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A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php

Faith, Freedom and the Future¹

John Thompson

1. FAITH

Most of us, I suspect, will have been brought up with the idea that there are two avenues to our knowledge of God - the natural and the supernatural. The former was seen in two ways - reason can lead us by proofs to the existence of a supreme being; or, there is an intuitive knowledge of such a being or beings implanted in each one of us. The traditional view posited belief in a supreme being and called this being God. This was regarded as a kind of preliminary, a preamble to the Christian revelation.

However, these views were seen as inadequate since God can only be known in his truth and fullness in Jesus Christ. Natural Theology, as it is called, had also another apologetic function as an argument against unbelief.² Yet others argued that one could discern traces of God in the created universe - and this was called general, as contrasted with, special revelation.³

Now these views have been under attack for some time, indeed for some centuries, even though they are still held by many. Criticism came first from the philosophers like the Scot David Hume and the German Immanuel Kant and latterly from theologians as well.⁴ Questions such as the following were asked: is a supreme being identical with the Christian conception of God? Does not sin, as Calvin said at the time of the Reformation, mar our ideas to such an extent that the God we conceive by ourselves turns out to be an idol? Does the Bible itself give any credence to a knowledge of God whom we can discover or to a general revelation in creation? If it does, it is very peripheral. In the past theism, i.e. belief in one God discovered or proven, was felt to be an ally of revelation. Today this view is seriously questioned. Indeed the opposite is affirmed, namely, that theism is so dubious and weak an argument that it is rejected and with it its Christian ally revelation. In their place we have atheism of various kinds. The God of Natural Theology turned out to be no God at all. Christian thought, therefore, today finds itself in a new situation, what one

¹ This lecture was delivered at the Public Opening of Union Theological College, Belfast on Monday 28th. Sept. 1992.

² Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, pp. 47ff.

³ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God, Dogmatics* vol. I, pp. 14ff.

⁴ Among modern theologians one can name Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann, Eberhard Jüngel, all of whom oppose so-called Natural Theology.

might call the twilight of the gods. If God, that is the supposed God of natural theology is dead, as Nietzsche said in the last century, are we not sent back to the one thing needful, to the one true source of the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ and to faith in him as the one, true revelation of the divine nature?

This is in fact the argument favoured by some leading German theologians today including J Moltmann, Eberhard Jüngel and Walter Kasper, the former two Protestant and the latter Roman Catholic and all from Tübingen. The first two especially take their cue originally from Karl Barth. Barth is a strong opponent of natural theology and believes that he has the Bible on his side. He writes, 'In the whole Bible of the Old and New Testaments not the slightest attempt is ever made to prove God'.⁵ The true knowledge of God is given in Jesus Christ. There God has made his name and nature known. The Christian revelation therefore does not require these supposed preliminaries; it stands in its own right and makes natural theology both superfluous and impossible. It is superfluous because all that we need to know of God is given us in Jesus Christ and it is impossible because no one by natural means could ever discover that a crucified man was the revelation of God. Now not all by any means follow this argument. Pannenberg,⁶ another German scholar, in his recent publication entitled *Systematic Theology* argues, not for the old philosophical proofs, but for the intuitive knowledge of a god or gods and quotes the example of other faiths and religions as indicators of the truth of this form of knowledge. There is, however, a strong movement away from such a position.

Thus today we are asked to consider the revelation in Jesus Christ as the one sure foundation. This is, in fact, the position adopted by the main Christian creeds though not by all confessions of faith. They say implicitly - we do not begin with some general view of God and then go on to equate this with the God of revelation. We do not seek natural proofs in order to believe but the reverse 'Credo ut intelligam' - 'I believe in order that I may understand'. The Creeds all begin therefore with faith in God revealed in Christ 'I believe' and 'We believe' say the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. Let us take the first article of the Creed: 'I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth ..'. This is not the discovery of natural theology; it is a tenet of faith. It is not something shared by all and sundry in some kind of forecourt of the gentiles. Rather

⁵ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 37.

