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THE SPECIAL CHARACTER OF RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE.

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SOME attempt must be made to define what we mean by the term "knowledge." Is it that which the human mind produces, or that which it receives? Do we mean by knowledge the body of ideas produced by the thinker as he meditates upon himself or upon the objective world around, and upon his relation to the world? Do we mean the correlation and explanation of the objects of nature, or the events of history, or the ideas of others, produced when the thinker confines his attention to them, paying little regard to his own feeling or thoughts about these things? In a word, is knowledge a body of ideas produced by the thinker or received by him? Or, is it a combination of both?

In ancient and medieval times, excluding the great books of Hebrew literature in the Old Testament, knowledge consisted in the thoughts of the thinker. It was a body of ideas, systematically correlated by him, according to the period and his own capacity, about men and the world, and his own relation to both. To this was added, as time passed, the accumulation of these ideas, which became a system of tradition—philosophical, legal, and in later times theological. The central fibres of this knowledge were the deductions which men drew from what they thought out, and from what they perceived, and the stress was generally laid upon what they thought out. The *a priori* or deductive process was not merely the method; it was the condition of ancient and of most medieval thought. It matters not whether you consider the pre-existent "ideas" of Plato, or the "categories" of Aristotle, in both cases you are dealing with principles of knowledge which issued from the brain of the thinker.

But Aristotle indeed laid the foundation of the modern conception of knowledge not only by his *Analytics* but by establishing the categories. Long before the *Analytics* was made known to European thinkers through the Arabic-Latin translations, men began to question with Roscelin the relevancy of the "categories" to reality. By drawing attention to the different categories in existence, Aristotle had implied the question, "Does Nature really divide up in this way?" Nominalism challenged the whole basis of the idealist or realist conception of the universe derived from Plato, and laid the foundation for the numbering and classifying, the weighing and analysing—all the processes of the crucible and the magnifying glass, as well as the mathematical analysis of modern times. So the inductive method was born, and like its predecessors became also a process. In the nineteenth century nothing was allowed to be knowledge which was not independent of the observer. Observation took the place of thought, the observer sat on the stool of the

thinker. Knowledge was received from without. It was not produced from within. It is true that some of the greatest achievements of modern science have been produced by a combination of the two methods. A brilliant idea when tested has been proved, over and over again, to correspond with observed facts, events, and in physics during the last thirty years, the combined method has been so largely used that it is somewhat doubtful whether modern physics should be included any longer among the inductive sciences. Moreover, in our own day we find even the mathematicians, if they are at all represented by Whitehead and Jeans, suggesting that even mathematics may have to resort to some sort of deduction to correct its inductive processes.

Passing, now, to the problem of religious knowledge, we must first ask into which of these two types of knowledge it falls. We at once come upon a curious criss-crossing of replies from different quarters, quite contrary in the direction which they take to the trend which you would expect them to follow. The rationalist would like to show that religious knowledge springs from sources external to the observer, but he is compelled, by his refusal to admit revelation, to assert that religious knowledge is merely the creation of a certain type of human brain. It is merely deductive. On the other hand, the traditionalist, who constructs his system upon a series of fixed principles, which he himself lays down, or receives from the past, is compelled by revelation which he admits, to allow that religious knowledge in its origin is really independent of human thought. It is really inductive. So they arrive at conclusions opposite to their principles. But what the rationalist will not allow and what the traditionalist tries to crib and cabin by his *a priori* notions is really the basis of religious knowledge, and yet it is also the very contradiction of the whole concept of human knowledge.

