

Theology and Disbelief¹

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It is a fair question for the enquirer who encounters theological talk to ask at what point, and in what way, such talk is rooted in common human experiences that can be discussed. His difficulty is that, while not wanting to deny to theological talk some empirical foundation, he is at a loss to know what this foundation is. The problem is especially acute when there appears to be a claim by believers that only 'insiders' can really understand the language that is being used: that is, when *credo ut intelligam* is interpreted as 'unless you are prepared to believe what we believe you won't be able to understand what we are talking about'. The enquirer feels that he is being invited to take a blind plunge, on the grounds that only real swimmers can know what swimming is, when he has no idea what it is he is being invited to plunge into, or how to do it. His natural reaction is therefore to say that religious belief must be grounded on some special kind of experience not accessible to himself as an outsider. One advantage of his introducing 'religious experience' here is that it gives the enquirer a chance to appear sympathetic to the claims of religious believers without feeling any need to rebuke himself for not following their example—he is just unfortunately not favoured with the special kind of experience required for belief. The curious result often emerges that the non-believer insists on the preliminary need for religious experience, while the believer says that he can do perfectly well without it.

Moreover, if the enquirer were right, then the claim of Christianity to be a universally valid religion, in the sense that it is the duty of every man who understands it to embrace it, would be untenable. Any exclusive justification of Christianity on the basis of a *special*, and not universal, experience would be inconsistent with the tenets of Christianity itself. Some people might evade this problem by denying that religious experience is anything special at all. It is offered at some time or another to everyone, and any completely honest person would immediately recognise it for what it is. God can't be accused of an oversight in the case of any individual whose final salvation depends on

¹I am indebted, for some of the ideas behind this paper, to Fr Hamish Swanston of the Birmingham Oratory, who first raised some of the problems in discussion.

faith. This argument looks at first sight very close to an important Catholic doctrine—namely that every person is given the opportunity, at some moment or other, to accept or reject God. But Catholicism does not involve the appeal to a special religious experience here. The trouble with this appeal is that it undermines the whole purpose of bringing religious experience into the discussion. Religious experience was introduced in order to give religious belief some kind of empirical foundation. But while the appeal to it appears to be an assertion about human experience, it fails to pass the test which alone qualifies any statement to claim an experimental basis. This is that there must be some situation conceivable in which the statement would prove to be false. If we cannot conceive of any condition under which it would be falsified, then the statement cannot claim to be about experience. And this is precisely what the appeal to religious experience fails to provide. Since we could never be sure that a man who denied that he had ever had a religious experience was not being dishonest with himself, the statement that at some time or other every man must have some such experience contains a built in guarantee that it could never be falsified.

The appeal to a special religious experience, then, gives no help to the enquirer. (Perhaps this is why he is so fond of appealing to it. He knows that he cannot be held to anything as a result of making the appeal.) But it is noteworthy that his complaint that he has never been favoured with such an experience implies that if he did have one he would recognise it. Otherwise how could he know he hadn't had one already? His certainty on this point entails that he thinks 'religious experience' is a legitimate concept: and his self-defence is incompatible with a genuine suspicion that 'religious experience' is a spurious notion or a mistaken diagnosis of a situation. For him, not having had a 'religious experience' must describe a real lack of something which could have been had.

It follows from all this that the Christian assertion that not being a Christian always argues a certain deficiency in a person must not be construed as a lack of 'religious experience' in this self-defeating sense of the term. It must point to something which does not imply that only those who have had a 'religious experience' can appreciate the plight in question. In other words, it must denote in some sense a *moral* deficiency. But how can we really say that every unbeliever is morally deficient? To answer this question involves a re-examination of the original dilemma.

