

# Argument, Essence and Identity

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English theology is notoriously 'lop-sided'. In the historical disciplines, it has an excellent record of intelligent and discriminating scholarship. But, when attention shifts from what was once said and done in the name of Christianity to what might be said or done today, matters are either handed over to the philosopher (whose admirable and indispensable preoccupation with formal and linguistic considerations is no guarantee of competence to perform *this* task) or else are tackled at a level which, according to the standards operative in cognate 'secular' disciplines—from aesthetics and literary criticism to social and political theory—is so strikingly amateurish as to render it hardly surprising that theology plays little part in the conversation of the culture. In this naughty world, Professor Sykes has performed an excellent deed. *The Identity of Christianity*<sup>1</sup> is a learned, vigorous and original reconstruction of some perennial problems: problems which found particular focus, in the nineteenth century, in discussion of the 'essence' of Christianity.

Sykes has shifted the theme from 'essence' to 'identity' partly to counter the widespread but unwarranted suspicion that an 'enquiry into what makes Christianity Christianity' (p.3) is likely to be reductionist in character, and partly because his discovery of the importance of Newman's work for the 'elucidation of what was at stake' helped him to see how mistaken was the equally widespread view that the issues under consideration are of central moment only to Protestant Christians.

He has set himself two tasks: 'to analyse and exhibit the kind of question which the enquiry into the identity of Christianity is and ... to propose some modest minimum conditions under which the identity of Christianity may be preserved' (p.5).

In Part One, he sketches the context of the 'essence' debate by isolating three issues which he believes to be of paramount and permanent importance. There is, first, the fact of controversy. Jesus' transformed Judaism, but strictly speaking did not found Christianity. Rather, Christianity was founded by Jesus' earliest followers on the foundations of his transformation of Judaism' (pp.19-20). It follows that controversy concerning 'the nature' of Christianity, far from being a regrettable and avoidable accident or disfiguration, was from the first and has ever been *internal* to that complex process of interpretative transformation which is

Christianity.

The perennially controversial character of Christianity has, in Sykes's view, two specifically modern features. The first, a consequence of the politics of the Enlightenment, is that controversy is conducted more 'openly' and cannot be resolved by the mere exercise of power. The second: 'critical historical enquiry finally destroys the always unrealistic hope that appeal to the Scriptures would end controversy' (p.23).

The second perennial aspect of the problem is described as 'the importance of inward dispositions to Christian discipleship' (p.5). Emphasis on commitment, integrity, purity of heart, on the primacy of 'spirit' over 'letter', is ever in tension with the concern for sound words and right order. 'It appears', he says, 'that the more conscious one is of the inward response, the more likely one is to adopt a critical distance from the external forms of the institution' (p.50).

Thirdly, because 'conflict is endemic in Christianity ... there will be power struggles within the Christian Church' (p.73). He deplores the tendency of theologians to avoid consideration of the problem of their power ('I wish to challenge the bland assumption that the theologian's job is to specialize in purely intellectual problems', p.6) and hence to be irresponsible in the wielding of it (cf. pp.74, 76). In this connection, he has good things to say in criticism of what I might perhaps call 'Whig theology'. Whig theologians, for whom the history of Christianity is the history of touching simple-mindedness and credulity slowly and painfully producing the sophisticated excellence of the present, uncritically adopt 'the role of vanguard to the Christian community' (p.6) and wonder wearily when the pastor and his flock will catch up with them. The 'bias' of this self-portrayal of the theologian as pioneering 'expert' (a bias surely derived, in part, from inappropriate late nineteenth-century analogies with 'progress' in the natural sciences) 'is inherently towards discovery and intellectual novelty'. In admirably unfashionable contrast, Sykes wishes 'to locate the role of theology in the task of the preservation of Christian identity' (p.7).

