logic*. rev. ed. pp. 119-120.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed criticism see "Logical Discrepancies of Logical Positivism" Iqbal Review. vol. II. No.1.

The same contradiction occurs in case of a similar normative claim of the logical positivists that all necessary propositions are conventions. "Which of the two classes does it fall in, the class of empirical probabilities or the class of tautologies. if the former then at any moment a necessary proposition may turn up that is not tautology, and hence the sweeping statement is illegitimate. If in the latter, the theory is self-contradictory again, for having laid it down that no necessary proposition, says any thing about the facts, it lays down a necessary proposition about propositions: Since a proposition is described as a 'class of sentences' for sentences are facts, we have a necessary statement about facts after all".<sup>3</sup>

The case of religion therefore is not at all weakened by an attack from the logical empiricist, firstly because the arguments are not cogent enough, and are based upon a number of challengable assumptions, and secondly because the movement undermines itself in its attack on religion. In its attempt to fix the limits of rational inquiry, by fiat, it uses at the same time natural sciences unjustifiably as the basis of a new authoritarian orthodoxy, and hence the criticism of other orthodoxies is unjustifiable and comes with poor grace.

## II

There are yet two more viewpoints which contribute to the secular tendencies of the present age, one belonging to psychology and the other to socio-economic philosophy. One is the theory of psycho-analysis affected by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and the other is the Dialectical materialism expounded by Karl Marx. Though they differ in certain important points, the average man is not wholly wrong in associating Freud and Marx as belonging to the same chapter of intellectual history. The psychological relativism of Freud has seemed to buttress the sociological relativism of Marx. As a result of psychological relativism, ideas, values and standards are regarded as at bottom merely the expression of unconscious desires striving for fulfilment,

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<sup>3</sup> Blanshard, B. *The Nature of Thought*, Macmillan and Co., N. Y., 1940, vol. 2. pp. 416-17.

and of the various mechanisms by which these desires are diverted or checked.

Moreover, both Freud and Marx drew heavily on the philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) son, who traces the psychological origin of religious doctrine in human hopes, fears, and aspirations. God for him is a beautiful idealization of human wishes. Marx had accepted in his frustration, Feuerbach's basic theory of religion, which was nothing but a projection of man on a cosmic screen. With Sigmund Freud, however, this conception developed into something of central importance. Feuerbach's epithet "Man has given objectivity to himself, but has not recognized the object as his own nature," has become a brief statement of a crucial aspect of Freud's doctrine. "When religion — consciousness of God — is designated as the self-consciousness of man, this is not to be understood as affirming that the religious man is directly aware of this identity; for, on the contrary, ignorance of it is peculiar to the fundamentals of religion. To preclude this misconception, it is better to say, that religion is man's earliest and also indirect form of self-knowledge, as in the history of the race, so also in that of the individual. Man first of all sees his nature as if *out* of himself before he finds it *in* himself. His own nature is in the first instance contemplated by him as that of another being ....Hence the historical progress of religion consists in this: that what by an earlier religion was regarded as objective, is now recognized as subjective, that is what was formerly contemplated and worshipped as God is now perceived to be something *human*."<sup>4</sup> Feuerbach tried to show that each item of religious faith or experience, may be interpreted as an objectification of a certain wish. Providance is the desire to believe we are important; the experience of God is the effort to say that ours is the class of most important of beings; prayers, a desire to converse with ourselves; miracles satisfy the wishes of men in the most desirable way — i.e., without any effort or waiting etc. The New Psychoanalysis and the

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<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*. translated by Marian Evans, 2nd edition, London, 1881 p. 13.

theories of Freud gave a 'plausible' explanation of the above theory of Feuerbach by providing a methodology for analysing mental activities, and by pointing out the most important phenomena of mental science, i.e., unconscious, sub-conscious, and conscious, etc. So. even if one is saved by the hands of a logical positivist, and admits the presence, importance and meaningfulness of religious experience a psychoanalyst is closely at hand to give a "psychological explanation" of it in terms of "father image", "conditioning" or "wishful thinking".

Freud's teachings about religion are found in three of his important works, "*Totem & Tabu*", "*The Future of an Illusion*", and "*Moses & Monotheism*". His thesis, in the first instance, seems to be quite plausible. It begins with the hard facts of life. Life is, generally speaking, full of misery, sufferings and privation. There are evils of nature, disappointments in life, and in the end there always is the "evil of death". According to him "man's seriously menaced self-esteem craves for consolation, life and the universe must be rid of their terrors, and incidentally man's curiosity, reinforced, it is true, by the strongest practical motives, demands an answer".<sup>5</sup>