The usual examples of theological talk, in discussions of Christianity

like this, are propositions such as 'In the beginning God created Heaven and Earth' or 'God loves men as a father loves his children'² or 'God rules over the world'.³ It is held that such statements represent the essential content of the Christian religious vision, being directly concerned with the goodness and personality of God, with human immortality, with the moral perfection of Christ, etc. They constitute the religious basis on which that complex structure of doctrine which is called theology is built. I believe this is a mistake, resting upon a false notion of what Christianity and Christian theology is about. The truth is that theological statements of doctrine are fundamental, and religious vision the superstructure, not *vice versa*.

In order to see what this means, it is necessary to notice that on the erroneous view just outlined, religion is conceived of as a pre-theological mode of awareness, or interpretation of experience, and that the function of theology is to elucidate, analyse and state in precise terms the character of that awareness and what it implies. For instance, the doctrine that God loves men as a father loves his children might be regarded as an attempt to describe or analyse the character of a religious awareness of man's contingency, and hence of the loving care which, it is felt, must lie behind the fact that he exists at all. What made it a theological statement would be its comparative clarity and sophistication, its use of an analogy from human experience to expose a super-human truth. But while these are certainly characteristics of theological statements, is it satisfactory to regard theology as a drawing out and analysis and exposition of a basic pre-theological mode of religious awareness? The contention of this paper is that it is not; because there is no such thing as a pre-theological mode of religious awareness. The significant break is not between *religious* experience and theological doctrine but between *ordinary* experience and theological doctrine.

A characteristic feature of the erroneous view I am trying to refute is that it leaves human history to one side. Theology, being an elucidation of man's religious experience, has no essential basis in history. This is the fundamental error of this way of thinking about theology. On the contrary, a central place in all theological statements is occupied by a particular view of historical human actions. What makes 'God loves men as a father loves his children' a theological statement is not the fact

²cf. A. Flew in 'Theology and Falsification' (*New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, S.C.M.).

³cf. A. MacIntyre in 'The Logical Status of Religious Belief' (*Metaphysical Beliefs*, S.C.M.).

that it is a drawing out of the implications of a special religious awareness, but the fact that it is implicit in a record of God's dealings with men: namely the Bible. (Similarly, the various statements which go to make up the doctrine of the Trinity are only part of the Christian religion because they are derivable, however indirectly, from other, more immediately theological statements which are themselves bound up with a certain view of historical events.)

In order to make this clear, I want to give a single example, as an illustration of how a typical theological statement works. One of the basic assertions of Christianity is the following: 'As one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men'. (Rom. 5. 18). Now the characteristic thing here is that a relationship is set up between two historical events: Adam's act of disobedience, and Christ's act of obedience towards God. It is asserted that the second event has somehow cancelled out some of the consequences of the first. One event is to be understood in the light of another. It is this relationship between historical events which is held to reveal the God who is behind the events. There is no frontal attack here on God, no overt metaphysic. It is important to insist that the historical events set in relationship to one another by St Paul were empirical in a perfectly normal sense. For St Paul, Adam's act of disobedience was clearly something which we could have witnessed if we had been there—the eating of a fruit. Similarly the Passion and Resurrection of Christ were testified to by witnesses. But the specifically *religious* thing that he says is that the relation he sets up between the events—the relation of 'cancellation' to put it briefly—actually holds in the world. What makes St Paul's drama theological is the assertion that it is genuine history. Religious experience (in the ordinary, not the rare mystical sense) is simply a coming seriously and sincerely to entertain the possibility that theological propositions are historically true. This is why theological propositions are the foundation of religious awareness. Following on such experience comes faith—which is an unconditional assent to their being true.

At this point a difficulty will inevitably arise; namely, that, while St Paul may have conceived that the Fall happened exactly as described in Genesis, the modern reader cannot. The commonest way out of this difficulty is to dismiss the historicity of the Fall entirely, and simply to regard it as an illuminating myth—part of a significant pattern but nothing more. After all, the Genesis story is not a newspaper report but rather a didactic poem—a pattern of images, symbols and concepts