Professor Sykes's lively erudition is best displayed in the historical chapters which constitute Part Two. Although these chapters are said to be 'the core of the book' (p.5), I shall treat of them only briefly, because their chief function is 'to show something of the complexity of the issues involved' (p.81) and my main concern is to indicate and comment on Sykes's own account of these issues.

Schleiermacher and Newman are selected as two modern theologians of 'unquestionable stature', Harnack and Loisy as historians, and Troeltsch and Barth because they demonstrate the extent to which the contemporary theologian has inherited 'two mutually exclusive patterns of epistemological argument' (p.81). On

Schleiermacher, Sykes is an acknowledged authority. He has come more recently to Newman, whom he reads with perceptive appreciation: 'We shall look in vain for a systematician, but it is pure gain for the argument of this book that Newman was constitutionally incapable of reflecting any tradition of discourse without at the same time transforming it' (p.102). I part company with his reading of Newman at only one point, which I shall mention in due course because I believe it to indicate an area of quite interesting substantive disagreement between us. His conclusion that the views of Schleiermacher and Newman 'on the identity of Christianity show a fundamental similarity of pattern' (p.122) I find persuasive and important (nor is Newman the only Catholic theologian of whom this is true: there is, I believe, ample scope for doctoral dissertations on similarities between the later Schleiermacher and the later Rahner). I am likewise persuaded that, notwithstanding the received accounts of the dispute between them, Harnack and Loisy 'had a broadly similar purpose' (p.142).

'Can one work *both* as a historian *and* as a believer?' (p.149). That troubling question is, as Van Harvey showed, the legacy of Troeltsch, who himself had no satisfactory answer: 'The cost of justifying doctrinal Christocentrism on socio-psychological grounds was to make its truth relative to the cultures in which it had established itself' (p.173). Sykes would, I think, agree with me that it is both ironic and depressing to find this awkward impasse presented, many decades later, by theologians such as John Hick, as dramatic innovation (or 'copernican revolution') and 'radical' resolution of Christianity's dilemma.

Karl Barth made preaching 'central to his view of what is involved in the maintenance of the identity of Christianity' (p.174). The theologian, as 'the preacher's critic' (p.175), occupies 'the vital centre where criteria are clarified and applied, and the groundwork for the Church's ministry is prepared' (p.205). Barth's greatest strength and weakness lay in his preoccupation with the problem of *power*. 'Does the theologian follow Schleiermacher and play upon Christianity "as a virtuoso plays upon his fiddle" .... Or does he follow the more demanding path, as Barth thought it, of utter obedience and responsible servanthood' (p.200)? That may, indeed, be the issue, but Barth's tendency to present the realities of divine and human power as 'parallel or merely coordinated' (p.207) leaves the question hanging, rhetorically, in the air.

The third and final part of the book opens with an analysis of the lessons that have been learnt from the historical survey. Among the more important of these is that 'Unity, peace and love are achieved by the containment of conflict within bounds, not by its elimination' (p.212). It follows that, in the perennial, practical quest for the

maintained 'essence' or 'identity' of Christianity, all simple or straightforward 'solutions' will be illusory. For example, Christian theology cannot content itself with historical description (the apparently 'neutral' character of which merely masks the prescriptions it embodies), nor will it suffice to have recourse to formal, methodological definition. Disputes within Christianity are such that 'they raise both substantial and methodological questions at the same time ... consequently methodology is not a prior discipline in theology' (p.256).

Equally unsatisfactory are unstructured power-struggles between 'externality' and 'inwardness'. Borrowing from W.B. Gallie the notion of an 'essentially contestable concept', Sykes argues that the 'idea' of Christianity is such a concept, and that therefore Christianity only preserves its 'idea', maintains its identity, to the extent that the contest (whose form will be that of continual dialectical interplay between the 'external' and 'internal' pressures or tendencies in its tradition) is kept within appropriate bounds. These bounds are set by the fact of common worship: 'the phenomenon of Christian worship makes a vital difference to the conditions under which vigorous argument of a radical kind may be regarded as a constructive contribution ... to the performance of Christian identity in the modern world' (p.265). And again: 'the identity of Christianity consists in the interaction between its external forms and an inward element, constantly maintained by participation in communal worship' (p.283).

