

# FAITH AND THOUGHT

*A Journal devoted to the study of the inter-relation of the  
Christian Revelation and modern research.*

1974

VOLUME 101

NUMBER 1

---

**F. H. CLEOBURY**

## **Subjective Trends In Contemporary Theology**

**Much modern theology has become subjective to the point of absurdity : God is variously identified with our idea of God, with feeling or with depth of experience. As a result natural theology, which assumes God as an object of thought, is suspect. In this article Dr. Cleobury, writing as a philosopher, seeks to bring wayward theologians back to a sense of responsibility, reality and common sense.**

Anyone acquainted with the history of theology in the 19th and 20th centuries will be aware of the great influence of the philosophy of Kant on a succession of German theologians. This influence was not confined to one school ; it extended to writers as diverse as Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Barth, Br nner and Tillich. I shall not attempt here a general discussion of this ; I must confine myself to some assumptions in which the hand of Kant can be seen. To what extent that very great thinker would have agreed with them does not concern me here. It *is*, however, my concern to show their falsity. The propositions I shall examine and reject are the following :-

1. There is a clear-cut distinction between the way in which we arrive at beliefs about the physical universe and the way in which we arrive at beliefs about our 'inner' lives.

2. Our beliefs about God are connected exclusively with this 'inner' experience. (I use the vague expression "connected with" because these theologians have differed widely in the way in which they have traced the emergence of God-awareness from self-awareness.)

3. True beliefs about the physical universe may rightly be called 'knowledge'. This is because these beliefs have *objects*, i.e. objects-of-knowledge, whether these are physical objects or physical facts. Beliefs about our inner experience, and therefore beliefs about God, have no objects, since they are concerned exclusively with cognising *subjects*. Theological discussion takes place entirely in this realm of 'subjectivity'.

4. These two realms, the inner and the outer, are distinguished by the fact that we can find words to describe directly the objects of our outer *knowledge*, but can use words only in an indirect way, e.g. symbols, metaphors, evocative language, and so on, when we try to talk about our inner experience and about God.

5. The way in which we arrive at scientific knowledge of the physical universe is to trace the mechanical laws by which it works as a 'closed' system. Science has largely accomplished this task, and we do not need, therefore, to 'bring God in' in order to complete the process of explanation. (The attempt to do this is usually referred to pejoratively — as regarding God as "the God of the gaps".)

These five propositions are obviously closely inter-related. I shall not, therefore, try to deal with them in order, one by one, but shall discuss the reasoning which led to them.

The event which we call 'knowledge' is one in which a subject, indicated by a personal pronoun, cognises an object. The verb 'cognises' covers perception, in which case the object is a physical object, and also thinking, or mentally judging, in general, in which case popular language refers to the object in a large variety of ways — e.g. 'fact', 'proposition', 'the objective situation', and so on. Popular language subsumes perception under knowledge, by substituting "We know that trees exist"

for “We perceive trees”.

It would be generally agreed that a cow can perceive a tree, but that it is incapable of saying to itself, or even thinking to itself “I perceive this tree”, still less “I know that I am perceiving this tree.” In other words, a tree can be an object to an animal, but itself as a cognising subject — an “I” — cannot be an object to itself. A cow, that is to say, is aware of a tree but is not explicitly aware of itself as a cognising subject. But a mature human being *is* aware of himself as a cognising subject. (One could here raise the question of how we can possibly know what goes on in the minds of other conscious beings, but that would deflect me from the point before us. Suffice to say that most of us would justify such knowledge by analogical arguments. But in any case we all actually *do* assume that we have *some* knowledge of other people’s thoughts. If we did not, conversation would be absurd.)

We can now consider the third proposition, and in particular the statement “Beliefs about our inner experience . . . have no objects, since they are concerned exclusively with cognising subjects.” It is important to realise exactly what is meant by those who deny that a mature human being, when he is aware of himself as a cognising subject, has himself-as-cognising-subject as an object. They are not denying that when he thinks of himself as a *physical organism* he can be an object of his knowledge. What they are denying is that that cognising subject, to whom his own body is as truly an object as is the moon, can be an object to himself. They claim that he is aware of himself as a cognising subject but that this awareness is not awareness of an *object*, and cannot therefore be called knowledge. I shall contend that even as cognising subjects we are objects to ourselves, and that we can have *knowledge* of our inner states.