Let me deal with the latter point first. What do I mean when I ask whether religious knowledge does not contradict the concept of knowledge? I think the question is answered by putting another: Is God knowable? There can only be one answer to that. It is in the negative. Man cannot know God. This is not possible, firstly on philosophical grounds. The created, the phenomenal, cannot know the Creator, the supra-phenomenal. The contrast is so complete between God and man that the only tolerable definition which can be given of God is that He is non-being. He does not exist. The only *being* that exists is creation, which is the expression in phenomena of the mind of God. Even the mathematicians are now contending that the universe consists of the thoughts of God, creation is the expression of the thoughts of God (*cf.* Jeans, *The Mysterious Universe*). This is of course the Berkeleyan idealism which represents a refining down of the Platonic idealism, by removing from the constitution of being the second term. Plato's system combined God, the ideas or universals and the human mind, Berkeley abandoned the notion of pre-existent ideas and left man face to face with God, a revolutionary achievement which John Scotus Erigena came near to performing in the ninth century.

On philosophical grounds, then, man cannot know God, and so religious knowledge in the sense of human knowledge, namely, that which the thought of man can grasp and explain is not possible. Science is to-day saying a similar thing. Both Eddington and Jeans are warning the scientists off the field of religion, because its categories are not commensurable with the processes of scientific investigation and analysis; in a word, religion is not knowable by scientific methods.

Before I proceed, let me answer one question which would otherwise be fired at me from several quarters. I have described God as non-being. What does that mean? Well, certainly not that there is no God. Only the fool saith that. It means that God is not like anything with which human thought has to deal. He was before *being*. Before anything existed He was. So He cannot exist, He is non-being. But He *is* and always has been.

Now we must begin to qualify, not, however, with the object or necessity of withdrawing. I have said that religious knowledge is not possible. Here again it is a matter of the use of terms. Religious knowledge cannot be procured like other knowledge, because we have no data to supply a real epistemology. But we have revelation, we have revealed knowledge about God, or more properly a revealed description of God. This is necessitated on the one hand by the fact of creation, nay by the fact that God "is," and on the other, by the fact that man is incapable of knowing or of finding out anything about God. It would be unreasonable to suppose that God would create man and leave him without knowledge of Himself, and the limitation of our powers of cognizing God makes a revelation of any knowledge that man needs to be a necessity. So we have the gradual revelation of the knowledge of God in the Old and New Testaments. The special character of religious knowledge is a revealed character. Religious knowledge is a revelation. That, of course, is one of the key-notes of the Barthian system.

But we must again qualify our terms, but again without withdrawing them. Revelation is imparted by three channels, each of them human—by the channel of thought or meditation (the prophets and evangelists); by the spoken word, the voice of the Son, the Word Himself; by the written page—the page of the Bible—all human mediums, all that which is not God, not divine, and therefore merely symbolical. Human words, even of the man Jesus Christ, human writings, convey to us the body of religious knowledge, the revealed Word, which lay behind the human tones of the voice of Jesus or the accents of Peter and Paul and John.

Plenty of scope, then, is left for the ordinary instruments of human knowledge—perception, cognition, reason—to grasp, understand, explain (so far as it can) and apply this revealed Word. Thus, if fundamentally, religious knowledge consists of a body of principles or ideas revealed by God, and so is deductive in character, yet its apprehension and application call for all the processes of inductive knowledge—there must be criticism of the texts, the elimination where possible of human error, the adaptation to different epochs

of history or stages of society, all the apparatus, in fact, of linguistic, historical, critical sciences—a goodly array of opportunities and urgencies for religious knowledge on the human side. And for them also Karl Barth contends.

The medium of revelation must be symbolical. The only possible instruments for revelation are human words and human writings. Religious knowledge in its lower aspect is the correct interpretation of the symbols, aided of course by the Spirit of God whose special function is that of interpretation—not revelation, that is the function of the Son, the Word. And again, we must notice that scientific thought agrees with us. It is now frankly admitted that the statements of science, the conclusions of science are symbolical. Some years ago I gave a copy of Dr. Whitehead's work on Relativity to a colleague of mine, who secured a double-first in mathematics at Oriel College, and had been an instructor in mathematics in the Navy. He confessed that he could not understand it. I then gave it to a young mathematical student at Edinburgh, and he rejoiced in it. The symbols used by mathematicians and physicists had completely changed in thirty years! Who has seen an electron? Who ever will see it? Certainly not—because by the time they have devised an instrument capable of revealing it, physicists will be looking for something else, for some new symbol for which indeed they are already calling out. Science, according to Jeans, is not in touch with reality, and I think he suggests that it never will be. Well, John Scot made that statement a thousand years ago when he said that God is unknowable, God is non-being.