I have tried briefly to indicate something of the range and power of argument of this important book (which, if taken seriously, could help to crack the tired mould of imagined opposition between 'conservatives' and 'radicals' within which recent debate in English theology has been set). But appreciation is not the same as unqualified agreement. Indeed, unqualified agreement would be a poor response to a theologian insistent upon the permanent necessity of controversy!

My first disquiet concerns Sykes's use of the model of 'contained conflict' to characterize the unity of the Church. I sympathize with his suspicion of 'formulas of concord', of that quest for compromise which masks and does not resolve significant disagreement. But, in view of the fact that, on his account, one of the functions of disagreement is dialectically to promote that continual process of transformative interpretation by which the identity, or continuity, of Christianity is sustained, the metaphor of 'containment within bounds' is curiously *static*. There is an air of Hobbesian pessimism about the notion of 'contained conflict' which seems at odds with the redemptive, reconciliatory hope at the heart of Christian action. 'To be a Christian theologian', Sykes tells us, 'means to participate *defensively* and *aggressively* in the contests which necessarily occur

about Christianity' (p.275, my stress). There is no answering (dialectical?) emphasis on gentleness, compassion, fellowship or peace. 'Conflict' is amply indicated in the index, but there are no entries for 'charity' or 'reconciliation'. Are all courtesy and kindness, then, to be *in principle* confined to the sanctuary and banished from the seminar?

A second, more general difficulty, arising from Professor Sykes's use of metaphors, concerns the philosophical poverty of crucial features of his argument. As a first illustration I take up, once again, the metaphor of 'containment of diversity within *bounds*' (p.240, my stress). It is in these terms that, in an uncharacteristically laboured way, he addresses the question: 'under what conditions can Christianity be grasped as one *thing*' (p.243, my stress). But how helpful, here, is the notion of a (unitary) 'thing'? My hunch is that Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblances' might have been of more help to him than the notion of some one 'thing' in his attempt to characterize the unity of a phenomenon whose 'concept' is 'essentially contested'.

A second illustration concerns the central place occupied in his argument by the metaphor of 'inside-outside', or 'externality' and 'inwardness'. When this metaphor is first deployed (in Chapter Two), the impression is given that distinctions between 'external' and 'internal' aspects of Christianity are more or less *the same* as distinctions between the 'actual' and the 'ideal', or between 'body' and 'spirit' (cf. pp.48—9). Clearly they are not, and to suppose otherwise is to exhibit the kind of linguistic 'absent-mindedness' which requires the therapeutic services of the philosopher! There is worse to come. The discussion of Christian 'inwardness' is introduced by the assertion that 'religious experiences cannot be directly inspected' (p.31). Presumably this is because they lurk, invisible, somewhere 'inside' the Christian heart or head. Readers of Wittgenstein, or Cavell (or *New Blackfriars!*) will need no further warning that we are in the presence of the demon 'Cartesianism'. And some of us, by now, suppose that we have good reason to be deeply suspicious of any suggestion that Cartesian dualism can furnish a satisfactory framework within which to map out the constitutive tensions of Christian experience.

My third major area of difficulty and partial disagreement concerns the tendency of the argument to operate in abstraction from consideration of the social context in which Christian identity is to be preserved. As a first illustration of this, I return, yet again, to the model of conflict contained within bounds. These bounds are set by 'participation in communal worship' (p.283). The implication would seem to be that, without such participation, there is nothing to prevent the liveliness of theological conflict degenerating into sheer

destructiveness. This may be so, but surely *some* account should be taken of the fact that common participation in communal worship is still, for the most part, what Christians conspicuously lack. Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Anglicanism and varieties of Protestantism retain distinct patterns of public worship from full participation in which they frequently exclude each other. Does it really follow that there are therefore *no* 'bounds' within which theological 'conflict' between, say, Lutheran and Greek Orthodox, or Catholic and Baptist, may be 'contained'? The experience of recent decades encouragingly suggests otherwise, and yet I find nothing in Professor Sykes's argument to indicate how or why this should be so. It may be too strong to suggest that he has produced a more convincing account of the identity of the Church of England than of Christianity, but there do seem to be some pieces of the argument missing.

