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The Language of Christian Faith

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ONE OF THE MAIN DIFFICULTIES in determining the meaning of religious language is its apparent lack of verifiability. On the one hand there is no objective test or controlled experiment by which the validity of religious statements can come under scrutiny. On the other hand, even when experience seems to contradict a religious statement the one who asserts it does not admit the necessity or relevance of reconsidering what he has said in terms of its truth-value. This latter test, the test of falsifiability, is one that has never seemed relevant to those who make religious statements. But the reasons for the irrelevance of such a test must be clarified, and in this clarification it is hoped that it can be cogently argued that Christian language is in principle, although not in fact, verifiable by anyone.

All meaningful language derives ultimately from experience, and religious language is derived from religious experience. Unlike the experience of the physical world, however, religious experience has apparently no objective co-referent, and therefore religious language cannot claim to say anything meaningful about the observable world. As a result, the term "experience" has been denied to religion, and in its place is substituted "feeling" as that which is determined by the subject himself rather than by an object.¹ Any seemingly objective statements that are made, then, cannot be understood literally, but must rather be interpreted symbolically, as representing the structures of this religious feeling in a formally appropriate, although materially inappropriate, way.²

Traditional Christianity, on the other hand, makes the claim that the "experience" appropriate to its statements is determined, not by the subject, but by an object. It does this fundamentally in its use of the term "faith" in place of "experience." If we have been able to draw a distinction between "experience" and "feeling" by seeing one as the influence of an object on a subject, and the other as a self-determined action of the subject, then we must see in the distinction between "experience" and "faith" a distinction

1. See A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Gollancz, 1958), p. 119, and B. Russell, *Religion and Science* (London: Butterworth, 1936), p. 189.

2. Cf. P. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1958), p. 41: "Man's ultimate concern must be expressed symbolically, because symbolic language alone is able to express the ultimate"; F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), p. 76: "Christian doctrines are accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech." It is important to notice here, however, that both Tillich and Schleiermacher reject the thesis that the subject determines religious "experience." Tillich points to revelation, which is an ecstatic encounter with the mysterious, while for Schleiermacher the feeling of absolute dependence is inevitably related to that upon which it depends. For both, however, that which determines the experience is something that is unobservable in the objective world.

in the relation between subject and object. In "experience" the datum of experience is that which is given by the object, but its interpretation into a *meaningful* datum is the action of the subject in his relating of the content of experience to previous meaningful experiences.³ In other words, the content is determined by the object, the structure is determined by the subject. "Christian faith," however, is such that the object determines both structure and content.

This can be illustrated more clearly with a comparison of the ordinary human and the Christian use of the term "faith." If I say, "I believe in Richard," I am saying basically: "I am convinced, on the basis of my past experiences of Richard's behaviour, that Richard will in the future, under certain stimuli, do such and such." Here the content of belief is determined by Richard and Richard's previous action. The structure, however, that which brings conviction, is: (a) the past experience *I* have had of Richard's behaviour, and (b) my presumption that the motivating elements in Richard's behaviour are sufficiently stable to allow some comment about the future to be made. I presume stability in his motivated behaviour because I relate it to my own motivated behaviour, and, on the basis of my own experience of myself, I assume that stability is a characteristic of motivated behaviour.

The object of Christian faith, on the other hand, is not said to be another man with motivated behaviour like my own, of such a kind that my belief in him can be ultimately grounded in my own experience of myself. Faith talks about God, and it talks about this God doing certain things in history in a way that we would not expect God to act. The Christian creed says, in its central doctrine, that God became man, was born, was executed as a criminal; and three days later his body was mysteriously revived. The content of this faith is God and God's action in history. But apart from this statement about God I have experience or evidence about God's action neither in my past experience nor in any supposed similarity between myself and God of such a kind that I can relate it to this statement to make it meaningful. What is more, my own conception or expectation of the way in which God would act is quite contrary to that pictured here. I find it difficult to imagine God (*eo ipso* powerful, omniscient, and not necessarily concerned with the world) becoming man as a wayside preacher without money or home, and accepting an unjustified criminal's death, even if he did try to right the wrong by rising three days later.⁴ In other words, while I am able to recognize the historicity of the facts about the life of Jesus Christ, and attach to them a meaning in so far as they can be reinterpreted and understood in my own experience, I am not able to attach any significance to such statements as: "God became man in Jesus Christ," and

3. This idea was formulated in the philosophical development from Hume, through Kant, to Hegel, and further, in explicit relation to experience, in the American pragmatist school.

4. If evidence is required, one need only compare the philosophical concepts of God from Plato to Whitehead with what the Christian creeds say.