This is no mere matter of splitting hairs, as we shall see. The only reason I can think of for its appearing obvious that the cognising subject cannot have itself as an object of knowledge is that one is relying on a spatialised mental picture. If one symbolises the subject-object relation by an S on the left-hand

side of the page and a lot of O's on the right-hand side, with a good space between, then the subject can never be object. But there is no reason to suppose that this picture, or any spatial picture, is adequate. A cardinal sin, in metaphysics, is to argue from mental pictures. The subject-object relation is admittedly unique; no other relation is completely analogous. One of its defining characteristics — part of its *differentia*, as the logicians say, — is that in the case of mature human beings the cognising subject is object to itself. I do not mean that we can easily state in words all that we are aware of in our inner lives; I merely mean that when we *do* make statements on the basis of our inner experiences, the nouns stand for thought-objects exactly as they do when we make statements about the physical world. This applies, too, to the pronoun "I", even when it is followed by a verb of cognition such as "know".

I am not unaware of Hume's attempt to deny that there *is* any cognising self. He was completely answered by Kant. Professor H. J. Paton,<sup>1</sup> one of the greatest of modern Kantian scholars, remarks that Kant's reply to Hume has been "not so much rejected as ignored by modern empiricists", and he adds that Kant's argument for the subject-self appears to him sound, and, if sound, obviously important.

Proposition 3 states that not only is the cognising subject not an object to itself, but that our inner experience is not an *object of knowledge*. With this I disagree. The affirmation in which I refer a sense-datum to the outer world, and say "This apple is green", is logically co-ordinate with the affirmation in which I refer an emotion to myself, and say "I am angry". Indeed, the very distinction of subject from object is logically co-ordinate with the distinction between north from south or circle-centre from circle-circumference.

The canons of reasoning, revealed in the study of logic, apply to the "inner" realm in the way that they apply to the material world. Consider the paradigms of syllogistic reasoning. For example, "All M is P; some S is M; therefore some S is P." The variables can be given either physical or psychological values;

for example “All acids contain hydrogen ; some of these liquids are acids ; therefore some of these liquids contain hydrogen.” “All sad experiences can be outlived ; this is a sad experience ; therefore it can be outlived.” Similarly with relational inferences — say a transitive relation. “Lead is heavier than iron ; iron is heavier than wood ; therefore lead is heavier than wood.” “Love is better than indifference ; indifference is better than hatred ; therefore love is better than hatred.” These are obvious and trivial instances, but they serve to illustrate the point that the canons of reasoning apply equally to the physical and to ‘inner’ discourse.

Propositions 1 to 3 must, therefore, be rejected. Human reason operates on inner experience in much the same way as on the outer world, and in both cases we have objects-of-thought. There is no sound reason, therefore, for limiting theological discourse to the alleged realm of ‘pure subjectivity’, especially when we realise that proposition 5 is also false. With regard to this last, it never has been proved, and it never will be proved, that the physical universe is a ‘closed’ mechanical system. For one thing, inductive reasoning can be taken as valid only if we assume as true a principle of induction which itself is incapable of proof.<sup>2</sup> For another, no crucial experiment or series of experiments could, in the nature of things, be devised to demonstrate that our sense of freedom of choice is illusory. (I have dealt with this fully in chapter 9 of my book *A Return to Natural Theology*.)<sup>3</sup>

With regard to proposition 4, 20th century philosophical analysis and theoretical physics have considerably blurred the sharpness of the alleged distinction between the outer and the inner realm in the matter of describability in words. The analysts have emphasised that *description* is only one among the functions of language, even where language about the material world is concerned. The positivists have gone further and have proposed to interpret the laws of nature not as categorical description of what goes on ‘out there’ but as hypothetical and inner ; for example, “if I have percept A I can expect percept B to follow”. And the truth of the basic equations of relativity theory and of

quantum mechanics can be tested only by their reliability as guides to the course of perceptual experience. Physical language is "as-if" language, and when we insist — as we must — that in the final analysis true statements must be categorical — must relate to an Object — then that Object must be the Divine Thought. In short, over the *whole* realm of human discourse, not merely in an alleged realm of pure subjectivity, we have to resort to symbols, metaphors and evocative language.

