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Religious Implications In the Humanities

By
NATHAN A. SCOTT, JR.



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Religious Implications in the Humanities*

NATHAN A. SCOTT, Jr.

It is appropriate that those of us who insist upon the study of religion being given the honorable place in the academic community that it deserves should occasionally remind ourselves not alone of the contribution that religion may make to higher education but also of the sustenance and reinforcement that liberal learning may give to religion. And my impression is that—perhaps because of the polemical situation in which we have lived—it has not been our custom to do this in recent times. During the past decade there has appeared a whole spate of literature that attempts to set forth the reconstructive role that religion may play in the life of the modern university; but very rarely in this body of literature does one come upon explicit acknowledgement of the strength which high religion may draw from that liberal learning of which, presumably, our colleges and universities are the main custodians. So it is, I think, quite proper that the theme of last evening—"What Can Religion Contribute to Higher Education?"—should, this morning, be so inverted as to become "What Can Higher Education Contribute to Religion?"

And, among the many issues that arise with this change of emphasis, perhaps the most difficult has to do with the relation of religion to what we call "the humanities." The question involves us in perplexity, partly, of course, because of our uncertainty as to what this baffling term "the humanities" should be taken to mean. In the last century, for example, both Huxley and Newman—two gentlemen than whom there could be none more at opposite poles—believed that natural science, when viewed in the light of its bearing upon the entire economy of human knowledge, might be regarded as offering a humane mode of education. Whereas, on the other hand, philosophy which has been traditionally regarded as one of the cornerstones of the humanities has been, in our own time, on first one American campus and then another, associated by its professional representatives with the social sciences; while history which the modern tradition has associated with the social sciences is, increasingly, coming to be regarded once again as belonging

*This essay was read at Cornell College (Iowa) on the occasion of its Conference on Religion in Higher Education (November 1953,) which was held in connection with the College's observance of the centennial anniversary of its establishment.

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amongst the humanities. And one could go on to enumerate other instances of such ambiguity which make it difficult to separate humane learning from other sorts of learning.

Professor Ralph Barton Perry, as a result of this incoherence that abounds with respect to the meaning of the term "humanities," some years ago was led to make up a definition of his own, and he suggested that the term be allowed "to embrace whatever influences conduce to freedom," that is, to "enlightened choice."¹ This definition, admirable in many ways as it is, does not, of course, simply by reason of its breadth, take us very far: Professor Perry recognized this and alternatively suggested that the humanities, viewed from the standpoint of the curriculum, might be regarded as "those studies which inhumane teachers cannot completely dehumanize."² And this is about as good a definition as we are likely to find. We know, I think, what those studies are: they are, principally, philosophy (not, however, as it is practiced today by the logical positivists but as it was practiced by a Bergson, an Alexander, a Whitehead), literature and the arts—and literature most especially, because "literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of [the] variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty"³ that make up the human story. There are, of course, dull teachers of literature, and I imagine that most of us as students had one or two of them. But however dull they may be, they cannot completely destroy their subject, as inhumane teachers of history and philosophy and even of religion often succeeded in dehumanizing theirs. So on this present occasion I shall talk as if literature and what we call "the humanities" were one and the same thing, though we shall, all of us, recognize full well that that is not quite the case.

And within the terms of this perspective upon our theme, it is the figure of Matthew Arnold that, almost inevitably, appears to be our necessary starting point for an assessment of the relation of religion to the humanities in our period. Arnold does not in a sense, of course, belong to our period, for ours is what Mr. W. H. Auden has called "the age of anxiety," and the Victorians, even in their most thoughtful moments, were never quite as anxious as is our generation about what we have come to call "the human situation." But, in a deeper sense, Ar-

¹ Ralph Barton Perry, "A Definition of the Humanities," *The Meaning of the Humanities*, ed. Theodore M. Greene (Princeton, 1938), p. 4.

² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

³ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York, 1950), p. xv.

nold's legacy continues to be a vital element of our culture, and it is from him that one whole aspect of our present climate of opinion must be regarded as having taken its origin. For it is with Arnold that the feeling arose that for our age the great choice might no longer be a choice between religion and science but between science and the humanities, or rather what in Arnold's vocabulary is called Poetry. He was, of course, a legatee of the nineteenth-century insurgence of romanticism, and, in the paeans that he delivered before the altar of Poetry, he was but the spokesman for the many voices of his time whose accent formed a minor and dissenting note amidst the ever-growing scientism of the century. Yet we find ourselves today going back to Arnold with very much greater frequency than we go back to Carlyle or to Huxley or to Spencer because we feel that his problem is still essentially ours. And in this I believe our common feeling is proper, it was upon Arnold that the necessity of defending the life of the imagination against the imperialistic claims of modern positivistic science registered with perhaps a greater urgency than upon any of his contemporaries. The fundamental issue, in other words, that stirred his thought into movement continues to be the central issue of modern culture. And it is in this sense that he remains an *exemplary* figure in our intellectual life—but only in this sense, however, for his final disposition of the problem that was his and that still is ours hardly seems today at all adequate.

