

Scientists' Belief in a Personal God Probed

Interesting Results of a Study Made of Selected Groups—Their Views on the Question of Personal Immortality Also Studied

DR. JAMES HENRY LEUBA, Professor of Psychology and Pedagogy at Bryn Mawr, has published the replies received by him from large groups of American men of science, historians, sociologists, and psychologists as to their belief or disbelief in a personal God and in personal immortality.

The charted statistics of the answers show for each group a majority of unbelievers in a personal God, but in the matter of the personal immortality there is much more orthodoxy in the replies, some of the groups even showing slight majorities for belief in life for the individual after death, regardless of the absolute unbelief or agnosticism of the group members as to the Deity of the Christian religion.

"It was not intended," says Dr. Leuba in commenting on his statistics, "to find out the religious beliefs of these men, but only to learn whether they believed in a particular concept of God, without which Christian worship, as now practiced, cannot continue. Those who declared disbelief are not to be classed on that account as materialists. Many of them hold some form of idealism. Neither are these statistics set forth as proof that the disbelieving majorities are in the right. But the fact is that the majorities do disbelieve in the personal God and, further, the replies show that as we pass from the less eminent to the more eminent men in each group the majority of unbelievers grows much larger."

That point is enlarged upon by Dr. Leuba in his book, "The Belief in God and Immortality," published by Sherman, French & Co. of Boston, under the chapter heading, "The Chief Cause of Disbelief," in the course of which the author says:

Greater eminence implies, doubtless, greater knowledge in the field of eminence and frequently also outside of it. But this does not mean that the loss of belief accompanying eminence arises entirely or even chiefly from greater knowledge. The reward of eminence is not usually given for mere knowledge and sheer intellectual ability; the measure of native intellectual capacity is far from being always in direct relation to the social and scientific standing attained.

The men of higher rank are, on the whole, distinguished among their colleagues for activity, tenacity, initiative, and self-reliance. Of these qualities, at least the last two tend to resist the forces of tradition, of authority, and of prestige, as well as to increase knowledge.

A certain callousness, making for effective freedom from kith and kin, for love of the naked truth and sharply defined situations, and a courageous impatience with the bonds that would tie us to the past and retard the movement forward and upward entered as frequent and powerful factors in the determination of the opinions of our scientific men.

Possession in reasonable degree of these qualities, antagonistic to the traditional and the orthodox, is incontestably favorable to success in the careers followed by the classes of men with whom we have been occupied. I conclude, therefore, that the greater loss of belief suffered by the greater men is probably not to be ascribed chiefly to their greater knowledge, but rather to certain temperamental qualities or energies which make it relatively easy for them to rid themselves of much of the social pressure to which others yield.

The action of the qualities singled out is favored by the social environment to which the person who has reached distinction is usually transported. He finds himself removed from lower circles where tradition holds undisputed sway. Around him intellectual freedom is honored far above orthodoxy. So that those who fill the places that fall to the lot of distinguished men of science are relieved of much of the pressure which bears upon their less favored colleagues.

If, furthermore, the greater men issue predominantly from eminent families, they have been from their early years freer than the lesser men from the influence usually exerted upon youth by traditional opinion. In a struggle against the forces of tradition the greater men would thus be doubly favored.

How shall we account, now, for the differences in belief among the lesser men and among the greater men themselves? Within these subdivisions, as between them, there exist again differences of distinction resting upon the qualities I have singled out. I see, therefore, no reason for giving a separate answer to this second part of the problem.

Unbelief both among the lesser and the greater men is probably determined not chiefly by intellectual possessions and abilities, but more essentially by temperamental traits which resist the influence of the social

forces that tend to the maintenance of established beliefs.

But why should greater moral and intellectual independence result in the rejection of the beliefs with which we have been concerned, instead of lifting them up to the level of truly personal, critically established convictions? Which of these two possible effects will actually take place in any particular instance of traditional belief will depend upon one's estimation of the validity of the grounds on which it is held to be true. When none is offered, or when the proffered grounds of belief are insufficient to meet the requirement of an independent mind, then independence will lead either to the rejection of the belief or to agnosticism.

Preliminary to the chapters and charts on the leading groups under

the members of the freshman class declared their belief in personal immortality.

In the sophomore group the percentage of believers dropped to 76 and of the juniors the believers numbered only 60 per cent. For the senior class the figure went up to seventy. Dr. Leuba says that the difference between juniors and seniors was accounted for by the "exceptional independence and intellectual superiority" of the juniors of that particular year as compared with the seniors.

For the wider, more important in-



Dr. James Henry Leuba.

consideration, Dr. Leuba gives the result of two inquiries among students and finds them very different from what he thinks would have been obtained fifty years ago when, he surmises, American undergraduates would have answered questions as to their belief with uniformity and assurance, and in the terms of the catechisms then in use.

One of the two student inquiries of the present day covered all the members of a number of classes belonging to non-technical departments of nine colleges of high rank and two classes of a normal school. The answers showed that 56 per cent. of the men and 82 per cent. of the women students were believers in a personal God. Thirty-one per cent. of the men and 11 per cent. of the women tried to express themselves as believers in an impersonal God.

