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GOD AND THE PROFESSORS

Mortimer J. Adler

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Of course, the minority view will get a hearing, with all that indifference about the truth which hides behind the mask of tolerance, but it is a foregone conclusion that no body's mind will be changed; in fact, everyone knows that is not the aim of a conference, anyway. Hence, when all is said and done, the relative weights of majority and minority opinion will be registered once more. The Conference will have exhibited the characteristic mentality of our culture, and those who are deeply concerned about changing that mentality will be confirmed in their pessimism that nothing, simply nothing, can be done to reform our education or to reorient our culture.

Now I am well aware that my colleagues do not think there is any such clear-cut division between a majority and a minority view of science, philosophy and religion. For one thing, they do not like to

acknowledge the existence of clear-cut issues, with truth on one side, and error on the other; if there were such issues, then anyone who undertook to think about them might be obliged to risk his academic reputation by coming to a definite conclusion.

For another thing, the professors do not like to feel that they share even a common majority opinion with each other. The sacred individuality of each professor can be preserved only by differing. When one is in substantial sympathy with what a colleague has to say, he still safeguards his freedom of opinion by saying the same thing some other way. Most professors seem to feel that agreement, even if freely reached, violates their personal integrity.

Nevertheless, I charge the professors—and here I am speaking of the vast majority—with being in substantial agreement on one side of the crucial issues this Conference faces. I say that most of them are positivists. I know that there are enough varieties of positivism to permit the professors to retain their individuality, but I insist that behind the multiplicity of technical jargons there is a single doctrine. The essential point of that doctrine is simply the affirmation of science, and the denial of philosophy and religion.

Again I am aware that the professors will smile at my simplicity. Whoever heard anyone, except a few violent extremists, flatly denying philosophy and religion; as a matter of fact, such dogmatic denials are made only by a small circle of “philosophers” who blantly advertise themselves as positivists. The very presence at this Conference of scientists, philosophers and theologians shows that the representatives of the several disciplines respect each other; the fact that they are willing to listen to each other’s papers shows the spirit of cooperation which prevails among them. One even begins to wonder about the sanity of those who talk about the disorder and disunity of modern culture. The real problem of this Conference must be the perils of Democracy; it certainly cannot be the issue about positivism.

Despite such blandishments, I repeat my charge. The professors, by and large, are positivists. And, furthermore, I say that the most serious threat to Democracy is the positivism of the professors, which dominates every aspect of modern education and is the central corruption of modern culture. Democracy has much more to fear from the mentality of its teachers than from the nihilism of Hitler. It is the same nihilism in both cases, but Hitler’s is more honest and consistent, less blurred by subtleties and queasy qualifi-

cations, and hence less dangerous. I shall return to this point after I have supported my charge.

Within brief scope, the easiest way to force the professors into the open is by making the issues sharp and clear. Let me do this first with respect to philosophy, and then with respect to religion.

With respect to philosophy, the following propositions must be affirmed. He who denies any one of them denies philosophy.

(1) Philosophy is public knowledge, not private opinion, in the same sense that science is knowledge, not opinion.

(2) Philosophical knowledge answers questions which science cannot answer, now or ever, because its method is not adapted to answering such questions.

(3) Because their methods are thus distinct, each being adapted to a different object of inquiry, philosophical and scientific knowledge are logically independent of one another, which means that the truth and falsity of philosophical principles or conclusions does not depend upon the changing content of scientific knowledge.

(4) Philosophy is superior to science, both theoretically and practically: theoretically, because it is knowledge of the being of things whereas science studies only their phenomenal manifestations; practically, because philosophy establishes moral conclusions, whereas scientific knowledge yields only technological applications; this last point means that science can give us only a control over operable means, but it cannot make a single judgment about good and bad, right and wrong, in terms of the ends of human life.

(5) There can be no conflict between scientific and philosophic truths, although philosophers may correct the errors of scientists who try to answer questions beyond their professional competence, just as scientists can correct the errors of philosophers guilty of a similar transgression.

(6) There are no systems of philosophy, each of which may be considered true in its own way by criteria of internal consistency, each differing from the others, as so many systems of geometry, in terms of different origins in diverse, but equally arbitrary, postulates or definitions.

(7) The first principles of all philosophical knowledge are metaphysical, and metaphysics is valid knowledge of both sensible and supra-sensible being.

(8) Metaphysics is able to demonstrate the existence of supra-sensible being, for it can demonstrate the existence of God, by appealing to the evidence of the senses and the principles of reason, and without any reliance upon articles of religious faith.