In the Preface to *God and the Bible*, which appeared in 1875, Arnold remarked: "At the present moment two things about the Christian religion must surely be clear to anybody with eyes in his head. One is, that men cannot do without it; the other, that they cannot do with it as it is." And these lines sum up very largely his fundamental religious position which grew out of his conviction that modern "scientific" criticism had demolished the theological foundations of traditional Christianity and that "a spirit of sober piety" could only be preserved by such a frank acknowledgement of this as would issue in the effort to secure some more invulnerable support for religion than the old myths and dogmas afforded. In the famous essay on "The Study of Poetry" in the second series of *Essays in Criticism* he declared:

There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it.

And his conclusion was that the literalism of Protestant bibliolatry

must, therefore, be rejected utterly and that the only possible view for an intelligent man to take of the miracles and prophecies and dogmas of traditional religion was to regard them as "unconscious poetry"—as language thrown out by . . . men . . . at immense objects which deeply engaged their affections and awe . . . ; objects concerning which, moreover, adequate statement is impossible."⁴

Religion, in Arnold's view, was simply imagination joined with conduct, or, in his famous phrase, "morality touched by emotion." And, moreover, he did not believe it to be the habit of righteousness to use the rational language of science in its self-articulation. So, therefore, since, as he said, "something in us vibrates"⁵ to the old words and the old phrases, he was convinced that the sophistications of a scientific age would never completely displace the poetry of religion. To use, in other words, the terms of modern positivism, Arnold was saying that the language of fact is the language of science and that the language of values is the language of poetry. And it was from this standpoint that he declared in "The Study of Poetry" that

More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete, and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.

Arnold's main tactic, then, was to "appease the hardheaded modern multitude"⁶ by first acknowledging that science had disposed of all the falsifications of dogmatic theology and then insisting that the heart of religion yet remained untouched, since true religion is simply "ethics heightened, enkindled, lit up by feeling," and expressed in poetry. He was not, however, an *a priorist* in ethics, for he believed that that in us which is really natural is truly good, and that the natural and the good are only to be discovered in *experience*, by empirical trial and human judgment. So that finally, since the concept of *experience* was focal for both science and axiology, it became for him the common ground on which science and poetry met. Poetry, being patently a construct of the imagination and therefore not requiring the kind of scientific confirmation required by religion, had become the main vehicle for values and a surrogate for religion. And in the process it had also become, as Mr. Allen Tate has said, a kind of "descriptive science,"

⁴ Matthew Arnold, *St. Paul and Protestantism* (New York, 1924), p. 213.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

⁶ Basil Willey, *Nineteenth Century Studies* (London, 1949), p. 279.

dealing, that is, with that level of experience that is "touched with emotion." Its future, said Arnold, was "immense."

Now I trust that the irony that Arnold's career represents is plain. For, apart from his whole confusion of poetic and religious experience, it consists in this—that, though setting out to defend the imagination, at least in its aesthetic phase, against the corrosive criticisms of modern science, he ends by giving the whole case away, since poetry in his program becomes what it was for the eighteenth century, a rhetorical vehicle of ideas, and ideas whose validity, it seems, must be determined by the canons of science. The function of the poet becomes that of dressing out value-propositions in such a way as to touch them with emotion, and thus it is that "poetics disappears into rhetoric,"* the poet becoming essentially a propagandist—to be tolerated, as Mr. I. A. Richards would once have said, as long as his "pseudo-statements" lend some sort of support to, or at least fail to subvert, the "certified statements" of scientific discourse.

This is, of course, a gross oversimplification of Arnold's position, but at least it may indicate the accuracy of Mr. T. S. Eliot's observation of some years ago in his Norton lectures at Harvard that "we are still in the Arnold period."⁹ For when he is juxtaposed to the semantic positivists of today, we detect a rather striking familial resemblance. He is not, to be sure, their grandfather: in the English nineteenth century Jeremy Bentham, I suspect, comes nearer to being that. But he is perhaps their great-uncle (though even this is not quite right, since it suggests an affinity between Arnold and Bentham which is misleading), for he released influences that co-operate with all those influences that are today most effectively represented by the logical positivists who would persuade us that science has contrived a superior mode of attaining truth and that the end of the poetic imagination is not the prehension of truth but the control of man's volitional life.