organised by a literary artist. But to take this way out is to cut theology off from history, in the very act of trying to see it as concerned with history, and not just metaphysics. The historical roots of theology can only be preserved, in the illustration under discussion, if the historicity of the Fall is maintained. Now it is no accident that it is only through the Yahwist's poetry that the Fall as an historical event is in any way accessible to us. The situation is comparable to one in which an early phase of British history were knowable only via Shakespeare's *King Lear* (which itself relies on an earlier play by an earlier author—this analogy holds too for the Fall story). It is somehow essential to the idea of 'Salvation History' that no 'straight' record of the Fall should be recoverable; that is to say, that the making of a poem about the beginning of Salvation History should, in an important sense, take precedence over its historical beginning, and be the only medium by which its beginning is made known to us. For it is especially because of this situation that the question arises how a pattern of words and ideas, organised by an artist for his own purposes, is related to the historical reality which it celebrates. If the artist's purpose is purely dramatic, then historicity is irrelevant; but if the purpose is religious, then his belief in its historicity is essential. Nevertheless, while calling a poem religious entails believing in the historicity of the events it celebrates, it is the poem that is religious, not the events themselves, conceived of as having happened beforehand in isolation from the poetic celebration of them. An event is not, by itself, material for theology. Events celebrated in words—poems—are the raw materials of theology. The Genesis Fall story is a religious poem: St Paul uses it to make a theological statement.

This may seem to contradict what was said earlier, that theological doctrines are the foundation of religious awareness, not *vice versa*. But this is not so, precisely because of the inaccessibility of the story except through the poem celebrating it. Since the poet has no independent evidence for the truth of the story—his sources being nothing but other, earlier poems—his belief in the historicity of the story (and also our belief in it) is itself a kind of dogma; something that can only be asserted, not verified. (I can, however, imagine a situation in which it could be falsified, because it is conceived of as something which could have been witnessed. In this sense it is not open to the objection raised earlier to assertions about religious experience as the foundation of theology). Thus the poem is religious because of the tacit doctrine of the historicity of the events it celebrates. What makes the critical

difference between the believer and the unbeliever is not that the one likes to talk about, and make significant patterns by making use of, the idea of 'some terrible aboriginal calamity', and that the other does not: but that the one believes that the calamity actually occurred at some historical moment in the irrecoverable past, and the other does not. (I say that the poet celebrates, rather than records or describes this calamity, because I do not wish to imply that the poet imagined that he was in any way recording or describing exactly how it happened. He was rather celebrating *that* it happened. Whatever he thought about it, that is all we are committed to.)

Of course, the making of a poem is itself an event: and the making of a Biblical poem is a special kind of event: God's intervention into history through an act of inspiration directed towards the poet. It is because of this intervention that the story can be properly regarded as having been uttered by God. Now, the sceptic cannot object here that, granted all this, he still is unable to attach any sense to the notion of an utterance by God. For what he is required to do at this stage is merely to understand what the writer in question thought was an utterance by God, not whether the writer's notion made sense. Philosophical criticism would here be out of place, since the preliminary work of historical reconstruction is still under way, and for this reason the philosopher cannot be sure that he has posed the problem properly.

However, once this task of historical reconstruction is done, it is still possible for the sceptic to say that he doesn't even begin to understand the religious meaning of, say, 'God loves men as a father loves his children' even in the context of the Pentateuch, or of the Old Testament as a whole. But now I think we could justifiably begin to wonder whether his inability even to understand is not a kind of moral deficiency (assuming it is not a mental deficiency). This is because he would be claiming an inability to understand a work of human art which millions of ordinary people have claimed to understand and profit by. An analogy might help here. The classic case of a highly intelligent person's inability to understand a work of art is Tolstoy's failure to appreciate Shakespeare. Now I think it is not unreasonable to say that the reason for this failure was that Tolstoy had no *faith* that Shakespeare could say anything valuable or interesting about human life. In view of the existence of *War and Peace* this is, indeed, almost the only possible explanation for the situation. It certainly wasn't for want of trying, of imagination or of intelligence. I am not concerned here with the reasons for Tolstoy's lack of faith in Shakespeare's ability to

