Science, Religion and Scientism

Alex Comfort

Introduction by
The Rev. Arthur Peacocke

66th Conway Memorial Lecture
20 September 1990
Science, Religion and Scientism
SOUTH PLACE ETHICAL SOCIETY

South Place Ethical Society has been in existence for almost two centuries. In 1888 its name was changed from South Place Religious Society to South Place Ethical Society. It has slowly shed religious forms, with *Hymns of Modern Thought* unsung from the 1960s. In 1980 it was decided that the Society was a charity, with these objects (as interpreted by its General Committee in the light of the 1980 Court ruling): the study and dissemination of ethical principles; the cultivation of a rational and humane way of life; the advancement of education in fields relevant to these objects.

Formally, the Society's objects are “the study and dissemination of ethical principles and the cultivation of a rational religious sentiment”.

Its journal, *The Ethical Record*, is among the benefits which members enjoy (subscription £6 a year). Its library is also open to members. Meetings every Sunday morning and afternoon are open to all—as is the annual Conway Memorial Lecture. Further features of the Society's year are Sunday concerts in the evening, and classes on weekdays (recent themes include Paths to Humanism; Evolution and Controversies in Biology; Futures, Utopias, Science Fiction; Third World in One World; Humanism and the Novel; Humanism and Contemporary Plays; World to Win or Destroy 1935-1991; Radical Britain 1930s-1980s), as well as a newly instituted annual prize for an unpublished pamphlet on a secular theme, and a prize for new music.

South Place Ethical Society is a centre in London, with national and also transnational links, for the introduction and exchange of fresh concepts and goals.

Published 20 September, 1990 in an edition of 1,000 copies

©1990 South Place Ethical Society and Alex Comfort

Price £2
This is the sixty-sixth Conway Memorial Lecture. George Jacob Holyoake, who was an uncompromising atheist in a sense Moncure Conway distanced himself from, relates in his *Bygones Worth Remembering* a question and his own answer. "Moncure Conway asked whether, if his life was in danger in China, and I could save it by the Chinese oath of breaking a saucer, I would not do it? Certainly I would, to save Dr Conway, if the Confucians would permit me, but I should not the less deceive them by pretending to have sworn before them in the Chinese sense. But . . . in no country would I willingly treat truth as a superstition. By taking the "saucer" oath, I should obtain in Chinese eyes a validity for my word not really belonging to it. . . . All "forms" which are unreal are unwise and hurtful." Holyoake conceded that "some are for the spirit more than the form."

In "Sixty Years of an Agitator's Life," Holyoake recalled a spirit with affinities to Alex Comfort's in the present century. Kropotkin "is the most accomplished anarchist. . . . No one who does not know the prince can imagine how bright, ardent, wise, and human he is. But the impression his writings give you is that his many attainments are tempered by dynamite . . . he neither swerves nor fears".
Comfort has called Kropotkin "the founder of modern social ecology". In a tradition of rational questioning which includes Godwin as well as Kropotkin, and which is linked to Comfort's knowledge of "non-Western" centuries of enlightenment, there is to be made a new morality "of human solidarity and mutual aid". The attitude to sexual behaviour is of a piece worth the rejection of state wars. In his introduction to The Koka Shastra, Comfort suggests "acceptance and pleasure where we have for generations been taught to look for danger and guilt."

In 1949, he broadcast that "Humanism does not formulate ten commandments. It formulates one only. . . Do nothing which increases the difficulties which any individual has to face, and leave nothing undone which diminishes them." Before considering his present insights into science and religion, the observation of a Comfort bibliographer, Harold Drasdo, is appropriate. "The greatest embarrassment in discussing his work is that he expresses himself so memorably that one is tempted to use massive quotations. . . . We know that those not well acquainted with his writings will draw from them encouragement and insight to enrich their personal lives; we hope, too, that they will find principles to guide their corporate actions".

Nicholas Hyman
Alex Comfort was born in 1920 and educated at Highgate School and Trinity College, Cambridge University. His academic and scientific distinctions are numerous (including doctorates in Biochemistry and Gerontology). He is Adjunct Professor at the Neuropsychiatric Institute of the University of California at Los Angeles and Consultant (Medical Education) at Ventura County Hospital. He is an Honorary Associate of the Rationalist Press Association.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Silver River; No Such Liberty; Into Egypt; France and Other Poems; A wreath for the Living; Cities of the Plain; The Almond Tree, The Powerhouse; Elegies; The Song of Lazarus; Cecil Collins; Letters from an Outpost; Art and Social Responsibility; The Signal to Engage; Gengulphus; On this side Nothing; First Year Physiological Technique; The Novel and Our Time; Barbarism and Sexual Freedom; Sexual Behaviour in Society; The Pattern of the Future; Authority and Delinquency in the Modern State; Delinquency; And all but He Departed; A Giant’s Strength; The Biology of Serescence; Darwin and the Naked Lady; Come Out to Play; Haste to the Wedding; Are You Sitting Comfortably; Sex and Society; Aging; The Koka Shastrë (Translation); The Process of Ageing; Nature and Human Nature; The Anxiety Makers; The Joy of Sex; More Joy; A Good Age; Sexual Consequences of Disability (Edited); I and That—Notes on the Biology of Religion; Poems: the Facts of Love (with Jane Comfort); A Practise of Geriatric Psychiatry; Tetrarch; What is a Doctor?; Reality and Empathy (with Jane Comfort); What about Alcohol?; The Patient; Walsingham’s Drum; The Philosophers.

