CAN A SCIENTIFIC MAN BE A SINCERE FRIEND?

SILVANUS P. THOMPSON said: The question on which I was asked to write a paper a few months ago was, “Can a scientific man be a sincere Friend?” If there seems in the first quarter of it to be apparently some contradiction with what Rendel Harris says about human nature not being divided into compartments, I think you will find that it comes out right in the end.

SILVANUS P. THOMPSON then read a paper as follows:

Please to note that the question on which I have been asked to write a short paper is not whether a Friend can be a scientific man, but whether a scientific man can be a sincere Friend. The former query is sufficiently answered by the mere mention of three names—John Dalton, Luke Howard, Daniel Hack Tuke, all Friends, all indisputably men of science. The other question before us can only be answered by inverting for the time being our point of view, and, starting from the position of the man of science, enquire whether that position is compatible with the acceptance of the particular views of Christianity which distinguish the Friends from other bodies of Christians.

You know beforehand what my answer will be. Were it not an affirmative answer, I should not stand here to-day. Try to forget for a while that forgone conclusion, and follow the line of thought which I have to put before you. It may not be that which pleases you; it does not entirely please me. Had my task been the discussion of the other side of the question, it had been at once easier and more congenial.

What then is science? I reply that science is another name for a knowledge of facts and their co-ordination, of truths about man and the world in which he lives, tested and established by experiment, and of the relations between them, and of the natural laws to which they conform, so far as those relations and laws are discoverable and verifiable by experimental proof, or, in cases where positive experiment is not available, by logical processes of inference from the ascertained facts.
And the scientific man is he who, admitting as facts only those things the existence of which is thus established, and accepting only those relations and laws which can be either demonstrated or logically inferred from the facts, has learned to apply [228] the same methods and tests which have led him and others to the discovery of the true and the rejection of the false. I do not forget that an important part of the scientific method deals with the question of probabilities; as to how far the probability of any event or inference being scientifically true or false can be established. But the discussion of probabilities would lead too far away from the main issue. The truly scientific attitude of mind may be very well expressed by borrowing the apostolic phrase: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.”

But between the good and the bad, between that which is accepted as demonstrably true, and that which is rejected as demonstrably false, there lies a vast ocean of ideas, opinions, doctrines, views, statements, to which in the present state of knowledge it is impossible to apply any satisfactory scientific test. So far as scientific methods are concerned, they are neither demonstrably true nor demonstrably false. The scientific man, as such, has nothing to do with these things, save so far as he treats them as subjects for research, as phenomena needing to be traced to their causes, endeavouring to discover new means of testing them. Till he is in a position to bring such tests to bear, he has no reason either to accept them as true or to condemn them as false. His proper attitude is to doubt them. He has no right, as a scientific man, either to believe them or to disbelieve them. The greater part of metaphysics, nine-tenths of that which goes by the name of politics, hopes, fears, prejudices, ambitions, nearly everything that may be set down as the aspirations of mankind, lie within this non-scientific region. So far as they are not amenable to proof or disproof, on a basis of fact, the scientific man has nothing to do with them. So far as they are admissible as probabilities, I fear that the balance of the scientific judgment would be to disallow them as non-proven.

Of course there are other methods of investigating facts and hypotheses besides those which are strictly denominated scientific tests. The historical or critical method has a right to be considered as a method of discovering truth; but it is not the same as the scientific method, and though modern thought as often operates by the one as by the other method, it is beyond the narrow limits of the present paper. The fact that [229] a thing has been believed to be true since the fourth century A.D., or since the twentieth century B.C., does not prove it to be true. For while there are truths as old as the hills, there are also errors older than the pyramids of Egypt.
Yet outside the ambit of things shown to be either probably true or certainly false by either the scientific or the historic method of discovery, lie many of those views, statements, doctrines, to which allusion has been made. And toward these the only right and proper attitude of mind for the scientific man or for the trained critic, as such, is an attitude of honest, fearless, sacred doubt. If by neither process of investigation a thing can be proved to be true, and if at the same time it cannot be proved to be untrue, then it is wrong to believe it as if it were true; it is equally wrong to disbelieve it as if it were false. The only honest course left is to hold it in doubt. Suspense of judgment is not only wise, but essential. Alas, how few have the capacity to understand this simple point, or, understanding it, are candid enough to act upon it.

