

REASON AND VISION

Review of "A Pluralistic Universe". By Professor William James, 1909. Longmans, Green & Co. and "Studies in Mystical Religion". By Dr. Rufus M. Jones, 1909. Macmillan & Co.

by **W. L. Wilmshurst**

There are two paths by which the human mind endeavours to approach the sanctuary of ultimate truth. The first, the more general, and, as it eventually proves, the inadequate method, is that of reason; ordered, calculated thought, based upon objective evidence and drawing its conclusions from within the limits of individual experience and from such phenomena as are found available. The faculty employed in this case is the rationalising intellect, which, as it works, enacts its own laws of logic and evidence, and formulates its own canons and criteria of judgement, thereby necessarily restricting its own capacities and conclusions to its own self-forged fetters. A formidable query-mark therefore always stands opposite the results of the rationalistic method, for, firstly, the quantum of experience varies with individual minds, and, secondly, the laws of logic applicable to one man's measure of experience are apt to break down when applied to another's. Follow the track of pure reason far enough and it leads to a position altogether impracticable and inconsistent with your own or some one else's personal experience. Again, we have schools of both materialistic and of idealistic philosophy, and (to leave the former entirely out of account in the present consideration) the official professors of the latter are found to be seriously disunited in their conclusions. Does ultimate, perfected truth already exist? they ask; is it something static and directly cognizable, or still in the process of making? Are things moving towards an assured "divine event," or towards something undetermined and *in futuro*, the nature of which depends upon the way in which the totality of cosmic forces develop? Is Deity already fully extant and in control of the universe or still only coming to birth concurrently with the universal evolutionary processes? Are there intermediate "lords many and gods many"? Is there an Absolute behind, encircling all? Even if monotheists, are we logically bound to be monists? Are there not strong reasons for being dualists, and still stronger ones for being pluralists? So far, and into such perplexities do reason and its organ the logical intellect, even when committed to a spiritualistic view of things, lead us.

The alternative and rarer method of approaching the final verities is by means of a faculty quite other than the reason, and indeed one in regard to which reason stands in constant conflict. It involves a direct act or state of consciousness which places the individual, though he touch but the hem of its garment, in first-hand relation with what he realises irrefutably to be a permanent Reality forming the woof of both himself and all else. Greek philosophy defined this faculty as the "active reason" as opposed to the "passive reason" or "carnal mind"; it is "the Knower" of Oriental religio-philosophy; it cognizes rather than intellectualizes; and it is, in fact, the only true and reliable organ of knowledge we possess. That it may be abused or allowed to act ill-regulatedly is as unquestioned as that a ship's engines will "race" when the propeller they drive becomes lifted above the water it is intended to work in. But given a duly balanced human organism, it is the intuitive faculty that should control and inspire the reason, whereas the reverse method usually prevails, and the subordinate faculty is allowed to usurp the throne and dispossess the rightful king. Thus it ensues that the value of any man's philosophy depends more upon the measure of his illumination than upon that of his intellectual power. "Where there is no vision the people perisheth." Excess of intellectualism produces an inadequate philosophy;

illuminated reason alone can show us any good. As the Welsh mystic Thomas Vaughan quaintly puts it, "It is a terrible thing to prefer Aristotle to the Elohim."

Now the present position of the official philosophy taught in the academies of learning, and of which one phase is exhibited in Professor W. James's recent Gifford Lectures just issued under the title of *A Pluralistic Universe*, is extremely interesting and suggestive, because many of its exponents, if not yet arrived at the summit of the mount of vision, seem assuredly to be traversing the lower slopes that lead thereto. This brightest and breeziest of philosophers realizes fully the value of transcendental experience as distinct from mere intellectualism. "A man's vision is the great fact about him," he declares, not his reasons; and since "philosophy is essentially the vision of things seen from above," the wider the range of a man's consciousness, the greater the value to us of both himself and his philosophy.

