Science and Religion[1]

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Most scientists today have ceased to bother about the famous nineteenth-century 'conflict with religion'. It is over. They do not think that religion has been defeated; more seriously, they think it has become irrelevant to them. And unfortunately the scientists who do believe in Christianity, even those who are Catholic, contribute to this notion. Their religion is best kept at arm's length, kept for Sundays. Those who write about the matter have found the perfect formula to ensure that no conflict should be possible; they insist that no point of contact can be found. Science and religion are about quite different realms, they say; science deals with the laws that govern the material universe, while religion is about spiritual truths, ultimately about a remote and immaterial God.

Such a picture is thoroughly false and misleading. But it is true that a lot of popular Catholic teaching does contribute to the existence of a general attitude of this kind in the community at large. It is still far too 'spiritualist' in outlook; children are still being taught, often enough, that their bodies are not really necessary, that the great moment to hope for is the escape of their souls from imprisonment in matter, from this wicked world of flesh (and, by implication, from all those nasty people) in order to wing away alone to God. No wonder there is a general impression that matter is not quite nice, and in consequence Catholics leaving school still receive nothing like the same encouragement to take up science as they do to take up arts. Or if they have been allowed to go to the science side at school, this is because of the great openings it offers: science is the gateway to influence and power, to be used naturally enough for the Church's advancement. That scientific work can in itself be a spiritual activity is mentioned much less often. Undoubtedly things are improving, but I know from experience that the picture I have just sketched is still far from caricature. We shall have to wait until the great renewal of Catholic theology reaches this country in the practical form of proper catechetical instruction in our schools before attitudes change completely. At least we now know more or less what needs to be done. This paper is intended to indicate some

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of the lines along which change should come, and to show how a better understanding of what Christianity is about can lead to a new attitude towards science on the part of Christians.

Of all the great world-religions, Christianity is easily the most materialistic. Far from teaching a manichean hatred of matter, the Church has always insisted on its goodness as part of God's creation. Unfortunately this has to some extent been offset, over the last four hundred years, by the kind of false idea about the relation between body and soul which I characterised above. That has so entered into popular Christian thinking that people are often surprised to learn that it derives largely from the thought of Descartes, and was very far from being characteristic of Christians in earlier ages of the Church, or to be found in scripture. The emphasis there is on the fundamental integrity of man as a single person in whom, indeed, spirit expresses itself through matter, but cannot readily be understood apart from matter. In its first ages the Church insisted not on the immortality of the soul but on the bodily resurrection of the whole man; insisted not on the individual's relation with God but on his relation with the community formed by Christ. This community is renewed and reconstituted in a community work – the celebration together of the liturgy Sunday by Sunday by God's people. It is there we find the source of our daily life with the risen Christ, who as man, risen to his Father's side but still flesh and blood in the glory of God, sends into our midst the Holy Spirit to draw us to his resurrection life and put us, while still a part of this world, into the kingdom of heaven, making us, too, sons of God the Father. Until recent years these truths had been neglected: but few of us can have missed their practical consequences in renewed liturgical life, and they will be as much a part of our children's (or at least grandchildren's) lives as the wretchedly abstract statements of our present English catechism are a part of ours. God works through material things; through the people he gives us to love him in, through our celebration together of the seven sacraments; first of all he gave us his Son, in whom he became visible: 'who sees me, sees the Father'. Now this begins to indicate a view of Christianity with more relevance to science.

The life which the Holy Spirit brings us, the life of God, has to be lived in our daily work in this world. Hence this work, whatever it is, always has a moral significance. For Christian life, coming from the risen Christ, is a life of love – the same love shown us on the cross, which raised Christ and us from death. Love is essentially for persons, and so is always manifested in community; sin, its opposite, the failure

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of love, is manifested as a turning inward to oneself rather than to the community; putting oneself before Christ. Clearly in all our life, in all our work, this moral choice is to be found. This does not mean that we must continually advert to it. If we are doing our work fully and properly, no doubt we are serving the community rather than ourselves: such work is done with Christ, and has its place in the kingdom of heaven, here and hereafter. Science is no exception. We do not need to be making special intentions or acts of will about it, setting grimly out to pray before each new experiment that we shall do it purely for Christ. Do it for the advancement of science and it will be enough. But do it for power, do it purely to beat down competitors in the academic rat-race, and let this make the objective difference that the work is done without the necessary safeguards to guarantee its validity, its value to the scientific community, just so that we can manage to publish it before putting in for the professorship – that surely is purely selfish work, not ours with Christ. I have taken a rather extreme situation, in order to make my point. Of course in practice our situation is less clear; for most of us some sin will often be involved but not enough to separate us from Christ. The real question is how often we even think of our work as the main field (because the main part of our lives) in which we deepen or break that bond with Christ? How often do we restrict our examination of conscience to matters much less crucial for morality, such as sex?