In time past, when at an earlier stage of human development it was customary to appeal to authority to establish the truth or falsity of any statement or view, instead of putting it to the touchstone of investigation to see whether it really was true, many things were believed and accepted as facts that were none, simply because of the goodness or the influence of the person who stated them. In the middle ages the authority of the Church ruled not only all questions of faith and practice, but presumed to dictate what should be received as to astronomy and geology. Outside the Church the appeal was to Aristotle and the schoolmen. In medicine it was almost a crime to deny a single statement of Avicenna. The wildest notions were received as true if only supported by the authority of a revered name.

We find in the writings of Plutarch that if a magnet be rubbed with garlic, or touched with a diamond, it loses its power of attracting iron until such time as it is restored by being dipped in the blood of a he-goat. We all know now that the statement, though repeated again and again in mediaeval books on physics, is utterly false: the simple touchstone of experiment to see whether the facts are so, has dissipated the myth. But formerly the authority of Plutarch [230] or of St. Thomas Aquinas was held quite sufficient to prove such stuff to be a fact. To dispute any statement of so holy a man was almost blasphemy. Yet nobody now would receive such a statement on the authority of Plutarch, nor yet on that of Philip Melancthon, in whose work on Physics it is to be found. The statement that a wise man’s heart is at his right hand while a fool's heart is at his left will not now, since the invention of the stethoscope, obtain credence from a single rational being—yet it stands on the authority of Solomon. The statement is not open to doubt of the smallest kind ; as a statement of fact it is demonstrably false.

In this middle ground between that which the scientific method can prove to be true, and that which it can demonstrate to be false, amongst the views, opinions, doctrines, and
statements which in the present state of knowledge are not within the pale of science, we
must necessarily place many religious views and beliefs. Let this point be made quite clear. I
do not for one moment say that religious views and beliefs cannot be either proved to be true
or demonstrated to be false. I say that many of them cannot be proved to be true or
demonstrated to be false by the scientific method. The scientific method fails to touch them
either one way or the other; they are outside its jurisdiction.

How then, you will say, can there be any conflict between science and religion? I do
not admit that there can be, and my reasons for saying so will, I trust, be apparent presently.
The only conflicts that have ever arisen, or can ever arise, between science and religion, so-
called, are when either has stepped out of its true province. When religion has stepped out of
its province and meddled with science, as when it was made an article of creed that the earth
was immovable, or when, in the name of religion, it was contended that there were no
antipodes, or that the sun and moon stood still, it entered upon ground where demonstration
from observed facts suffices to prove the proposition false. And when science, in the mouth
of one of her ungentle followers, proclaimed that Christianity was a scourge which had
destroyed three civilizations, the statement simply proved that a man trained in science may
sometimes be very unscientific.

Even now there are sincere, devout men who, without [231] understanding even what
it means, will dispute the truth of the survival of the fittest, yet these same men would not
question the truth of the multiplication table. The survival of the fittest may be very
disagreeable to the unfit. That ten times ten make one hundred may be very unsatisfactory to
the man who cannot earn more than ten shillings a week; but both are true nevertheless.

It was in an age thus unscientific, uncritical, unaccustomed to testing truth, that the
Christian Church arose. What wonder that around the simple gospel preached by Jesus and
his disciples there grew up a vast accretion of human error. The people around him looked for
signs and wonders, and were rebuked by him in unmistakeable terms. Few years elapsed
before we find the Apostle Paul contending with Judaizing teachers, to whom he gave place,
no not for an hour. And in spite f the astonishing energy of his efforts to bring back into
spiritual lines the gross materializing tendencies of the time, error grew apace. Ecclesiastical
systems arose; greed of power and pride of place crept in.

