

Faith and the Olive of Athena

ALEXANDER WINSTON

LEGEND in Attica says that on a bright morning the citizens left their daubed huts and mounted the towering rock which was their *akra polis*. They came to choose at patron for their city—either calm Athena, wisest of the gods, or that tumultuous ruler of the sea, Poseidon. Poseidon courted their favor by bringing from the dry rock a salt stream that swirled and gushed wild as a storm blown up from the Hyades. Then a touch of Athena's spear; where the lizard scuttled grew an olive tree thick with its nourishing and versatile fruit, shade for the heat and fire for the cold. The citizens chose Athena. With her, in the centuries of Athen's glory, they chose the attitude of detached enquiry which she symbolized, the philosophic speculation of Academy and Lyceum, the brilliant insights of Archimedes, the implements of logic and disciplined search for truth of which the western world is the proud inheritor. We all eat the olive of Athena.

In our generation Greek rationalism, supplemented by scientific observation, has created a crisis of faith the more deadly because it is so quiet. Our peace is that of the grave. We are wistful for the days of open and healthy combat when believer and disbeliever kicked each other alternately down the steps of the British Museum, for then the opponents seemed matched and the outcome uncertain. By reason of its practical and visible utility scientific naturalism has become our *Zeitgeist*, openly or covertly ruling our civilization. Its tightly integrated inductive-deductive methodology has evaporated the mists of superstition and given mod-

ern man the control over his environment for which once he relied on sacrifice and prayer. The study of man and his world has done what whole pantheons of gods never accomplished; we know now that an electric motor succeeds where hecatombs of oxen and clouds of incense failed. Medical practices, improved agriculture, communication and transportation on a global scale and the protection of social benefits have thrust back those dark enigmas and sudden disasters which once raised man's imploring hands to heaven.

The naturalistic limitation of reality to the data of experience governed the thinking of the three most influential minds of the last hundred years—Marx, Darwin and Freud. Universities coddle science applicants; governments pour millions into research and scatter pennies to *belles lettres* and the arts. Underdeveloped nations are so rated not because their religion is superstitious or their literature non-existent, but because they lack dams, roads and industrial plants. For the first time in recorded history a great world power, Russia, officially condemns all religious practices. In philosophy, logical positivism carries the semantic implications of scientific method to absurd extremes, and existentialism asserts *au fond* only man's freedom and can be (in the hands of a Sartre, for example) atheistic and nihilistic. The tension between nature and transcendence has become divisive for our theologians, driving Bultmann and Tillich into the former and Barth and Brunner into the latter.

Thus, in a quiet way, subtle as osmosis and as penetrating, scientific naturalism has become the *modus vivendi* of educated western man, bone of his bone. "Science says" now carries the aura of authority once reserved for the church. We may profess God with

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our lips but we find Him holed up in an out-of-the-way corner of our hearts. It is time to re-think the function of faith.

II.

Since the act of faith is primitive—life, the inexhaustible *Bios*, affirming itself over death and destruction—we understand it best in its metaphysical matrix. The metaphysical venture starts with the given, peeling off layers of the adventitious and particular as one might strip an onion, in search of the core. What I wish to propose, after some scattering of contingent layers and fumbling for the essence of the matter, is a statement of the utmost generality: that the universe is constituted of individual entities acting for survival and growth.

These entities range from the smallest fluff of durable matter-energy, pried by an accelerator out of the sub-atomic realm, to the most comprehensive minds of human history. Each individual pursues its own unique life-line, inheriting its special past and embracing its special future in a single, continuous effort aimed at its survival and enhancement. Its characteristic activity is the grasp of a field of novelty and the organization of that novelty into the routine harmony of its established being. This is the basic *factum* of the given.