See also his One of the best of a rather dour bunch’ (Solidarity Journal, N.S. 24, 1990). Harold Drasco Alex Comfort’s Art and Scope; and John Ellerby The Anarchism of Alex Comfort in Anarchy 33 (1963).
Introduction

There have been many diagnoses of the present malaise, the current dis-ease, that besets the human spirit in the Western world today. Amongst the tensions, lack of resolution of which has been made responsible for our ills, is that supposed to exist between science and religion. The conventional hypothesis in self-appointed informed and supposedly educated circles up to a few decades ago was that “science” had triumphed and all we needed was a more intelligent and determined application of it to cure our ills—while the older remedy of “religion” had been clearly established to be an idol with feet of clay. Today many thinking people are less sure of this over-confident diagnosis and of the respective characterisations of “science” and “religion” that it pre-supposes.

For the application of science in the form of technology, especially military technology, has been and is being shown to have horrendous effects on our planet and so on ourselves—and science itself has no way from within its own resources of channelling and controlling these effects. Moreover, from within science itself, the natural world has come to be seen as a hierarchy of structures of increasing complexity, with emergent processes and systematic structures that display new and genuine realities at their own level that are not reducible to those of their constituent quarks, atoms, etc. Amongst the most significant of these emergents is the human consciousness that is displayed by human persons. Furthermore, even the so-called “fundamental” particles, the rock-bottom of reality from which the reductionist is claiming to deduce and construct everything else, prove to appropriate only a subtle and baffling kind of reality, much less hard than the confident scientific imperialism of the 19th century assumed would be the case.
Alex Comfort this evening will be drawing attention to these and other significant features of modern science. I agree with him that an arrogant "scientism", the belief that the only knowledge that we can possibly have will be scientific, is no longer tenable—at least as long as we do not simply label any knowledge "scientific" simply because it is something we know! What we are all seeking is truth, and an organised body of knowledge, that is of truth, used to be what the word *scientia* denoted—but for over 150 years now, the word "science" has stood for something narrower, namely that organised body of knowledge about the physical, biological and social world that is obtainable by the experimental methods interpreted by the imaginative reason.

My own philosophy of science is that of critical realism which I think is not only defensible philosophically but corresponds closely to how scientists think and work. There are, I would urge, good grounds for thinking that science is attempting to depict reality by metaphors, often organised as models, and that these depictions are the possession of a continuous linguistic community that interprets them in their application. The success of science in prediction and control is, for me, the sign that its metaphors and models are at least provisional approximations for depicting reality—and are always revisable.

This is also what I think religion is about—or, more precisely, what theology, the intellectual reflection on religious experience and traditions, is about. Theology, like science, is also attempting to make inferences to the best explanation but of wider aspects of our experience of the world—natural, biological, cosmological. It also does so by means of metaphors and models that are revisable and which are the possession of continuous linguistic communities that interpret and apply them. Theology
as the intellectual reflection on the content of religious experience through the ages concerns itself with meaning as well as with intelligibility more so than the natural sciences. For its focus of interest is much more those non-reducible levels of the natural order that constitute human consciousness, personality and society.

Considerations such as these have long since led me to regard science and religion as two prongs of the enterprise of humanity in seeking both intelligibility and meaning in our existence. It will not surprise you that I also think, pace Alex Comfort, that, profound as many of the insights of Eastern religions are, it is the Judeo-Christian heritage (which incidentally provided the milieu for the growth of science) that will be the most rewarding companion for science in this joint human enterprise. So that I find myself urging on my fellow-believers a Christian humanism in no way contradictory to a humanism that honours and co-operates with science. For me, as Einstein put it, "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind."(1)

It is clearly an insight of this Einsteinian character that has spurred the remarkable and fruitful life of Dr Alex Comfort, our honoured and distinguished Lecturer tonight. For does he not write, in one of his "Poems for Jane" of

"... another mode, that now is now.
God breaks each moment to create the next—
so, not lifelong nor happy ever after—
some things are perpendicular to time"(2)?