Men of great intellect, men of real devotion, too, sought to glorify God by wisdom of
their own translated into formal propositions the Oriental metaphors of Paul, and buried the
pure Gospel under a heap of tradition, half Jewish, half scholastic. Then arose the bitter
controversies of the third and fourth centuries. Councils of bishops anathematized one
another. They altered the canon of Scripture to fit their preconceived purpose, accepting one 
epistle and rejecting another, according as it suited their notions of what ought to be 
orthodox. Historic accuracy was of little or no account; the test of genuineness was whether 
the contents squared with their own narrow opinions. Casuistry and worldliness advanced 
hand in hand. Such a sickening exhibition of envy, malice, hatred, and all uncharitableness as 
is presented by the rival councils in the fourth century has rarely been equalled. And out of it 
all came the system of ecclesiastical domination; the formal adoption of the orthodox creeds; 
the supremacy of the clerical order. Already in the fourth century the simple teachings of 
Jesus was well nigh forgotten, and out of mind, overborne by the trappings of intellectual 
pride, hidden under the theological lumber of the Church. [232] 

Well might Luther in after time exclaim: “Quam primum apparuit theologia 
scholastica evanuit theologia crucis,” words which we may paraphrase as follows: “When 
scholastic theology first came upon the scene, the simple Gospel of Christ vanished clean 
away.” Whenever you see the word “orthodox,” there read “human”; for the Councils which 
set up the so-called standards of orthodoxy were human and fallible. The anathematizing 
bishops were but men of like passions with ourselves. 

From that mass of ecclesiastical overlaying of truth have descended the current 
religious views and beliefs of to-day. Many of them we now know to be founded on 
ignorance, and are demonstrably false. Such the scientific method can deal with and disprove. 
But for the rest they lie within that middle region where absolute proof or disproof are looked 
for in vain. 

Yet in that middle region of thought, where neither the scientific nor the critical 
method is available to discover truth, all is not darkness or confusion. In the darkest ages, in 
the remotest depths of antiquity, in the blackest night of mediævalism, the human spirit has 
never been left without witness. To every man there comes a consciousness, not to be 
analysed in the test-tube of the chemist, nor probed with the scalpel of the physiologist, not to 
be touched by the syllogism of the critic, nor disposed of by the reading of a codex, a 
consciousness of something quite other than those things which are to be apprehended by the 
physical senses. Not to the intellect, but to the soul of man does the voice of God speak, 
teaching him of righteousness, convicting him of sin, making known to him the 
overshadowing of a great Divine love, saying to him: “This is the way; walk ye in it.” And he 
who has given heed to that voice, and has obeyed, no matter how imperfect his development, 
how rudimentary his knowledge, has learned something which no science has ever taught or 
will ever teach. And with the obedience comes the renewal of guidance, so that as the soul
grows receptive the Divine Spirit not merely visits, purifying and regenerating, but dwells in
the soul, making it a living temple, and illuminating the whole life. He that has awakened to
the new life in Christ, who has experienced the new birth, is alive to the spiritual impulse, is a
new creature in Christ. The illumination of the Divine life within [233] the soul, the Christ
within, the witness of the Spirit, is a fact science can neither explain nor investigate. It is a
spiritual fact, only to be apprehended by the spiritual sense. And this They is indeed what
Christ conveyed in those memorable words: “The kingdom of God cometh not with
observation—the Kingdom of God is within you.”

To us, the Society of Friends, has been given, above all other bodies of professing
Christians, a clear conviction of this most profound of all spiritual truths. Most profound of
all, I say, because without it we are spiritually powerless. He who has not, or who fails to
recognize the guidance of the Divine light in his soul must needs take his religion second-
hand. He may still have the scientific and historical methods of investigation to help him to
reject the false, but these alone will never demonstrate what is spiritually true. He may be still
able to sift the claims of a church to historic continuity; he may even be able to assign a date
to a Hebrew text, or test the scientific accuracy of the statements set down therein; but to its
inner spiritual significance he is blind, led, perhaps sorely misled, by others who may be as
blind as himself. You cannot prove the inspiration of the Bible to a man who does not himself
feel it to be inspired. Though the statement were made by a hundred Councils that is no
proof. Neither. on the other hand, ought the circumstance that its inspiration is apprehended
by the spiritual sense to debar the fullest inquiry into the history of the book or books, the
dates when their authors lived, the surroundings that influenced their writings, and the
sources of their information. We may admit in entire sincerity their Divine inspiration,
though candour compels us to refuse the untenable modern dogma of their miraculous textual
dictation. Such a caricature of the truth simply repels every earnest inquirer. To the spiritual
sense, not to the intellect, does the inspiration of Holy Scripture appeal. “He that hath ears to
hear—let him hear.”