These eight propositions are not offered as an exhaustive account of the nature of philosophy, its distinction from, and relation to, science. I have chosen them simply because they will serve like intellectual litmus paper to bring out the acid of positivism.

Let the professors who claim to respect philosophy—and this goes as much for the professors of philosophy as for the others—decide whether they affirm every one of these propositions. Those who say that philosophy is just another kind of knowledge but not superior to science might just as well call philosophy opinion and deny its existence. Those who suppose that philosophical principles or conclusions are dependent on the findings of science; those who suppose that real technical competence is necessary in order to solve scientific problems, whereas none is needed for philosophical problems; those who think that philosophy comprises a variety of logically constructed systems, among which you can take your choice according to your preference among postulates; those who say philosophy is all right, but metaphysics is nonsense, and there is no rational knowledge of God—all these deny philosophy. They are positivists.

If the professors were clear of mind and forth right of speech, they would come right out and say that they regard philosophy as opinion, not knowledge. But professors are unaccustomed to simple affirmations and denials. They give true-false tests, but never take them. They will, therefore, avoid the test I have presented by saying that it is all a matter of how you use words, or that it all depends on your point of view, or something equally evasive. Yet, by their evasions shall you know them, for those who affirm philosophy to be knowledge neither hesitate nor quibble on any of these points.

With respect to religion, the following propositions must be affirmed. He who denies any one of them denies religion, in any

sense which makes it distinct in character from science and philosophy.

(1) Religion involves knowledge of God and of man's destiny, knowledge which is not naturally acquired in the sense in which both science and philosophy are natural knowledge.

(2) Religious faith, on which sacred theology rests, is itself a supernatural act of the human intellect, and is thus a Divine gift.

(3) Because God is its cause, faith is more certain than knowledge resulting from the purely natural action of the human faculties.

(4) What is known by faith about God's nature and man's destiny is knowledge which exceeds the power of the human intellect to attain without God's revelation of Himself and His Providence.

(5) Sacred theology is independent of philosophy, in that its principles are truths of faith, whereas philosophical principles are truths of reason, but this does not mean that theology can be speculatively developed without reason serving faith.

(6) There can be no conflict between philosophical and theological truths, although theologians may correct the errors of philosophers who try to answer questions beyond the competence of natural reason, just as philosophers can correct the errors of theologians who violate the autonomy of reason.

(7) Sacred theology is superior to philosophy, both theoretically and practically: theoretically, because it is more perfect knowledge of God and His creatures; practically, because moral philosophy is insufficient to direct man to God as his last end.

(8) Just as there are no systems of philosophy, but only philosophical knowledge less or more adequately possessed by different men, so there is only one true religion, less or more adequately embodied in the existing diversity of creeds.

These eight propositions, like those concerning philosophy, are far from exhaustive. They are intended simply as a device to bring professorial positivism—or shall I call it “negativism?”—out into the open. Those who claim to respect the distinct place of religion in modern culture, but refuse to grant that religion rests upon supernatural knowledge, or that it is superior to both philosophy and

science, either know not what they say or are guilty of profound hypocrisy. For unless religion involves supernatural knowledge, it has no separate status whatsoever; and if it rests upon supernatural knowledge, it must be accorded the supreme place in the cultural hierarchy.

Religion cannot be regarded as just another aspect of culture, one among many human occupations, of indifferent importance along with science and art, history and philosophy. Religion is either the supreme human discipline, because it is God's discipline of man, and as such dominates our culture, or it has no place at all. The mere toleration of religion, which implies indifference to or denial of its claims, produces a secularized culture as much as militant atheism or Nazi nihilism.

Philosophers who think that all the significant questions men ask are either answerable by reason or not at all, are naturalists in a sense analogous to the positivism of scientists who think that science alone is valid knowledge, and that science is enough for the conduct of life. If the professors are positivists, they are certainly naturalists. They dishonor themselves as well as religion by tolerating it when, all equivocations overcome, they really think that faith is superstition, just as they really think philosophy is opinion. The kind of positivism and naturalism which is revealed in all their works and all their teaching, is at the root of modern secularized culture.

Now let me guard against misunderstanding once more. The various propositions I have enumerated I do not regard as matters of opinion. I think their truth can be proved. But I have not done so. I have done absolutely nothing to show that positivism and naturalism are false doctrines. My only aim was to show that the professors are, whether right or wrong, positivists and naturalists. My only hope was that the professors might examine their conscience in the light of clearly defined issues, and acknowledge plainly what they really think. I know, of course, that that is too much to hope for. But since actions speak louder than words, no one who understands the issues will be deceived by what the professors have to say, how ever much they fool themselves. The professorial reaction to the proposals of Mr. Hutchins, the professorial conduct of this very Conference, give the lie to professorial speech, the polite discourse, the insulting tolerance, which conceals the dismissal of philosophy as opinion and religion as superstition behind expressions of specious respect.