For Arnold the scientist's job, as Mr. Allen Tate has said in commenting on this aspect of his thought, was exact observation and description of the external world. The poet could give us that, and he could add to it exact observation and description of man's inner life, a realm that the positivist would never be so bold as to invade.

⁷ Allen Tate, *On the Limits of Poetry* (New York, 1948), p. 18.

⁸ Cleanth Brooks, "Metaphor and the Function of Criticism," *Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature*, ed Stanley R. Hopper (New York, 1952), p. 130.

⁹ T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London, 1933), p. 129.

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But the poet's advantage was actually twofold. Not only did he have this inner field of experiences denied to the scientist, he had a resource which was his peculiar and hereditary right—figurative language and the power of rhetoric.

If the inert fact alone would not move us, poetic diction could make it moving by heightening it; for poetry is "thought and art in one."¹⁰

And the poet's job was to generate values.

For Mr. I. A. Richards—not the later Richards of *Coleridge on Imagination*, but the early Richards of *The Meaning of Meaning*, *Principles of Literary criticism*, and *Science and Poetry*, who remains an archetypal example of the positivist mind—for Mr. Richards, poetry was constituted of "pseudo-statements" whose truth claims cannot successfully rival those of the "certified scientific statements" of technical discourse. And yet Mr. Richards, in Arnoldian accents, declared in his little book *Science and Poetry*, which appeared in 1926, that poetry "is capable of saving us," because, he argued, it orders the mind by releasing our impulses and equipping us with "relevant responses" to our environment. Its value, for him as for Arnold, was salvific and medicinal; it was a substitute for religion.

Now it has been the burden of calling into question this whole confusion that many of the most able literary men of our time have undertaken—Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, R. P. Blackmur, and the other literary scholars who are today somewhat inappropriately referred to still as "the new critics," a term which has well-nigh become a pejorative with Mr. J. Donald Adams of *The New York Times*, the editors of *The Saturday Review* and the great horde of English professors in our colleges and universities "who object to any more strenuous concern with literature than the assembling of footnotes and the culling out of charming little anecdotes about the foibles of authors."¹¹ I have not the time to rehearse in any detail at all on this occasion the shrewd strategies that these men have adopted by way of combating the heresies of modern positivism: I can only say that their main effort has been to demonstrate that poetry—and literature generally—is, as Mr. Tate has said, "neither religion or social engineering."¹² They are, of course, as much aware as the rest of us are of the perils and tragedies in the contemporary world, and they have not intended to suggest any principled disdain for the serious problems of our common life. But they have wanted to claim a certain autonomy for the imagination. That is to say, they have rejected the positivist definitions of knowledge and truth, in accordance with which knowledge and

¹⁰ Allen Tate, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹¹ Cleanth Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

¹² Allen Tate, *op. cit.*, p. xi.

truth are limited to the experimentally verifiable and the language of poetic vision is regarded as a kind of important nonsense that performs a religious function. And they have gone on to argue for a plurimodal theory of truth and a plurimodal theory of language. They have, in other words, rejected the contemporary habit of dividing up the functions of language between the "referential" and the "emotive," maintaining that language also has what Mrs. Langer has called a "presentational" mode¹⁸ and that this is the mode of poetry whose function is not to be the handmaiden of any doctrine at all—ethical, religious, or political—but is to *present* through its characteristic instrument of metaphor those prehensions of the world that are not otherwise expressible.

Now I believe that the discriminations that recent criticism has tried to establish between science and art and religion have served not only to rehabilitate art, and the humanities generally, but also religion insofar as they have confronted us again with modes of grasping reality other than those sanctioned by the procedures of scientific positivism.

There is, of course, a most powerful philosophical party today (whose platform is variously called Logical Analysis, Scientific Empiricism, or, more usually, Logical Positivism) which announces that language performs two functions: Professor Rudolf Carnap, one of the chief spokesmen for the movement, calls them the "representative" and the "expressive."¹⁹ Language, we are told, performs a "representative function when it designates a state of affairs whose existence and character can be empirically determined; and it performs an "expressive" function when it is used simply to express our feelings and our moods and our dispositions toward action. The "representative" or "referential" use of language, it is held, is that which characterizes scientific discourse, and the "expressive" or "emotive" use of language is that which characterizes poetic and religious utterance. The difference is that the one presents us with verifiable objectivity and therefore makes sense, while the other presents us with private subjectivity and is, therefore, considered from the standpoint of its capacity to convey truth, very much like laughter or any other emotional ejaculation: the emotive use of language, we are told, simply expresses emotional or volitional dispositions but does not deal with matters of fact. Poetry, in other words, if it is to have any connection with truth at all, must be regarded as a

¹⁸ *Vide* Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (New York, 1948), Chap. IV.