The emphasis thus laid upon the clear and determinate difference between the
operation of the intellect working by the scientific method in the establishment of physical
truths, and the process by which the soul is brought to the apprehension of spiritual truths,
must equally be extended to the truths [234] themselves. Each process has its own sphere,
each discovers only its own kind of truth. The one establishes proofs: the other instils
convictions. That which is spiritually discerned is not to be measured by physical process;
nor is that which is proved to be physically true to be controverted by motions of the soul. It
were equally fallacious to attempt to weigh pains and pleasures with a pair of scales, or measure them with a foot-rule. I do not take my geology from Moses or my anatomy from Solomon; but neither do I take the writings of Faraday or of Darwin as guides to the things that are unseen and eternal.

Is science then necessarily irreligious or religion unscientific? Not for one moment let the thought be entertained. Never will I, for one, admit their incompatibility. Human nature is not built in such compartments that a man's religious convictions can be kept from influencing his whole nature, from directing the whole tenor of his life and thought. On the other hand, the habits of accurate thought and careful expression acquired in the scientific training, cannot but follow a man into all his dealings with religious questions.

We cannot forbid the man of spiritual convictions from rejoicing in the works of the Creator; his is the privilege to feel and understand how wonderfully the wisdom of the Almighty has shown itself in this Creation. The great astronomer, Kepler, said that two things filled him with wonder; the starry heavens above and the moral law within the soul. If the undevout astronomer is mad, so is the undevout follower of any other science. All this we may admit, yet protest against such arbitrary conceptions as that of Paley, whose likening of God to an Almighty Clockmaker is deplorably unspiritual. Why should any incompatibility be even suggested between science and revelation? We who reverently accept Christ as our Master, who acknowledge the Fatherhood of God, and worship Him as the Ruler and maker of all, the Creator of the Universe, do not find the humble following of Christ to be incompatible with the effort to learn more and more of the things of the Creation around us, and of the laws by which that Creation is governed. To us it is a principle needing no demonstration that our Father who created the Universe will not deliberately deceive his children or put them to confusion [235] by creating contradictions or by making part of his revelations incompatible with some other part. That were to think him less than All-good or All-mighty. His we are and him we serve. His we are no less than the tiniest atom. He has created us as we are, and endowed us with whatever faculties we possess. We dare not stultify our conception of his Fatherhood by adopting unworthy views of him. Either we must acknowledge that he is the Creator of the Universe, in which case the facts are but what he has made them, and the physical laws that govern them are but the expression of his will; or else, if we deny those laws to be the expression of his will, we must be prepared to assign to the facts some other origin. Either he has given us our intellectual faculties whereby we can ascertain the facts and investigate the laws, in which case our use of these faculties is a sacred duty; or else, if the use of our intellectual faculties will lead us into confusion, then those
intellectual faculties were not given us by him or were given us on purpose to lead us astray. No, we dare not suggest such an imputation.

