Comment: *Agnostic Vetoes*

One story, widely accepted by educated people in western Europe, is that religion has become unbelievable and irrelevant, thanks to the advance of science. Of course, there are scientists who are religious, Buddhists as well as practising Jews and Christians. There is no reason to think that they must necessarily compartmentalize their minds, operating with one standard of truth in religion and a different one in science. On the whole, however, agnosticism seems the commonest assumption, tacitly and unexaminedly held, seldom if ever militant.

Anyway, we are all good at dividing our minds and practising double standards. No doubt there are many scientists, as there are thinkers and scholars in every intellectual discipline, who keep their personal convictions, religious or otherwise, quite separate from their professional activities. After all, those who engage professionally in religious studies are neither required nor expected to be adherents even of the religion in which they specialize. Most will study several religions, could not adhere to more than one, and may have personal commitment to none. Moreover, there are distinguished professors of Christian theology, at least of specialisms that fall in that field, who keep their personal religious beliefs out of their teaching and writing, honourably and rightly, not just because they hold certain beliefs about academic objectivity, but simply because they have no religious beliefs whatsoever. If it is possible to teach religion without being a religious believer oneself, as it seems to be, then we cannot be surprised that scientists can conduct their research independently of religion.

It does not follow that science and religion need conflict with one another. There are many eminent scientists who regard science and religion as perfectly compatible, at least in principle. Nevertheless, the authority of what we take to be scientific standards of verifying what is the case is so predominant in our culture that we must all feel, from time to time, if not continually, a conflict in our own minds between our intuitions of something mysterious and transcendent and our reluctance to believe anything except after careful examination.

The latter is what William Kingdon Clifford called 'the ethics of belief', in an essay published posthumously in 1879, the year that he died (a brilliant Cambridge mathematician, he succumbed to tuberculosis at the age of 34): 'It is wrong always, and everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence'. Indeed, Clifford thought, it is 'sinful': 'Belief is desecrated when

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2002.tb01828.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

given to unproved and unquestioned statements'. It is 'our duty to mankind', he contends, 'to guard ourselves from such beliefs as from a pestilence'.

One cannot but be struck by the religious overtones of the language in which Clifford insists on these 'agnostic rules for truth-seeking', as William James was to label this radical methodological scepticism about claims to truth which have not first been subjected to proper verification. Personally, as it happens, Clifford studied Thomas Aquinas carefully, in his student days, and accepted his arguments for the existence of God, only to abandon them and turn quite hostile to all religion, under the influence of Darwin and Herbert Spencer.

Charles Taylor, in his new book *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Harvard University Press 2002), referring us back to 'The will to believe', the essay in which James replied to Clifford (published in 1897), contends that James remains our best exponent of the tension between our willingness to trust certain intimations of truth and this moral imperative to resist any beliefs that have not come through the fires of scepticism. We are inclined to 'lie cowering', James thinks, under 'the agnostic vetoes upon faith as something weak and shameful'. Over against this, James argues, there are domains in which truths remain inaccessible unless we go at least half way towards them. Indeed, as he puts it, there are cases 'where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming'. There are cases, even, 'where faith in a fact can help create the fact' — an assertion that, initially at least, is bound to seem another example of the over-the-top rhetoric which James favours. And yet, on a little reflection, it is clear that James is only insisting on St Augustine's insight— that in certain domains it takes the risk of first trusting to enable us to see what would otherwise elude us, rather than our coming to see on the basis of our already having verified what is at issue. On one side there is the fear of believing something false, on the other the hope of opening up some as yet hidden truth through an anticipatory act of faith. Reasonable as it is to respect them, bowing in all circumstances to the agnostic vetoes on taking anything on trust will often only prevent us from finding out some of the truths that matter most.

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https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2002.tb01828.x Published online by Cambridge University Press