"Jesus Christ was raised from the dead three days (two by our reckoning) after he was executed."⁵ If I am to believe in them, or believe in God as the agent in these acts, either I must convince myself of their validity against all past experience and reason, or the object itself must determine my belief—the object itself must create in me the appropriate interpretation of these facts.⁶

Already in this argument we have pointed to the object of Christian faith, and in pointing to it have demonstrated that it is not an object hidden from the impartial observer, but one that can be quite easily encountered in the recitation of a certain number of historical facts⁷ along with several statements that claim to be historical but do not have any apparent historical significance. This combination of historical statements with apparently meaningless quasi-historical statements is made evident to the world in the proclamation of the Christian Church, whether through the Bible, her preaching, her creeds, or the statements of individual Christians. As such, the object of Christian faith is not unobservable to the world, but is universally available.

But there are those who have heard this combination of sentences in one way or another and even in hearing have not believed, or, in other words, have not found that they have been enabled in any unusual way to understand the significance of the two or more quasi-historical statements. This bothersome fact has plagued not only the "unbelieving" questioner, but also generations of Christian thinkers. On the one hand, some, looking at the determinative character of the object of faith, have said that the reason some believe and others do not lies in the object, in God, and that in his unknowable will he predestines some to belief and some to unbelief. Others, unhappy with this fearful picture of an undeserved hell, lay the fault of lack of belief at the feet of the possible subjects of belief—men. Whosoever will

5. Implicit in this statement of the inability to rethink in my own thought and experience the meaning of quasi-historical statements is the Collingwood thesis on historical method. Further, when attention is turned to statements made in the Apostles' Creed, only one can be accepted without question as a historical statement capable of normal historical interpretation: "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried." The situation is not much improved when we turn to the Gospels. On the one hand, the miracle-stories, and on the other hand, the absolute self-confidence and authority expressed by Jesus when he talks about God, or speaks, almost as God, to his fellows, are obstacles to a fully adequate historical interpretation.

6. It is this determining character of the object that leads some Christian thinkers to reject the term "object" and use instead "subject," with the claim that in the faith relationship God *creates* faith in the believer, rather than that the believer makes himself believe in God. Cf. S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953, p. 178-9. At this point we have considered the second article of the creed, and by implication the first article in so far as we have made God the agent in the historical action. It might be noted in addition that some Old Testament scholarship (cf. G. von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* [Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1962], I, 152) has suggested that the creation story in Genesis 1 is, in the intention of its author, not a scientific statement, but a historical statement: This is the beginning of history. The third article of the creed is evidently not a historical or a quasi-historical statement. Therefore it does not concern us at present.

7. Cf. W. Pannenberg's excellent article: "Dogmatische Thesen zur Lehre von der Offenbarung," in W. Pannenberg (ed.), *Offenbarung als Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961), pp. 91-114.

can believe, but apparently some do not *will*. This answer springs from the non-compulsive character of the object of belief—that it can be observed and efforts can be made to understand it, without its creating faith in the observer. To this extent it apparently is in no way comparable to a mathematical equation, a scientific correlation, or genuine historical evidence.⁸

If we are going to see the reasons for the claim by the Christian that the fact that someone does not find himself determined to believe is no valid evidence of the falsity of the statements, we must analyse the situation of the person concerned and his contact with the object a little more closely.

In the first place, we must take seriously the fact that only in the Christian claim of the fundamental determining character of the object does the observer come into contact with an object that is in principle not subject in some way to his own determining activity. We have already remarked on the relations between “feeling,” “experience,” and “Christian faith,” and we have illustrated that the term “faith” itself, in its normal usage, shares in the characteristics of experience and feeling in that at least the interpretations and meaning to be applied to the object (or subjective state) are derived from the subject’s own past experience, and therefore the application of meaning is an action of the subject. The fundamental uniqueness of Christian faith means that the observer’s past experience provides absolutely no evidence for the necessity to take it seriously, or even practical counsels by which he can prepare himself to be determined by the object.⁹

In the second place, we hear about the object of faith through the Church, and the Church is not always itself clear upon the structure of this faith. On the one hand it can try to rationalize what it says about the object by trying to fit it into the schemes of experience and feeling that are the normal patterns of the subject’s relation to the world. When this happens, it cannot be said that acceptance of such rational structures is “Christian faith,” because this acceptance is merely another instance of the more usual relation between subject and object; and the rejection of such arguments is not the rejection of Christian belief, because the arguments have, in their presupposition, already endeavoured to remove that which makes “Christian faith” unique. In other words, what the Church will be doing is removing

8. Unfortunately, there are those who will refuse to see *these* connections, as anyone who has tried to argue with a prejudiced man has found out.

