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Christianity and the Supernatural

II. Historical Notes on Christian Supernaturalism

EUGENE R. FAIRWEATHER

IN THE FIRST INSTALMENT of this study I tried to indicate the importance for Christian faith and life of the "supernatural," rightly understood, and to distinguish authentic supernaturalism from the two basic alternatives, antinaturalism and naturalism. In this sequel, I want to look briefly at some of the more significant moments in the historical development of Christian supernaturalism and its rivals.

The historical interaction of supernaturalism, antinaturalism and naturalism—i.e., of analogy, equivocity, and univocity, respectively, in the correlation of divine and creaturely being—is much too complex a tale to be summarized here with any pretence of adequacy. Nonetheless, it will be necessary to point out certain highlights in the story, both as a partial clue to the understanding of some of the most tenaciously held positions in contemporary theology and as an indication of the predominance of authentic supernaturalism in the great tradition of Christian and Catholic thought. The biblical teaching itself will serve as a starting-point.

The Scriptures, which provide the primary text for all Christian theology, are neither in intention nor in fact a source-book of ancient ontology. In any case, we can hardly suppose that we are committed to the incidental philosophical ideas of the biblical writers, any more than to their scientific notions. At the same time—and this is what is really important for the Christian philosopher and theologian—certain metaphysical ideas appear to be natural expressions of biblical faith, reflecting as they do that understanding of the divine-human relation which is implicit in God's historical self-revelation. On this level, it can be cogently argued that Christian doctrine itself, in its primordial expression, points directly to realism and to transcendence—that is to say, to the essential marks of an analogical ontology. For instance, the Bible, for all its emphasis on the sovereign freedom of the divine purpose in history, speaks of order, of inherent and unassailable law, of a "righteousness" which defines the divine character, of a divine "image" in which God's purpose for man is initially expressed, and all this leads us to look for intelligibility and moral coherence in the revelation of God's nature and purpose. As for the other aspect of an analogical doctrine, the Bible speaks of the "holiness" of God, of his eternal transcendence, of his initiative in divine-human relations—all in terms

which make impossible any simple mutuality in man's relations with God. When we put all this together, it seems to point to analogy, rather than sheer voluntarism or univocal naturalism, as the structure of our understanding of divine revelation.

When we turn to the first post-biblical exponents of the Christian tradition, the Greek Fathers, we find the same attitude expressed against the background of a different intellectual history. In the first place, we have an insistence on the coherence of God's purpose in creation and salvation, a lively awareness of the intelligibility of the divine nature and action, and an affirmation of the real possibility of man's perfection in a vital union with God. In particular, as Jules Gross points out in his careful study of the Greek Fathers, one of their dominant concerns is the expansion of the Pauline "Christ-mysticism" and the Johannine doctrine of "eternal life" into a full-blown theology of man's participation in the divine nature as the end of God's action in creation and salvation;¹ such a doctrine, however, assumes a coherence between human nature and its divine destiny. At the same time, we have an emphasis on the gulf between creature and Creator, expressed both in repeated assertions of the divine mystery—for instance, against Arian attempts to interpret the doctrine of the Trinity univocally—and in the doctrine of God's "divinizing" action—that is to say, of the elevation of man's being by the divine indwelling—as the necessary ground of personal communion with God. It is not, I think, sufficiently recognized that the latter doctrine, however realistic its idea of sanctified man's communion with God may be, expresses an awareness of divine transcendence, deliberately formulated in opposition to those neo-Platonic ideas of the divine in human nature which are the real Eastern equivalent of Western Pelagianism.² Once more, transcendence united to realism defines an essentially analogical viewpoint.

Perhaps all this is best illustrated by reference to the fundamental concern of the Greek Fathers with the Christological problem, from the early struggles with Docetism to the Council of Chalcedon and beyond. The Christological dogma, elaborated as it was to safeguard the fundamental Christian truth of man's eternal salvation through the real yet unconfused union of the genuinely human with the truly divine in the mystery of the Incarnation, provides the perfect, concrete expression of the two correlative aspects of an analogical realism. On the one hand, it insists on the essential diversity of the divine and the human, while on the other hand it points to the possibility of their fruitful union through the loving condescension of the transcendent God. In other words, the doctrine of the two natures, each irreducible to the other, speaks of the ontological contrast between Creator and creature, but at the same time the doctrine of the unity of person reflects the unshakable conviction that the creaturely nature, made