I now come to the task of showing the influence of these propositions on the thought of some of the theologians I have mentioned. I shall not, of course, be denying that our inner states reveal far more important knowledge about God than does the physical world. I merely insist that we do not have to engage in fantastic and unintelligible ways of talking in order to limit God-talk to an alleged realm of pure subjectivity.

Let us begin by noticing a fallacy of which some contemporary theologians can be accused. They have failed to notice the essential difference between saying that beliefs about God are *derived from* experiences A, B and C and saying that talk about God *is really talk about* experiences A, B and C. We must examine this.

First, let us generalise, and ask whether talk about *anything whatsoever* can be said to be *really* talk about our experiences. When we are talking about material objects, or are engaged in the physical sciences, a plausible case can be made out for the view that we are really talking about those of our experiences which we call sense-data or percepts. Broadly speaking, this was the contention of the positivists and of Ernst Mach. (The post-Kantian idealists, F. H. Bradley for example, did not fall into this error, but to explain their position in the matter would interrupt our argument.) But there is one realm of discourse in which no-one makes this claim, for it would land us in solipsism. Statements about a person other than myself are clearly *not* reducible to statements about those of my experiences which witness to his existence. Even if I were to concede that statements about snow were really statements about the sensations white, cold and sparkling, I cannot concede that talk about the Prime Minister

is really talk about how I feel about him. This is because the Prime Minister is not merely a physical organism but a conscious being. It is clear, then, that if we use the word 'God' for someone who, how ever more He may be, is at least personal, God-talk cannot be exhibited as man-talk. The only person who can consistently reduce God-statements to man-statements is a confessed atheist, e.g. Feuerbach.

Before I apply these general considerations to the theological writings I have in mind, I must call attention to another fallacy to be found in writings of persons hostile to natural theology. Hendrik Kraemer <sup>4</sup> insists, quite rightly in my view, that Christianity is not merely one religion among others — not one of the fruits of the human spirit — but was born of a Revelation from God in particular historical acts. But he tells us that "for philosophy . . . God can never become anything else than the most comprehensive Idea, the highest thinkable value, the highest object in a system of thinking." Later he sums up Kant's view of the transcendental philosophy as the view that God "is a man-made idea." This he contrasts with the Biblical conception of God as He or It which transcends all being and all Idea as primordial reality, and "not as a hypothesis".

This seems to me quite confused. It is one thing to say "I have an idea, i.e. a certain conception, of God." It would be quite another to say that God *is* my idea or conception of Him. This would be nonsense. To say that I have an idea of God is not necessarily to deny that He is Objective Existent. It would be quite significant — quite valid language — to contrast Barth's idea of God with Bultmann's, and it would be quite irrelevant to reply that Barth did not regard God as an Idea.

Kraemer also affirms that an attempt to make a case for the rationality of the theistic hypothesis has to end in a confession that the final tribunal for the justification and verification of religious faith is "the forum of the individual mind or person" — the personal opinion of a sincere philosopher who has the leisure to rack his brains and exert all his faculties. This is a travesty of the real position. It is no mere question of leisure; people *make*



time to think about what they care about. If we hunger for God as the hart pants after the water-brooks we shall find ourselves engaging in natural theology in the course of a country walk. The natural theologian recognises that his faculties are God-given and assumes that God intends him to use them. He regards the Logos, who was with God and who was God, as the immanent source of human rationality.

There are two ways of reconciling the validity of natural theology with the acceptance of Barth's and Kraemer's thesis that God revealed Himself in particular events in history, as recorded in the Bible. The first is the common-sense view, held by Catholic and Anglican theologians in the past, that rational theology leads us to a point where we realise our essential cognitive limitations and therefore *expect* to find evidence for a historical revelation. The second is the view, which Barth himself favoured, if I am not mistaken, that once the transcendent revelation has been accepted by faith, it supplies us with fresh data for a *deeper* rational theology. These two views are not alternatives; we can accept them both.

