ALEXANDER F. SKutch

The Scope of Religion

[Our old and deeply esteemed friend Dr. Alexander F. Skutch has been the author of many thoughtful articles for the AMERICAN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY. He always brings to bear upon major questions in human living a lucidity and earnestness that in their turn are sure to evoke careful thought in the reader. In this article he considers the proper scope of religion, science, and philosophy; and gives an admirable distinction between the proper spheres of Church and State.

We invite readers' attention to the note following the article, which embodies some reflections prompted by the article.—en.]

EVEN for the simplest organized being, living is a hazardous undertaking. The vital processes can go forward only within a narrow range of external conditions; extremes in either direction are for most organisms rapidly fatal. On every hand lurk innumerable perils. Not only must the living being meet immediate needs and avoid present perils; it must make provision for its own future requirements and produce offspring to perpetuate its kind. This hazardous enterprise of living demands an unending succession of nice adjustments which can hardly be made in the absence of full and complete guidance.

When we survey the whole range of living beings on this planet, with their bewildering diversity of expedients to maintain life, we discover only two radically distinct modes of guidance. Life can be carried on in accordance with a pattern which has proved successful in the past, without giving thought to the future; or it can be lived in conscious anticipation of what the future may have in store, what blessings to be enjoyed, what evils to be avoided. The first of these is the method of instinct; the second, that of intelligence. Instinct is never careless of the future, but prepares for future contingencies on the basis of the past experience of the race, without asking what that future will be like. It has implicit faith that cycles are incessantly repeated and arrangements once successful will continue to be adequate. Intelligence is never forgetful of the past, which alone can provide us with indications of what the future will bring forth. But it is apprehensive of the future as instinct can never be.

Unquestioning instinct and full understanding are the only two stable forms of government in the living world. Between these two extremes we do indeed find many transitional modes, but they are inherently unstable, tending always toward one or the other of these end
since religion, in order to accomplish its avowed and recognized ends, is committed to the tremendous task of providing complete guidance to human life, it has often joined forces for this purpose with the civil government. Such alliance of Church with State has invariably proved disastrous to the practical as to the spiritual ends of life. Few priests are strong enough in mind to be indifferent to the allurements of wealth and power, which are placed securely within their grasp whenever they are able to control the policies of the State. Instead of spiritual guidance, they then become scheming politicians and opulent landlords. Distrustful of change and fearful of general enlightenment, they hold the people in ignorance and shackle the nation to a dead past. Yet unfortunate is the state whose policies are not guided and embodied by the light of religion. The relation between Church and State should, however, be indirect rather than direct. It is the task of religion to infuse the minds and hearts of the people with love of truth and righteousness and compassion; the people, so enlightened and exalted in spirit, should make their own laws and establish their own institutions without the direct interference of the Church. But when an ecclesiastical body wields temporal power, it can rarely resist the temptation to take the shortest and easiest course, and, neglecting to leave the hearts of men, pass over their heads direct to the source of civil authority. Thereby religion becomes a cold and formal ritualism imposed from without, rather than a warm and radiant inner light.

So long as men lived in small tribes, relatively homogeneous in the capacities and interests of their members, there was no great harm in the close association, or even complete identification, of the kingly and priestly powers. This situation was probably unavoidable at a certain stage in human evolution. But the diversity in origin, innate capacity, education, and interests of the citizens of a great modern nation render the union of Church and State intolerable. This is not to contradict our previous assertion that religion is obligated by its own avowed ends to provide complete guidance to life in all its aspects. The very comprehensiveness of religion makes it disastrous to itself to be yoked to the State with its far narrower aims. The proper function of the State is to guarantee to its citizens that security in person and property, that freedom from arbitrary interference by public officials or private neighbors, without which they will be greatly trammeled in the pursuit of happiness and the fulfillment of their lives. Even if we enlarge this classic concept of the democratic state and admit that it should assume some responsibility for the health, education, and material welfare of its inhabitants, the state's interest in the individual is still more
restricted than that of religion. Religion is concerned with a man's inmost being, the State with his public conduct. Religion views his existence as transcending the limits of the State in both time and space; it enters into the life of the individual in a manner far more intimate and comprehensive than the State possibly can.