The others were doubters. That there were more unbelievers among the male than among the female students, Dr. Leuba attributes to a "stronger impulse to self-affirmation and freedom and to a correlated lesser need of affection and of moral support felt by the men."

The second student inquiry was concerning belief in immortality of the individual, and the statistics are based on replies from 90 per cent. of all the students in one college of high rank and moderate size, including members of all the Protestant denominations and a few Roman Catholics. Eighty per cent. of

inquiry among the men of science, Dr. Leuba, for the convenience of those to whom he appealed for statements, issued the following form, asking each man to whom it was sent to mark the declaration which fitted his own belief.

A. CONCERNING THE BELIEF IN GOD.

1. I believe in a God to whom one may pray in the expectation of receiving an answer. By "answer," I mean more than the subjective, psychological effect of prayer

2. I do not believe in a God as defined above.

3. I have no definite belief regarding this question

B. CONCERNING THE BELIEF IN PERSONAL IMMORTALITY, I. E., THE BELIEF IN CONTINUATION OF THE PERSON AFTER DEATH IN ANOTHER WORLD

1. I believe in personal immortality for all men..... conditional immortality, i. e., immortality for those who have reached a certain state of development.

2. I believe neither in conditional nor in unconditional immortality of the person in another world

3. I have no definite belief regarding this question

4. I desire personal immortality intensely..... moderately..... not at all

"In this investigation," says Dr. Leuba, "I was able to make use of 'American Men of Science,' a volume containing about fifty-five hundred names; and of the membership lists of the American Historical Association, the American Sociological Society, and the American Psychological Association. Any one familiar with these lists will know the

their standard of inclusion is rather too low than too high; it would be easy to single out from the membership of the American Psychological Association many persons who could hardly be offended if denied the right to be called psychologists. I say this in order that it may not be imagined that this inquiry deals only with men of very high achievements."

Continuing, Dr. Leuba says:

I have been assured by statisticians that results based on the whole list of 5,500 men of science and results based on 500 would be to all intents and purposes the same. Such a proof might be attempted by carrying out two separate, but otherwise identical, investigations, each involving 500 persons taken by a rule of chance from the volume named.

Should their conclusions coincide they could be held to be valid also for the entire 5,500 men listed in 'American Men of Science.' This is precisely the procedure I followed, i. e., I carried out separately two identical investigations, each including 500 scientists. In every one of the other groups my investigation included a larger proportion of the whole than in the case of the scientists.

Something less than 10 per cent. of all to whom the questionnaire was sent failed to return the blank forms and only about 14 per cent. of the others sent back the forms without their personal statements of belief or disbelief. There was no request for signatures, but many of those who declared their orthodox belief in the personal God and the personal immortality signed their names, while the unbelievers, for the most part, sent in their statements without signatures.

Each of the two groups of 500 scientists and of the smaller groups of historians, sociologists, and psychologists was subdivided into the men of lesser and greater eminence. In each group of 500 scientists 300 were rated as lesser and 200 as greater men.

In the first group 51 per cent. of the lesser declared belief in a personal God; only 35.7 per cent. of the more eminent section declared that belief. In the second division of 500 scientists 45.5 per cent. of the lesser men believe in God and only 27.7 of the more eminent.

On the belief in personal immortality these two divisions of 500 men each divide as follows: First division.—Lesser men, 66.5 per cent. believe; more eminent, 38.8 believe. Second division.—Lesser men, 52.8 believe; more eminent, 35.2 believe.

Before leaving his thousand scientists, Dr. Leuba rearranges them in two new groupings, classified as physical and biological scientists, and finds that the biological men are much less orthodox than the others.

The most skeptical group in the entire list is that of the psychologists, of whom there are fifty men rated as distinguished and fifty-seven as less eminent. Thirty-two per cent. of the lesser and only 13 per cent. of the greater believe in God. Twenty-seven per cent. of the lesser and only 9 per cent. of the greater believe in immortality.

The conclusion which Dr. Leuba draws from his statistics is, in part, as follows: The representative nature of our statistics invests them with a very great significance, for if these groups of men do not include all the intellectual leaders of the United States, they certainly include the great majority of them.

Most of them are teachers in schools of higher learning. In that capacity they should be, and doubtless are, in a very real sense, moral leaders. There is no class of men who, on the whole, rival them for the influence exerted upon the educated public and upon the young men from whom are to come most of the leaders of the next generation.

The situation revealed by the present statistical studies demands a revision of public opinion regarding the prevalence and the future of the two cardinal beliefs of official Christianity, and shows the futility of the efforts of those who would meet the present religious crisis by devising a more efficient organization and co-operation of the churches, or more attractive social features, or even a more complete consecration of the church membership to its task.

The essential problem facing organized Christianity is constituted by the widespread rejection of its two fundamental dogmas—a rejection apparently destined to extend parallel with the diffusion of knowledge and the moral qualities that make for eminence in scholarly pursuits.