⁶ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol I, pp. 63ff and pp. 119ff.

it is because we believe in Christ that we know God as Father and our Creator and therefore believe in him. It is not only Christ and his work that is the manifestation of the grace of God but as Luther said 'creation is also grace'. In fact many world views do not share this idea of a creator God at all or that God and the world are to be distinguished. There are many conceptions of the universe which see the world as an aspect of the divine or an emanation from the deity. The Christian view is quite unique and has its basis in relation to both redemption and creation in the one and only name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let me give you a further example of change in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity. Here modern theology differs from traditional views. They began with the unity of God, 'De Deo Uno,' concerning the one God and then went on to speak of 'De Deo Trino' concerning the triune God, three in one and one in three. The real error of that approach, as with theism, is that there is no God who is simply one, singular. The unity of God is the unity of three in one. Moreover, to begin with unity and then go on to trinity could mean fitting the trinity into a preconceived idea of unity. Karl Rahner, a prominent Roman Catholic theologian, has pointed out that this is an implicit Unitarianism.⁷ He goes on to show how this, especially in the Catholic tradition, has been a prominent feature of theology and has led to a minimal place being given to the doctrine of the trinity.

Thankfully, within the last two decades there has been considerable change in our conception of the nature and function of the triune God. The Trinity is viewed not as an abstruse dogma accepted but largely set aside. Rather, it is seen as the expression of the living, dynamic God of revelation who has life, love and fellowship within himself and who gives us the pattern for our lives in Church and society.⁸ This he communicates to us and enables us to participate in the fellowship of the divine life. Moreover, as a society or fellowship, a being in relationship, his life is the paradigm or exemplar and inspiration of what we are called to be in Church and society, in fellowship one with another. In modern thought, therefore, on the basis of revelation, the Trinity has once more become highly significant and relevant for Christian life, for the Church, for worship, for its theology and for social and practical concerns.

⁷ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, pp., 15ff.

⁸ See, for example, *The Forgotten Trinity*, the Report of the B.C.C. Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine To-day.

Thus the older views which had an element of natural theology are now suspect. In contrast to a rather static view of the nature and being of God and the Christian revelation, given almost in propositional forms, modern attempts are made to show God as dynamic, living, active, entering in sacrifice, in vulnerability into our history and sufferings, our sin and needs. The Christian revelation properly understood gives us, therefore, further fresh insight into the nature of God.

The very heart of that revelation is the person of Jesus Christ. One can put it like this; if the centre of God's revelation is in Christ, the centre of Christ is the cross and the cross is seen not apart from his life and work but as the crown and culmination of it,⁹ the coronation of the royal man, the manifestation of the deity of the living God. The one true being of God is in Jesus Christ the crucified. It is above all on the cross that God is most clearly revealed. Here in the greatest possible contradiction God is at one and the same time concealed, veiled in flesh and yet known as he really is. This supreme veiling, this darkest hiddenness, this setting of the Son as it were over against the Father in atonement, and yet the two as one in this act is the revelation of the very nature of the true God himself. It is this death that manifests the life of God so that some theologians like Moltmann, following Luther, speak of the crucified God, or, Jüngel, the death of the living God,¹⁰ phrases that must be carefully used and defined. While it is not meant that God actually ceases to be, which is an impossibility, it is by submitting himself in the man Jesus to death in union with the Son on the cross that the very nature of life, of the living God is revealed.

Here, however, one must add a further important thought and that is that the whole life of Christ including his death would not have these characteristics, would in fact be meaningless and tragic, were it not for what followed, that God raised his Son Jesus from the dead, confirming all that he was and said and did. It is there that one sees the revelation of God as he really is. The resurrection casts its light back on the whole life, ministry and cross of Jesus and gives it its revelatory significance; it casts its light back on the whole of the Old Testament and gives it its Christian character. Bengel, one of the old theologians, a couple of centuries ago said that the Scriptures breathe the resurrection. Were it not for the

⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, 2 centres his doctrine of reconciliation on the cross and resurrection, pp. 199ff.

¹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God, passim*; Eberhard Jüngel, *Vom Tod des lebendigen Gottes in Unterwegs zur Sache*, pp. 105-125.

resurrection the cross would be a dead letter, what happened there would be closed off from us. But what happened in the resurrection has opened to us the saving significance of the cross and by the power of the Holy Spirit creates faith in us. That is the God in whom we believe, that is our faith.¹¹ We are thus challenged today by our theologians to rethink our conception of God, to see him in this living and dynamic way in the light of what he has actually done in the life and death of Jesus Christ and in the power of his resurrection. The practical consequences of this are that we abandon or at least query the old Apologetics and follow what is the main thrust of the New Testament proclamation and its theology, namely that we bear witness to the truth as it is in Jesus, Son of the Father, giver of the Spirit, our Redeemer and Lord.