The laws of the State should be few and peremptory. They should, ideally, be limited to such as are indispensable for safeguarding the lives and possessions of the citizens, and no infractions should be tolerated. A law which one can flout with impunity is no law. The counsels of religion, on the contrary, should extend to all aspects of life in so far as they have moral or spiritual import, yet avoid becoming so prolix that their purpose is obscured by a maze of petty detail. Religious injunctions should never be laws in the sense that their violation is attended by punishment meted out by some formal authority. All religions agree that infraction of their mandates leads automatically, and without deliberate human agency, to loss or suffering by the transgressor. Moral rules are not followed, like civil laws, by a statement of penalties, because retribution is deemed to be certain and inevitable. The individual decides for himself which of the exhortations of religion he will obey and which he will disregard at his own peril.

The immediate concern of religion is man's inmost nature, which determines his whole future destiny. Although it is undeniable that what we do under external compulsion, legal or otherwise, cannot fail to influence our character, the exercise of unconstrained choice is more effective in giving our moral nature its peculiar colour. The purpose of religion is best attained when it sheds its guiding light on every rough place and turning of life's path, yet leaves us free to follow or stray as we will. The necessities of the State are most adequately served by giving commands only at certain critical points along the way, yet making those directions obligatory. The attempt to combine these radical and mutual frustration: on the one hand making the religious life an empty formality; on the other, weakening the stringency of the civil laws through multiplying them to such an extent that strict enforcement becomes impossible.

The State undertakes to give life that external stability and permanence without which the human spirit can with difficulty mature and flower. Religion attempts to guide men's spiritual growth within the framework provided by the State, leading it to heights which transcend the capacities of the civil government. Science endeavours to tell us what is, yet cannot reveal the spirit's full potentiality of becoming. Philos-

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ophy's task is to relate scientific knowledge to the ultimate realities, and to discover its significance in terms of human values. When it passes beyond mere interpretation to become a way of life, an endeavour to realize our highest potentialities, philosophy is difficult to distinguish from religion at its best. Religious philosophies and philosophic religions have been man's most daring and important enterprises. In attempting to discover the ultimate significance of life they have surveyed all human knowledge, and in endeavouring to guide life in accordance with the conception so formed, they have striven to give unity and direction to all our activities. They have aspired bravely to combine theory and practice in a single sublime synthesis, the most comprehensive ever attempted by man.

But since those who shape religions and philosophies are only men, who for all their self-discipline and all their zeal have not wholly outgrown their share of human weakness and folly, it follows that they have not avoided all the pitfalls that surround their grand undertakings. These pitfalls are of two sorts. On one hand, there is the danger of rushing to conclusions upon difficult problems without adequate examination of the relevant facts, then closing one's mind to the light of reason and stubbornly refusing to consider alternative interpretations. On the other hand, there is the temptation to burden life with activities not essential to its maintenance, in the mistaken belief that ceremonies are somehow more efficacious in forming human character than those foundational pursuits without which life would fail and society disintegrate. The first aberration leads to rigid dogma, which seeks to coerce the mind that it cannot persuade; the second gives birth to empty ceremonialism, which occupies hands and tongues without exalting the spirit. No major religion has wholly avoided one or both of these pitfalls; the popular religions of the modern world are heavily encrusted with outlandish beliefs that embarrass a critical intelligence, and often, too, with primitive ritual inappropriate to contemporary conditions. Nevertheless, it would be folly to conclude that because no religion is perfect we can live satisfactorily without religion or something difficult to distinguish from it. If we abandon religion, we shall have nothing to bind our lives, with all their discordant inner impulses and all their divergent external demands, into a coherent, stable whole. We cannot afford to relax the endeavour to criticize and purify religion so that it approaches ever more closely to the lofty goal that it long ago set for itself.

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