For my second illustration I turn to his treatment of Newman. Discussing the 1877 Preface to the *Via Media*, Sykes takes at face value Newman's ascription to theology of the status of a 'regulating principle', and comments: this is 'to raise the theologian to a position of considerable importance, over against (if need be) the proclivity of the human mind towards power (in the regal office), and self-indulgence (in the priestly)' (pp.117-8). At one level, the paraphrase is unexceptionable and yet, as I have tried to show in some detail elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> to take Newman's remarks about the 'regulating principle' at face value is to overlook important features of his complex and not always entirely consistent argument. Notice the effect of this in Sykes's account: 'Newman himself had assigned to the theologian the right to check the religious and political excesses of *popular religion*' (p.146, my stress). Here, Newman's 'tripolar' model of piety, enquiry and organisation is being subtly replaced by a *dipolar* model according to which 'theology' is set over against 'popular religion', into which category not only worship but the whole public, social, organisational, 'episcopal' dimension of Christianity has been collapsed.

It is, as we have seen, this dipolar model which dominates Sykes's account: along one axis in the dialectic between 'externality' and 'inwardness'; along the other in the 'bounding' of rational dispute by communal piety. It is an account in which surprisingly little is said about the social, institutional *mediations* of the dialectic between heart and head, worship and argument. It is a striking fact that there is almost no discussion of what current ecumenical jargon refers to as 'episcopé', and that most of the few references to church leadership can be read as if this leadership were largely exercised by theologians (cf. e.g. p.6).

At one level, I am perhaps doing little more than registering a characteristically 'Catholic' disquiet at what seems to me to be

significant omissions or understatements in Sykes's admirably 'Protestant' analysis. Perhaps, and yet I believe that what is at issue here is something more fundamental than differing assessments concerning the extent to which ecclesiological considerations demand explicit treatment in even a tentative sketch of the 'minimum conditions under which the identity of Christianity may be preserved' (p.5). The restriction of the function of 'episcopé' to establishing and sustaining patterns of communal worship is but one side of a coin the other side of which is the failure to 'earth' or 'situate' his model of Christianity (even formally) in contexts of social, cultural and political order and conflict: contexts of proclamation and martyrdom, hope and oppression. That 'world' of which Christianity forms a part, and in which it seeks to be obedient to the Gospel, is hardly adverted to except for passing reference to the resistances in our culture to religious commitment (cf. pp.272-3), and a concluding mention of the 'infinitely greater *external* struggles' (p.286, my stress) in which the Christian community is involved. And is not this implicitly dichotomous account of the relationship between 'Church' and 'world' simply a fresh expression of that pervasive dualism of 'inner' and 'outer' to which I have already drawn attention?

In trying to bring out, as clearly as I could, those areas in which I find the argument of the book unconvincing or uncongenial, I may have overstated my criticisms. But I have also been at pains to indicate my appreciation of a timely, subtle and complex study and (if I may *end on a personal note*) *I much look forward to continuing the conversation with Professor Sykes when he returns to Cambridge to take up office as Regius Professor of Divinity.*

- 1 *The Identity of Christianity* by Stephen Sykes. SPCK 1984. pp xiv + 349. £15 (cased), £8.50 (paper).
- 2 Nicholas Lash, 'Life, Language and Organisation: Aspects of the Theological Ministry', *Theology on Dover Beach* (London, 1979), pp. 89-108.