What I have just said applies to work in general, though I drew my illustration from the work of theoretical science. Applied science provides us with a more obvious field in which to recognise its truth. For while the actual subject-matter of pure science is, on the whole, neutral to moral considerations, that of technology is not. There is an immediate sense in which the man who is finding out ways of fighting disease, ways of feeding the hungry, ways of bringing the peoples of the world closer together through improved communication, ways of bringing literature and art and music within the reach of all, is doing the work of Christ; there is an immediate sense in which the man who is making contraceptives or hydrogen bombs ought at least to examine his conscience in the matter. Yet even here the theological meaning of their work seems to escape people. They fail to associate, to take only one example, the healing done by modern medicine with the healing done by Christ. Matter and spirit remain apart. Yet surely it is true that all human suffering is evil, the consequence of the evil done by our first parents long ago, and that the resurrection of Christ means that evil

has been in principle overcome. It is we who have to co-operate with our Lord to spread the fruits of victory in the world, to win the world itself, given over almost from the beginning to an evil spirit, back for men, with the help of the Holy Spirit sent us by the man of heaven, Christ. Our spirit as always must work through material things, and it is on this, we know, we shall be judged. 'Did you clothe me, feed me, comfort me?' Did you, dear technologist, make evil things or good? And in making them, were you indifferent to their social and political uses? Did you attempt to see, through your trade union, through your voting for a government having some claim to morality, that your work didn't merely make some capitalist richer, but rather helped to make the whole community happier? Clearly applied science is not irrelevant to religion.

However, I shall say nothing further about that now; I want to turn back to the work of the pure scientist and show the ways in which it too is specifically to be related to religion, for this is where the discussion usually lies. As just now with technology, I shall be concerned with the *contents* of the subject, since I have already tried to show that as *human activity* science pure or applied, and indeed all human work, can be a true expression of our transformation in Christ. But can the discoveries of science make a specific contribution to our faith? We shall be dealing now with two forms of knowledge: theology, the knowledge of our religion, and science, the knowledge of the natural world. Can we combat the idea that they have nothing in common? Here first of all we need to find out what sort of thing theology is.

A theologian is a Christian who reflects on what he believes. In that sense theology is something binding on all Christians: they can get by without thinking about science, or history, or, at a pinch, even about literature (though I do not recommend any of these efforts at dehumanisation) but they cannot get by without thinking about revelation. There is, as I am well aware, a powerful tradition to the contrary, dating roughly from the fourteenth century, but it seems at last to be disappearing with the modern realisation that a theologically educated laity is essential to the well-being of the Church. But though we are all trying to do theology, we rather too readily think of this as the study of a collection of propositions set out in a textbook, on a par with the axioms of geometry or the laws of thermodynamics, except that in the case of science the text books are always getting out of date, whereas we've suffered the same catechism in this country for heaven knows how long. But no: faith lives and grows in the mind of the Church, and

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that mind is formed, in the way I have already shown, by personal relationship with the Father in Christ, a relationship which is expressed in scripture through images of life, body to head, bride to husband. It has to be manifested, set out in words, but significantly enough that manifestation first takes place in the living context of the community's celebration of the liturgy: in the first instance we do not read the gospel, we hear it, and the explanation of it doesn't first come from a book but from the homily preached about it – if there aren't too many notices. We can easily see why the Church speaks about a *tradition* of doctrine – a word which implies a handing on, a passing from one generation to the next in a growing, developing way. The outlook of the Christian community changes quite radically from one century to another, for the word of God in scripture, the source of our theological understanding, is 'living and effectual and sharper than any two-edged sword.' It is an inexhaustible source of renewed understanding, somewhat as the world of nature gives inexhaustibly new meaning to the scientist. Each is progressive, though the rates of progress understandably differ; science grows outwards rather than in depth.

And theology furthermore is rooted and grounded in history, in solid matter-of-fact happenings in this world. For not only is it concerned with your and my relationship with God here and now, not only is it presented to men afresh in each age – as we have seen – but the revelation of God itself which theology interprets and re-presents was delivered slowly to men and not in the least in tidy cut-and-dried categories. When Christians have got away from the error of thinking that their belief was dropped from heaven in the shape of the catechism or the *Summa*, they still tend to think something the same thing of the Bible. But the revelation of God in scripture grew up in a natural, human, piece-meal way. God revealed himself by acting significantly to change the course of history, not merely to speak through men; the salvation of Israel at the sea of reeds, or the journey of the captured ark to the city of David, decisive interventions of God's power, are just as much revelation for us as, say, the promulgation of the commandments or the prophecy of a new covenant: and when revelation was completed with the incarnation of the Word himself, he spoke by actions such as the healing of the sick as much as by parables. Knowledge of God grew slowly in history, then: and not only by the events, visions, messages themselves, but by what Israel made of them. The passage of time between the actual intervention of God and the final presentation as revelation in the form we know it was equally part of his plan for

our salvation: it allowed many different traditions of the event to grow up, gathering theological significance as men reflected on their meaning, finally being given shape in the different strands of writing that make up most of the books of scripture, so that we see different aspects of, say, the Sinai meeting or the exodus event through the four main writers or schools of writing in the Pentateuch, producing their thought in different circumstances and with different needs from perhaps three to eight centuries after the event. The writing of scripture is best understood as itself part of God's plan to reveal himself in history.