The Creator has in his wisdom endowed us not only with souls, and with bodies, but also with intellects; and has assigned to each part of our threefold nature its own particular functions. We have no right to neglect our intellects any more than we have to neglect our bodies. We have no right to starve the one or the other, or to cripple any faculty or limb by persistently refusing to use it. We do not persistently refuse to use our eyes, for fear they should show us something that we had forgotten, or that our forefathers had incorrectly observed. Neither are we justified in refusing to think, for fear that thought logically followed out, might change opinions that we or our fathers have cherished. The faculty of reason, the noblest possession of a man’s physical being, that which distinguishes him from the brute, is a faculty not only to be prized, trained, and used, but to be trusted and followed. He who neglects his intellectual powers or refuses to be guided by them in the discovery of truth, is not only an intellectual coward, he is defying the purposes of the Almighty, just as truly as if he were deliberately to starve himself or to put out his own eyes. The heart cannot say to the head I have no need of thee: else that would dishonour him who created both. [236]

There are, alas, misguided persons who preach against the use of the intellect, and invite us to leave all reasoning as useless. Do they ever consider how wrong it is to despise gifts that God has granted? By what authority do they set themselves up as wiser than the Almighty? Be not “babes in understanding,” said the Apostle Paul. God would have us indeed to be as receptive as little children for the things of his kingdom; but he would have us babes in heart, not babes in brain. To distrust the intellect is a species of spiritual pride. The true humility consists in accepting devoutly, sincerely, lovingly, the God-given faculties; in using them confidently and honestly; using them as stewards who must account for their stewardship. Let us, then, be whole men in Christ, not dwarfs, or cripples. Let us, then, who accept in all its fulness the oneness of the Creation as being all his, who know all life, all our lives, to be of his bestowing, who, while conscious of the littleness of ourselves in the great immensities of time and space, know that we are not left to ourselves to wander aimlessly in a universe of nothingness; let us, I say, rise to the responsibilities thus laid upon us. In the darkest hour let us be very sure that he still watches and guides. Let us not act as though the Universe were a mere machine working in obedience to the laws of gravitation and thermodynamics; as though we were but pawns pushed across the board by the hand of fate. Far nobler is the conception that he is everywhere controlling and directing; that he who made, guides, that his tender mercies are ever over all his children, that it is he who, while we
yet walked in darkness, hath shined in our hearts bringing the light of the knowledge of his
glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

He who is thus a whole man in Christ, who can thankfully rejoice in an abiding
consciousness of light within his soul, may fearlessly investigate the problems of thought and
life that crowd upon him. Having received the Kingdom of Heaven as a little child, he may as
a little child fearlessly ask questions about even the most sacred things. He may have
unexpected lessons to learn. He may have to learn that not all of that which was for centuries
received as truth will pass the test; but he will not learn in vain if amid all he preserves
unsullied the heart of the little child. That was the spirit which [237] animated Fox and Penn,
Barclay and Woolman,—men denounced in their lives as heretics and subverters of the
truth,—men who, filled with the spirit of Christ, followed out their convictions, and took their
part in the movements of their age, fighting against ecclesiastical domination, and idle forms
of ritual, against dogmatic orthodoxy, against worldliness and time-honoured social wrongs;
and were by the grace of God what they were, lights lighting the world. To their own Master
they stood or fell: before no lesser tribunal would they hold themselves bound to give
account.

Here, then, in the stress of modern problems, the true Friend may go forward, finding
scope for his faculties, not fearing amid evil report and good report to use them. Man of
science he may be, if such be his bent of mind and his training; and man of science none the
less sincerely because he is a true Friend. For what is a Friend but one who, illuminated by
the quickening spirit, has learned to cast off the incrustations which ignorance and intellectual
pride or intellectual folly have during the centuries built up around the simple core of Christ’s
teaching? Back to Christ's teaching was the essence of the Quaker reformation of the
seventeenth century. Back to Christ’s teaching, and away with the traditions of men, is still
the call to us to-day. When mediaeval Christianity perverted the doctrine of the immortality of
the soul into the grotesque notion of a physical resurrection of the body,* materializing and
degrading sublime truth, it needed the sharp acid of scientific fact to dissolve the caricature.
Friends have happily never made that caricature an article of creed. Think, once for all, how
much a Friend rejects of that which the vast majority of Christians consider essential to
orthodoxy. “This is the catholic faith,” says the Creed which is recited every Christmas day,
and on certain feast days in every parish Church in England, “which faith except every one
do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.” And what a creed!
An incomprehensible, self-contradictory, metaphysical muddle, wherein words are used in
unnatural [238] senses, a creed which even few honest Churchmen now pretend to
understand, much less to believe. Read the baptismal service for infants, and note the hideous
innuendo by which it is set forth that every child dying unbaptized is certainly damned. From
the amazing assumption underlying it all, that every child is born a little imp of darkness,
needing to be exorcised by the sprinkling of water by a priest, we Friends have no need to
clear ourselves. We have cleared ourselves once and for all by rejecting the ordinance of
water baptism. Other ordinances, other items of dogmatic creed which modern thought has
shown to be untenable, we as Friends have either rejected from the first, or have never held to
be essentials. Foremost, the entire rejection as unscriptural, of the idea of a priestly caste,
with its figment of a physically communicated apostolical succession. The true priesthood of
all believers, the true succession to apostolic gifts, we acknowledge, but how differently. One
is our Master—even Christ—and all we are brethren. To our own Master we stand or fall. No
man shall step in between our souls and our God.

