

## Correspondence

### THE PHYSIOLOGY OF FAITH

DEAR SIR,

The appearance in the May edition of the *British Journal of Psychiatry* of Dr. William Sargant's Presidential Address 'The Physiology of Faith' gives me an opportunity to express a few doubts that I have had as to the validity of his argument ever since I read *Battle for the Mind* which deals with the same subject.

It is difficult to grasp so much material for accurate argument with any brevity except by putting it in the larger context of one of our basic problems. That problem is the exact relationship between intellect and emotion. The separation of the two has been described as the great schism of our age; the Greeks taught that to love wisdom (philosophia) was to escape the stranglehold of the emotions; Freud seems to have regarded the thinking mind as subject to the distortion of the emotions in all sorts of subtle ways and yet—paradoxically—to be capable in the end of winning the day over the force of the emotions if necessary.

*We may make a beginning on the question by asking under what circumstances are the intellectual and the emotional life brought into harmony and under what circumstances is there a diaschisis so that emotions surprise the intellectual fortress and take it unawares or alternatively in which one finishes up with an emotionally unrealistic but intellectually accurate viewpoint.*

I believe that Dr. Sargant's thesis confuses rather than helps us in our task. His argument seems to have three main themes presupposed if not explicitly stated.

(1) That an intellectually invalid faith (unsubstantiated is the word used) must necessarily depend upon some emotional trick played on the 'higher' (or more complex and intricate) mental processes known as reasoning by the basic and panpsychic effects of the operations of the brain-stem particularly when overworked or exhausted.

(2) That an emotional crisis during a person's religious experience is to be interpreted in terms of the 'lower' subcortical or emotional factors distorting the functions of the 'higher' intellectual and critical faculties so that

'new ideas can then be accepted and believed in which are totally at variance to all the individual's other past and present experience and belief. The

two sets of contrasting ideas and belief then seem able to co-exist together in the brain for sometimes years and years on end.'

(3) That the evidence so far collected both historically and by current observation substantiates this view.

I believe that Dr. William Sargant is wrong on all three counts. And I find a fourth theme in his thesis a problem:

'And yet the paradox remains that without some faith or another the problem of living becomes one of extraordinary difficulty for everyone of us. We have to believe in something, to have some purpose in life, however bizarre the life of faith may turn out to be, now or later'.

As far as intellectual conviction is concerned, psychological validity (that is the person is reasoning accurately and free from bias) does not depend upon the ultimate validity of the position held. It is surely affected by the person's intellectual capacity and breadth of knowledge at his disposal. The Ancients with the observations available to them quite naturally drew the conclusion that the sun moved round the earth (and the repeated comment by so many that 'we now know that the earth goes round the sun' only demonstrates how easily, even now, we accept ideas uncritically, for the observed phenomena in question are explained by the earth rotating on its own axis).

The second theme assumes that on the basis of inadequate intellectual substances a conviction is due to an emotional cheat produced by a serious state of emotional exhaustion in which the whole mind is laid open to the influence of new suggestions and convictions or in which the mind is suffering from a high degree of 'localized sensitivity' (the death of a deeply-loved relative may make one vulnerable to discussion on the question of the 'after life'). This concept is deemed sufficient to account for a whole range of experiences in which change of conviction and emotional reaction are the two common parameters. It includes political 'brain washing' in which the prisoners are subjected to prolonged and emotionally debilitating experiences followed by equally long and intensive indoctrination—at one extreme, and at the other the conviction that God just accepted him as he was (justification by faith alone) on the part of John Wesley—and for that matter many others—after a prolonged and care-

fully worked out theological pilgrimage and with a 'crisis' which was more obvious for its lack of extreme emotional reaction than its presence. Similarly it equally confuses the extreme orgiastic crises induced in certain religious cults with the carefully maintained balance between intellect and devotion by such men as St. Thomas Aquinas, Søren Kierkegaard and Bishop Robinson.