No such distinguishable entity walks like Kipling's cat, by its wild lone. Each is knotted into the whole web of concrete existence and exhibits its peculiar combination of freedom and dependence. Reality, taken in entirety or by segment, is a loose-jointed organism where individuality is embedded in, and operates within, a mesh of dependencies. There is no isolation without mutuality and no mutuality without isolation. The mutuality may be as rigid and homogeneous as the aggregate of molecules locked into a piece of steel; it achieves higher and higher levels of complexity in living tissue, in the subtle homeostasis of unicellular organisms, in the integrated functioning of birds,

fish, primates; becomes societal in the intricacies of ant-heap and bee-hive, in mating, flocking, nesting and nurture, reaches exalted heights in the deliberate self-sacrifice of men resolved that their culture, and the ideals for which it stands, shall endure even at the cost of individual life.

The axiology of such a universe is "given" along with the cosmology. Life (the equivalent of being) is the value of values, without which no other is possible. The good is whatever either preserves an individual entity undisturbed in its established routine or furthers it in the achievement of a higher level. The evil is whatever lessens the individual's vitality, upsets the routine functions of its being or prevents it from ascending to a higher level of sensitivity and action. This defines good and evil absolutely; any support or enhancement of any individual is, in itself, good; any destruction or frustration of any individual is, in itself, bad. Both good and evil are built into the mechanism of the universe. No entity can exist except by the grace of mutuality and none can exist except by intense and continuous depredation. Of necessity we live by killing; this is the fact of evil in its most frightening universality. Existence itself, however, is a triumph of community over conflict, of life over death.

Progress within this universe of individual entities consists of growth in awareness. We can only speculate on the primitive sensitivity of atomic individuals which are little more than centers of energy resisting dissolution, but in man we find the spearhead of the *Bios's* creative thrust toward psychical experience. Memory tutors man's actions in the present and gives him grounds for a predictable future. Man devises instruments for survival, forms concepts, develops moral consciousness, invents language, turns and looks at himself, becomes artists, philosopher, worshipper. In the most abstract thought or playful fancy, in science

and sacrifice, in art and faith, the **Bios** disguises itself but is in no way weakened. It remains the basic **factum**, the thrust and direction of the natural world.

Life, therefore, is individuality operating in community toward awareness. Men use their isolation to affirm their community, as individual destiny identifies with that of larger and larger groups. "I don't ask the wounded man how he feels," said Walt Whitman, "I **am** the wounded man." All ethics is a matter of sympathy. Love mingles lives otherwise disparate, overcomes separateness, bridges the isolation of individuality, brings each to preserve and enhance the other.

The comprehensive ideal (for Christians, the Kingdom of God) is that society in which all individuals act at all times for mutual support and enhancement. The lion of that Kingdom lies down with the lamb and the lamb, for once, is not inside the lion. This is obviously impossible in the universe as we know it, hence the Christian apocalypse of "a new heaven and a new earth."

Awareness also fixes the hierarchy of values and justifies the primacy of entities over each other. In taking, as ethically his right, dominion over the lower forms of life and the necessity of surviving at their expense, man appeals to the fundamental **Bios** which through him asserts itself in preservation and realization.

Awareness operates by means of data, knowledge and faith. Data are the raw, unorganized medley of thoughts, sensations and imaginings which reason organizes. Knowledge is the belief in true propositions with comprehension of the reasons for their truth. Faith is the belief in what is needful either to live or to live well.

III.

Faith is always some degree of transcendence dictated by the necessities of existence. It justifies all else, even knowledge, for the probabilities of our

common experience are undergirded by "vital postulates" which are no more than acts of faith transcending phenomena.

(1) The past, no longer available for direct verification, must be received upon the authority of memory. Memory is notoriously fallacious; every court of law is racked by disagreement as to what happened; and if the past is questionable in some respects it is questionable in all respects.

(2) Prediction of the future doubles this liability since it derives from a past which may be faultily remembered and projects the remembered characteristics of that past into an unborn future with no final guarantee that the future will arrive at all or that it will resemble, in any given detail, its temporal precedents.

