

A GEOLOGIST LOOKS AT RELIGION

G. VIBERT DOUGLAS

HOMO sapiens has existed on the surface of this planet for about a million or more years. Before his appearance, life both animal and vegetable existed for many hundred millions of years. These are all fairly well established facts. They can be read in any text-book of historical geology, especially those published in the last fifty years.

In contrast to the antiquity of the geological record, Christianity is a recent event. But any event which affects this Earth in any of its aspects, whether ancient or modern, has to be considered by the impartial investigator. One of the most fundamental things that Christianity teaches is that God is love. The geological record on the other hand shews that the "Prime Mover" created and set at work a universe which is obeying certain sublime laws (such as the law of gravitation). These laws are invariable, but may bring, and are thought to have brought, about certain chance events such as the formation of our whole solar system. In their operation they may bring destruction to living matter, and might in the future wipe out the whole human race. The geological record further shews that before the advent of man on the earth, life existed by the ruthless destruction of life; just as it does now in the animal kingdom. There was no mercy when the sharks made their appearance and dominated the seas of the world by feeding on all other forms of life weaker than themselves. There is no love exhibited in the geological record prior to the advent of man. Yet we are told that God is love. How are these two antipodal views to be reconciled? An attempt at reconciliation will be possible only if we are honest and fearless. Fearless, for we must be capable of disregarding any "authority" just because he is a saint or because we admire him or her as a human person. Honest, for we must throw out all arguments or ideas which we have not the strongest evidence for believing. The philosopher may object to this last statement by saying that ultimate knowledge is impossible. The geologist stands on an outcrop and examines it. His purpose is to find out all the true facts that this exposure can tell him. What is the nature of the rock, what is its posture, what is its history, what is its significance? There is an ultimate truth regarding that outcrop.

Any geologist examining that rock may reach that truth or he may only approach that truth. It may be that no observer or group of observers will hit upon the ultimate truth, but nevertheless they can all be honest in their convictions regarding their findings. Somebody bearing a great name in geology may have pronounced his opinion, a quite honest but possibly erroneous opinion. The authoritarian pronouncement should be respected, but each observer must be free to differ, otherwise he is not an honest observer. A further point is that the supposed observer must approach the outcrop with an open mind; the mind of a little child in its receptivity.

In the light of this approach we shall examine the statement "God is love." Is there a God, and is he loving? Few persons living will doubt the existence of some Originator. Behind matter, behind energy, behind space, behind time, what is there? No scientist has a better answer than Leonardo da Vinci's Great Prime Mover. No writer in the Old Testament has a better answer than Isaiah's "Lift up your eyes on high and behold who hath created these things." Ultimately the basic idea of God is founded on some such conception. The Old Testament attributes of God, justice and mercy, are augmented in the New Testament by the idea of a loving Father. The idea of love is therefore recent in the history of life. How can the views of a deity, author of the most ferocious ruthlessness and at the same time author of the idea of loving kindness, be reconciled? Does the nature of God change, or has God created an order of change? That the nature of God should change would imply chaos and the doom of man as a rational being, but the whole idea of an order of change is contained in the doctrine of evolution. Within this doctrine is the comparatively new idea of *holism*—the making of wholes as a process in Nature. The conception of holism leads to a view of immortality. Over the range of time of which we have any knowledge, possibly two thousand million years, we can see some notable steps in the organic life of the planet. The first is the beginning of life—the first complex molecule that began to pulsate. This event took place in the era known to geologists as the Precambrian. The next great event occurring some time in the Palaeozoic was the beginning of thought—instinct. This attribute continued developing until the third great increment to development came with what may be called spirit. As this term has been used in so many ways, it will require some definition. Spirit in the sense used here means all that part of an intelligent brain which is not common to lower animals:—the power to investigate the nature of things, the power to appreciate

beauty, the power to discern goodness. If this spirit can unravel the laws of the universe, it is not unreasonable to suggest that it is of the same sort of "stuff" as the Spirit that endowed the universe with these laws. It is further not unreasonable to suggest that as the existence of man on this Earth is a recent event in geological history, the Original Spirit is also in existence and this Original Spirit or Prime Mover has persisted throughout the whole of known time. There is no evidence that development has ceased or will cease. If the spirit of man is of the same nature as the spirit of the Prime Mover, why should it not persist?

The whole of human history is the story of a great development in ideas. Not always is this development gradual. There are sudden increments. Confucius, Socrates, Plato and Christ are names associated with sudden new creative ideas. Of all the ideas associated with the welfare of mankind in actual practice, Christ's teachings seem supreme. What is the main theme of Christ's teaching? Is it not just this—He is pointing out that the way of life is the way of loving kindness. The alternative to this way is the utterly ruthless ferocity of the struggle for survival. Mankind will pass, as other species have passed, if ruthlessness is placed as the way of life. Where are the trilobites that flourished in the Palaeozoic, where are the dinosaurs that plodded over the mudflats of the Mesozoic? Where are the other species of life that lived and developed and have left only a trace in the records of palaeontology? But the way of Christ points out how the human race can persist, and as far as we know it points the only way. If, as we believe, this statement is true, would it not be reasonable to lay emphasis on that part of Christianity which deals with the way of life? A Christian who tried to follow that way with the open mind of a child might be doing more for the human race than one who repeated a Creed and based his claim to Christianity on certain beliefs which may or may not be substantiated by facts. Why cannot the Christian Churches all unite on the simple basis of pursuing the way as laid down in the teachings of Christ in the four Gospels? The questions of belief in this doctrine or that doctrine need not cause dissension and strife. If one body wishes to hold one idea of the Trinity and another body is on that point very different, it does not matter. The way of life remains untouched and unobscured.

The account of Christ's life and teaching given in the Gospels is a simple story. It tells of his sojourning here and there, and it gives some account of His teaching. That teaching consists of simple, practical commands which constitute the Way of Life. It is not a philosophy as we understand the word. Much harm has

come from trying to invent a philosophy to suit the teachings of Christ. If philosophy was infallible, if all philosophers starting with the same premise could arrive at the same conclusion, there might be some justification for a Christian philosophy.

The history of the development of scientific thought in geology or any other science shews that as soon as any thinker begins to theorize and gets away from facts, experiments or mathematical deductions based on facts, his mind cannot be trusted.

If this is known to be so in science and philosophy, it is equally true when philosophy is applied to religion. Why should man-made theories be allowed to form the basis of true religion? Should not the search for the truth of the Christian religion be rather the search for the way in which each individual can interpret the direct words of Christ Himself, unobscured by philosophies and dogmas? A geologist deals with the actual facts seen on an outcrop, and by these traces the truth about the whole geological problem of some area.

By taking Christ's teachings as our principles and by applying them pragmatically to life, as does the geologist with *his* principles and the facts relating to his area, it is very probable that we should unfold truth in relation to the problems of society.

The susceptibilities of those holding to creeds and dogmas cannot be hurt by emphasis on action regulated by the direct teachings of Christ as found in the Gospels. With the genuine zeal of the true believers of various Christian denominations directed to this end, it is possible that the Way of Life forms *the* common basis for immediate co-operative action.