Now we are in better shape to face the problem that has been before us all this time: what are the areas of contact between the *contents* of scientific and theological knowledge? We can agree that there are wide areas in which no contact occurs. Pure physics, for instance, is a very abstract science: the laws of electrodynamics appear to apply at any place and any time, and are not bound up with the particularity of this or that event in history. No doubt it is God's world of which they tell, but all knowledge does that. On the other hand there are historical sciences. Evolutionary biology is one, and we might expect it to make contact with theology. Cosmological astronomy is another; at least it seems to be making claims about a particular event, the beginning of all things, just as theology does. Space does not allow me to discuss these matters now; each would need a paper to itself to treat properly. I want simply to emphasize that if there can be contact, it is the positive contribution these sciences can make to theology that is important. As Christians we believe that God's providence not merely brought the world into existence and holds it now in being, but also directs its development. Cosmology may, and evolution does, give us the actual details of the process, lets us into the secrets of God's plan by showing the actual created causes through which his creative causality always works. For the same reason there is a real possibility of conflict, which in past centuries showed itself very sharply. Many of these conflicts are now resolved; it is of faith that they always will be resolved. But we can never merely state this ('truth cannot contradict truth') of the conflicts that are with us at any given time. There is, for instance, a real problem in the question whether mankind began as one pair or many; it needs active investigation, and may take generations to resolve. Meanwhile we have to live with it.

At this point I might have ended, but there is one last point which seems to me must be cleared up, again because popular Catholic teaching is so very muddled about it. Does science as such point to faith? In

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what I have said so far I have been comparing knowledge gained through our natural reasoning powers with knowledge that is simply given by God and accepted by the response of faith through the new relationship to which he calls us – truth that no human reasoning could prove. If the faith could be proved it would no longer be faith. It is a sign of the unhappy state of religious teaching in this country that we are still far too concerned with an apologetic approach, which envisages people outside the faith being argued into it, rather than a theological approach, which considers people within the faith arguing about it. If we really got down to theology, and having learnt the meaning of our faith went out and preached it straight, the way the apostles did, the results would be staggering. But that is by the way. The effect of replacing theology by apologetics is to leave people with a vague idea that their faith can be proved (if they take this seriously they later leave the Church), and in particular leads to the repeated false claim that science brings a man to religion. No doubt there are many scientists who become Christians but it is certainly not because of the subject-matter of their science. No natural knowledge can lead to revelation. All that I have said here has been said as a believer. As a Christian I can relate science to belief: but I shall not cut much ice with my fellow-scientists who are not Christians when I present them with my synthesis, even if it is as vague and grandiose as the *Phenomenon of Man*. Christianity may make men want to do science: science cannot make them want to believe.

In saying this I am not denying that men can gain knowledge of the sheer fact of God's existence, as indeed they can of much of the moral law, by reasoning alone. This does not give them faith. Does it even lead them towards faith? I would be inclined to say that when the Church dealt with the matter at the first Vatican Council she was concerned more with the salvation of pagans who would never have more than this to go on, than with first steps towards the gospel. But again that is by the way. What I would finally suggest is that even a rational approach to the existence of God could not be based on *scientific* knowledge as such, in the way people have sometimes argued. That this world depends on a cause that transcends it is something that in principle anyone could see (however few do in practice). It does not help to have specifically scientific knowledge. The reason is that the starting-point of the argument can only be that the universe exists, not that it has particular characteristics of order in space or time. Particular characteristics, such as the scientist investigates, lead him to postulate

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particular causes; only the sheer fact of existence, which is not a characteristic, could lead thought to the cause of all. This has consequences for such arguments as the one from design, which in its modern as opposed to its classical form is essentially scientific in character, and consequently as presented in many textbooks certainly invalid.

To sum up, I have suggested that you cannot argue to God's existence by reasoning derived from science, or to the revelation we accept in faith by any natural reasoning at all. But speaking within a common faith, I have tried to show why science is a fit Christian activity. First because it is a serious, a moral way of life, which we can share with Christ. Further because when applied it helps us to win back the world for man from the evil Spirit. Finally because when theology is properly understood it is seen to have implications for certain situations that are also investigable by some sciences: and thus the theologian's hand is strengthened, though he may also have to face possible conflict. Yet all this, as I have said, is as yet not acceptable to many English Catholics, and I have tried to indicate the lines along which the renewal of theology might bring about such a change of heart.

Keep Left for the Church—1

BRIAN WICKER

There must always be a tension in Christianity between the demands of the world and the demands of the Kingdom of God. By her very nature the Church must be forever reminding herself that it is part of her vocation to be potentially subversive of any worldly order of things: and she must also be forever reminding the world of this fact too. But the definition of where this tension ought to lie, in the twentieth century, is not easy. We are still mainly influenced in our conception of it by late medieval and Jansenistic ideas. The spirituality of the *Imitation of Christ* lingers: 'Fly the tumultuousness of the world as much as thou canst: for the talk of worldly affairs is a great hindrance, although they be discoursed of with sincere intention . . . we are quickly defiled

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