To label Alex Comfort by any of the conventional descriptions that might be applied—physiologist, physician, gerontologist, psychiatrist, biologist, poet, novelist, Orientalist—would all be true but totally inadequate to capturing that unique synthesis that is himself. He is sui generis and we look forward to hearing now his
mature reflections on these matters of "Science, Religion and Scientism" in this 1990 Conway Memorial Lecture.

Arthur Peacocke

(1) Albert Einstein in *The World as I see it.*

. The Rev. Dr. Arthur Peacocke holds numerous academic distinctions and has specialised in biochemistry and in the relationship between science and religion. He was Director of the Ian Ramsey Centre at St. Cross College, Oxford from 1985 to 1988, and has been Warden of the Society of Ordained Scientists since 1987.

Amongst his publications are: *The Physical Chemistry of Biological Organisation; Intimation of Reality; God and the New Biology.*
Science, Religion and Scientism

You are all, I am sure, aware of the story of Adam and Eve. The version we have was compiled by Jewish scholars about 520 B.C., but the legend itself is much older. What exactly does it say? That God created Man in his own image—what that means is not elaborated further; that he prohibited Man from seeking the knowledge of Good and Evil, but Man, incited by Woman and by a very ancient inhabitant of the environment, the Serpent, did seek it, and in consequence of this the Edenic harmony collapsed and—if we take the Pauline rather than the original Judaic view—serious damage was done to creation and heroic measures were required to restore it. Man and Creation still bears the scars.

Many peoples, from Papua to North America, have myths about the First Man. This is one such, but like many myths it is extraordinarily powerful as an oblique philosophical statement. That, and not works of literary fiction, is what myths are: they are explanatory theories expressed parabolically. If we write them today on this subject we put them in terms of palaeonathropology and call them theories. Because of their power in summarizing attitude we ignore myths at our peril. This one has

10
had, in fact, far more influence on Christianity than on Judaism, because it is the foundation of centuries of speculative doctrine about sin, atonement, and all the theological hardware of our European tradition, setting it apart from other traditions—the Greek or the Buddhist, for example, where the writ of this particular theory did not run.

When such a legend is incorporated into an intellectually sophisticated system such as Judaism or Christianity, we need to look at it: it is trying to tell us something. After all, those who codified and wrote down the Torah were not Bronze-Age village story-tellers but serious Jewish philosophers, the ancestors of the people who latterly wrote down relativity and quantum theory. Moreover, in the light of this, there are some extremely paradoxical elements in the story, some very odd things about it. God in the Judaic tradition is not only That-which-is, an abstract creative dynamic, but also an enthusiast for righteousness: why should he not want Adam, his creation, to know Good from Evil? Why, knowing Man to be contrasuggestible, did he put the tree of knowledge there? Human Original Sin is a very naive reading of the parable—even the Middle Ages had trouble with the Christian version. The author of the old carol has his own solution:

Never had the apple
the apple taken been
never had Our Lady
ne been Heavene Queen. . . .

In other words, God planned the whole performance in order to implement the subsequent epic of incarnation and vicarious atonement. That, of course, was the last kind of reading that the Jewish scribe had in mind. In his legend, God might have warned Adam off the apple because the introduction of self-consciousness and
ethical sense into a self-running and largely mechanistic universe creates a deep fissure, and a huge capacity for suffering. Was the apple incident a fall due to hubris—incuring the wrath of God—or a point at which Mind enters creation, incurring God’s admiration, and, because Eden was suddenly closed to Man, his pity? Here, in Spencer-Brown’s words, the universe acquires the ability to view itself—that is not the Fall of Man but something more like the birthday of God. If anyone thinks this is a highly un-Judaic notion, closer to Whitehead, process theology and Teilhard de Chardin than to transcendent monotheism, he or she should look at the speculation in Kabbalah that God created many universes, like soap bubbles, but could only enter one of them when it came to contain a self-conscious mind, a vehicle (merkaba) or probe.

Now both myths and theology are in desuetud in our thinking, especially if we are scientists. They are part of a universe of discourse called “religion” with which, over the last 150 years, science has been in acrimonious dispute. The dispute began as observations, tended increasingly to show that many mythical and religious statements were not literally true. It is historically quite recent for geographers to try to locate the Garden of Eden, as they did the site of Troy. One would be inclined to ask “just how thick can one get?” Such literalism would have seemed bizarre to the scholars who put the myth on paper. Instead of trying to argue with such people they would have related immediately to Spencer-Brown’s question—“how does the universe acquire the ability to see itself?” but now they would have to call that address not religion, but science or philosophy, and the medium of reply might well be not a myth but math.

I want to talk tonight about the rather trampled subject of science and religion. One immediately thinks of the