The central problem of mediaeval culture was the relation of faith and reason, religion and philosophy, supernatural and natural knowledge. The so-called mediaeval synthesis, the cultural harmony and unity of the mediaeval world, depended on the solution of that problem. It was not solved by conferences, although in the middle ages something much better than conferences of this sort took place: patient, honest, forthright, hard thinking discussion.

Centuries of earnest disputation, despised by modern professors as logic-chopping and wordy dialectic, prepared the way, because in every case the disputants were seeking to agree about the truth, not to maintain their individuality by holding to a difference of opinion. When, after such preparation, the time was ripe, two men solved the problem by sheer intellectual mastery of every relevant truth: Moses Maimonides solved it for the Jewish community, and St. Thomas Aquinas for the Christian world. That later Jews and Christians did not sustain the solution, or even repudiated it, was part of the cultural tragedy which the modern era went through at its birth.

The central problem of modern culture is more complicated, and much more difficult, than the mediaeval, because in our times science has become a distinct and important enterprise, both theoretically and practically. The modern synthesis, the harmony and unity of modern culture, will be achieved only when all the goodness of science can be praised without sacrificing any of the goodness in philosophy and religion, only when the truths of philosophy and religion can be integrally retained without losing any of the genuine advances in knowledge or production that science has contributed.

The modern synthesis must necessarily include the mediaeval solution, but it can do so only by carrying the mediaeval principles to a higher level of comprehension. In order that every cultural good shall be preserved to the fullness of its own unique value, each must be recognized precisely for what it is, and according to its distinctive character it must be ordered to the others. Since in the world of values, there is no order without hierarchy, science, philosophy and religion can never be harmonized so long as they are all asked to lie down together, but only when each is called upon to perform its proper function, whether that be to serve or to rule.

The time is obviously not yet ripe for a modern solution. There are not enough scientists who understand the truths of philosophy and religion, nor enough philosophers and men of faith who are at home in the domain of science. Much work by representatives of all three disciplines is required to prepare the way for the modern analogue of Maimonides or Aquinas, perhaps even centuries of patient discussion and incisive disputation.

This Conference might have been an occasion for such work. That it was called at all indicates a vague realization of the task to be undertaken. But if I am right about the professorial mind—and I look to the actual proceedings of this Conference for confirmation—there will be no discussion of fundamental issues, nor even a formulation of them. The members of this Conference are not cooperatively seeking to agree about the truth, through the painful ordeal of intellectual debate. Each is content to express his own opinions, and to indulge everyone else in the opportunity for similar self-expression.

The various propositions I have enumerated are either true or false. Each, therefore, can be regarded as constituting a problem, a two-sided issue at least. Should it not be the business of this Conference to take up such problems in a definite order, and to direct all its intellectual energies to their solution? If a group of men do not come together because they have common problems, and ultimately seek to reach common answers, there is no more community among them than there is in a modern university, or in modern culture itself.

As I have already said, the failure of this Conference to do the only work which justifies its existence, perfectly symbolizes the absence of cultural community in the modern world; worse than that, it justifies the most extreme pessimism about an impending catastrophe, for until the professors and their culture are liquidated, the resolution of modern problems—a resolution which history demands shall be made—will not even begin. The tower of Babel we are building invites another flood.

The failure of this Conference is due not only to the fact that the professors are, for the most part, positivists; but even more so to their avoidance of what is demanded for fruitful intellectual procedure. Unlike the mediaeval man of learning, the modern professor will not subject himself to the rigors of public disputation. He

emasculates discussion by treating it as an exchange of opinions, in which no one gains or loses because everyone keeps his own. He is indocile in the sense that, beyond the field of science, he cannot be instructed, because he acknowledges no ignorance.

Hence anyone who would try to instruct him about philosophical or religious truths would be regarded as authoritarian, as trying to impose a doctrine. He is scandalized by the very notion of a commonly shared truth for all men. Even though such truth can be attained only by the free activity of each mind, the fact that no mind is free to reject the truth seems like an infringement upon his sacred liberties. What he means by truth in science and by agreement among scientists permits him to talk as if he were a truth-seeker and willing to agree; but that is because the contingent and tentative character of scientific knowledge so perfectly fits the egoism, the individualism, the libertinism, of the modern mind.