1. Cf. Jules Gross, *La divinisation du chrétien d'après les Pères grecs* (Paris: Gabalda, 1938), *passim*.

2. Cf. C. Moeller and G. Philips, *The Theology of Grace and the Oecumenical Movement* (London: Mowbray, 1961), pp. 6f.

in God's image, is capable of the most intimate communion with the divine. At the very heart of their theological teaching, then, we find the Greek Fathers working from what we have seen to be the fundamental principles of biblical faith—the unapproachable holiness of the transcendent God and the gracious approach of that same God to his creatures, made for fulfilment in his love.

When we come to the Latin Fathers, we shall perhaps expect, in view of their more extensive interest in legal and moral questions, to find signs of a naturalistic idea of communion with God through the observance of a moral code, in place of a proper ontology of the supernatural. It is true enough that they are more obviously concerned with the concrete conditions of the moral life of conformity to the divine law than with the analysis of the relation of manhood, as such, to the supernatural, and that as a result they tend, in interpreting God's dealings with man, to present us with expressions of the moral duality of sin and *healing* grace rather than the ontological duality of nature and *supernatural* grace. Moreover, the greatest of the Latin Fathers displays a tendency to guarantee the transcendence of grace, given man's fallen state, by asserting the sheer freedom of God's will in predestination, instead of emphasizing the ontological gap between Creator and creature, and in this way provides an opening for some of the interesting variations of later theology on the theme of divine voluntarism.³ Nonetheless, when he looks beyond the Fall to the grace of Adam and the angels, or talks about the grace of *caritas* as the condition of the beatitude for which man's created nature longs, and above all when he states the meaning of our sonship to God in Christ, the ontological structure of Augustine's real doctrine comes to light. It is unmistakably plain, for instance, when he comments on a striking passage from the Psalter:

Consider whom he addresses in the same psalm: "I have said, Ye are gods, and ye are all the sons of the most Highest. But ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes" [Psalm 81 (82): 6f.]. It is manifest, therefore, that he called men gods who were deified by his grace, not born of his substance. For he justifies who is just through himself, not by another, and he deifies who is God in himself, not by participation in another. Now he who justifies, also deifies, because in justifying he makes sons of God. For "he gave them power to become sons of God" [John 1:12]. If we have been made sons of God, we have also been made gods, but this takes place by the grace of adoption, not by natural generation.⁴

If, then, Augustine tends to be preoccupied with the analysis of the truly virtuous life, so that the concept of grace as *adiutorium*, or divinely bestowed power of action, predominates in his thinking, his insistence on such grace as the indispensable condition of true righteousness is rooted in a realistic interpretation of human goodness as determined by certain ontological conditions. Thus, while it is in less spectacularly influential theologians,

3. Cf. Augustine, *De dono perseverantiae*, 16 (PL, 45, 1002); *De civ. dei*, XXI, 12 (CSEL, 40/2, 541); H. Rondet, s.j., *Gratia Christi* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1948), chs. vi-viii.

4. Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 49, 2 (PL, 36, 565).

like St. Ambrose and St. Leo, that we find the most explicit reflections of the Greek patristic ontology, it is undeniable that the same correlation of realism and transcendence underlies the wider developments of Latin patristic thought.

Nevertheless, Latin theology first achieves a systematic statement of an analogical ontology only after a delay of eight centuries. It is in the thirteenth century, when the tradition dominated by Augustine is enriched by fresh contact with the Greek Fathers and stimulated by the challenge of the Aristotelian renaissance, that we find this new and clear awareness of the ontological structure of Christian doctrine. When it comes, however, it marks a definitive advance in theological understanding. As Christopher Dawson puts it, in assessing the work of St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas Aquinas:

While preserving the broad lines of the Augustinian doctrine, they laid a much greater emphasis on the ontological character of the supernatural order. While Augustine conceives grace primarily as an act of divine power that moves the human will, Thomas considers it, above all, under its essential aspect of the new spiritual principle which transforms and renews human nature by the communication of the Divine Life: in other words, the state of deification of which the Greek Fathers habitually speak. . . . This combination of the Augustinian tradition with the characteristic doctrine of the Greek Fathers is perhaps the greatest theological achievement of the scholastic period, though it is usually little noticed in comparison with their philosophical synthesis.⁵

One might perhaps suggest that there is a closer connexion between their metaphysical thinking and their "emphasis on the ontological character of the supernatural order" than Dawson seems to realize. But the most important implication of his statement is the traditional character of the fundamental theological ideas of the greatest thirteenth-century thinkers, whose great achievement lay in giving articulate expression to the main stream of Christian thought, not in bringing off a doctrinal revolution. The revolution was to come in the following century.

