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John Oman

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PART I
SCOPE & METHOD

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CHAPTER I

THE FIELD OF INQUIRY

SEEING that the world is one and our experience of it 'one universe of discourse', there is no ultimate separateness either in what we study or how we study it. Absolute frontiers no subject has, and the better we know a subject, the more debatable its frontiers become, till it seems to be very little more than a selection according to a particular interest. An inquiry into the Natural and Supernatural would in any case seem to include all things in heaven and earth. All special studies, as Prof. Hobson says, depend on the fact that experience is made up of approximately isolated systems, and that these, for practical purposes, can be isolated still more.¹ Thus natural science limits its field by ignoring everything, even in the world of the senses, outside of a system of measurable quantity; politics by ignoring everything, even in the world of society, except a certain organisation of it; and ethics by separating conduct from much else that goes with it. But, as one of the most important aims of our discussion is just to see this unity, and to try to pass beyond arbitrary divisions of experience, we cannot hope to limit our field by assigning to it a special system and ignoring the rest.

Yet, though the Natural and the Supernatural include all environment, and an inquiry into their relation can involve nothing less than a view of the universe, the mere division of environment into natural and supernatural shows that the inquiry is limited by the particular interest of religion. We might, therefore, describe our subject as the concern of religion with environment. This involves very large questions, but, as they have a definite purpose, they have definite limits.

The interest of religion in the Supernatural may be more apparent than in the Natural: and it might seem that we

¹ E. W. Hobson, *The Domain of Natural Science*, pp. 44 ff.

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should limit our field of inquiry by confining ourselves to it, as many studies of religion have done. But it will be maintained that there is no possible study of anything apart from the Natural, and least of all religion, and that not only has religion to do with our relation to all environment, but that by its view of the Natural the quality of religion is determined, even if it be also true that the view of the Natural is determined by the conception of the Supernatural. Therefore we may not limit our field by ignoring the Natural and concentrating on the Supernatural, as science ignores quality and concentrates on quantity.

The field, therefore, cannot be limited, but our special business in it can be: and, as this limitation is by its interest for religion, we must begin by determining the scope of religion, with as much definiteness as its width and variety allow.

(a) THE TEST OF INTEREST

So wide is the scope of religion that it has been maintained that its essential quality is to be concerned with the mind as a whole and the world as a whole. In that case, it would be a hopeless task to try to distinguish what embraces everything from anything else and, from the start, any attempt to define religion would seem doomed to failure. Nor do the variety, the contradiction, the generality of the many attempts already made afford much evidence that a better result awaits us.

Runze, after reviewing a long list of them, says that no definition, no description even, can include all the manifestations of religion, without becoming too general to be of use as a criterion for distinguishing from other phenomena those specially religious. He proposes instead to accept the fact that the boundaries of subjects are determined purely by interest; and his prescription is: Have the right interest in a subject, and you will see what belongs and what does not belong to it. Given the right interest in religion, which is to have a soul at peace with itself, so as to be responsive to the great things of life, then, without needing to define the sphere

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of religion, you will know practically what is within it and what without. If this be thought vague guidance, no other central human activity, he maintains, has better, nor is more required to show what concerns it and what does not. Even natural science, definite as it seems to be, can no longer be defined so that all belonging to it shall be included and all else excluded, yet no one with a scientific interest and a scientific habit of mind has any difficulty in distinguishing what does and what does not belong to natural science. And, though art is even more impossible to define than science, an artistic interest and an artistic attitude of mind can determine even more certainly what belongs to art and what does not. Religion may be still more difficult to define, but with a religious interest and a religious attitude, he maintains, we can still more surely distinguish what does and what does not belong to it.¹

The importance of this equipment of a right interest and a right attitude for discernment, except, singularly, in religion, is rarely questioned. We do not expect persons, whose only standard of a scientific truth is the number and confidence of its advocates, or whose standard in art is the price in the catalogue, to be able to distinguish what belongs to science or art, even with the aid of any amount of description or definition, while we generally assume that, given a scientific or artistic interest and habit of mind, there will, even without the help of definition or description, be no grave mistake.

In all other subjects students are approved as they have sympathy, insight and enthusiasm for their study. In religion alone, it would almost appear that complete lack of interest, and even positive distaste, are necessary qualifications. Religion is apparently thought to be so peculiar that interest in it is necessarily bias.

This prejudice against religious persons, in contrast with scientific or artistic persons, has, it must be admitted, not been wholly without justification. There have been religious people whose interest in religion was largely prepossession, and who,

¹ Georg Runze, *Psychologie der Religion*.

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instead of regarding truth as the supreme religious interest, rather treated religion as a germ to which daylight is fatal.