Note again the wisdom of our fore-elders in declining to use terms not warranted in
Scripture. The Eucharist is unknown to us; the empty disputes between consubstantialists and
transubstantialists touch us not. The unscriptural term Trinity we have never used, and have
been thereby saved from controversies like that which, in the fourth century arising between
the rival Councils over words ὄμοιούσιον and ὄμοούσιον rent the primitive Church a sunder.
The very word Incarnation is unknown amongst us; we are not tormented with futile attempts
to explain in quasi-scientific terms that which science is powerless to investigate, and which
must forever remain amongst the things which by the scientific method can neither be
demonstrated to be true nor proven to be false. We, in fact, as Friends, have been trained for
two centuries to exercise that very suspension of judgment, that sacred doubt in things that
are neither provable, nor matters of direct personal individual revelation, which claimed
attention at the outset. My point then is that modern thought will clear away only the human
error that has grown up around divine truth; and that, of the accretions which it will clear
away, the greater part have already been renounced by Friends. But that [239] which is divine
truth, modern thought will leave wholly untouched, or will touch but to confirm. The
Kingdom of God cometh not by observation; neither will it depart by observation; the
Kingdom of God is within you.

Here then I close. Being Friends, we are, to the unspeakable gain of our souls,
preserved alike from those diseased word-battlings that afflict so many honest and sincere but
less enlightened Christians, and from the torturing fear that science may one day undermine
our faith. We have learned a new and more blessed meaning to the words trust and love. We
have reached a stronger anchorage of hope, and felt a higher incentive to prayer. We have
found a stronger because a purer faith. We have learned that sin, being a spiritual disease, requires a spiritual remedy. We have advanced beyond the materialistic notion that sacrifice is better than obedience. We have learned that there is no infallible man, no infallible church, no infallible book. We have learned that creed is not separable from conduct; that a man’s religion is not that which he professes, but that which he lives; that our dealings with our fellow men must be judged from no lower standpoint than that of the springs which govern our inmost thoughts and actions. The habit of accurate thought and speech, of letting yea mean yea and no more, which is characteristic of Friends, is one that the scientific method tends ever to strengthen. From modern thought truth has nothing to fear; rather should we welcome it as a God-sent means to sweep away the incrustations of error. Before it may go down mere mediæval survivals, Jewish modes of thought, and customs hallowed only by the tradition of men. Repulsing and degrading notions like those of fountains filled with blood, entirely unscriptural as they are, must go, as being not only unscriptural, but unscientific. But all that is true, all that is real, all that is vital, will remain, will prosper, will grow; and our growth in the truth will be all the more sure, because modern thought shall have cleared away so much that choked and hindered the clear in-shining of the Divine light of Christ in the soul.

“Thanks to Him,
Who never is dishonoured in the spark
He gave us from His fire of fires, and bade
Remember whence it sprang, nor be afraid
While that burns on, though all the rest grow dark.”

-----

* The resurrection of a spiritual body brought by the Apostle Paul into so marked a contrast with the resurrection of the natural body can surely only relate to the individuality of that which alone is immortal, the soul.