2. FREEDOM

We come now to the second word, 'freedom' and will look at it in three ways. First, Christian freedom is the freedom of God who is love. God loves and lives in the freedom of his own life in the fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and comes to us in the Son by the Spirit for our salvation. What God has done in Christ is done out of his free love. This means that he is not forced by any necessity in himself or any external pressure, not even our sin, though he does come to take away our sin. It is an act of complete freedom which when received by us liberates us, is, as our reformed forebears said, free grace, wholly undeserved and unconditional. Yet, as Bonhoeffer pointed out, it is not a cheap but a costly grace, costing the whole drama of God's sacrificial act in Christ by the Holy Spirit. And it is the Spirit who makes us alive, sets us free from our bondage to sin and evil, brings us into the liberty of the children of God and enables us to call God our Father.

Secondly, Christian freedom is freedom for fellowship. This freedom which the Christian faith affirms and as Christians we experience is from first to last a community affair. God has always chosen a people, the people of Israel and the Church, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a peculiar people, to reflect his triune life, freedom and fellowship. Personal faith is within this context. Has not much of our practice, if not our theology, departed seriously from this conception? Individualism whether past or present, a low view of the Church and the sacraments, a history of schism all go back, to some extent at any rate, to the neglect of the doctrine of the Church. This century has been called the century of the

¹¹ Barth, *op. cit.*, pp. 283ff.

Church and current theology re-emphasises that we are free in the full sense of the term as members of this community, in fellowship with Christ and with one another. The Creeds do not say, I believe simply on my own but I believe as a member of God's people. We believe 'the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church'.

One of the areas where, within the Church, the whole conception of freedom is important is in relation to the past. In theology, the great past traditions which we inherit, our confessional documents, have moulded us strongly especially here in Ireland. I suggest the way we should seek to deal with these is summed up in the phrase 'respectful freedom in relation to tradition'.¹² The respect comes first. Our forebears have left us a great heritage which influences us powerfully still. Theologically, the Reformation and the 17th Century movement figure greatly in our thinking and action especially in Presbyterianism. The wrong attitude towards this is to absolutise tradition and confessions, treating them as if they were more than human forms and expressions of a particular age and forgetting that the faith has to be lived out and thought through afresh in each new generation. Jürgen Moltmann in his book *The Crucified God*¹³ speaks about the need for identity and relevance. We would lose our souls if we lost our Christian identity, that is the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. At the same time, our identity becomes petrified if it is simply equated with a past tradition. Tradition then can be seen as almost the only way to interpret Scripture. It then goes on to be set side by side with Scripture and then virtually takes over. Thus tradition becomes the norm; tradition rules. We do what we accuse the Roman Catholic tradition of doing and we are paying the price for it today. To absolutise tradition or to neglect our identity with the past are both wrong ways. The third way is freedom in relation to tradition. This is not freedom to do or to believe anything or everything which would be licence. Rather freedom in this context means to be free to assess all traditions in the light of the supreme standard of Holy Scripture. Our forebears said that all councils have erred and must be subject to a higher court. This is also implicit in the great slogan which we inherit from the past that the Church reformed must be a church submitting itself continually to reformation. I take this to mean not just renewal in life but in thought, submitting ourselves to rethinking and re-expressing the faith and relating it relevantly to the issues of the hour. This is an aspect of our Christian and our theological liberty and a continuing obligation to be exercised in relation to all our traditions.

¹² Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1,2, pp. 695ff.

¹³ Moltmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 7ff.

Thirdly, freedom is both a gift and a task (Gabe und Aufgabe). It summons us to responsible behaviour and has moral and ethical requirements of holiness, love and peace built into it. It is a call to service which in Christ is perfect freedom. It is based on and reflects the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It involves those hard things we shirk too easily, self-sacrifice, self-denial, taking up the cross, dying with Christ that with him we may truly and freely live. It is, quite simply, as the New Testament states, working out our own salvation as God works in us.

A further obligation is not only to stand for and promote freedom in the Church but to see it and its implications for society and politics, to look for systems of government built on freedom and guaranteed by law and order. The Church's approach is neither purely individualistic nor collectivistic but surpasses both in seeking a social order that embraces all freely. And the obligation laid upon us is in line with the wishes of so many people today.

There is a view that is held by many and has often a great deal of truth in it that the Church is over against the world and is there to counter the spirit of the age. Very often it has to swim against the stream. The liberty of the Sixties encapsulated in Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*¹⁴ all too quickly evaporated and degenerated into the permissive society. While this is so, is there not another possibility, which I put before you that in every age those things which concern us in the Church are also the concern of the world outside the Church in a different way.

