

as one bears torture. I continue to hold the same ideas, the same positions as when I was in prison. I do not know how long I shall be away from my country. I wait impatiently for the opportunity to make my humble contribution to my people should they still want me to continue fighting with them.

Natural Theology and the Historicity of Faith

by P. F. Harris

'An existential system cannot be formulated. Does this mean that no such system exists? By no means; nor is this implied in our assertion. Existence itself is a system—for God; but it cannot be a system for any existing spirit. System and finality correspond to one another, but existence is precisely the opposite of finality.'

S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

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Philosophy of religion and theology

We are by now too well acquainted with much that goes on under the heading of 'philosophy of religion' which seems to provide sport for some professional philosophers but has little to do with religious belief. The tactics are well known. A typical statement of a theological kind is set up for examination and is then put through the logical hoops without, apparently, any further need for reference to the theological context. The strategy often presumes that there is basically only one type of theological statement and that this can be dealt with adequately without looking at the complex structure of thought which surrounds it in its theological setting. Faith may indeed be simple, but its systematic exploration and articulation inevitably demands a complex and sophisticated exposition without which it becomes not only unreasonable, but even unintelligible. The discussions of some of the philosophers of religion have as a result only too often a rather tired and well-worn air, and frequently theologians find little resemblance between what they themselves are doing and what philosophers presume that they are about.

A certain tradition in philosophical theology, usually related to the label 'neo-scholastic', has itself contributed considerably to this situation. Carried on, as it has been, within the confines of an explicitly believing community, it found little difficulty in identifying the God of natural theology with the God of Christian faith. (Admittedly, its better exponents were aware of the problems existing

here, yet did not always give full weight to them.) In this milieu it was possible to carry over the findings of *natural theology* into the area of *speculative dogmatics* without any great problem, thus lending a strongly 'rationalistic' air to, for example, treatises 'de Deo Uno' and the like.

Theological rationalism

It was rather as though one could make one's entry into the divine world by either of two routes: either a metaphysical natural theology proceeding through considerations about contingent being to the existence of a necessary and unconditioned Being; or, learning to believe through the Christian Church in the God and Father of Jesus of Nazareth. Having made one's entry by means of one or other of these admittedly rather different routes, one could now pursue further research in common, and the rather abstract findings of natural theology could with safety be incorporated into the understanding of faith and so form a normal part of Christian theology.

The purpose of this paper is not entirely to deny the legitimacy of such a procedure, but rather to investigate both the conditions and the limitations to this process arising from the nature of belief and Christian theology itself. Indeed, the tendency to make such a move can be discerned in the writings of the New Testament, for example in the attribution to Jesus of 'pre-existence' in St John's Gospel. In that instance however, the writer of the gospel was keenly and vividly aware of the movement of faith which both upheld *and qualified* such an attribution. Without such consciousness of this essential dependence and limitation, the procedure becomes a kind of irreligious presumption of the kind which Karl Barth in his attacks on natural theology has done so much to expose.

There is, in fact, in the gospels an instance of the kind of presumption that I am trying to identify: 'If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!' say the bystanders at Calvary (Matt. 27, 40). Either Jesus is God or he isn't. If he is, why doesn't he act like God? If he is God, he must be omnipotent, omniscient, impassible, etc. If he is God, he must be all the things natural theology attributes to God.

This view is essentially the view of the unbeliever; for no one who has undertaken the perilous journey of passing from regarding Jesus as a great teacher, prophet, etc., to confessing: 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God', with real interiority, with full appropriation of faith (and not simply with 'ecclesiastical faith', which is a kind of role-play) could have this hearty confidence in ascribing to Jesus, without further ado, all the attributes (and problems!) which natural theology would confer on God, for motives quite different from those in the heart of the Christian believer.

Genetic description of faith

I want to try to elucidate this question by attempting a kind of

schematic account of the genesis of faith which finds its expression in the New Testament writings.¹ This will be followed by a very simple analysis in terms of the 'inductive' and 'deductive'² moments in this 'history of faith', designed to show the essential cognitive provisionality and obscurity in the theoretical movement from the inductive to the deductive moments.