¹⁹ Rudolf Carnap, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax* (London, 1935), pp. 27-28.

kind of translucent gilding by which a hard core of rational discourse may be surrounded either for rhetorical or for pleasure-giving purposes. And religion will probably be regarded along the lines that Freud laid down for its study.

This whole view of the matter, in the extreme parochialism of its concepts of knowledge and truth and in its refusal to accord any real seriousness either to poetry and the arts or to religion, is, obviously, one which subverts the very structural principle of the imagination and creates all those false dilemmas which have riven the modern mind. "We get, on the one hand, mechanized nature, amenable to scientific description, and we get on the other, the realm of judgment and value, private and unverifiable. It is the spirit that runs through our Western civilization. It is indeed the breach which the scientists themselves, now alarmed at the state of our culture, are appealing to the humanities to heal."¹⁵ And it is precisely this job that many of the most able students of literature in our period have undertaken. This has, indeed, been by chief reason for discussing the contribution that may be made to religion by the humanities so largely in terms of the issues of modern literary criticism. For recent criticism, in rejecting the concept of literature that modern positivist theories of language and meaning advance, has done more to vindicate the imagination in a sceptical and scientific age than perhaps has been done in any other area of humanistic study; and in this it has rendered a service to religion with which one wishes the spokesmen for the religious community were more largely acquainted.

The form which this defense of the imagination has taken has been an intense study of the nature of metaphor and myth and symbol. These are, of course, issues with which the religious thinker must himself be deeply concerned, and I wish that I had the time to discuss at some length the immensely fruitful vein in recent literary criticism that religious thought must some day mine in coming to terms with the whole question of the distinctive nature of religious myth and symbolism. Both poetry and religion, it is clear, employ what Professor Urban, following Flanders Dunbar,¹⁶ has called the "insight" symbol which does not simply make more concrete realities that might really be quite satisfactorily grasped by the descriptive symbols of science; it is rather an indispensable means for "apprehending and expressing certain value

¹⁵ Cleanth Brooks, "The Quick and the Dead: A Comment on Humanistic Studies," *The Humanities: An Appraisal*, ed. Julian Harris (Madison, 1950), p. 19.

¹⁶ *Vide* H. Flanders Dunbar, *Symbolism in Medieval Thought* (New Haven, 1929).

relations not otherwise expressible." ¹⁷ The apprehension and the appreciation involve, to be sure, the element of feeling and emotion, since values can never be appreciated except through feeling; and this aspect of the situation, as Professor Urban says, has led the positivists to define the aesthetic and the religious symbol as purely "emotive." "But," Professor Urban declares, "to say that this is the essential function of the symbol is to misapprehend and to misrepresent the entire situation. The essential function of the symbol—and this the expansion of any symbol shows—is to give us insight into, or knowledge of, certain aspects of reality." ¹⁸ Such knowledge is, of course, arrived at by processes different from those by which we arrive at scientific knowledge. In both, to be sure, the rational faculty is at work, since there is no knowledge apart from reason, but it is at work in different ways: in the case of scientific knowledge, it is the discursive or conceptual reason that is operative; and in the case of poetic and religious knowledge, it is the intuitive reason which is operative and which works to give us what philosophers in the Thomist tradition call "knowledge through connaturality." ¹⁹

The "insight" symbol, as Professor Urban calls it, though employed in both poetic and religious discourse, functions differently, of course, in each, and at this point recent literary study has been concerned to make more careful discriminations than those of Matthew Arnold and the tradition of analysis that has been shaped by his influence. But in insisting upon the validity of the imaginative or intuitive use of reason and its characteristic expression in myth and symbol, particularly at a time when great pressures are being exerted upon us to take seriously only the descriptive symbols of scientific discourse, contemporary critics have assisted all those who would uphold religious values amidst the aggressive secularism of our time.

¹⁷ Wilbur Marshall Urban, *Language and Reality* (London, 1951), p. 490.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 491.

¹⁹ *Vide* Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York, 1953, Chap. IV).

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