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Hernando Maceda

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Einstein's Cosmic Religion

HERNANDO MACEDA

WHEN the death of Albert Einstein was announced recently in the newspapers, there were few places where the name did not find recognition and where there was not at least some vague knowledge of the studies with which his name was associated. Few men were as well known as he and few have influenced the lives of so many people as profoundly as he. His theory of relativity appeared at first of interest to only a handful of specialists, but in time it came, through its application to the techniques of modern warfare, almost to stand as an arbiter of human destiny. It might, therefore, be of interest to examine into the thoughts of so great an intellect upon the greatest of all subjects: religion. What was Einstein's attitude toward religion?

Albert Einstein was born of very irreligious parents and at the early age of twelve developed a vehement scepticism which stayed with him throughout his mature life. In his "Autobiographical Notes" he wrote:

... there was religion, which is implanted into every child by way of the traditional education-machine. Thus I came—despite the fact that I was the son of entirely irreligious (Jewish) parents—to a deep religiosity, which, however, found an abrupt ending at the age of 12. Through the reading of popular scientific books I soon reached the conviction that much in the stories of the Bible could not be true. The consequence was a positively fanatic [orgy of] free-thinking... Suspicion against every kind of authority grew out of this experience, a skeptical attitude...

which has never again left me, even though later on...it lost some of its original poignancy.¹

It appears that, through all the years of religious scepticism, Einstein never completely gave up his childhood belief in God. Thus, some forty years later, he could say:

My religion consists of a humble admiration for the illimitable superior spirit who reveals Himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds.²

In his maturer years this belief in God was evidently in a supreme Intelligence;—because he saw that it could not be by chance that the universe was run: “I cannot believe God plays dice with the cosmos.”³ He had discovered the greatest unifying laws of nature, but it was only because there were already intelligent patterns ahead of him in nature. If God played dice, i.e., if the world were run by chance, there would be no ordered patterns he could trace. Neither he nor any other mind could ever discover laws, and all scientific efforts would be useless.

There are however serious deficiencies in Einstein’s notion of God and of religion, which it would be quite revealing to study. I will mention three.

I

God, as Einstein conceived Him, cannot be a God who rewards and punishes men. Why? Because that would make God anthropomorphically cruel and malicious, since men are not free and do not do good and commit evil from free choice.

God is subtle, but he is not malicious.⁴

I believe in Spinoza’s God, who reveals himself in the harmony of all being, not in a God who concerns himself with the fate and actions of men.⁵

A God who rewards and punishes is for him [the cosmic religionist] unthinkable, because man acts in accordance with an *inner and outer necessity*, and would, in the eyes of God, be as little responsible as an inanimate object is for the movements which it makes.⁶

This denial of human freedom is indeed strange in one who left his native land forever when his personal freedom was

endangered, and for years enjoyed the blessings of freedom in a land of free men.⁷ Why so keen a mind should so definitely and unequivocally deny man's inner and outer freedom is not fully understandable to me. It is perhaps traceable to the fact that Einstein lived a relatively secluded life, far from violent free acts of crime and heroism among men, and to the fact that his mind lived constantly in a universe of thought where the law of necessity was supreme—the universe of mathematics and natural science. Thus, in the physical world, he saw the utter supremacy of law, but he could not see in the moral world the *law* of reward and punishment that likewise necessarily followed goodness and crime; his reason—there is no such moral world, since there are no freely chosen acts.

I hazard a guess that if Einstein had studied more of the sciences which deal with the deliberate choices of men (history, sociology, politics, law, etc.), men would probably have lost some of his epoch-making discoveries, but neither would they have been misled by his denial of man's freedom, of the moral order, and of a God who controlled the free wills of men by the law of reward and punishment.⁸

II

A second deficiency of Einstein's religion is that paradoxically it is a religion in which one cannot *pray*.

In his brief explanation of "cosmic religion,"⁹ he describes three stages in the evolution of religion:

a) The *fear*-religion of primitive peoples—who believed in and sacrificed to their god(s) out of fear that he would hurt them with disease, famine, death, drought, storms, etc.

b) The social, *moral* religion—of Judaism, Christianity, and the oriental religions, which to keep the social unity of their peoples, preached an anthropomorphic God, a God of Providence, who rewarded and punished men for their good and evil deeds. Thus, they developed the idea of morally good and evil acts, and of a moral order.

c) The *cosmic* religion—which is pure religion, unmixed with any human subjective motivations, and which "seeks to

experience the totality of existence as a unity full of significance."¹⁰ Einstein describes cosmic religion further as present in all religious founders but as having no definite teachings:

The religious geniuses of all times have been distinguished by this cosmic religious sense, which recognizes neither dogmas nor God made in man's image.¹¹

... it cannot lead to a definite conception of God...¹²

It is likewise strong in Buddhism,¹³ and especially in heretics and atheists and saints:

It comes about, therefore, that precisely among the heretics of all ages we find men who were inspired by this highest religious experience; often they appeared to their contemporaries as atheists, but sometimes also as saints.¹⁴

From all the above, it seems to follow that in cosmic religion one can not *pray*, because:

a) man has no freedom of will, and prayer is essentially a free act of will;

b) God in cosmic religion does not "concern himself with the fate and actions of men,"¹⁵ is not a God of Providence (which Einstein expressly attributes to moral religion). How could a man feel like praying to a God who will not aid or forgive him, or hear his prayer?

c) God in cosmic religion is vague and undefinable, of him we can have "no definite conception." Certainly a God whose nature fits the God of Buddhists, heretics, atheists and saints, is, to say the least, a puzzling divinity, an "unknown God." Would a man feel like praying to such a deity?