The "anti-ontological deviation"⁶ of the fourteenth century was the result of the union of an exaggerated "Augustinianism" with a new strain of philosophical "nominalism." Thanks to this deviation from the main line of Christian thought, arbitrary will came to the fore as the true definition of God and the sole principle of coherence in reality. Whereas older theologies had tended to think of God's power as ordered by the law of his nature, the new theology developed a doctrine of his absolute power (*potentia absoluta*) as above intelligibility and order, which meant that the order of his *potentia ordinata* was conceived simply as a matter of divine choice, itself bound at most by the law of non-contradiction.⁷ As a result, all kinds of theological hypotheses appeared, in which the actual finality of God's action in nature and history was ignored for the sake of speculation about

5. C. Dawson, *Medieval Essays* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1953), pp. 101f.

6. E. Cailliet, *The Christian Approach to Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1953), pp. 131-41, speaks less justifiably of the "ontological deviation" in early Christian theology.

7. Cf. H. de Lubac, s.J., *Surnaturel* (Paris: Aubier, 1946), pp. 266ff.

possible alternatives to any given element in the Christian mystery, and the latter was turned into a mere sequence of arbitrary divine decisions.

Having obscured the ontological relation of creatures to the Creator, the new theology proceeded to destroy the essential dependence of nature on grace and the intrinsic orientation of grace to glory by speculating about a possible communion of man with God apart from grace and a possible dissociation of the present state of grace from the future state of glory. In such an ostentatiously incoherent theology, grace becomes an ornament casually bestowed by a divine fiat, rather than the supernatural fulfilment of a nature purposefully created by divine wisdom. The one significant reality that remains is God's will, whose typical act with respect to man becomes "acceptation" rather than "new creation."⁸

All this theological demolition, ostensibly undertaken in the interests of the sovereign Lord of biblical faith, led (as "biblical theology" often does) to an ambiguous result, in so far as the Christian God took on a striking resemblance to the divine ideal assumed by Ovid's heroines when they insisted that the mark of "true gods" was that they "could do anything."⁹ It is true that as long as Ockham's voluntarism was fortified by copious infusions of St. Augustine, some semblance of the authentic supernatural remained, but the principle of voluntarism makes the relations of creature and Creator inherently unstable. Ockham's critics, then, were quite right in suspecting Pelagian tendencies in his doctrine, for once the analogy of being is broken down, even in the supposed interests of transcendent liberty, the transition from an initial antinaturalism to naturalism is only too easy. As I have already hinted, one might well argue that, once the supernatural is reduced to self-assertive will, the question of whether there is anything "there" at all refuses to be suppressed. But even on the level of less radical questioning, once the supernatural reality of God and his grace is replaced by an omnipotent will and its groundless decision, we can legitimately ask if we may properly conceive of that will as granting salvation by way of covenanted reward for the observance of a legal morality. The human will then becomes, in a sense, determinative, since it is permitted to earn salvation by its own natural activity. But if it is conceded, even hypothetically, that man's works can have saving efficacy, the barrier against Pelagian naturalism is broken down, and the end product is a notion of the divine-human relation as a simple interplay of wills—univocally conceived, as in fact (and here of course is the secret of the quick change) they had been from the start. For such a doctrine the mystery of grace is really superfluous.

This strange but predictable product of antinatural voluntarism found a ready ally in Greek philosophical naturalism, revived by the Renaissance. The theological critique of sanctifying grace, in association with the humanist rebellion against so-called Augustinian denigrations of nature, produced

8. Cf. P. Vignaux, *Justification et prédestination au XIV^e siècle* (Paris: Leroux, 1934); W. Detloff, o.f.m., *Die Lehre von der Acceptatio divina bei Johannes Duns Scotus* (Werl i. W.: Dietrich-Coelde-Verlag, 1954).