(3) Nature appears to us as given, the womb of our being, an independent and self-sustaining numenon behind mental phenomenon, yet this external world of things-in-themselves evades, by definition, any direct experience of it and can only be assumed as the stable ground from which our fleeting awareness arises.

(4) We never directly apprehend other minds than our own; we see bodies, hear words, communicate by sign and gesture, without any direct perception of the mind that these are assumed to house and express.

(5) In each of the above areas an attitude of vital trust is assumed in order to arrive at adequate knowledge. Empiricists who yield these outposts may attempt to hold the epistemological citadel—direct awareness of self with its immediate field of experience. For thinkers of very different stamp this has been the last and impregnable stand of certitude. Augustine first gave it explicit statement in pointing out that even if we are deceived in all else, we must **be** in order to be deceived. Descartes found the **cogito** unassailable, and William James admitted that he knew nothing for sure except that "I

exist at this moment." Upon this stronghold of absolute knowledge I must cast more than a shadow of doubt.

The immediately given, taken by itself, is not knowledge in any intelligible sense of the word. Let Adam open his eyes on Eden and he knows nothing. What is presented to him is pure datum, the raw stuff out of which knowledge is constructed. He cannot classify, analyze, differentiate. He neither remembers nor foretells. He sees no distinction between subject and object. Ask him the simplest of questions—"What exists?"—and he is powerless to reply, for existence is not a quality of the given. Only a *series* of experiences provides a framework for thought, and these bring in their train the vital postulates, the inevitable acts of faith—memory, external world and uniformity of nature—upon which all empirical knowledge relies. The awareness of self is already a sophisticated experience.

The result of this analysis is to conclude that we know nothing for sure. The word "know" passes by common consent. The most primitive and universal beliefs are tainted with probability. All assertions reflect a degree of coherence, and coherence is exactly what has no end in an infinite universe. An endless series of larger frames of reference offers endless risks that a narrower consistency will turn into a larger inconsistency. Yet this is not skepticism, which holds that we know nothing. Our partial knowledge—"we see in a glass darkly"—is sufficient for vital action. We have what John Dewey called "warranted assertibility." The rest is faith. Faith and knowledge are related as two poles of a fractional series converging on its limits but never reaching them, for the limits are not members of the series. There is no pure knowledge and there is no pure faith; all our thinking combines the two in varying degree.

IV.

Scientific naturalism accepts its acts of faith, its "vital postulates," because

they are needful to our *esse*. We cannot live without them. As we have seen, knowledge of phenomena comes quite unglued without acts of faith to stick it together. Science justifies this faith by pointing to the isomorphism between the objects of its faith and the objects of its knowledge. The noumenal and phenomenal are locked together in a one-to-one correspondence, every stable experience having a stable object as its point of origin. Past, present and future form an unbroken causal series, duplicating and re-duplicating a reliable pattern of events. The self and its fields of awareness—stored, passing anticipatory—are identical; and other selves, in their hidden experience, match the words and gestures by which they indicate (but do not prove) their selfhood. Natural faith has a maximum of coherence and a minimum of transcendence.

In search of our well-being—our *bene esse*—Christian belief has moved in various ways away from the pole of coherence toward the pole of faith. At the upper levels of transcendence the act of faith becomes purer and the isomorphism diminishes. The function of natural theology is to cling to isomorphism, deriving the transcendent from the phenomenal. Creation argues a Creator, order implies an ordering Intelligence, space-time could only be constructed by the Great Mathematician and Geometer. "I think God's thoughts after Him," said Newton.

But it is possible for theology to repudiate all structural correspondence between phenomena and the object of faith, in fact to deny that faith has an object in the phenomenological sense of the word. This has been true of mysticism, in which individuality, time, space and all the particularities of our common life lose their integrity in the undifferentiated unity of ultimate Being. God is not this, not that; no finite attribute fits. Neo-orthodoxy, in its more western and classically Christian fashion, arrives at the same conclusion:

only man's pride leads him to assume that he can proceed to the Creator by means of the creation; faith deals with the rationally absurd; all isomorphism is broken, and if faith contradicts even our noblest (but necessarily finite) ethical judgments, so much the worse for ethics. Here we have an awesome and disquieting triumph of faith over reason.