\* \* \*

Let us now look at the influence on some well-known theologians of the propositions which I have designated as false.

When Schleiermacher turned from natural theology and sought to derive faith in God from a feeling of dependence he did not, I think, go to the length of saying that God *was* our feeling of dependence. But Tillich, in one oft-quoted passage, does come very near it. He said that 'depth' is what the word 'God' means; he enlarges on this by speaking of "the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation."<sup>5</sup> Now one of these offered alternatives is different from the others. To define the word 'God' as the source of our being is to offer an intellectual construction, and is quite orthodox. The notions of 'source', 'ground' or 'creator' are metaphysical, and 'God' is clearly an objective Being. But my concerns or my seriousness, and even

my depth, if it means deep experience, are subjective states, and cannot function logically as synonymous with the word 'God'. David Jenkins<sup>6</sup> tells us that Tillich<sup>6a</sup> "is trying to describe the 'shape' of faith (what it is like to be a believer) but he is no more prepared than Schleiermacher or Bultmann to allow that faith is basis for, or even has the nature of, *assertions*. That is to say that faith cannot be taken to be about anything in any sense akin to that in which knowledge is about something." Hence Tillich's liking for the passive mood. We are alleged to be aware that "we are accepted" — without saying *by Whom* we are accepted. Jenkins rightly sees that faith has either to go further or to cease.

Let us now come to Bultmann. Jenkins<sup>6b</sup> defines "existential questions" as questions arising not from empirical experience of the outer world but out of subjective experience. Bultmann, he says, holds that "no amount of data about the world can settle the question of what it means to be me or assuage my concern over what it is like to be me. Indeed, the existential effect of data about the world is to threaten me in my existence, to make me see how much I am at the mercy of chance and how inexorably my existence is under sentence of death . . . The question of existence, therefore, is whether I am simply a determined object in the closed system of the world or whether I am a subject who can be set free from the threatening determinations of the world for freedom and fulfilment as a person with persons."

This existence which sees itself threatened and unfulfilled is labelled by existentialist writers "inauthentic". Authentic existence is the existence of a being who realises himself to be free from the past and open to a future no longer felt to be subject to mechanism or chance.

We need not quarrel with the existentialist's pessimistic, even tragic, diagnosis of the human situation. It is, indeed, a welcome return to realism after the groundless optimism of the so-called Enlightenment. But the Christian must reject the suggestion that the question whether I can have authentic existence *is* the question of "the existence of God as the transcendent existential possibility,

not part of the world as a system, which gives fulfilment to personal living." <sup>6c</sup> This identification of God with subjective feeling is apparently, in Bultmann's view, the only way to de-mythologise talk about God. The brief answer to this is that to think of God as active in, and evidenced by, the physical world is not mythology but sound metaphysics. If, and only if, we have faith in God as revealed in Scripture — and finally in Christ — can we have "authentic" existence in the fullest sense of that word. But the God of the Bible is the Creator whose glory the heavens declare. The question that really matters is whether I can *trust* my "subjectivity" — whether my sense of authentic existence is illusory, because it results from a technique of *escape* from reality, or whether, on the contrary the subjective and the objective alike — feeling and knowledge alike — can reveal the God Who is One God, the Creator of heaven as well as of earth.

We now come to Barth. From Jürgen Moltmann <sup>7a</sup> one gathers that Barth was influenced by Hermann, who had held that God is revealed only in our subjectivity. I find this hard to follow. How can we talk meaningfully about what goes on in "the non-objectifiable subjectivity of the dark defenceless depths in which we live at the moment of involvement." Moltmann does, however, say that Barth "puts the subjectivity of God in place of the subjectivity of man which Hermann means by 'self'", and he means by this that whereas Hermann starts from self, and has to show (in words which do not have thought-objects!) how we come to subjective awareness of God, Barth insists that "Man asks about his 'self' only because, and if, God is pleased to give him knowledge of his (i.e. God's) Self." The direction of Hermann's mental process (we are forbidden to speak of *reasoning* in this connection) is from self to Self; that of Barth is from Self to self. I do not understand this. As I have tried to show in my published works, there are valid *rational* arguments from human self to Divine Self — arguments in which both these words stand for thought-objects — but I myself have never had, and cannot see how anyone else can have had, an 'immediate' awareness of God. For by "immediate" is meant an experience as yet not interpreted — not yet an assertion. I can coin a *name* for such an experience, but before it issues

