

## RELATION OF RELIGION AND SCIENCE

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THE problem of the relation of religion and science is not dead, as we are often told, but has been made obscure because it has become difficult to define the issue clearly. In the days of T. H. Huxley and Gladstone it was comparatively simple. The Christian religion asserted a great number of propositions which it held to be true, while science, or scientific researchers, had come to conclusions which seemed, in many cases, to be irreconcilable with those propositions. Now, however, the epistemologists have raised the question of the nature of scientific 'truth' and the still more devastating question whether religious propositions have any meaning and can be described as either true or false. The consequence is that discussions of religion and science tend to degenerate into a kind of shadow boxing: neither side of the argument really comes to grips with the other. Yet the 'plain man' feels that there is a problem and a vital one. In his simple way, he would say that the kind of universe which science progressively discloses is singularly unlike the kind of universe which is presented by the documents and the doctrines of the Christian faith.

It is one of the many merits of Prof. Coulson's recent book that he is quite clear on what he is talking about\*. By science he means the results, up to date, of the application of the scientific method in every sphere where it has been applied and the method itself; by religion he means the Christian religion, not as a vague sentiment or an admiration for the character of Jesus, but as a system of doctrine and worship. Nor is there any doubt about the purpose of his inquiry. It is, "To see whether there is any coherence between science and religion, and whether, in an age of science, it is possible to hold the faith with propriety and with intellectual integrity".

This little book, consisting of three lectures given under the Riddell Memorial foundation, contains more sound sense on the subject than most works five times its size, for it deals with the ultimate issues and keeps to the point. The challenge of the two universes and two systems of knowledge—the scientific and the religious—is always before his mind. He rejects any theory which would vindicate religion by somehow inserting it into the scientific universe, finding a place for it either in the yet unexplored territory or in the incoherences which can be discovered in scientific conclusions. Perhaps he is a little too hard on theologians who find something of interest to them in Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, for if determinism breaks down in one part of Nature, it may well be only an appearance, or a useful fiction, elsewhere; but undoubtedly he is splendidly right when he says, "If God is here at all, it must be at the beginning of science and right through it".

The concept of Nature inevitably comes up for discussion. Prof. Coulson rejects the idea that Nature is 'given', in the sense that it lies 'out there' presenting us with a puzzle to be solved. In a very general way one may agree that his view of Nature

is Kantian. Certainly he holds that, in a sense, "mind makes nature", and that it is totally misleading to assume that we have any knowledge of Nature, or of the existence of Nature, apart from our minds. In some of his phrases he seems to go beyond Kant and to verge on Berkeleyan idealism; but on the whole, he holds fast to the conviction that, though in one sense "the whole scientific universe is a construction of our own", in another sense, it has objective validity, though it is not easy to gather from these lectures precisely what this latter sense can be. But, after all, Kant himself left us in the dark about the "things in themselves".

The short answer to the question, why there can be two different views of the universe, the religious and the scientific, both well-founded, is that they are two distinct views of the same object. This thought is developed with great skill by means of an analogy—that of the different aspects of Ben Nevis. This might easily have been too facile a solution; but Prof. Coulson is careful to point out where his analogy fails, and perhaps the reader would be well advised, in reflecting upon this conception of two points of view, to bear in mind the important passage at the end of Lecture 1, where it is argued that Nature and man are indissoluble and that Nature has a spiritual meaning. In this connexion the author has a word for theologians as well as for scientists. Too often, he thinks, theologians regard Nature as merely the stage on which the great drama is performed, whereas they ought to think of it as a part of the play.

One difficulty may be mentioned about the 'aspect' or 'point of view' theory. It would certainly be more convincing if there were only one religion; but the great religions of the world differ in a marked degree from one another in their conceptions of the universe, of the ultimate Reality and of man's place in the whole, yet presumably both the Buddhist and the Christian systems arise from the religious apprehension of the One Object. Two possible answers suggest themselves to this objection. It might be maintained that there is, in fact, a fundamental agreement beneath the differences of the great religions, and it might be argued too that there is, in fact, no settled scientific view of Nature. In both spheres, so to speak, there are shifts of focus.

It is not possible to touch upon all the lines of thought which are opened up by this suggestive book; but we must not omit one which evidently is very near Prof. Coulson's heart, the 'message' which he would give to theologians and scientists alike. It is that we should enlarge our idea of the life of the Spirit. The work of scientific research, when faithfully done, is a spiritual activity and a service of God. All the disciplines which constitute culture are, in essence, spiritual, and each needs all the others. The ideal of the Christian Church is a fellowship of all who 'wonder'—the scientist, the historian, the poet and artist, the philosopher and theologian, and also the unlearned man of faith. In this fellowship "the fullness of each separate discipline is revealed". In such words we welcome the authentic voice of Christian humanism.

\* Christianity in an Age of Science. By Prof. C. A. Coulson. (Riddell Memorial Lectures, Twenty-fifth Series.) Pp. ii+53. (London: Oxford University Press, 1953.) 5s. net.