9. Cf. D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1952), p. 145: “. . . We may conclude, that the *Christian Religion* not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by *Faith* to assert it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.” Translated into our present context, this says: God is not only the agent in becoming man and in raising Jesus from the dead (the miracles in which we are to believe) but he is also the agent in determining the observer to belief. Hume is arguing here against the apologetic interests of the conservatives of his time (see the following paragraph, and also Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*). It is only a very short step from Hume to Kierkegaard (*Philosophical Fragments*).

from the object those offensive statements that are the very ones demanding interpretation and significance if faith is to become a reality.

On the other hand, the Church can assume that faith is something that the subject of faith can determine, and at this point it will turn its attention in what it says to the subjective factor in this relationship between subject and object. In other words it will talk about "conversion," "repentance," or "belief," either in terms of some sort of religious "experience" caused by an unknown and unseen something, or in terms of some subjectively determined action, such as the previously mentioned acceptance of the validity of the statements of faith in opposition to all the evidence of past experience. This attempt of the Church also betrays the fundamentally determining character of the object.

When the Church in either of these two ways turns its concern in proclamation away from the object of faith, as the determining object, to the subject, in the supposition that the subject can determine faith, it has made it difficult, if not impossible, for even the most interested and willing observer to be the subject of the determining object. For the observer cannot be expected to know on his own that the object of faith is that which determines faith both in structure and in content. Only if the Church makes this the presupposition, and perhaps even a part of the content, of its proclamation, can the possibility of faith be taken as a serious possibility.

There are, then, two possible reasons for the fact that not every one who hears the historical statements of the Christian faith believes in them. On the one hand, he may be at fault in that he is unwilling for one reason or another to admit the possibility of an object that would determine both the structure and the content of an "experience." On the other hand, those who tell him about the content of the Christian faith may tell him in such an ambiguous way that the basic structures of the faith relationship are obscured.

The ugly question now raises itself: What about the situation where the observer is completely open to the possibility of determination by the object, and the Church is quite unambiguous in its proclamation, but even then the observer does not find himself determined to belief? This is the ultimate question of falsifiability. The answer of the Church may be to claim that (a) it is never entirely unambiguous in its proclamation, and (b) no observer is entirely open to this determination by the object because, this being a unique experience, he can have no idea what type of relationship will be created, and therefore he cannot hope to prepare himself adequately for it. But the answer does not satisfy, because it appears that the Church must bring in these reasons *ex post facto* to explain an embarrassing possibility. Furthermore, it would seem that, if the obstacles to faith are so great, faith itself can be only an illusion. In fact, the whole discussion can be regarded only as a nice hypothetical theory with no relation to fact and no real possibility of belief in the Christian statements.

The possibility of faith becomes a possibility only by our turning our attention to the third article of the creed. A Church, or a Christian in the Church, who has taken seriously the structural characteristic of faith, and has found itself or himself determined to belief, finds that the receiving of this determination is the receiving not only of an interpretation or significance of the two or more previously meaningless sentences, but also of a new determination of the subject as a whole. And this new determination of the subject as a whole finds its fullest expression when he together with other subjects is similarly determined. This results in a personal conviction of Christian and Church that is not forced, but is rather a spontaneous conviction arising from the fundamental character of the subject's new determination. This character of the life of the Christian and the Church is such that, in spite of the obstacles from the side of the observer or of the Church, it can lead an observer towards considering seriously the structure of belief and towards being himself a recipient of the determination by the object. To express the point theologically, it is the action of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church that makes the contact between the Church and the observer, between the proclamation of the object of faith and the possible subject of faith, a contact that results in faith. It is this element of spontaneous conviction in the interpersonal relationships of the Church that makes the proclamation of the Church, whether in the Bible, in preaching, in the creed, or in personal conversation, not a mere recitation of historical facts with added quasi-historical facts, but a witness of what the object of faith has already done for the one who witnesses.

In conclusion, the Christian claims that religious statements are in principle verifiable if all attendant conditions are satisfactorily fulfilled. It is his attendant claim that one can never be sure that such attendant conditions have been fulfilled that makes him reject the relevance of falsifiability, although in principle such a test would certainly apply if it were possible to ensure the appropriate conditions.

Further, any analysis of Christian language, if it is to be adequate, must consider both the objective and the subjective aspects of faith. On the one hand, it should consider how far certain statements are meaningful because the meaning is determined by the object; on the other hand, it should consider how far the statements are meaningful as mythological or symbolical expressions of the subject's experience. All Christian language can (and much does) express both of these aspects. The task of the analyst is to distinguish the one from the other. In doing this he is doing a service for the proclamation of the Church.