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## CONCERNING GOD, MODERN MAN AND RELIGION

**Mortimer J. Adler**

♦ Part 2 ♦

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### The State of Contemporary Scientific Knowledge

I have reviewed everything I know about the most recent discoveries in cosmology (the vast expanses of the galactic universe, the competing hypotheses about its condition or its origin in the big-bang theory or the steady-state theory); in atomic physics (our new knowledge of elementary particles and our new principles of quantum mechanics); in biology, genetics, and the theory of evolution (especially our discovery of the fossil species of man and the molecular biology of DNA); in psychology and psychiatry (in-

cluding Freud's psychoanalytical theories of the genesis of man's belief in God). As I go through the whole range of my acquaintance with scientific knowledge I find nothing, neither facts nor established hypotheses, that requires the denial of God's existence.

I would go further to say that, in the whole range of our *currently* accepted scientific understanding of the world, I find nothing that introduces a single new difficulty into our thinking about God, or presents an intellectual obstacle to our affirming God's existence. In short, so far as science goes, nothing so far discovered about the world would require me to alter in the least the philosophical conception of God that I presented earlier in this essay and nothing that I can learn from science has any bearing on the thinking that I must do when I address myself to the question whether God, as thus conceived, exists or not.

Note I did not say that future discoveries may not be decisive with regard to the question of God's existence. We must always be open to the possibility that within the next hundred years a scientific discovery or demonstration will change our view of one central fact, which may provide the coping stone for atheism. But it is as yet only a possibility. Possibilities are not realities; conjectures are not knowledge. All I am saying, then, is that the present state of our scientific knowledge of the world does not warrant Bishop Robinson's thesis that a truly contemporary person must be an atheist.

### The State of Contemporary Philosophical Knowledge

Turning from science to philosophy, are there any advances in philosophy that call for atheism? Materialism in metaphysics does require atheism. But is there something new about this? Not at all. Materialism always did require atheism, from Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius right down to the present day. The present arguments for materialism as a metaphysical position still fall short of demonstration and proof; hence it cannot be said that a truly contemporary person cannot avoid being a materialist, if he is philosophically reasonable. And if he can avoid being a materialist, he need not be an atheist on these grounds.

Existentialism? Existentialism is a philosophical novelty, as materialism is not. Is this what Bishop Robinson had in mind when he said that a truly contemporary person must be an atheist? If so, he forgot that there are two varieties of existentialism. There is the religious or Christian existentialism of men like Kierkegaard and Marcel, and there is the atheistic existentialism of men like Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre. In the latter, atheism is itself the root of the whole philosophical position, not its conclusion or con-

sequence. The despair or angst of this brand of existentialism stems from its denial of God's existence, not the other way around.

Analytic and linguistic philosophy, of the sort that dominates the English and American university scene? None of the semantic or logical principles of analytic or linguistic philosophy would require me to alter the philosophical conception of God that I presented in these pages, or would change in any way the kind of thinking I would do in trying to answer the question whether God exists.

Hence I must conclude that the answer to Bishop Robinson's question is a simple and flat no. No, it is not necessary for a truly contemporary person to be an atheist or to disbelieve in the existence of God. And I find no arguments, no reasons, no evidence or facts, not in Bishop Robinson's writings, nor in Bishop Pike's, nor in the writings of Tillich, Bultmann, and Bonhoeffer, or in the lesser breed of new theologians, which support the opposite answer.

The new theologians are impressed by the secularism of our society, by the spread of irreligion and of atheism or disbelief in God. It is this which leads them to propose a religionless Christianity, or an atheistic Christianity, a secularized religion to meet the needs or fit the condition of present life. All this is justified on the ground that the church is absolutely out of touch with contemporary life, and that this is no connection between what goes on in the church and contemporary life, and soon. I am sure that a religionless or secularized Christianity is as much a self-contradiction as an atheistic theology.

I would like to make two points about secularism and religion. One is to question the claim that secularism and irreligion are on the increase. The other is to raise the question about the meaning of religion itself—a question that will affect the view we take of religion in the West and in the East.

With regard to the apparent increase of secularism or irreligion in our Western society, I suggest that the men and women who have given up religion because of the impact on their minds of modern science and philosophy were never truly religious in the first place, but only superstitious. The prevalence and predominance of science in our culture has cured a great many of the superstitious beliefs that constituted their false religiosity. Bishop Robinson is right if what he means is that a truly contemporary person cannot be superstitious in the way that countless human beings were in the past. The increase of secularism and irreligion in our society does not reflect a decrease in the number of persons who are truly religious, but a decrease in the number of those who are falsely re-

ligious; that is, merely superstitious.