The degree of transcendence in the gospels, especially in the synoptics, and in the mainstream of Christian theology, is far less than Kierkegaard or Barth attains. All being is revelation at its appropriate level. God is Creator and Sustainer of the visible world; He clothes the lily of the field and makes the sun to shine on the just and unjust; not a sparrow falls that He does not grieve for it. All His virtues and powers are man's maximized to infinity and perfection. "If you, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

V.

Yet even the most fantastic and undisciplined faith shows respect for the criteria of possibility, importance and goodness. The believer is convinced that the transcendent object of his faith **can** be, **ought** to be, and is sufficiently relevant to demand the effort of trust. In application these criteria are vastly confused by the welter of sectarian, cultural and individual emphases, but we can consider them in their generality.

1. Possibility is intelligible only relative to some context. The logically impossible is self-contradictory and cannot eventuate from any context; to say that a round-square is impossible is to state an unchanging relationship between roundness and squareness so that in the context of actual events (including the concepts of circles and squares as Euclidean geometry defines them, held in the contexts of some or all minds) no figure can be put together mentally or physically which integrally unites

the character of square and circle. What we might call a "grounded impossibility" displays an incompatibility with some specific context. That a man should fly to the moon by waving his arms is not inconceivable; it is simply impossible relative to the known properties of levitation in the actual universe. Possibility is validly assertable whenever the proposition stating it is compatible with propositions rendered true by the relevant context of actual events. Philosophical theology asks the question: given the context of the natural world is it impossible that the statement "God is" is true?

All the arguments for God—cosmological and teleological, from moral and mystical intuition, and even the slippery ontological—give evidence of God's possibility. Fideists would, of course, hold for much more: God is highly probable or even certain; but possibility is the broad common denominator. Even the most ardent believer cannot resist the strength of logic which shows his idea of God to be self-contradictory or contrary to all experience.

We should note, in addition, that once God's existence is granted the context of further possibility has radically changed. "With God all things are possible" and it now becomes extremely difficult to deny the most miraculous occurrence. To avoid this Deism separated God and His created world, giving the latter an independence that would guarantee the orderliness of its procedures, and all enlightened Protestantism has continued to apply the canons of nature (but not with complete consistency) to the religious tradition. However severe the pruning of natural reason (as we witness in Bultmann's demythologizing) the great mysteries of the Incarnation and immortality remain as possible in the context of God.

2. Importance, the least valuable of the criteria, serves the practical purpose of limiting acts of faith to what is vitally significant. This is a bow to knowledge, an indication that faith

should not be needlessly exercised. The truth serves best. I have neither faith nor the lack of it in the honesty of the tax-collector in Madagascar but the people of that island cannot afford to be equally detached. To many Protestants the physical ascent of Jesus into the sky and the immaculate conception of Mary are unimportant, but the Incarnation is. Whether Jesus raised the widow of Nain's son is not essential to the gospel, but the Resurrection is; belief in the Bible's literal accuracy is not important, response to its spirit is. The good and possible in other faiths does not lay hold of us, as ours does not lay hold of them; we believe Christ sinless but are not sure about Zoroaster, we believe that Moses received the Ten Commandments from God but have no opinion about Mohamed receiving the Koran from Gabriel. Faith is a fearful thing, not to be taken lightly nor indulged in beyond the limits of necessity.