It is then from the standpoint of empiricism — that is, from the experiences of personal consciousness — that Professor James embarks upon a journey of protest against the monistic idealism obtaining in modern seats of philosophic learning. Briefly, his argument is this. An idealistic view of the universe may involve the following beliefs: (1) a dualistic theism, postulating God and man over against each other, a view which "makes us outsiders and keeps us foreigners to God. . . . His action can affect us, but He can never be affected by our reaction; . . . not heart of our heart and reason of our reason, but our magistrate rather"; and (2) a pantheism involving intimacy between man and the creative principle, with which we may consider ourselves substantially one; "the divine, the most intimate of all our possessions; heart of our heart, in fact." But this pantheistic belief can itself be subdivided into two forms: one, which conceives "that the divine exists authentically only when the world is experienced all at once, in its absolute totality" (which, it is urged, may never be actually experienced or realized in that shape at all); and another, which holds that an Absolute may not at present exist, and that "a disseminated, distributed, or incompletely unified appearance is the only form reality may yet have achieved." It is this latter idea that Professor James champions at length; one that assumes a plurality of consciousnesses as against a divine mono-consciousness; one that, he claims, whilst making of God one of many conscious beings "affords the greater degree of intimacy" for us. For the ideally perfect Whole is one of which the parts are also perfect; but alas, we, the parts, are imperfect; hence, if the world is, as it appears to be, still incomplete and unfinished, instead of believing in one Absolute Reality, is it not more rational to conceive reality as existing distributively, not yet in an All, but in a set of eaches, or pluralistically? But even if the idea of an Absolute is dropped, is there no consciousness better than our own? Yes; "the tenderer parts of personal life are continuous with a more of the same quality operative in the universe outside us and with which we may keep in working touch; . . . we are continuous, to our own consciousness at any rate, with a wider self from which saving experiences flow in." And here, because of such experiences, which reason would never have inferred in advance of their actual coming, but which, as they actually do come and are given, cause creation to widen to the view of the recipients, the Professor finds himself obliged to break away from logic and intellectualism and stands ranged, in a quite literal sense, upon the side of the angels. The impetus of his own argument leads him to a belief, similar to that held by the late German psychologist Fechner, in a pluralistic pan-psychic universe teeming with superhuman life with which, unknown to ourselves, we are co-conscious; "angels and men ordained and constituted in a wonderful order," as the old Church collect has it.

In so far as the Professor's treatise speculates upon the finiteness or otherwise of Deity, of whom he claims we are indeed internal parts and not external creations, it may strike one as but un grand peut-etre. Apparently he claims no more for it, nor need the problem vex even the most susceptible religious mind. To know even dimly the God of this world is all that men of this world need to know; and that there are still higher, and as yet undeclared, heights is not improbable in a universe whereof our world is but a grain of dust, nor are some forms of religion without warrants for such a supposition. But the significance of this doctrine at the present era of intellectual reconstruction is that it constrains rationalism henceforward to recognize that fulness of life exceeds the limits of logic by taking into account the experiences of the mystical consciousness

and by furnishing a rationale for belief in those vast orders and hierarchies of intelligences transcending our own which Milton's famous line summarises as -

"Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers,"

and which, under various names, are common to every theosophical system. And though with these we may as yet be disconnected in consciousness, yet this pluralistic universe, it is claimed, is self-reparative through ourselves, as getting its disconnections remedied in part by our behaviour. Truly a high and noble motive for human conduct.

Dr. Rufus Jones' *Studies in Mystical Religion*, a substantial and admirably written volume from another American Professor, gives us a compilation of just those experiences upon which Professor James bases his hope for the future of both philosophy and religion. Again, how significant is the present day demand for the literature of mysticism and for what Dr. Jones calls "initiation into the Divine Secret"; betokening both a reaction from rationalism and a protest against the insufficiency of orthodox doctrine. An aphorism in Mr. A. E. Waite's *Steps to the Crown* asserts that "The consolation of God is in His mystics rather than in His angels"; which sounds daring until one reflects that to-day the consolation of men also seems to be in the mystics and the literature concerning them rather than in the official schools and churches, and that in this as in many respects *quod inferius sicut est quod superius*.

Dr. Jones book being in the nature of a historical record tracing Christian mysticism from its roots in Platonism and classical literature down to the seventeenth century, there is perhaps nothing new in it for those familiar with the subject and with its exponents. Its virtue lies in the skilful collation and presentation he has made from many scattered records of the experiences and testimony of men and women forming "a continuous prophetic procession; a mystical brotherhood, through the centuries, of those who have lived by the soul's immediate vision." In respect of a book of over 500 well-filled pages, written with obvious sympathy and insight and with both historical and philosophical learning, we shall not complain if he has not exhausted his subject, especially as he promises a further volume to be devoted exclusively to that master-mystic Jacob Boehme and states that the present is but an introduction to a series of historical volumes by himself and others devoted to the development and spiritual environment of a particular branch of Christianity, the Society of Friends. What is given us is excellent, notably the introductory chapter on "The Nature and Value of First-Hand Experience in Religion," in which he defines mysticism as "the type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of relation with God; on direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence. It is religion in its most acute, intense and living stage." For those desiring a compendium of excerpts and mystical testimony from primitive and Alexandrian Christianity, from Montanism, Neo-Platonism, the Waldenses, the Franciscans, and numerous Brotherhood groups, or from the memorials of such great names as Augustine, Dionysius, John Scotus, Eckhart, Suso, Ruysbroek, and others down to George Fox, no more useful or impartial collection can be recommended.