There is no question but that science is the cure for superstition, and, if given half the chance with education, it will reduce the amount that exists.

The truths of religion must be compatible with the truths of science and the truths of philosophy. As scientific knowledge advances, and as philosophical analysis improves, religion is progressively purified of the superstitions that accidentally attach themselves to it as parasites. That being so, it is easier in fact to be more truly religious today than ever before, precisely because of the advances that have been made in science and philosophy. That is to say, it is easier for those who will make the effort to think clearly in and about religion, not for those whose addiction to religion is nothing more than a slavish adherence to inherited superstition. Throughout the whole of the past, only a small number of men were ever truly religious. The vast majority who gave their epochs and their societies the *appearance* of being religious were primarily and essentially superstitious.

What I have just said goes a long way, I think, toward explaining the increase of atheism. The growing number of new atheists consists of those who never did understand the conception of God, and whose mistaken conceptions of God have been shaken, as well they should, by modern science and philosophy.

### The Question of Religion

I come finally to the question of religion itself. The question may be easy for a person of religious faith, but is most difficult to approach from a purely philosophical point of view. The difficulty lies in drawing the line between the natural and the supernatural in the sphere of human thought and human action. Words are difficult to manage here, but let me at least try to draw the line. By the natural in human thought and human action, I mean that which man can achieve entirely by the exercise of his own power, without any aid whatsoever from any agency or power that is not included in the natural order itself. By the supernatural in human thought and action, I mean that which man can think or do only through the aid of an agency or power that transcends the natural order.

The difficulty we face arises as a consequence of this distinction. Suppose, for example, that such disciplines as mathematics, history, the natural, social, and behavioral sciences, and all the branches of philosophy exhaust the departments or branches of natural knowledge. What then? Then either religion is supernatural knowledge—knowledge that a man possesses through God's

revelation of himself—or it is nothing but a set of superstitions.

Again, many persons think of religion as an ethical code, a set of prescriptions for living in a certain way, a set of beliefs about the world and about man. Now if these rules or prescriptions are arrived at by the natural process of the human mind, they are nothing but moral or ethical philosophy. *There is absolutely no reason for calling them religion.* If a set of beliefs about the world and about man is similarly arrived at, they are nothing but metaphysics or speculative philosophy. *There is absolutely no reason for calling them religion.* They deserve and demand the name “religion”—as something distinct from science and philosophy—only if they are supernatural in origin, only if they are a gift of God’s grace, only if they are something man receives from God, not something that he achieves entirely by his own powers in an entirely natural way.

What I have just said about religious thought and religious knowledge applies equally to the religious life. No one can lead a way of life that is religious except through the supernatural agency of God’s grace. If a way of life can be lived entirely through the exertion of man’s natural powers, entirely through the exercise of his own free will and the habits he can freely form through his own acts, entirely through the discipline he can acquire through his own efforts, then that way of life is not religious. In short, I am saying that a religious way of life can be lived only through God’s grace, just as religious faith or belief can be had only as a gift of God. Hence if God does not exist, religion does not exist, but only counterfeits of what it would be if it did exist. Fully to appreciate the difficulty of either accepting or rejecting this definition of religion, you need only to examine the consequence of the two alternatives.

On the one hand, let us suppose for a moment that the definition of religion as involving the supernatural in man’s life is false. On that alternative, there is no way of drawing the line between such things as science and philosophy, on the one hand, and religion on the other. In fact, in view of the ways in which religious beliefs are formed and the ways in which they are held, it would then become necessary to say that most religious beliefs are simply bad philosophy; or worse than that, unfounded conjectures about things beyond our knowledge. On this alternative, all religions are secular institutions and are fraudulent when they pretend to be sacred. This applies to the religions of the East as well as to the religions of the West. It is generally admitted that most of the religions of the East cannot be distinguished from philosophy. That being the case, the only important question about them is how good they are as philosophies.