3. The reigning motivation for the act of faith is to believe in what the faithful holds good, namely, essential to his *esse* or his *bene esse*. No one pursues evil for its own sake. Some good is always the end; it may be blighted, paltry, vicious, but whoever acts for it finds it desirable, and the evil comes only as a by-product of the action. It is good, says religious faith, that a comprehensive Mind rule this system of spinning worlds, that Love like our own watch over us, and Justice punish the misdeeds of our disobedience and Mercy forgive our errant blindness. It is good that this great God stoop from behind His veil of majesty to reveal Himself in the human Jesus whom our eyes can see and our hands touch. It is good that we who stumble and fall and whose hopes gutter out like a brief candle shall live on beyond flesh that betrays and sight grown dim, shall have a second chance with new strength and our hard-won wisdom unimpaired. It is good to believe that on some day, however distant, the Right shall take the

Wrong by the throat and put it underfoot and our little victories of honesty and goodwill shall be justified.

Faith is belief (1) in transcendence (2) according to these criteria (3) in what is needful (4) for our being or well-being. Only the "vital postulates" of scientific naturalism are necessary to our existence and therefore are the common property of all men. Every other type of transcendence is debatable; Hinayana Buddhists and orthodox Marxists have no God, Moslems revere Jesus but Mohamed is the seal of the prophets, multitudes survive without any conviction of immortality, the Hindu Nirvana is not the fulfillment of individuality but its annihilation. Yet everyone has his faith, whether it be in nature, Karma, the Father of Lights or only the desperate courage of lonely man tossed up by an alien world.

VI.

Faith is the *Bios* asserting itself—life against death, sustaining order against chaos and destruction, growth against inertia, mutuality against rampant and internecine strife, the good against the bad. Knowledge studies the *Bios* lapsed into the routine of being, faith lives at the growing edge of its becoming; knowledge is the discovery of what is, faith the recognition of what ought to be; knowledge looks back to what the *Bios* has done, faith looks forward to what it is doing. Blind and often grotesque, faith probes for actuality's latest meaning and eventuality. It feels the rush of the creative urge, demands of the universe what the universe, so far, only dimly and haltingly promises.

Knowledge is the eternal observer, objective and disengaged; faith the eternal actor, passionate and partisan. The unity of action transcends every probability. If a friend has met you at a given hour only half the time, observation can state no more than the fifty per cent probability that he will be there to greet you today, but you will not meet him at all if you go only half-

way or reckon (on the percentage) that he will not be there today but will be tomorrow. Nor can we estimate that the arguments for God have a fractional validity and so worship three-quarters of a God or praise Him with the appropriate fraction of our hearts. To meet God we must go all the way.

Man's unhappy virtue is to be torn by moral claims and to signify thereby that while he has not risen to the angels he has surpassed the animals. At the fall, knowing at last good for good and evil for evil, we have not Satan slithering off through the grass. The **Bios** itself urged life forward from unthinking instinct into the painful stage of ethical awareness with its racking tensions and guilts as well as its triumphs of love and righteousness. Man sensed that the guilt was given as surely as heaven and earth, that the agony of moral choice was the **Bios** opening up into new flexibility. In this more ample freedom man had space to turn about and view the **Bios** not only as actuality but as intention, as God. Out of this empirical fact of guilt man laid a demand upon the universe that it spring from an infinite and eternal Will which

wills only the best. In this act of faith sin and salvation were simultaneously born as resistance and obedience to that Will. To sin is to fall, to have the **possibility** of doing so presupposes two of life's most significant affirmations: God's goodness and man's freedom.

From this complex of recognitions finally, in its time, arose the Christian formula: (1) God the Father, the unchangeable intention for good, is also (2) the Creative Word, issuing in the temporal advance of all individual entities joined in mutuality, and is also (3) the Incarnate Word, by which life and immortality are brought to light. The Word is God as inexhaustible **Bios** pressing toward the Kingdom which God the Father intends; Jesus Christ is the Word in man's flesh, showing us the way which God the Father intends: not three but one, not one but three, of whom the essence is life. "God is not the God of the dead but of the living. I am the way, the truth and the life. I am come that they might have life and that they might have it abundantly." Christian faith is the belief that this is so.

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