in an existential proposition ("this chair exists"; "God exists") there must be an intellectual construction. We have this to bear in mind when we read the language of the mystics about union with God and Barthian language about confrontation by God.

Moltmann<sup>7b</sup> states definitely that Barth completely re-cast his commentary on *Romans* in the second edition of 1921, one of his reasons being that he was indebted to his brother Heinrich for "better acquaintance with . . . the ideas of Plato and Kant." Moltmann says that "the concept of the self-revelation of God developed by Barth corresponds with Anselm's ontological proof of God as interpreted in his book *Fides quaerens Intellectum* (1930)." <sup>7b</sup> It would seem that, far from turning his back on philosophy, Barth was influenced by the line of philosophical thinking which I have summarised in the five propositions from which I started, and which I regard as false. I should be the last to criticise Barth for philosophising; I merely think it a pity that he did not start from sounder philosophy.

It would not, however, be true to say that Barth was a party to what Jenkins<sup>6d</sup> called "the unholy alliance of Schleiermacher and the scientists (or men of modern culture) to which Bultmann also acceded, in taking it for granted that knowledge has as its objects only that which is or can be the object of science."<sup>6</sup> For in spite of Barth's philosophy of theism being, as we have noticed, an attempt to see God in our "subjectivity", and in spite of his denial that men can arrive at a conception of God from other human concepts, he nevertheless insisted that the faith awakened in those who have been regenerated by the preaching of the Word is faith in God as Object. He would have been the last theologian to identify God-talk with man-talk — humanism with theism. But I cannot agree that God — defined as Cosmic Mind — is *inconceivable* apart from the revelation of God in Christ. The early Hebrews, and some of the Greeks, had conceptions of God which were valid as far as they could reach. The final revelation in Christ was concerned with *what* God was; they already believed *that* He was.

There always has been, and there always will be, a place for

natural theology. Admittedly it was not stressed in the Pauline and Johannine writings, but this is because some form of theism or near-theism was intellectually respectable in the Roman Empire at that time. But the Western world today is largely sceptical — not because the intellectual basis of theism has been under-mined (it certainly has *not* been) but because with the current demand for specialization, very few people outside the churches, and, for that matter, very few people inside them, including dogmatic and Biblical theologians, appear to have any real grasp of the strength of the contemporary metaphysical case for theism. I can conceive of no factor more damaging to the Christian witness to the world, in an age when the masses are vastly impressed by the practical achievements of science, and are simple enough to believe that science ‘explains’ the universe, than the surrender of the whole intellectual field signalled by the quite common pulpit utterance “Of course we can’t prove the existence of God”. This statement, *tout court*, is completely misleading. For to justify it you would have to restrict the meaning of ‘proof’ to ‘logical entailment’, in which case there is a vast variety of statements which everybody believes but which no-one can prove. But if to prove a proposition is to show that it is a rational interpretation of experience, then we most certainly *can* prove the existence of God.

## REFERENCES

1. Paton, H. J., *In Defence of Reason*, 1951, pp. 100, 104.
2. Russell, B., *The Problems of Philosophy*, 1912, Home Univ. Lib. Ed., p. 106.
3. Cleobury, F. H., *A Return to Natural Theology*, 1967.
4. Kraemer, H., *Religion and the Christian Faith*, 1956, pp. 206f.
5. Tillich, P., *The Shaking of the Foundations*, 1948.
6. Jenkins, D., *Guide to the Debate about God*, 1966. (a) pp. 92–3; (b) p. 59; (c) p. 60; (d) p. 75.
7. Moltmann, J., *Theology of Hope*, 1965. (a) p. 53; (b) p. 50; (c) p. 45.