What I have just said applies to the teachings of Jesus just as much as it applies to the teachings of Confucius or of Buddha or of the Zen Masters. If Jesus is not the Incarnate Word of God, if he is not God revealing Himself to man, if he is just a man like you and me, then his teachings are no different from those of Socrates—no different in character, in their origin, or in the standards to which they must submit. Being a follower of Jesus, as one might be a follower of Socrates or of Ghandi, is not being religious. Moreover, I would seriously question the possibility of following Jesus' teachings, of living according to his precepts, of imitating his way of life, if his teachings are taken on the purely natural plane, the same plane on which we take Socrates' teachings or Ghandi's. And in the same way that I question whether anyone can imitate Christ, as the Christian saints did, without God's grace, so I also question whether anyone can become a Zen Master or achieve Satori without God's grace.

Let me summarize what I have just said in another way. On the alternative that religion is entirely a natural product of man, and not something that man has through a supernatural gift, I say, first, that it cannot be distinguished from philosophy; and that, in addition, most of it, by the strictest standards, is very bad philosophy. And I say, second, that the way of life or of thought that is recommended by the great religious leaders, if treated as purely natural, makes demands upon man that human nature by itself—without supernatural aid—can never fulfill. No one can live the life that Jesus recommends—no one can follow Jesus' teachings—on the natural plane. Merely as ethical philosophy they are of little use or truth. And the same thing is true of the teachings of Buddha or of the Zen Masters.

On the other hand, let us suppose that the true definition of religion involves a supernatural gift that lifts human thought above natural philosophy. On this alternative so far as thought is concerned, there is a clear line of distinction between philosophy, on the one hand, and religion, on the other hand. Also, so far as conduct and action are concerned, there is a clear line of distinction between ordinary ways of life, on the one hand, and the religious way of life, on the other hand. On this alternative, a secular religion, a secularized Christianity, is as impossible as a round square. Further, on this alternative, only the religions of the West, and among these especially orthodox Christianity, make claims that entitle them to the name of religion.

My knowledge of the Eastern religions is not sufficient to make the judgment that is here implied, and so I leave with you the question whether the so-called religions of the East claim a supernatural

foundation for the beliefs that they inculcate, and a supernatural support for the way of life that they recommend. If they do not, or if, further, they deny any supernatural foundation or source, *they are not religions in the sense defined*. And if they are not that, then they are at best philosophies—moral or speculative—and we must judge them by the same standards that we judge any other philosophical effort on man's part.

To which I would like to add one other observation. The teachings of Confucius, so far as these doctrines propose a code of conduct and a way of life, seem to me quite practicable for ordinary man. They make no demands on man that human nature cannot meet, no demands that would require supernatural help to meet.

On the contrary, the teachings of Buddha and of the Zen Masters, so far as I can understand them, seem to be the very opposite of philosophical thought. If you were to take them as philosophical thought, you would have to dismiss them—as one must dismiss the Christian mystics—as having little or no philosophical merit. I must add quickly that, if mystical visions are rubbish to the philosopher, the reverse is also true. Four years before he died, Thomas Aquinas retired from the world, gave up philosophy and theology, and gave himself entirely to mystical contemplation. He left his greatest work—in my judgment, one of the greatest works of all time—the *Summa Theologica*, unfinished. When asked by one of his brethren why he threw aside that great unfinished work, Aquinas said, “It is all as so much straw.” That judgment is quite proper when made from the height of mystical vision, just as it is quite proper for the philosopher, on the lower plane of reason, to dismiss the mystical vision.

I am impelled to ask but not to answer the question whether the achievements of Buddha and his saintly followers, and the achievements of the Zen Masters—both in thought and action—may not be manifestations of God's grace, the products of a supernatural intervention in human life and thought, even though the Buddhists and the Zen Masters themselves may never claim a supernatural foundation for their doctrines or supernatural help for their way of life.

### Conclusions

I have not in this essay asserted, much less tried to prove, the existence of God. I have done nothing but present the minimum philosophical analysis that is required to expose the inanity and double-talk of the new theology and the death of God movement, and to raise some serious questions about secularism and religion, applicable to both East and West. It is this very last point—applicable

to East as well as West, and applicable in the same way to both—to which objection may be made. To meet that objection, or at least to challenge it, let me state for you the two controlling principles underlying everything that I have said.

The first controlling principle is that science, though mainly a Western invention and development, is now neither Eastern nor Western, but universal. Anyone who in any way or degree lives by means of technology (which is nothing but an application of science) tacitly acknowledges this. If there is no truth in the science of aerodynamics, we would be fools to trust our lives to airplanes. To acknowledge the usefulness and trustworthiness of technological applications is also to acknowledge the truth of the science that is applied to them. In short, both Eastern and Western cultures must agree that science gives us a measure of truth, not the whole truth, but considerable truth about the world in which we live—about nature, about society, and about man himself. In short, science is at least a part of the truth about the world—nature, society, and man.