But, though religion offers larger scope to the wrong kind of interest than any other sphere, it is far from having a monopoly; and no more than in any other subject do the errors of individuals justify identification of interest in religion, forthwith and without discrimination, with bias. True interest in religion, as in all else, is just interest in what is true concerning it: and when we speak of interest in religion, we ought to mean this right kind of interest, as when we speak of interest in art or science.

Without interest man never achieves clear consciousness of anything. The study of the development of mind, hitherto, has been mainly concerned with the progress of man's power of reasoned explanation, but a still more important chapter, could it be written, would tell how he came to his present reach and quality of awareness, for it would be little less than the whole inward story of life: and it is almost entirely the story of his interests. Nor has anything done more to stir higher interests than religion.

Religion is, above all else, concerned with 'moving about in worlds not realised'. We may be living by this higher environment as fishes in the water live by air, and be equally ignorant of the fact: and the reason may be lack of interest, not of capacity. To inquire into such a possibility without interest in it is obviously futile. Supposing that the task which gives religion its unique character is not to secure what man's present interests reveal to him, but to stir in him interests which will make him aware of still higher environment, the turning away of interest from the highest we know would obviously be fatal to any effective consideration of this even as a possibility.

This question of interest goes back to the relation of feeling to reality. As Prof. Whitehead says, the insistence in the Platonic culture on disinterested intellectual appreciation is a psychological error. But there is the still graver objection that it is also an objective error. We cannot know without

interest. But is there not an interesting world to be known, which is the interest of some other mind before it can be ours? All life, at all events, has dealt with the world only by interest, and the world does not seem to have responded to anything else all down the ages. And to the higher interests of truth and beauty and goodness it has responded most. Even the scientist, to quote Prof. Whitehead again, is a kind of artist, sustained in his labours by the ideal of finish and perfection in his work. And, on the lowest grounds of utility, science would have no uses were there no validity beyond the mere mechanical world which science has been supposed to prove to be alone real.

A further reason for the need of interest for any study is that, if we have not the right interest, we introduce interests, which, being alien, are certain to be misleading.

This is true of every subject. Science, when there is no interest in knowledge for its own sake, comes to be regarded as a mere commercial or military asset; poetry, when the true interest of imagination is wanting, is judged as epigram, rhetoric or philosophy; art, when there is no interest in beauty, is esteemed only as decoration or as an evidence of wealth. But, of all subjects, religion is most confused by lack of its own interest, because almost any interest can be dragged into it, till it comes to be treated as a quasi-science or a popular philosophy or as a buttress for morality.

Rationalism, for example, conceived religion mainly as an intellectual affair of evidences about God as the maker of the world, and providence as the direction of it, and immortality as compensation for its injustices and imperfections. The reason was not that religion ever seemed anything of the sort to those really interested in it, but that interest in religion was replaced by interest in scientific discussion, which, in that age, was the one dominating interest. Art, for example, fared no better than religion.

Because religion is often studied by persons who are better equipped intellectually than religiously, this danger of introducing intellectual interest illegitimately is always with us.

It is a danger of the same kind as criticism is for poetry, when it proceeds as if criticism were poetry.

But interest in mere intellectual evidence is not the only misleading interest in the study of religion. In our day there are two ways of regarding religion which seem to be utterly unlike the old Rationalism, and to be wholly anti-intellectual. The one is the study of psychology and the other of history, especially the history of primitive religion.

It was not left to our time to discover that the proper study of mankind is man, but in our time this study has moved from the consideration of the mind in its normal and logical functioning to the study of life-impulses, instincts and complexes, with a tendency to concentrate on the non-rational, and to emphasise the abnormal. Religion, because it magnifies the defects as well as the virtues of human nature, offers large scope for this kind of psychology, which, by the selective working of its special interest, tends to revive an old view of religion as due to mental characteristics of a rather morbid practical type. But in religion, as in all else, we ought to distinguish what belongs to it as such from what is merely imported into it by the imperfections of human nature. Nothing that has so central a place in man's life and has played so large a part in his history can be due purely to what is abnormal in man's mind. No more in religion than in anything else is there justification for ascribing to it in particular what is due to human nature in general. But this means an interest in religion itself and not merely in matters connected with it.

Yet the real cause of a view of religion which makes it all explicable by a certain kind of psychology is still due to the substitution of scientific for religious interest. Religion is not found to be what Rationalism thought it, but there is still the same idea, that, if it deals with any objective reality, it ought to be: so that while the psychology is not rationalistic, the psychologist still is.

The same is true of a view of religion which makes it all explicable by primitive ideas. The reasoning is that, as most

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primitive ideas have religious associations, and primitive ideas are outlived ideas, therefore religion is outlived ideas. Here again, while the history is not rationalistic, the historian is, for it rests on the rationalist view that all religion, as Sir James Frazer expresses it, is just 'theories of thought'.