say anything valuable. *What* I am concerned to point out is that it is reasonable to say that a total inability to appreciate Shakespeare, for whatever cause, whether conscious or unconscious, is a serious deficiency of a moral (though not necessarily culpable) kind. It is part of any serious belief in literature that reading and understanding it has a deep moral value. The exercise of the imagination in the appreciation of literature, as Shelley said, is 'the great instrument for the moral good'. This is not because a work like *King Lear* advocates, or exhibits, morally good qualities or acts, which the beholder will be led to imitate; but because his range of moral awareness will be enlarged. He will become, not more moral, but more morally alive. But this kind of enlargement through art and literature demands what Coleridge called poetic faith—a willing suspension of disbelief. In the case of *Lear*, for example, one must suspend disbelief in the superficial incredibility of the story. One must refuse to be bothered with the child's question (it is significant that it is a characteristically childish question) 'is it true, Mummy?'—if one is to see the kind of truth it has.

Now the impact of an effective work of art is that, once this initial disbelief has been suspended, what is offered to our understandings seems to be utterly real. One has to remind oneself, at the crucial point of horror or agony, that it is only a play. But a characteristic of great art is that this sense of reality is not wholly temporary. One does not merely assent with unconditional faith to the proposition 'this is what the world is like' while the drama lasts: but when one comes outside into the daylight world, some of this assent remains. One now recognizes that the real world is like that, though one had not realized or articulated it oneself. Thus *Lear* illuminates for us the logic of human ingratitude: and this illumination is now part of our permanent possession. But all the same, when we return to the daylight, we are also forced to admit that most of the time it does not work like that. In the daylight, everything which Shakespeare left out of the picture comes rushing in to confuse it again, to dilute the impact and give us pause to doubt or reject. Nevertheless the picture has been seen, the illumination offered, the moral awareness challenged to expand; and it is certainly a kind of deficiency in a person to be unable to receive what has been offered and assimilate it. There is something lacking in a person who cannot see the point of *King Lear*.

The same sort of thing could be said of a person who complained that he couldn't see the point of (say) the story of the Fall. Simply as an organised pattern of ideas—that is as a work of literary art—it is no

more difficult to understand than *King Lear*. The crucial step from the religious point of view, however, comes when the suggestion is offered and begins to be taken seriously by the reader, that this pattern—and the pattern of which it is only a part, the pattern of Israelite religion as a whole, set out and organised in the Bible—is not just an interesting creation of human minds, but a pattern organised in response to an external reality which is independent of it. When this happens the thought is being seriously entertained that perhaps the dramatic world is as real and permanent as the world of daylight outside. To see Jesus as the new Adam cancelling out the actions of the old Adam is now not an elegant and beautiful thought: a way of looking at the history of mankind, which one person can choose to accept and another can reasonably choose to reject. It is an organisation of words by the mind in response to an organisation within the events themselves. Theology involves the idea that events, as well as signs, can be given meaning. One event can point to another, just as a signpost can point to something. It is people who make a piece of wood to be a signpost: that is, to point to something. But once somebody has done this, the signpost points, whether we see it as a signpost or whether we simply take it as a piece of wood. If however we fail to appreciate that the wood has been organised into a signpost, and therefore fail to take account of how it points, we shall get lost. Once the wood has been made into a signpost, it remains a signpost whether we like it or not; but it is nevertheless true that its functioning as a signpost depends on our seeing it *as* a signpost, and not just as a piece of wood. Similarly, to see that God has made one event point to another, or be intelligible fully only in the light of another, is something that we have actively to do: but interpreting events in this way *correctly* involves more than just seeing them as pointers. We have to see them as pointing in the direction in which they actually do point. The difference in this case from that of a signpost, or any other purely human symbol, is that ultimately it is God, not man, who is responsible for making the symbol represent what it does represent. That is to say, the symbol is sacramental in character. The symbol is still a human device: but behind the human devising, there is God's devising too. We are not fully in control of the situation, even at the beginning. God has used the human capacity to make things into pointers, by directing certain people to make, out of historical events, pointers which point in the direction he wants them to point in.