'Who do men say that I am?'—a question addressed by Jesus to his disciples should not be understood as curiosity on the part of Jesus about how belief in himself was currently progressing, but rather as an approach to the growing question and wonderment in the minds of the disciples: 'Who is this man?', 'Who are you that we may believe in you?' This question cannot at first have been anything like: 'Is he God or not?'—such a question was simply not available to the minds of Jews. For them, the one, true God was the being who corresponded to the full range of structures in which their customary faith was expressed, and so inevitably thus located—in history, as the God of the Exodus and Mt Sinai, in institutions as the God of the Mosaic Law, of Temple worship, of the Sabbath, etc. The first question in the minds of the disciples must have been something like: 'What is the meaning of this strange and disturbing and different, but powerfully attractive teacher, this *man*?'

The progress of this questioning and wonderment may be schematically described as the progress through the names or titles accorded to him. For present purposes, let us suppose a progress of the following kind:

'The Nazarene'—a simple reference by place of origin.

'Rabbi'—by courtesy: he was obviously not a standard product of the rabbinic schools, but taught in the manner of the rabbis.

'Master'—an expression of human faith or confidence in this man.

'Jesus, Son of David'—an open-textured title, with meanings ranging from something equivalent to 'true Israelite' to 'in some way the inheritor of Messianic promises'.

'Son of Man'—again open-textured, but even more suggestive because of its association not simply with any kind of historical Messianism, but also with catastrophic, apocalyptic Messianism.

'Lord and Christ'—a much more advanced and practical faith,

¹This account is essentially meant to be schematic and not to take up any definite hermeneutical position with regard to questions about which christological titles represent the real succession of moments in christological faith, questions belonging properly to New Testament scholars. I simply assume general agreement that it is both possible and necessary to recognize strands and stages in the historical development of faith in the New Testament period. Whether the most developed faith of the disciples of Jesus dates from the first experiences of the Resurrection or to somewhere around the end of the first century is immaterial to the point at issue. It would, however, be difficult on any grounds to assign such fully developed faith to a moment before the Resurrection experiences, cf. Romans 1, 4.

²I use the terms 'inductive' and 'deductive' in the loosest possible sense to indicate a distinction between the mounting pressure towards faith in Jesus as 'Son of God' and the return movement of reflection about what follows if this man is, in truth, the Son of God. In this context it would clearly be to misconstrue the meaning of 'inductive' as referring to a purely rational or discursive mental process.

recognizing that it is through this man that God speaks and in him that God fulfils his promises: that is perhaps the point at which we have arrived at post-resurrection faith. Such an interpretation would accord well both with the primitive kerygmas¹ and with the narrative intent of the early sections of Acts.

‘Son of God’—still open-textured, but the possible meaning ranging as far as faith in a unique and unfathomable relationship to God, as Son to Father. It is worth noting already that the proper concern of Christian theology in its investigation of the nature of God is with this title, both as used by the disciples and as referring to Jesus’s own consciousness of his relationship.

My argument is not that the New Testament does not reach further than this in its ‘divinizing’ of Jesus, but that it is at this point that there is an essential disjunction between this stage and the attribution of divine properties such as pre-existence, creative power, active and not simply mediatorial redemption, etc. It is, indeed, this leap of faith ‘into’ the very being of God which will be the ground for further attributions of divine properties when the gospel reaches a fuller contact with hellenic thought, with its more ‘philosophical’ apparatus of ideas of the divine. My argument is that the disjunction I have indicated ought to reveal to us a different logical status of the expressions of faith either side of the divide.

Nazarene → Rabbi → Master → Son of David → Son of Man →
 Lord and Christ → Son of God → || (*therefore* → pre-existent
 → creator → saviour → A and O.
 ***** || (*therefore also*) → omnipotent, omniscient, eternal,
 infinite, unmoved, etc.

There are two points I want immediately to make concerning this scheme. First I want to draw attention to the distinction of the New Testament series ‘pre-existent, etc.’, from the more philosophical attributes: ‘omnipotent, etc.’. The scheme deliberately shows the existential continuity of both parts of the scriptural series and an absence of continuity between the first scriptural series and the philosophical attributes. The point is that they belong in reality to a different series of which the first part would be constituted by a series of philosophical considerations leading up to the demonstration of God’s existence. It denotes a different cultural origin and a quite different genesis, namely in Greek philosophical thought. The setting, motives and considerations leading to these divine attributes are quite different from those of the New Testament attributes.