True interest in religion, as in any other subject, should start with a sense of the importance of positive, constructive knowledge of it. This a study which is purely external, negative and critical resents, but if the Supernatural should happen to be an actual environment, and interest in it central for man's mind and the driving force in his history, we ought to be supremely and positively interested in it, and, for a right study of it, lack of interest is bias of the most obstructive kind.

(b) THE INSUFFICIENCY OF THE TEST OF INTEREST

But, while in religion, no more than in any other subject, is right interest bias, or indifference love of the truth, interest only approves itself when it is ready to spare no pains in seeking truth. Interest even in religion cannot justify itself merely by appealing to its own value, for the value of any interest is in the reality and importance of its object.

In respect of religion, more than any other subject, we can say that, without the right interest and attitude of mind, all attempts to distinguish its sphere by definition or description are vain. Yet it does not follow that, with them, discussion can serve no purpose and that the labour of attempting to define or at least to describe its sphere can be escaped. Even if we could show that all theories of religion have depended on the attitudes and interests of the minds that produced them, there is still the question of the right attitude and the right interest: and in any case it would not deliver us from the necessity of discussing what religion really is. It will not suffice to say with Runze: Have a soul at peace with itself, and be responsive to the high things of life, and you will know what religion really is and what it is not, because the vast differences of opinion which have been held by serious and

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able workers in this field, to the great confusion of understanding and co-operation, cannot be thus easily settled.

In the first place, neither could we determine when this condition of right interest and high response is fulfilled, nor could we bring our differences to the test of it, even if we had it. Therefore, it matters not how unsatisfactory the long discussion may have been, we cannot escape the necessity of continuing it and making the best of it. Unfortunately, in this troubled life, tasks are usually necessary in proportion as they are difficult.

In the second place, the difficulty of riding the marches is, as a matter of fact, not as great, either theoretically or practically, as Runze affirms, because, while it is true that there is only one world known in our experience, it is equally true that, the more we see the world as one, the sharper are the distinctions we draw in it; and the more we bring it within the unity of our thought, the more definitely we distinguish one part of our knowledge from the rest. All advance in experience, knowledge and thought has meant discrimination and differentiation. If we see the closer relations of things, we also have a deeper sense of the reality, significance and independence of the things themselves, so that, however we may conceive them to be in one universe, it may not be by the easy process of shunning the drawing of clear distinctions. Religion too is no less something apart at any stage because it is so intimately related to our whole world without and within: and it also becomes more clearly differentiated with progress. Both in practice and in theory it has, with the process of time, been ever more clearly distinguished from other concerns.

In primitive beliefs and practices it is difficult to say what is religious; and it is almost impossible to say what is not. Yet the extremest difficulty of the task cannot save us from trying to distinguish even primitive religion from primitive science, or magic, or social custom. On the contrary, the greater the confusion, the more an attempt to bring clear distinctions into it is necessary. But, as mankind advances, it becomes plainer that religion has its own sphere, and that, though it touches,

ever more widely, all aspects of human life, it does so in a way which is quite distinct from the ways of science or philosophy or social custom or even magic. It ought, therefore, to be possible to distinguish the sphere of religion, if not by such a mark as would be a definition, yet by such characteristics as would set it apart from all else.

Finally, even supposing that the confusion were so great throughout, that, from first to last, it seemed impossible to discover any mark by which religion might be defined or any description which would include all religious phenomena and exclude all non-religious, a discussion of the problem would be the more necessary. When we differ because we are not all considering the same object, the mere discussion of our differences at least helps to turn our attention in the same direction, even if it do not at once determine what is to be seen.

The sphere even of natural science is not so determined by scientific interest as to make discussion of it unnecessary. More recently there has, as a matter of fact, been a great deal of discussion which cannot be thought to have been superfluous. To the casual thinker, physics, for example, seems to be a science of the things of sense, at once taking them naïvely as we perceive them and displaying a deeper reality than we perceive. But to the philosophical scientist it is plain that physics abstracts both from the changing incidents of nature and from the mind which experiences them. It is far from being finally determined what this may mean of restriction in the sphere of natural science, yet the discussion of the problem has been of great value, because it has helped to clear away misunderstandings which have long been misleading dogmas.

Granting that the sphere of religion is less definite than the sphere of physical objects, and that the study of it touches, at more points, the whole world of human interests, and that its sphere is, therefore, still more difficult to distinguish than the sphere of natural science, so much the more is it imperative to distinguish as clearly as we can, and to discuss any reasons there may be which hinder our further progress in definiteness.

For example, the Evangelical Movement, by its interest in