Now, totally unlike that of the professional rationalists, the testimony of this innumerable cloud of witnesses, from the saint upon the mount of contemplation to the itinerant preaching Quaker, is uniform and it is certain. Their expression may vary with the fashion of their time or be tintured by the intellectual environment of their age, but all testify to having had contact with and drawn upon one "matrix consciousness" wider than their natural selves, and all affirm that nothing can hinder any one from rising to the divine union if he but puts forth the will to rise. " Their testimony to unseen Realities," says Dr. Jones, "gives the clue and stimulus to multitudes of others to gain a like experience, and it is, too, their testimony that makes God real to the great mass of men who are satisfied to believe on the strength of another's belief." The series of volumes, then, which this one inaugurates cannot but perform a great service as well in the interest of personal religion as in that of general history, and we accord to it our most sincere commendation.

By many tokens, including books such as these under review, proceeding though they do upon different but converging lines, it appears that we are at length moving away from an age of speculation and reason towards one of — at least, the desire for — intimacy with realities. And this advance accords, no doubt, with the cosmic order of development; "first that which is natural, afterwards that which is spiritual." Intellectualism is beginning to readjust its functions to its appropriate limits that a greater light than itself may be revealed. The mystics, persecuted, despised and rejected for centuries, are at last coming into their own, and are bringing sheaves of others with them. These followers of the inward way have constituted hitherto but a slender minority, but that minority is now coming to be recognized as having been the saving salt of the earth. With one voice they have testified to one truth and to one experience. They have risen superior to the methods of logic and to the academies of learning; they have transcended the letter and the formulae of official theological doctrine. Around them human life has come and gone in millions of legions, and but for them the long centuries have passed darkly. Can any progress be said to have occurred in the apprehension of things ultimate on the part of those who chose the broader path; the outward, intellectual way? It is doubtful. Possibly some slight elevation of the intellectual order has taken place, an advance commensurate with the development, since primitive times, of cranial capacity and brain-surface, if any value can derive from such merely physical increase. Doubtless the range of intellectual vision has been widened, though it has often been darkened, by the revelations of physical science ; some obscure places have been clarified a little, and a store of concrete facts has been garnered, constituting for future generations a patrimony that will obviate the need of discovering and relearning everything *da capo*. But, after all, such advance is but quantitative, not qualitative; all it amounts to is a widening, not a deepening, of knowledge. Knowledge is no guarantee of sanctity and avails little until it is transmuted into wisdom; its mere widening tends to stupefy and paralyse the mind rather than to illumine it. "He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" No man ever won to the heights or lifted the veil of Isis by bigness, and co-ordinating grasp, of brain merely. No; for every newborn life the old riddles recur in all their primal perplexity. To every soul upon entering this earthly prison-house the water of Lethe is given to drink. It forgets its own nature, and its native faculties become temporarily abrogated. Its eyes are bandaged by the veil of mortality which permits it but that substituted method of vision which we call human reason; and no matter who has previously passed this way, or what others may have divined before it in humanity's great hall of initiation and testing, it still remains the personal private task of each of us to pluck out the heart of the mystery for himself. But let a man turn inwards and seek to rend the veil of his own temple from top to bottom; let him lift the hoodwink of reason that blinds his power of interior vision; let him bare the burnished mirror of his inward self to that unquenchable intra-cosmic Light which illuminates and alone makes possible all lesser lights whether of the physical, intellectual, or moral order, and there will open for him, and within him, what Russell Lowell has finely called—

"The soul's east window of divine surprise,"

and once and for all he will pass beyond the vexation of merely intellectual pseudo-problems; beyond the region of theological controversy and philosophic speculation; and to all protests and challenges of objecting critics he will answer and persistently affirm, "One thing I know; that whereas before I was blind, now I see."