Faith in Jesus as ‘Son of God’

The second comment is that perhaps we can make the point more

¹Cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Teaching and its Developments*.

clearly of what I want to say about the logical status of the process by *correcting* the scheme so as to place the disjunctive sign half a place back, i.e. in its logically proper place, so as to read:

‘. . . Lord and Christ → Son of—// → God → (*therefore* :) pre-existent . . .’

precisely in order to show that the movement of mind indicated in the conjunction of ‘Son’ and ‘God’ is not one based on ‘rational evidence’ or even logical argument nor is it one which indicates mental comprehension of the conjunction being made, or better of the relationship being indicated. It is an act of faith and if reduced to a supposed evidence and comprehension it immediately betrays that faith into idolatry and blasphemy. It commits the sin against which the Jews had for centuries been warned, the pronouncing of the ‘name’ of God, the fashioning of his ‘image’. It also lays the theology which makes this move open to the justifiable charge of rationalism.

For the New Testament, the leap of faith is, so to speak, covering an infinite distance a distance which simply cannot be spanned cognitively or noetically but only by a trusting love which is content with its own inherent obscurity. Human history goes on and there is no hope of bridging the noetic gap except in a ‘day of revelation’. The characteristics of the leap of faith which ‘covers the distance’ for the believer are positively: trust, confidence, love, dedication of life, acceptance of the paradoxes of the ‘kingdom’, historical expectancy; but negatively: noetic obscurity, unclarity, provisionality (corresponding to the positive ‘expectancy’), uncertainty that we have ‘got it right’.

Natural theology again

All of this, of course, we knew already. But placing any high degree of confidence in natural theology is, of course, to forget what is going on in Christian faith. I do not want to deny all validity to the introduction of natural theological ideas and concepts into the ‘understanding of faith’, but what I want to recall is that the ‘enabling’ or ‘justifying’ element is not the power or correctness of theoretical reasoning in an abstract context (which could never overcome the cognitive gap between the contingent, conditioned and the necessary, unconditioned); the ‘enabling’ or ‘validating’ element is the power of the act of live faith which is able to entrust itself to Jesus as Son of // God. This act of faith is endowed with all those qualities which we dissociate from abstract and philosophical reasoning—it is tied into history: the history of the death of Jesus, the history of the first disciples and their concrete experience of the Resurrection, the history of their ‘children in faith’, the history of the birth and development of our own faith in all its concreteness and particularity. As soon as I allow myself to take for granted the transition from what I earlier called the inductive to the deductive

moments of belief and its understanding, I have withdrawn my 'attention' from Jesus of Nazareth and slipped into idolatry of a certain kind.

The believing mind may give tentative and provisional accounts of the noetic implications of what it is doing by the simple action of turning to the area of noetic problems about the existence and nature of God, but it has to remember that its answers are based on a relationship different in kind and not simply in degree from the supposed rational traversing of the finite-infinite gap. Any cognitive transcendence of human experience is here, to use a current expression, essentially parasitic upon the leap of trust and love, made possible through the man, Jesus of Nazareth.

Christian agnosticism

The point at issue might be expressed forcefully, if perhaps slightly inaccurately, by saying that the real Christian believer is aware of his essential agnosticism before the problem of God, of the meaning of human life and history until he places his faith in the man, Jesus Christ, a decision to engage in a search for the God and Father of *this man*. It is as 'son', i.e. by a relationship with and not simply identity with, God that he belongs to our human history. The other end of the relationship remains obscure, but the Christian is one who is so committed in his discipleship of this man that no other path to God is, for him, possible. It involves essentially the risk that if this man's life and death do not open into resurrection, then we are back in our agnosticism and Kant may well be thought of as having in some way said the last word.

Christian faith, for all its familiarity, is a very 'odd' kind of faith, quite unlike a scheme of belief *erected upon* a natural theology (as it is unlike religions of nature): ' . . . non enim intelligo ut credam, sed credo ut intelligam. . . .' The point of this essay has been to try to ensure that we have taken this perennial maxim of Christian theology with the utmost seriousness and *tenacity*, by attending to the historicity and particularity of that 'credo'. Whatever subsequent *understanding* may be gained can only be parasitic upon that faith; it is never the equivalent in intellectual clarity or evidence to the strength and conviction of the faith itself, which remains trust. The western mystical tradition ought here constantly to remind us that live contact with God in faith will always cut the ground from under both the images and concepts we frame of God.