This interpretation seems confirmed by Einstein's remarks elsewhere that his God is "Spinoza's God,"¹⁶ and by his implication that religion is reducible to painstaking scientific efforts or to a reverent awe of Nature:

A contemporary has rightly said that the only deeply religious people of our largely materialistic age are the earnest men of research.¹⁷

In every naturalist there must be a kind of religious feeling...¹⁸

My religious feeling is a humble amazement at the order revealed in the small patch of reality to which our feeble intelligence is equal.¹⁹

Thus, cosmic religion is one in which we can study Nature and admire it as the revelation of God, but not one in which we can establish contact with the Author of Nature Himself and pray to Him because He has a personal interest in and special providence over us.

III

A third deficiency in Einstein's concept of religion is that (contrary to our expectations from a mind so strictly logical) religion originates from *feeling* and *emotion*, not from mind and reason. We acquire it by "experience," not by logically reasoning to it from facts and events. This

. . . cosmic religious sense . . . is hard to make clear to those who do not *experience* it, since it does not involve an anthropomorphic idea of God; the individual *feels* the vanity of human desires and aims, and the nobility and marvelous order which are revealed in nature and in the world of thought. He *feels* the individual destiny as an imprisonment and seeks to *experience* the totality of existence as a unity full of significance.²⁰

We do not deny the function of emotions in religion, but Einstein seems to attribute the origin of religion solely to them, i.e. to emotions without reason. Thus, his essay on "Cosmic Religion" starts:

Everything that men do or think concerns the satisfaction of the needs they feel or the escape from pain. This must be kept in mind when we seek to understand spiritual or intellectual movements and the way in which they develop. . . .

What, then, are the *feelings* and the needs which have brought mankind to religious thought and to faith in the widest sense? A moment's consideration shows that the most varied *emotions* stand at the cradle of religious thought and experience.²¹

It seems obvious that in the field of religion, for some unexpressed reason, Einstein considered the scientific method of reasoning from facts as inapplicable, and its only means of knowledge to be feeling and direct experience.

In conclusion, Einstein leaves us with some very odd paradoxes, if not with actual inconsistencies:

- a. that there can be religion whose God one can not pray to;
- b. that atheists may be the most religious of people;
- c. that religion may be reducible to scientific effort, i.e. to science;
- d. that man is not free, yet Einstein left his native land forever to preserve his own freedom.

Where lies the root of these anomalies, of these subtle inconsistencies which took unawares the greatest mathematical genius of 300 years?

Perhaps some answer lies in that he seemingly gave only "a moment's consideration"²² to, and did not ask himself seriously enough these questions:

a) "Are feelings and personal experience sufficient norms for informing us on the nature of religion and of God?

b) "Why cannot the strict logical reasoning from causality, so successful in science and mathematics, be used in the field of religion—to discover the qualities of God and of true religion?

c) "Would it not be an even greater sign of God's intelligence to create men free and yet be able to control those free wills by some superior *law*? Are free will and law necessarily contradictory?"

Instead Einstein seems to have been influenced by the liberal Protestant atmosphere around him that religion was approached by feeling and unreasoning faith, and by the determinism of the physical sciences that men were determined by Nature and could in no way determine themselves.

Einstein's example gives mankind these important lessons:

a) on the one hand, that it is no weakness or old-fashioned tradition for intellectual people to admit and reverence a Supreme Intelligence that runs the universe;

b) on the other, that a human genius remains ever human; he may be supreme along one line, but in other fields, especially in that of religion, he may be as fallible as his next-door neighbor.

* * *

¹ Paul A. Schilpp (ed.), *Albert Einstein: Philosopher-Scientist* (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1951), p. 4.

² *Time Magazine*, May 2, 1955.

³ *Loc. cit.*

⁴ Einstein's words over the fireplace in the professors' lounge of Fine Hall, Department of Mathematics, Princeton University. The inscription is in German: "Raffiniert ist der Herr Gott, aber boshaft ist er nicht." (*Albert Einstein: Philosopher-Scientist*, p. 691.)

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁶ Albert Einstein, *Cosmic Religion* (New York: Covici Friede, 1931), p. 51. (Italics added). According to *Time*, May 2, 1955, Einstein also denied the immortality of the soul.

⁷ This denial of human freedom quoted above was made before his life in America, but for lack of later statements to the contrary, I presume that Einstein probably did not change this opinion.

⁸ Reward and punishment are not arbitrary whims of the Creator's Will, but are a *law* of the moral order that is ultimately rooted in God's being what He is.

⁹ *Cosmic Religion*, New York, Covici Friede, 1931.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁵ Schilpp, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 103.

¹⁷ Einstein, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48. (Italics added)

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43. (Italics added)

²² *Loc. cit.*