

RELIGIOUS CERTAINTY

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Religious Certainty by Francis J. McConnell

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FRANCIS J. MCCONNELL

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CERTAINTY**

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31 X 685



Figure 1. A 3D plot showing the relationship between the number of species (S) and the number of individuals (N) for 10 different species. The vertical axis is labeled 'S' and ranges from 0 to 10. The horizontal axis is labeled 'N' and ranges from 0 to 100. The plot shows a series of points connected by lines, representing the cumulative number of individuals for each species. The points are approximately at (1, 1), (2, 2), (3, 3), (4, 4), (5, 5), (6, 6), (7, 7), (8, 8), (9, 9), and (10, 10). The lines connect these points in a way that suggests a non-linear relationship, with the slope increasing as the number of species increases.

I

LIFE AND CERTAINTY

THERE is an ever-recurring debate in theology as to the seat and nature of religious authority. In our day, especially, there has been strenuous attack upon the claim of absolute infallibility as set up for the various sources of religious revelation. The doctrine of an infallible Church has been assailed by repeated setting forth of the very glaring fallibilities in the history and present practice of the Church which most persistently claims infallibility. The believers in an infallible Book have not been successful in replying to the contentions of historical criticism that the Bible is so much a product of the times in which it was written that it cannot be looked upon as literally binding for later times. Modern psychology and the comparative study of religions have robbed unusual inner experiences of much of their authoritative impressiveness. If we fall back upon dogmatic creeds

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as inexorable deliverances of reason we hear that even a chain of logic is no stronger than its weakest link, and that some of the links of the creed are sheer assumption. When we insist that conscience, at least, is infallible we learn that this doctrine can be only formally true; that the concrete duties of a particular hour can be arrived at only by processes of reasoning which are far from infallible. We are even told that the Christian love "which never faileth" now and again lands some believer in aberration rather than in unshakable certainty.

It is the opinion of the writer of this essay that the debate on religious authority cannot come to a satisfactory conclusion as long as absolute, technical infallibility is sought for. Religion is preëminently a matter of life, and in life absolute infallibility plays small part. Terms like absolute infallibility have only intellectual significance, and rather barren intellectual significance at that. We mistakenly emphasize infallibility through failing to hold fast the fact that the mind has other contents besides the strictly intellectual. The

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same agent that thinks also feels and wills, and feels and wills at the same time that it thinks. The stream of consciousness at any one moment is not the crystal-clear river that the intellectualist would like to see. The stronger the stream the more it resembles other streams in its ability to bear along matter which if left to itself, so to speak, might sink from sight. Consciousness is on-rushing force.

Since the mind realizes itself as a whole, though perhaps predominantly now in one form of activity and now in another, it would seem that reasonable certainty ought to satisfy the mind as a whole. Inasmuch as the mind seldom relies upon strict argument, sole reliance upon strict argument as a basis of religious certainty would seem to be of doubtful wisdom. We must move out from the realm of infallibility into that of practical certainty.

Again, we must not only insist upon a whole mind whose demands for certainty are to be satisfied, but we must insist upon certainty of the same kind as that for which we seek in real life—the certainty that comes out of life and

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that issues in life. The mind lives upon its belief, just as the body lives upon bread and water and air. Life is first, and formal reasoning second. The body finds itself in possession of certain appetites and, if left to itself, consumes whatever seems to give promise of satisfying the needs. Experience shows that some foods are better than others, but the appetite and its satisfaction come first, and the discussion as to the food afterward. In any case, the proof of the pudding is in the eating thereof. So it is in the beliefs of a man. The origin of the belief may be somewhat obscure, but the man believes a particular belief because he finds satisfaction in the belief. The belief may be very poor, but the belief is ordinarily held fast as long as it satisfies. If we ask the ordinary man why he eats bread and meat and fruit we may puzzle him very sadly. We may make quite an impression upon him by telling him of other and better sorts of food, and we may expatiate quite at length on the absurdity and risk of taking food into the delicate tissues of the system without being able to give a formal reason for so doing.