There is certainly not room here to spell out the implications of this analysis. In Christian theology they are literally unlimited, because it is an analysis of the centre and basis of all Christian faith—the confession that Jesus is the Son of God, the narrow gate which alone gives entry on to the world of God. It is particularly important for reducing the many encroachments of rationalism into belief and theology. It also relegates natural theology to a relatively less

important role in the understanding of faith, because natural theology is so far removed from the absolutely concrete nature and historicity of the act of faith in Jesus Christ. Far from having an *obvious* claim on 'perenniality' it has in some sense the adventitious character of the conclusions of a particular philosophical mood and style, having no direct and immediate relationship to the genesis of *Christian* faith.

With regard to the question from which I started it also suggests that philosophy of religion might concern itself more closely with examining Christian theology not simply with the logical tools appropriate to a critique of natural theology (for this is the common approach I outlined) but should look more closely at the existential description of what is in fact going on in that phenomenon which we call faith. It might then find that its logical tools alone will not suffice to give an adequate analysis and critique of Christian faith.

Christian faith may well need to construct for itself some kind of *provisional apologetic* for the purpose of situating itself more clearly in the world of knowledge and theory, but it remains provisional and faith places no ultimate reliance upon this theoretical construction. It could not be disturbed by the discovery of logical flaws in one or even all proofs of God's existence. The risks it runs are not of this kind. They are entirely of a historical and concrete kind, namely the risk of pinning one's faith on a man in the context of the full range of ambiguities of ordinary existence and history. Its risk is that the day of revelation will not come.

Conclusion

However high a regard one may have for the power of abstract thinking in the area of problems about God, it remains true and normative for Christian faith that its central statement is entirely and irrevocably existential. Its central statement is profession of faith that Jesus is the Son of God and such a profession can be made only existentially and personally, not as part of a system of philosophical considerations. The concern of speculative theology is then the exploration of the mystery of that relationship, not the exploration of the relationship of the contingent and conditioned to the necessary and unconditioned. It is concerned with the entirely existential problematic of the utterance of the 'Abba, Father!' Its mysterious nature remains tied to the history in which it was born, through which it has been handed on, in which it continues to come to birth in individuals and communities. It is concerned therefore with the mystery of the 'Thou' invoked and addressed across the gulf of human searching and expectancy for the meaning of existence and history. It is because of the relationship implied in Jesus's 'Abba' that there is thrown back into our understanding of Jesus himself the question of his divinity, a notion already wrapped in a disturbing mysteriousness for having been thrown back from the beyond which our minds

are *unable* to reach. It is out of the very power and disturbance of this confession and its constantly renewed existential problematic that there continually arises the problem of our own human identity and inter-relationships; not the problem of the relationship of contingent and necessary being. Instead of occupying the centre of the stage in speculative theology and apologetics, natural theology within its traditional limits of abstract thinking will have to occupy a more modest and less onerous place.

Disestablishment: Christianity in Wales

by J. P. Brown

For the older generation of Catholics, 'Welsh Disestablishment' recalls Chesterton's Ode with its climax, 'Chuck it, Smith!' and with its implication that the religious affairs of Wales are not of much interest to the rest of Europe. It often seems that they are of little concern even to those Europeans who have settled in Wales.¹ I have been asked to re-present for *New Blackfriars* readers the nature and origins of our complex denominational situation. I would suggest that 'disestablishment', i.e. separation of Church and secular power (especially the power of the State) is a unifying theme and that this may have the interest of novelty for most of Europe.

The political background

In an earlier article 'By Law Established',² I argued that from the beginning Wales has been a nation without a sovereign state, i.e. the highest political power in Wales has usually had its seat outside Wales, in England, in fact. While Welsh nationhood has been based chiefly on the Welsh language, it has generally been reinforced by a type of Christianity distinct from that of England. Since the English State has, of course, been hostile to Welsh nationhood, it follows that Church and State here have often been on opposite sides.

It must be noted, however, that imperialism is always met by a mixture of resistance and collaboration. Although people may be roughly sorted into resisters and collaborators, the division, especially in its subconscious forms, splits each person involved. Thus, a resister may make the rulers' standards the measure of his own

¹English and Irish mainly. But I was pleasantly surprised at the reception given to the original version of this article at the Menevia Diocesan Conference on Ecumenism at Aberystwyth in April 1970.

²*New Blackfriars*, October 1972.