

**CHANGING BACKGROUNDS
IN RELIGION AND ETHICS: A
METAPHYSICAL
MEDITATION**

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Changing backgrounds in religion and ethics: a metaphysical meditation by Herbert Wildon Carr

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CHANGING BACKGROUNDS IN RELIGION AND ETHICS

A METAPHYSICAL MEDITATION

BY

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INTRODUCTION

NON ALIA EST PHILOSOPHIA ET ALIA RELIGIO

The single purpose of this reflective study is to express definitely the consequences in ethics and religion of accepting the principle of evolution in philosophy. In the seventeenth century theologians and metaphysicians were divided between two conflicting views of the genesis of truth and goodness and of the ground of the authority they exercise over our intellect and will. Descartes was of the opinion that necessary truths such as those of mathematics, and even logical principles such as the principle of non-contradiction, were dependent on God's will and the result of God's choice; that God, had he so chosen, might have brought it about that judgments which seem to us necessary should not be true, and that judgments which seem to us self-contradictory should be true. The Calvinist theologians expressed the same idea in their doctrine of the sovereignty of God, and it proved a not inconvenient way of silencing the rebellious questionings of those who found it difficult to reconcile the doctrine of election with ethical principles. Leibniz, on the other hand, distinguished between God's intellect and God's will, and also between necessary and contingent truths. The necessary truths are independent of God's will in the sense that they arose as ideas in God's mind, products of his intellect, the expression of the divine activity itself. Contingent truths depend on God's will, his perfect wisdom being shown in the choice of the best possible among infinite possibilities.

The problem was never solved. Before it could be

solved the progress of thought and the changing background of science had robbed it of all meaning. The most superficial survey of contemporary thought will show how completely different are the problems of truth and goodness in our modern world. Between the speculative activity of the seventeenth century, with its theistic metaphysics and its metaphysical theology, and the experimental activity of our present age, with its scientific metaphysics and its metaphysical science, there has intervened an age of deistic ethics, materialistic science and positivistic philosophy. Twentieth-century science is not materialism. It has been described as an idealistic reaction. If, however, modern science is almost consciously idealist in its direction it is able to be so because idealism in philosophy has completely thrown off its theological garments.

The problem of religion and ethics in modern thought is not, as I conceive it, to harmonise natural science with the old religious concepts, but to reform our concept of God in accordance with our progress in interpreting our knowledge of the physical world. It is not: How can I frame an image of God? for we know that it is impossible to fashion an image of what is pure spirit; it is: How am I to conceive God seeing that a concept of God is a necessity of thought. Also, there is no escape from our moral obligation to live the good life. It is not open to us, as some philosophers of last century thought, to inquire first whether life is or is not worth living, and then act in accordance with our judgment of its value. It is true that we bring nothing into the world and carry nothing out, yet our life is a heritage of the past and we are guardians of that heritage for the future.

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