The two central points on which we must fix our attention when we try to acquire religious knowledge are these. God "is" and God's commands are of more importance for us than God's nature. We must postulate the fact of God, or there is no religion. That is what Mr. Julian Huxley fails to see. Secondly, we can never know God's nature. The only description we have of it is symbolical. He is fatherhood, love, light—all human terms, meaning something very different in ordinary connotation. But we can know God's commands, we have an effective revelation of God's love—again in human terminology, it may be, but supported by an imperative which is independent of the terms which expresses it. If I say "Do this," I express something vastly more dynamic than if I say "I am your master." The command will be obeyed, at any rate by one who owes obedience, but he may not be at all sure that I have any right to give him an order, he may theoretically maintain that I am in no sense his master. Was it not this very urgency and effectiveness of the divine command of Jesus that impressed the Centurion? He understood the living meaning of an imperative. We are really more concerned with Christian ethics than with Christian metaphysics, though of course the two are inseparably connected. By Christian ethics I do not mean the mere behaviour of one Christian man towards another, or towards the unbeliever, but the realization, the perception that the love of God must be obeyed by men just because it issues from God. In the majesty of that conception I

shall be raised above myself to a spiritual height, nearer to the level from which it springs, even as Professor Gwatkin used to remind us, the legionary was raised above himself by the dignity of Cæsar's service. Religious knowledge, then, is the discovery of the meaning of the revealed law of God, and its application to my conduct. Religious knowledge has thus a practical dynamic. It cannot remain merely intellectual, nor even merely spiritual, it must affect and control my conduct.

One other point occurs. If religious knowledge—the knowledge of the fact of God—is revealed knowledge, how did Plato and Aristotle, and other pre-Christian non-Hebrew thinkers, arrive at the notion of God? Are we quite justified in saying that the human mind is incapable of knowing at least the fact of God—that God “is”? Yes—I think we are, for the bare fact that God “is” was a revelation from God to the ancient pre-Christian world—the only revelation until Hebrew prophets and the Word Himself came in the fullness of time to reveal the law of God, and, in symbolic terms, something of the nature of God. Otherwise revelation was not necessary, for man having acquired the idea of God, might have gone on without the Incarnation to discover more of God and His love for himself. But we believe in Jesus Christ, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, not created, who came to make known to us all that we could as men receive of the knowledge of God.

THE DOCTRINE OF ABSOLUTE PREDESTINATION STATED AND ASSERTED. Translated from the Latin of Jerom Zanchius by Augustus B. Toplady, A.B. 5s. net.

This is a further volume on Calvinism and Arminianism issued by the Sovereign Grace Union. Those who want to swim in the deepest waters of religious controversy will find ample opportunity for doing so in the pages of this book, which was written by Augustus B. Toplady at the age of 19 years. For some time it remained in manuscript and was not brought out in translated form for nine years later. It has been described as one of the best, if not the best, books ever issued on Absolute Predestination. Zanchius was born of a noble family at Bergamo on February 2, 1516, and it was in the next year that under the auspices of Luther the Reformation began to spread far and wide. Early in life Zanchy lost his father, who died of the Plague in 1528, and his mother survived her husband but three years. Later on he became acquainted with Celsus Maximian, Count of Martinengo, who from being a bigoted papist, became a burning and shining light in the Reformed Church. For some years he attached himself to this capable brother and the story of their association together is interestingly told in this volume, which is published by the Sovereign Grace Union, of which the Rev. Henry Atherton, of the Parsonage, Camberwell Grove, S.E., is the Hon. General Secretary and with whom are associated a number of prominent Churchmen and Nonconformists.