In a nutshell the question raised is whether the emotional life may not be sustained by the intensity of intellectual conviction rather than the reverse. We may even be able to see a sort of continuum. At one extreme are those who have been intellectually and emotionally damaged (brain-washed)—and whose imposed convictions are not always held once the powers of intellectual criticism have recovered. At the other extreme are those whose emotional crisis (if any) is the result of the perhaps slow, but inexorable weight of the build up of intellectual reflection. To give an example in miniature, I find it difficult to see how one can come to a religious crisis which depends on the preaching of 'hell-fire sermons' if one does not already (and with good reason) believe in hell.

This way of looking at things may help to solve the problem which Dr. Sargant himself poses, for if we can show that man needs a faith to be able to unite his intellectual and emotional life in a single synthesis we have not only shown that man needs a faith (or at least a projection of this synthesis) but we have also developed criteria by which some of the distortions of faith can be corrected.

It is this view rather than that put forward by Dr. Sargant which, I feel, gives a better explanation of the available evidence. To begin with, there is no evidence at all that all Wesley's converts were of the 'emotional collapse' variety. This phenomenon was not in evidence at the beginning of his work and did not continue throughout its extent. It was a problem because not all who had these experiences remained (or ever were) convinced Christians. It might interest some to read the following extract from Charles Wesley's journals:

'Today one came who was pleased to fall into a fit for my entertainment. He beat himself heartily: I thought it a pity to hinder him; so instead of singing over him as had often been done, we left him to recover at his leisure. A girl, as she began her cry, I ordered to be carried out: her convulsions were so violent as to take away the use of her limbs till they laid her without at the door, and left her; then she immediately found her legs and walked off. Some very unstill sisters, who always took care to stand near me and tried who could cry loudest, since I have had them removed out of my sight have been as quiet as lambs.

The first night I preached here, half my words were lost through the noise of the outcries; last night before I began I gave public notice that whosoever cried so as to drown my voice should without any man's hurting or judging them be gently carried to the farthest corner of the room; but my porters had no employment the whole night'.

Obviously these early 'Methodists' (John and Charles Wesley, Whitefield and others) had a rather more critical view of what was going on than at first might be supposed, and John Wesley was in any case more interested in the way people lived after 'conversion' than in the emotional torpor or otherwise of the event.

I would not labour this point in a letter save to add that I have spoken to quite a few who have had the experience of being worked up into a transient conviction—lost it and then gained over a prolonged and thoughtful period a real religious conviction not always commensurate with the one so quickly gained and lost.

This brings us to a further point. The actual suddenness of an event surely does not mean that the intellect has been overthrown; it may mean that it has reached the climax of its endeavour so that the final abandonment of a cherished but unconvincing conviction has been made. I think not only of the typical religious conversion but of Julian Huxley who finally, but with a definite intellectual step, accepted the fact that (for him) the existence of a 'God' was no longer a convincing or necessary hypothesis, as well as of C. S. Lewis who came slowly, quietly and definitely but with an equal finality to the opposite conclusion. And dare I mention Archimedes and his cry of 'eureka' on reaching the solution of a highly intellectual problem—a cry so often echoed, but perhaps with deeper strain, by those convinced of the validity of a faith which enables them to 'abreact' a deep emotional distress. At this point we seem to be in agreement.

'And there is little doubt that what I hope to show is a sudden physiological induction of such a state of faith can sometimes be as effective as are some of our modern psychiatric treatments, such as the abreactive shock or drug therapies for anxiety and depressive illnesses.'