It might be plausibly objected at this point that the crucial religious

assertion—namely, that the dramatic world is as permanent and real as the daylight, and co-extensive with it—is self-contradictory. Certainly the coherence of this notion has to be validated since it is the basis of the whole argument. The fundamental point is that the difference between accepting the ‘play’ as illuminating, in the way *Lear* is illuminating, and assenting to its being true in the child’s sense of the term, is not a difference in the mode of understanding, but in the degree of permanence and depth given to the suspension of disbelief required. There are two ways of not being bothered by the child’s question: one is to ignore it for the time being, the other is to say ‘yes’ to it, and to accept the play in this new light. (This is where the childlike quality of faith is made explicit.) This is not to destroy the idea of the play as a play, but to deepen its significance. It would only be destroyed as a play if the suspension of disbelief amounted to a total abdication of reason. Certainly *Lear* puts great demands on our credulity; but not impossible demands. In fact we cannot willingly suspend disbelief in the sense of being able to switch our belief on and off at will. There must always be some rational basis for even the temporary suspension of disbelief. The data of the dramatic theorem are not abstract hypotheses but are derived, however circuitously, from experience. A new and permanent suspension of disbelief in the presuppositions which lie behind truly theological assertions, seen in their full context as part of an organisation of historical events by a human (even though inspired) author—this is what constitutes religious faith.

One further objection has to be met: that the sceptic might still say that, while he understood the full meaning of the Fall story, including its place in St Paul’s theology of redemption, he does not accept it. Or, to put it another way, he might admit to believing that by saying ‘Yes’ to the child’s question he might gain a valuable illumination of the world outside, but yet say that saying ‘Yes’ was unjustifiable unless good reasons for saying it could be produced. But I think this would be a mistake. It is true that saying ‘Yes’ might not give the illumination hoped for. Thus to say ‘Yes’ to *King Lear* would be to expect to have one’s understanding of the world increased by believing that *King Lear* was accurate history, and this would soon turn out to be an error, for it would fail to tie up with other known facts about the world. But the possibility that saying ‘Yes’ would not give the illumination expected from it, would not be a good reason for holding back when one did expect an illumination. The point about the religious situation is that one does not find that saying ‘Yes’ leads to the discovery of

anything incompatible with other known facts, and one does not believe that anyone else will either. Such apparent incompatibilities as may arise are only apparent—that is entailed by the religious ‘Yes’.

To put the matter in another way, refusing to accept the Fall story while admitting that it may have, in its theological context, the kind of significance religious people say it has, is analogous to saying that I understand what Lear says to the Fool but that I do not accept it. It is absurd to say this if one also wishes to claim to understand the dramatic point of the play. What the sceptic must be prepared to say is that he understands what St Paul says about the relationship of the fall-events to the redemption-events but does not accept it. This is like saying that he understands what Shakespeare is saying to us in *King Lear* but does not accept it. But this reaction is impossible to anyone who is not morally deficient in the sense I have tried to describe. If the sceptic complains that what makes him unable to accept what Shakespeare says in the theatre, is the state of the world he finds about him in the daylight (this is analogous to saying, e.g., that the goodness of the God in the Fall story seems to him incompatible with the evil in the world) then it can be retorted that being prepared, *before* going back out into the daylight, to accept that Shakespeare may be offering a genuine illumination of the daylight world precisely by what he says to us in the theatre, is an essential preliminary to even understanding what Shakespeare is trying to do in the theatre. Similarly, unless the sceptic is prepared to believe that St Paul may have something important to say about the real world—that is, that theological statements as described above are certainly *capable* of being true—he cannot begin to understand him religiously. But once having admitted that theological statements might be *true*—that events might really be related to one another in the way St Paul suggests—then he has had the very kind of religious experience which cannot be rejected without incurring a just charge of being a defaulter.

THE CONSCIENCE OF THE SIXTIES

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