9. Cf. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IV, 272f.:

pars fieri potuisse negant, pars omnia veros
posse deos memorant. . . .

a variety of humanistic theologies which stressed nature, human capacities, and human will, over against supernatural destiny, divine initiative, and divine grace. The theologies of "historical nature," of optimistic naturalism, and of "synergism" all reveal the same influence of the classical doctrine of "nature," which after its baptism by Thomas Aquinas had quickly lapsed because of the inadequacy of nominalism as a program of Christian education.¹⁰ The moral is pointed plainly enough in the ontologies emanating more or less directly from Renaissance culture, in which the relation of man to God comes to be presented in essentially univocal terms.¹¹

It is scarcely surprising that a number of serious Christian theologians, at once children of their age and students of the older Christian tradition, should have wondered where to go from here—nor is it surprising that they produced somewhat confusing solutions. The dilemma is magnificently illustrated by Luther and Calvin, Baius and Jansenius, who, with all their obvious differences, still dealt with the problem of nature and grace along parallel lines. Their common answer may be summarily described as an initial naturalism transformed into antinaturalism by a radical doctrine of the Fall and original sin. For all of them, man's primordial relation to God in paradise is essentially natural, since man's communion with God is made to rest on his natural capacities and achievements as God's creature, aided perhaps by a preternatural endowment or an actual grace, to which his nature is really entitled as part of its equipment for fully natural activity, but not elevated by sanctifying grace.¹² (Hence the description of that well-meaning "Augustinian," Baius, as "the Pelagius of the earthly paradise"¹³) For all of them, equally, man's situation is so radically altered by the Fall that he is now incapable, not only of natural salvation, but also of true supernatural redemption and transfiguration. Divine grace, by which man is ultimately saved from utter destruction, may be a matter of acceptance by the divine will, as in Protestant doctrines of justification, or it may be a simple determination of human action by the divine will, as in Jansenism. But the common factor is the supposition that, in the last analysis, grace remains essentially external, effecting no real inward renewal and elevation of nature.¹⁴ Despite the moving eloquence with which both Luther and Calvin, for example, speak of the indwelling of Christ and of the Christian's loving response, this relationship does not seem to include a true supernatural elevation of human nature. If it did, they would be compelled, for one thing, to give more consistent recognition to the organic relation of grace and works in the achievement of man's salvation. The reason for this radical deficiency in their theology lies in the tragic fact that the Reformers

10. The theology of "historical nature" is well represented by the Dominican Cajetan, optimistic naturalism by Baius, and "synergism" by the Jesuit Molina.

11. Cf. J. Maritain, *True Humanism* (London: Bles, 1938), ch. i.

12. Cf. F. X. Jansen, *Baius et le Baianisme* (Louvain: Museum Lessianum, 1927), p. 86; M. Thurian, "L'anthropologie réformée," *Irénikon*, 25 (1952), 24f.

13. Louis Bail, quoted by F. X. Jansen, *Baius*, p. 87.

14. This assertion may seem to many to be unfair and misleading, in view of the fact that the Reformers, at any rate, clearly intended to affirm the real "newness of life" of believers in Christ. Nonetheless, as the argument in the text indicates, Reformation theology seems unable to make room for a true renewal of human nature.

only escaped from Renaissance naturalism by way of the antinaturalist elements in nominalism, without finding anything better among the resources of a "Catholicism in decomposition."¹⁵ By their transformation of the Fall from a genuinely historical into an essentially ontological category they did succeed in breaking away from naturalism and expressing their profound awareness of divine transcendence, but at the expense of debarring nature from effective participation in the supernatural.

The complex antisupernaturalism of the Reformation finds illuminating expression in the Calvinistic "federal theology" of the *Westminster Confession*. In this document we are told, on the one hand, of the original "covenant of works," in which man's communion with God depended on "perfect and personal obedience" to the divine law. On the other hand, we are shown the "covenant of grace," in which man's salvation depends on faith in Christ as Redeemer. While it explicitly asserts the ontological gulf between God and the creature, the *Confession* assumes that this chasm can be overcome by the divine will expressed in a covenant, and so lapses into the naturalism of the "covenant of works," from which it only escapes through a doctrine of the Fall into total depravity.¹⁶ The argument moves, in other words, from a situation in which sanctifying grace is unnecessary to one in which it is impossible, without at any point presenting the natural as at once dependent upon and open to the supernatural.