To return to our original suggestion: the need is to discover a harmony between the intellectual and the emotional. That task—at least in the detailed ramifications of interpersonal behaviour can be seen to be the supreme work of the analyst. I have spoken to several who have been analysed and none have accepted (been indoctrinated on the couch, as Dr. Sargant puts it) the totality of Freudian ideas, but on the contrary, stimulated by his questioning mind,

his penetrating interpretation and the breadth of his thought, they have built up their own psychodynamic view of the world perhaps with horizons very different from those Freud himself possessed and containing many discoveries not known to him and many patterns of reaction which he only began to see and maybe saw imperfectly. The body of psychodynamic knowledge, like the body of all scientific knowledge, is forever changing. But there is no justification for assuming that in an age of psycho-pharmacology and accurate pre-frontal leucotomy there is not a very real place for an accurate re-adjustment of the interpersonal life in details and in areas in which medication is simply irrelevant, just as to attempt to treat a serious depressive or schizophrenic illness by psychotherapy alone may be regarded as just silly.

But this brings me to the question of drugs, pre-frontal leucotomy, etc., and their ability or otherwise to simulate or interfere with religious convictions. I fear that all the examples that Dr. Sargant gives may prove to be extreme and rare occurrences rather than the rule, and I can see no evidence for the view (regarding the effect on a patient's religious convictions of a prefrontal leucotomy) that

'a very full operation would probably have achieved this despite the strength of her conviction'.

Here again, real religious conviction is built round a synthesis rather than being built round a disintegration. In a very well written contribution from Downside Abbey when this subject was being discussed in *The Times* not so long ago, it was pointed out that whereas those taking drugs may lose their time sense and suffer perceptual distortion as a primary effect and be seeking to evade the impact of a painful reality, the religious devotee seeks to hold reality before his mind for so long that other irrelevant questions pass temporarily out of the field of consciousness. In essence, therefore, the two processes are diametrically opposed. And one hardly needs to pause over-long on the enormous gaffe in Aldous Huxley's argument in *The Doors of Perception*, in which he begins by stating that the experience of another cannot be fully apprehended and ends by supposing that because his own experience with mescaline (analysed later from recordings by his own highly synthetic mind) had some superficial resemblance to the writings of the mystics, he had thereby begun to 'enter in' to the experiences that they had had.

I say superficial resemblance because this brings us once more back to our original question and to the question of the nature of religion as a whole. It was a wise and thoughtful man who set some theological students this question: 'Why is the word

religion difficult to define? For it can mean a great many things—from Voodoo to high intellectual argument: from sexual orgy to puritanism; from primitive demonology to ethical monotheism (just as science can be loosely joined with alchemy and modern surgery with witch-doctoring). Such hazy combinations get us nowhere; and if all that Dr. Sargant's argument amounts to is saying that in the vast variety of religious experiences the emotions are brought heavily into play he has not taken us very far. If he is saying this is the essence of faith, I hope I have shown him to be mistaken. And we may be taken a little further along the journey by those who hold their convictions because these are largely determined by the force of argument, whose minds are always open to new questionings, and who are driven back to the same essential core of belief (however modified) from every position which they have temporarily assumed.

That emotion is an integral part of religious life it would be foolish to deny. Would religion have any ultimate validity if it ignored so important an aspect of life? Curiously enough, like psychiatry itself, it is concerned with the emotional and the intellectual harmony of human life, and its task is to create an intellectually true as well as an emotionally valid symphony—a symphony in which the intellect and the emotions are inextricably conjoined but without distortion of the one or disregard of the other. In the pursuit of that task there may be many 'religions', many crises, many long drawn out intellectual battles, many distortions and all of these may be seen in cultural as well as individual terms. *But the end is the same—a set of convictions so intellectually valid and tuning so accurately with the real emotional needs of everyone of us that it is proof against intellectual as well as emotional assault. What exactly is the form of that faith is beyond the reaches of psychiatry proper—perhaps we are still forging it—but no doubt the solution will be found somewhere in the depths of interpersonal behaviour.*

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DEAR SIR,

I was particularly interested in the Maudsley Lecture by Dr. Sargant, but since reading it I have had increasing doubts as to the validity of interpretation of the experience of faith.

Faith, by its very nature, is a personal experience. Ultimately it is what I believe that becomes faith for me. Of course there are, as Dr. Sargant points out in his lecture, many influences at work, including the neurophysiological, but in the end it is this personal