These problems are solved by a mechanism, termed as "the humanization of Nature", where human qualities are attributed to various natural phenomena." 'Psychology' is thus substituted for natural sciences much on the same lines as infantile fantasy makes father an object of fear, and dependence. Thus, man tries to make tolerable his own helplessness, and protects himself against the dangers of nature and fate at the same time. Hence the whole systems of religious beliefs are "not the residue of experience or the final result of reflection; they are illusions, fulfilments of the oldest, strongest, and most instant wishes of mankind; the secret of their strength is the strength of these wishes. We know already that terrifying effect of infantile helplessness aroused the need for protection — protection through love — which the father relieved, and that the discovery that this

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<sup>5</sup> Freud. *The Future of an Illusion*. Liveright. N. Y. 1953, p. 64.

helplessness would continue through the whole of life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father<sup>6</sup> — but this time a more powerful one. Thus the benevolent rule of divine providance allays our anxiety in face of life's dangers, the establishment of a moral world order ensures the fulfilment of the demands of justice, which within human culture have so often remained unfulfilled, and the prolongation of earthly existence by future life provides in addition the local and temporal setting for these wishfulfilments."<sup>7</sup> These wishfulfilments are not errors, it is a belief in which wishfulfilments is a prominent factor in its motivation, notwithstanding any relation to reality. They neither admit any proof, nor can they be treated scientifically which, according to this view, is the only way to the knowledge of external reality.

In the first place let us admit that the theories of psychoanalysis have helped us to understand, to a very great extent, the nature of man, and, thereby, hard also given us an insight into the nature of religion. In the second place the opposition between the theories of psychoanalysis and that of religion depends, to a very great extent, on the concept of religion and the religious beliefs involved in this comparison. But it remains a fact, that although to a certain extent there can be compatibility between religious beliefs and Freudian doctrines, the general theory of psychoanalysis definitely shifts the whole edifice of religion from its original ground and fixes it on an altogether new pedestal and in its new fixation it certainly generates a secularistic outlook. A God of a believer, really existing with all the good attributes (اسماء الحسنی), is very much different from the idea of God created by fantasy. Thus, psychology, like logical positivism (though on different grounds), tries to understand human experiences without any reference to "religious experiences." One brands it as 'nonsense', the other as 'wishfulfilment'. The result in both the cases is the same and the moral of both the attempts is identical. No meaningful construction of ideas is

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<sup>6</sup> Where there is no conception of 'father' in religion it is God.

<sup>7</sup>S. Freud. *The Future of an Elution*. p. 52.



possible at all by omitting the most significant and the most persisting piece of human experience.

As a theory of psychology, Freudian explanation of human behaviour has lost much of its shine and is regarded as an overemphasis on certain phenomena . It is also said to have been based on a limited observation and with an extra amount of imagination and theorizing — a theorizing not warranted by the facts observed. Hence the scientific method, which Freud himself advocates in finding facts, has been misused by him in elaborating his theories. If the evidence of religious experience is taken into consideration, one will find that the authentic decisions of faith, are not something that is always pleasant to man or that is flattering to his ego.

In some reports of religious experiences (of all traditions, christian, Muslim etc. which I cannot quote for fear of space) one would often find the experience forcing one to believe what he does *not want to believe*. Any strenuous explanation (like some dream interpretations of Freud) of these phenomena in terms of wishfulfilment would forever remain unconvincing.

Moreover, a *normative religious experience* often reveals the unhealthy (though comfortable) situation of man, and compels him to adopt a strenuous life of obedience to the commandments of God, which again can never be explained in terms of wishfulness.

Not only the nature of God as revealed in religious experience, is different from what men desired, but sometimes it is different even from what they are expected to find.

The psychology of Freud does not appear to be supported by any adequate evidence. "If our vagarant impulses," says Iqbal, "assert themselves in our dreams, or at other times we are not strictly ourselves, it does not follow that they remain imprisoned in a kind of a lumber room behind the normal self. The occasional invasion of these suppressed impulses on the region of our normal self tends more to show the temporary disruption of

our habitual system of response, rather than their perpetual presence in some dark corner of the mind."<sup>8</sup>

### III

The same secular trend expresses itself more clearly and on a bigger canvas in the form of Marxism. Like Freud, Marx himself was very much influenced by Feuerbach who interpreted the Hegelian system in a materialistic sense and treated world history as the unfolding of matter and not of spirit. Marx vehemently supported Feuerbach, but simultaneously came under the influence of the scientific materialism which was spreading at that time. He accepted the essentials of the explanation of Feuerbach, and maintained that projection results because man is frustrated in two ways, by nature and by society. The easy answer to frustration is pious imagination. For Marx the omnipotence of God is nothing but the fantastic impotence of people before nature and before economic and social relations created by themselves.