The attempt of Protestant "orthodoxy" to uphold the divine transcendence by means of an ontological downgrading of human nature on the basis of the Fall could only be successful as long as the Fall was interpreted as a real depravation of nature. When the pioneers of liberal Protestantism launched their attack on the latter doctrine, first on moral and then on historical grounds, it was clear enough that the outcome, granted the Protestant presuppositions, could only be a renewed naturalism, and in fact this issue of antinaturalism *versus* naturalism dominates the whole controversy.¹⁷ Starting with the assumption that the Christian religion has to do with law, fallenness, and grace, rather than with God transcendent, man the creature, and his supernatural elevation, the debate becomes a kind of struggle between the divine will and the human will, between pseudo-transcendence and sheer immanence, fundamentalist dogmatism and rationalistic modernism, religious heteronomy and ethical autonomy, salvation by miracle and self-salvation. In this perspective, God and man, faith and reason, grace and nature, have too often seemed to be in essential contradiction, and it is hardly surprising that modern man, conscious of his inherent worth and his natural powers, has tended to choose himself rather than God, or at most to tolerate a domesticated divinity, as in pantheism and religious naturalism or in doctrines of a finite deity.

15. L. Bouyer, *Du Protestantisme à l'église* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1954), p. 164.

16. Cf. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, caps. 6-7.

17. Cf. H. Shelton Smith, *Changing Conceptions of Original Sin: A Study in American Theology since 1750* (New York: Scribner, 1955); L. Bouyer, *Du Protestantisme à l'église*, p. 184.

The present generation has witnessed a spectacular reaction against Protestant orthodoxy and liberal Protestantism alike, led by one of the most powerful theological minds of modern times. Karl Barth's sense of the supernatural depth of the Christian Gospel represents a real recovery of that awareness of God in his transcendent mystery which more than anything else gave vital religious force to the Reformation. Unfortunately, he also shares with the Reformers the failure to achieve a genuine ontology of the supernatural. Indeed, his perception of the essential structure of Christian faith is distorted by a reversion, more thorough and much more deliberate than that of Luther and Calvin, to an antinaturalistic obsession with the divine will and its freedom, as if (in Bouyer's words) "the sovereignty of God could not be affirmed and maintained without a correlative annihilation of the creature, and in particular of man." Consequently, despite his impressive grasp of the fundamental Christian truths of the Trinity and the Incarnation and his real desire to do justice to the exigencies of human thought and action, Barth does not quite manage to carry us beyond the antithesis of the antinatural and the natural to a coherent doctrine of the fulfilment of nature in the supernatural. To quote Bouyer again: "It is not [simply] the prideful way of man towards God that is condemned, [but] it is the merciful way of God towards man that is cut off."¹⁸ Perhaps it is not irrelevant to note that Barth is deeply concerned to deal with the challenge to Christianity of Feuerbach's naturalistic interpretation of religion as projection of human emotion.¹⁹ Lacking as he does a genuine ontology of the supernatural as ground and end of the natural, Barth can only respond to this challenge by asserting the divine sovereignty at the top of his voice, almost as though, if he were to let up for a minute, his contentless God would vanish and only nature be left. To borrow an expression from recent political debate, Barth is compelled to practise a kind of theological "brinkmanship," just because antinaturalism is inexorably driven by its denial of ontology to the very brink of unbelief.

All this adds up to the conclusion that, if we were to accept the terms of the post-Reformation theological debate within the Protestant world, we could hardly avoid the decision between an irrational dogma of sheer transcendence, somehow manifested or symbolized in revelatory events within history, and an immanent philosophy of religion, allied with a humanistic ethic. We can only escape this dilemma by a deliberate return to the older and fuller Christian tradition. In contrast both to the heteronomous antinaturalism of the *soi-disant* Augustinians and to the autonomous naturalism of modern humanism, the attitude of this tradition may be described, in Paul Tillich's language, as "theonomous." That is to say, it repudiates the pretensions of secular humanism without doing violence to the structure of nature and reason, and sees the true greatness of man in his natural openness to fulfilment in the "new being" of grace.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

19. Cf. K. Barth, *From Rousseau to Ritschl* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1959), ch. ix.