The greater necessity and finality of truth in philosophy and religion oblige a mind in ways it will not suffer. On fundamental questions, which means all the questions beyond the scope of science, he wishes to keep a thoroughly open mind forever; he wishes neither to be convinced of anything nor to convince anyone. Hence he would not participate in a conference which required everyone to agree upon the fundamental questions to be answered, and measured its success by the degree to which such answers were commonly achieved as a result of the most patient discussion.

I have so far pointed out the significance of this Conference for the state of our culture, and the doom it forebodes. In conclusion, I wish to indicate briefly the bearing of my analysis upon the crisis of Democracy. Let me say at once that I hold Democracy to be the greatest political good, the most perfect form of political community; and I hold this not as a matter of fine feeling or local opinion, but because I think it is a conclusion which can be demonstrated in terms of the truths of moral and political philosophy. Now, what can positivists say about such a demonstration? Obviously, they must repudiate it. Outside the sphere of science nothing can be demonstrated, and the proposition that Democracy is the best political order certainly lies outside the sphere of science. What is neither self-evident nor demonstrable must be an opinion, which attracts or repels us emotionally. Anyone who denies that philosophy is knowledge denies, of course, the self-evidence of moral principles and the validity of moral demonstrations.


Hence the professors can be for Democracy only because they like it, not because they know it is right. They talk a great deal about natural rights and the dignity of man, but this is loose and irresponsible talk, in which they lightly indulge because they do not mind contradicting themselves. There are no natural rights if there is no natural moral law, which is binding upon all men every where in the same way. Man has no dignity if he is not a rational animal, essentially distinct from the brutes by reason of the spiritual dimension of his being. This should be enough to make clear that positivists are forced to deny the rights and dignity of man, or hold such views only as prejudice, rationally no better than Hitler's prejudices to the contrary. But to reinforce the point that the professors have no grounds for any of their fine feelings, let me add that the same facts which warrant man's dignity as an end to be served by the state also imply that man has an immortal soul, and a destiny beyond the temporal order. In short, one cannot have reasons for affirming Democracy and at the same time deny the truths of philosophy and religion.

Of course, the sort of democracy to which the professors are sentimentally attached cannot be demonstrably approved, for theirs is an essentially false conception. The social order they would like to preserve is the anarchic individualism, the corrupt liberalism, which is the most vicious caricature of Democracy. Objecting to any inequalities in value, objecting to any infringement of absolute individual liberty by loyalties and obligations to superior goods, they want a democracy without hierarchy and without authority. In short, they want chaos, not order, a society in which everyone will be as free as if he lived alone, a community in which common bonds will not bind the individual at all. Even when they speak enthusiastically about this false ideal, the professors seldom claim that they have rational grounds for its defense. The very fact that they so frequently refer to democracy, not as a government or as a political order, but as a way of life, reveals them as exponents of a false religion. This religion of democracy is no better than the religion of fascism. One is the idolatry of individual liberty as the other is the worship of collective might.

One of the greatest achievements of the modern world is the discovery of the moral and political reasons for the democratic ideal, as well as actual experimentation in the field of democratic processes. But though it be in this sense a child of modern times, Democracy will not be fully achieved until modern culture is radically reformed. Science contributes nothing whatsoever to the under-

standing of Democracy. Without the truths of philosophy and religion, Democracy has no rational foundation. In America at present it is at best a cult, a local prejudice, a traditional persuasion. Today it is challenged by other cults which seem to have more might, and no less right, so far as American ability to defend democracy rationally is concerned.

For all these reasons I say we have more to fear from our professors than from Hitler. It is they who have made American education what it is, both in content and method: in content, an indoctrination of positivism and naturalism; in method, an exhibition of anarchic individualism masquerading as the democratic manner. Whether Hitler wins or not, the culture which is formed by such education cannot support what democracy we have against interior decay.

If I dared to raise my voice as did the prophets in ancient Israel, I would ask whether the tyrants of today are not like the Babylonian and Assyrian kings—instruments of Divine justice, chastening a people who had departed from the way of truth. In the inscrutable Providence of God, and according to the nature of man, a civilization may sometimes reach a rottenness which only fire can expunge and cleanse. If the Babylonians and Assyrians were destroyers, they were also deliverers. Through them, the prophets realized, God purified His people. Seeing the hopelessness of working peaceful reforms among a people who had shut their eyes and hardened their hearts, the prophets almost prayed for such deliverance, through the darkness of destruction, to the light of a better day. So, perhaps, the Hitlers in the world today are preparing the agony through which our culture shall be reborn. Certainly if it is part of the Divine plan to bless man's temporal civilization with the goodness of Democracy, that civilization must be rectified. It is probably not from Hitler, but from the professors, that we shall ultimately be saved. 

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