The Marxist doctrine, in its inception, was not really something new, but only a faithful representation of the nineteenth century philosophy of materialism and atheism. Lenin propounds a less conventional rationalism and an atheistic humanism, and laid more emphasis on social conditions. "In modern capitalistic countries the basis of religion is primarily social. The roots of our religion are deeply imbedded in the social operation of the working masses, and in their apparently complete helplessness before the blind force of capitalism which every day and every hour cause a thousand times more horrible suffering and torture for ordinary working folk than are caused by exceptional events, such as war, earthquakes etc. Fear created the Gods. Fear of the blind force of capital — blind because its action cannot be forseen by the masses — a force which at every step in life threatens the worker with sudden, "unexpected", "accidental" destructions and ruins, bringing in their train beggary, pauperism, prostitution and death from

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<sup>8</sup> Iqbal: *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* p. 24.

starvation — this is the tap-root of modern religion which, first of all and above all, the materialist must keep in mind, If he does not wish to remain struck for ever in the infant school of materialism".<sup>9</sup> This is the real nature of religion. Whatever else has been taught in the name of religion and faith is evil, because it turns man's head from the real remedies, and substitutes a false faith, groundless and unscientific.

The creed based on the principles of scientific materialism provides not only a social programme and a scientific method, but also a kind of religion, the fundamental postulates of which are: —

- a. Scienticism
- b. Materialism and,
- c. Dialectic

In a nutshell the creed is based on an inherent assumption of scientific or natural explanation of the universe, governed by natural laws. Scienticism is also a watchword to guard against the idealistic tendencies, and normative ethics. The world is a factual world and can be known by employing scientific method. All pre-scientific explanations or descriptions are thus suspect in the very nature of the case. Like Auguste Comte the adherents of this creed show a willingness to leave behind both theological and the metaphysical stage of human development and to universally accept the dawn of a new era, the era of science. The whole idea is based on the logical priority of the material basis of existence. The fundamental order is material order. The class struggle is the necessary outcome of the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange which, in its turn, is the necessary outcome of the material structure of the world. History, thus, follows a pattern, not provided by any Divine agency, but determined by the material conditions in a given space and time. The inner dialectic is working itself out by successive steps with an inevitable logic. This is termed as dialectical materialism asserting a temporal priority of matter over mind, mind being an epiphenomenon. Thus, like the two previous attempts, dialectical materialism

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<sup>9</sup> Lenin, V.I., On Religion, P. 19.

is based on the same type of explanation of the phenomena of religion in human history. And if the grounds for the rejection of the psychological explanation are true the same may be true in regard to psycho-material explanation as well. The whole point lies in the above mentioned assumptions of dialectical materialism. To describe mind as an epiphenomenon of the processes of matter is to deny it as an independent activity, and to deny it as an independent activity is to deny the validity of all knowledge which is only a systematized expression of consciousness. As far as the assumption of the material nature of the world is concerned, which can be known by a scientific method alone (i.e. through sense experience) we can again best quote Iqbal who says " The question, then is, whether the passage to Reality through revelations of sense perception, necessarily leads to a view of Reality essentially opposed to the view that religion takes its ultimate character. Is Natural science finally committed to materialism? . . . It (science) is a mass of sectional views of Reality, fragments of a total experience which do not seem to fit together. Natural science deals with matter, with life, with mind; but the moment you ask the question how matter, life, and mind are mutually related, you begin to see the sectional character of the various sciences that deal with them and the inability of these sciences, taken singly to furnish a complete answer to your question. . . The moment you put the subject of science in the total of human experience it begins to disclose a different character. Thus religion demands the whole of reality and for this reason must occupy central place in any synthesis of all the data of human experience."<sup>10</sup>

Even if the so called scientific procedure is accepted and the ultimate nature of the world declared as material, and the logical priority of matter is granted, the question may be asked, does the marxist dialectic give a scientific account of nature and subsequently extract from this its moral and social ideal, or does it on the contrary pick and choose in nature precisely those phenomena which look as if they provide support for moral and social ideals

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<sup>10</sup> Iqbal: *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* pp. 41-42.

independently formed? According to the official doctrine, nature is an integral whole in which every part is conditioned by the other. The process of development in nature results in a series of changes in which some *insignificant* quantitative changes lead to rapid and abrupt quantitative changes. This movement *therefore* proceeds from the *lower* to *higher*, from *downward* to *upward*. Now a professedly scientific account does not and can not provide a vocabulary like "important", "higher", "lower" etc., a vocabulary that has been used in the official account of the philosophy of Dialectical Materialism by Stalin himself. The revolutionary *ideals* cannot be derived at all from the scientific study of nature. "The whole method of equating logical contradictions with opposing forces in nature, and with passage from the old to the new is a piece of mythology designed to support a political theory."<sup>11</sup>

In fact the whole argument can be very conveniently reverted. If in the process of dialectical development gradual quantitative changes produce abrupt qualitative ones, why can we not argue that gradual qualitative changes suddenly produce a new choir of heaven and a new furniture of earth. Neither argument has any validity, in so far as we remain true to the doctrine of scienticism. And no social and political change can be explained by this methodology.

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<sup>11</sup> H. J. Paton: *The Modern Predicament*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1955, p. 313.