Is not one of the great yearnings of our age, and rightly so, the cry freedom going up today from many quarters and groups, the cry of the poor for sustenance and of the oppressed for justice, of women for equality, dignity and opportunity, of all the under-privileged to be lifted up? These are not the same as the liberty of the children of God but do they not to some extent reflect that liberty in the world and so are signs of the Kingdom? A Church and its theology which believes in liberty will affirm all legitimate human hopes and be an agent for promoting peace, justice and freedom for all humankind.

¹⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope: on the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*.

3. THE FUTURE

A further area which has been given considerable attention in modern theology is the place of hope for the future described in theological terms as eschatology, the doctrine of the last things. The old view was that it came at the end and deals with death, the future life, the judgement, and this is still perfectly in order.¹⁵ But modern theology sees eschatology not simply as dealing with the future but affirms that in the coming and life of Jesus, in his preaching of the kingdom of God, in his life and death, the last days have come already, are realised in this present age, in principle at any rate. But, while it is here in its reality in him yet it awaits a manifestation at the end of time and history. There is therefore a clear relationship between what has happened already in Christ, his once for all acts, and what is still outstanding. To put it otherwise, there is a tension between the already and the not yet.¹⁶

Others like Moltmann in his book *The Theology of Hope*¹⁷ see the future aspect as the entirely predominant one. What God has brought in Christ is the confirmation of the Old Testament promises; it is, however, the future to which we look for a real fulfilment. With Moltmann there is no once for allness in the Christ event but only hope for that fullness in the future. So his theology and that of another fellow German, Pannenberg,¹⁸ is future orientated in a one-sided way. It is virtually lacking in a real doctrine of the atonement.

My own view is that the relationship between the 'already' and the 'not yet' is a much more balanced view and more in line with the substance of New Testament teaching. This means that in the light of the end already real in Christ, we await the ultimate manifestation of his reign in glory. In other words we not only have faith in Christ past and freedom in him by the Holy Spirit in the present but we have the hope for the future coming again of the same Lord in judgement and consummation. We believe not only in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting but we look for new heavens and a new earth where righteousness will dwell, for a new creation of people and the cosmos where God will perfect his

¹⁵ Heppe, op. cit., pp. 695-712; *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chpts. xxxii and xxxiii.

¹⁶ Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, Vol I, pp. 96ff; John Bright, *The Kingdom of God*, pp. 187ff.

¹⁷ Moltmann, op. cit., *passim*.

¹⁸ Pannenberg, *Jesus, God and Man*, pp. 74ff; E. Frank Tupper, *The Theology of Wolfgang Pannenberg*, pp. 186ff.

kingdom and he will be all in all. Here is a great, many-faceted, panoramic vision of our future hope.

I want to draw your attention here to something which has often been missing in our conception of the faith under the aspect of the future, namely the link between redemption and creation. Much traditional theology saw salvation as simply for men and women or for their souls determined for heaven and not hell and the whole cosmic dimension was omitted. In one of his latest books, *The Way of Jesus Christ*,¹⁹ Moltmann points out how this could and possibly did lead to our ignoring the creaturely order in God's purpose and led to its abuse and exploitation. It was, was it not, going to perish anyway and was of little or no significance for our salvation. In many of the books on the atonement and reconciliation this aspect is almost entirely lacking. But the New Testament and modern theology, which follows it, speak otherwise. We have indeed as humans a future hope but it is not merely a kingdom on our own as humans with God. It is the hope of a cosmic consummation. This cosmic vision, however sketchily outlined, is clearly brought before us in the New Testament. It is God's purpose to reconcile all things to himself both in heaven and on earth and this does not mean universalism. Rather it is indicative of God's will to embrace not only humans but his creation, the whole cosmos in his redemptive purposes and future glory.

Hope in the God of the future is quite simply hope in Jesus Christ, in what he has done for us, and, on the basis of that end, promises still to do. This is a great antidote to the despair to which we are prone in our own situation here in Ireland and in all the savagery and brutality of the human misuse of freedom in our world. It is also an antidote to those frightening scenarios to which we are often treated of global warming which will destroy the earth, of the apocalyptic view of nuclear destruction, now thankfully less than it was, or the old Armageddon view of the end coming from the Middle East, where today as elsewhere there are signs of hope.

¹⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ. Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, pp. 272, 283, 312.

But as Christians with our hope in Christ we cannot give these human views the last word. The end and fulfilment of all things and human destiny are ultimately in God's power. He is the ultimate Lord of the future, the victor over sin and death, the Lord of creation. His kingdom has come and will be manifest in all its glory at the last. This is ours and the world's abiding comfort and sure hope.

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