My second principle is that there is one whole of truth. There are not three separate kinds of truth, three separate modes of truth—scientific truth, philosophical truth, religious truth—unrelated to one another and incapable of being inconsistent or incompatible. One of the greatest disputes that ever took place in the thirteenth century occurred when Aquinas stood up and defended the doctrine of one truth against the double-truth theory of the Latin Averroists who wished to keep the truths of science and philosophy and the truths of religion in logic-tight compartments. St. Thomas, the inheritor of the science of Aristotle which had become available at the end of the twelfth century, had his books condemned and was almost excommunicated for heresy because he insisted that the truth of science, the truth of philosophy, and the truth of religion belonged to a single, integral realm of truth.


This principle applies to philosophy as well as to religion—and to both in the same way. Though philosophy may add truth to the truth learned by science, nothing can be true in philosophy which in any way violates or contradicts what we know by science. To make this point clear, let me use the phrase “scientific philosophy,” not for a philosophy that is developed by scientific methods, but for a philosophy that in every respect tries to be consistent with, although it goes beyond, the truths known by science. Similarly, though religion—through revelation—may add truth to the truths learned by both science and philosophy, nothing can be true in religion or as a matter of religious faith that in any way violates or contradicts what we know by science.



Let me call such religion “scientific religion.” I do not mean scientific in method, but compatible with science. At the beginning of Western theology, one of the great moments occurred when the greatest of all our Western theologians, St. Augustine, before he was converted to Christianity, and still in search of the truth, came upon the doctrine of the Manicheans. He studied with the Manicheans and read their books. But, as he tells us in his *Confessions*, when he discovered that the astrological views propounded by the Manichean religion were incompatible with the science of his day—the astronomy that he had learned from the Greeks—he dismissed Manicheanism as superstition. When he accepted Christianity, he found nothing in Christianity that at that time was incompatible with the scientific knowledge of his day. If he had, he would not have accepted it. His principle was absolutely right. There cannot be any truth in Christianity that is inconsistent with science, if science is true.

If these two controlling principles are sound, they apply equally to Eastern and Western thought—philosophical or religious—and they apply in the same way. Like Western philosophy, Eastern philosophy can have truth beyond what we know by science, which is the same East and West. Like Western religion, Eastern religion is separated from superstition and fraud by a line that divides what is and what is not compatible with the truths of philosophy and of science. In other words, what I am saying is that, to be sound, Eastern philosophy and Eastern religion must be wholly compatible with science in exactly the same sense that Western philosophy and Western religion must be wholly compatible with science.

You can try to avoid these conclusions in only two ways. One way is to deny that science and technology are common to West and East; but this is almost impossible to do, for the truth of the one, science, and the usefulness of the other, technology, are clearly the same in both East and West. Failing this, you would have to take refuge in the abhorrent doctrine of two truths or three truths, the doctrine that the truths of science, the truths of philosophy, and the truths of religion, can have no relation to one another and can be quite incompatible and yet all be true in some sense of the word.

It is impossible to deny that science and technology are common to West and East. To take refuge in the doctrine of two or more modes of truth, separated into logic-tight compartments, is to embrace an intellectual schizophrenia that is the utter ruin of the human mind. 

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Max,

The persistent unemployment in the news reminds me that after *Six Great Ideas*, the Adler work that had the most lasting impression on how I view the world was *The Capitalist Manifesto*, which Mortimer co-authored with Louis Kelso. Its thesis—that modern economies are increasingly capital-intensive and hence increasingly less dependent on labor—is ever more pertinent today.

I might add though that I had problems with their solution. One of Mortimer's great pearls of wisdom is that virtue cannot be taught, but must be acquired. That is particularly so with money. Gratifications are not easily deferred, greed can beget imprudence, and equities conferred by beneficent programs to provide an income stream might be improvidently liquidated by recipients for speculation or consumption. I would also be concerned that an idle mind (or person) is the devil's playhouse, and might view their optimism that a great portion of the unemployed could be redirected to liberal, artistic pursuits as utopian. And of course, neither Mortimer nor Louis were economists, though Mortimer I believe recognized the respect and deference that is due the specialist in his field.

Nevertheless, I do believe they defined the *problem*, and convincingly made the argument that such problem *is* a proper subject for government acting in the common good. Of philosophers applying general knowledge, we couldn't ask for more.

Irvin Halbleib

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