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# KING'S

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# THE GOD OF THE DOCTRINE COMMISSION. A CRITIQUE OF *WE BELIEVE IN GOD*<sup>1</sup>

KEITH WARD

It is a rare event in the Church of England for all the members of a doctrine commission to agree; not only to agree, but to be so unanimous that “all are prepared to stand behind every sentence of the text” (ix). One has heard of theologians who do not appear to believe in an “objective metaphysical God”; and so it is especially reassuring to find that what all the members of the commission are agreeing about is God. The concept of God is one of the most contentious and disputable in the history of human thought, and one could hardly have looked for such a degree of agreement in advance. In fact, the theological archeologist can find traces of quite profound disagreements which have been quickly buried. One such trace is evident in the Chairman’s preface, where he remarks that belief in an impassible God has been discarded. One suspects that the Chairman would like it to have been discarded; but the body of the text does not support the claim that it has been, in any sense in which it has been seriously held by Christian theologians.

Nevertheless, the doctrine that God suffers, which even Cyril of Alexandria, that staunch defender of impassibility, accepted, is certainly given a new prominence in the report, and I shall consider it later. A second statement which leaps out of the preface to confront the critical eye is that “God can be known only from within a response of loving obedience to his call” (viii). Of course, one must distinguish between knowing *that* there is a God, and knowing God by acquaintance. But here, perhaps, is another concealed dispute, between those who reject the project of natural theology, and appeal to revelation, understood in the sense of direct personal address; and others who might give greater place to argument, understood in a fairly wide sense. In the finished report, pride of place goes to the idea of a personalist God who calls us to obedient love. The tradition is a very English (or perhaps British) one, rooted in the personalism of H. H. Farmer and John Baillie, with further philosophical roots in the peculiarly British reinterpretation of the categorical imperative as a directly intuited demand of duty, which one finds in such writers as Kemp Smith.

It is worth noting that this is a rather localised interpretation of the idea of God in Christian tradition. The whole Thomist tradition, rooted securely in the Alexandrian Fathers, is scarcely mentioned. Other 20th century attempts to revise this idea, as in Process theology and in post-Positivist linguistic philosophy, are not seriously canvassed either. Whether one considers this a lack or an advantage probably depends on how obvious some form of theistic personalism seems. At any rate, one should note the primacy given to a personal-relationship model of Divine-human encounter in the report; and its reliance on a form of direct personal intuition, or religious experience, to ground its doctrine of God.

A great deal of the report is concerned with the question of how God makes himself known in revelation.

It is surely in order for a group of Anglican theologians to take the Bible as authoritative; but the sense they give to this authority is interesting. The tone is set by the statement that “If Christianity believes that God has revealed himself through the medium of human speech . . . then it cannot look for fixed, normative and universally agreed doctrine” (5). This is wholly different in tone from typical Roman Catholic statements, which insist precisely on irreformable normative doctrines, rooted in the *depositum fidei*. The Anglican statement is in one sense trivially obvious – that people will disagree on the interpretation of any set of words. But taken in another sense, it expresses a rather startling doctrine – that a verbal revelation from God is inherently incapable of conveying normative doctrines. The argument seems to be that, because a text may be interpreted in various ways, it can have no fixed core of meaning. “Revelation may be less of a fixed point than it appears” (10). It is stressed how much reason and experience affect how a text is read; and indeed, in chapter 2, interpretation of experience is said to have preceded the writing of the text. It is already imbued with rational interpretation; so the real locus of revelation turns out to be, not the text itself, but the interpreted personal experiences which preceded it and led to its writing.

All concepts, it is said, about God *as about anything else*, are necessarily incomplete, provisional, approximate and corrigible (25). Again, this statement seems to vacillate between the trivial and the breathtaking. It is trivial, if it means that no proposition gives an exhaustive description of an object in all possible respects, and that any proposition may be mistaken. It is startling, if it means that statements such as “This chair is brown” are so incomplete that someone else may say, “This chair is green”, without contradicting it. It does not follow from our limited knowledge that we do not know anything with certainty, or that we can never make any literally and simply true statements.

In the case of God, what is said to happen is that “there is One who makes a demand upon” persons. This demand requires interpretation; but it is objective, not a product of imagination. It is modelled in corrigible concepts, and then tested through time by a community, which accepts these models as appropriate to those characteristic experiences. There is a tension apparent here between a firm desire to be objective about God – “What God truly is, is what constrains and sets a limit on our approximate language about him” (33); and an emphasis on language being a set of “procedures for enabling us to think about the unobservable” (27). There are “points of discernment”, which may call for using many different images; yet there are limits on what is appropriate. The tension is one that is found in pronounced form in the work of Ian Ramsey, who uses the word “God” to mark the occurrence of disclosure-situations; but refuses to describe God except as the “more” which is there disclosed. There is something paradoxical in being certain that something more and objectively existent is disclosed, when one cannot describe what it is. Now the report apparently insists that some descriptions of God are available – perhaps this marks the advance of Mitchell over Ramsey. But there is still something odd about anyone apprehending the unobservable.

Perhaps we have again touched upon a hidden disagreement which does not quite surface, between those who would stress the *via negativa*, the abandonment of all concepts descriptive of God, and those who attribute personal attributes fairly directly to God, who can be apprehended much as other persons are. The latter view certainly predominates in the report. "The use of metaphors . . . about God is controlled . . . by theism as a metaphysical theory"(43). Strangely, however, the metaphysical theory is never more than hinted at. It seems to rely on the idea of God as a disembodied person, known in experience by a relationship of trust and openness. Vague gestures are made in the direction of other religions, of feminine language to describe God, and of various problems about Divine action in the world. But it cannot be said that they are taken seriously. A serious consideration of Buddhism, Vedanta or Islam, for example, might have led to a greater qualification of personalist imagery. And it is rather blithely assumed that patterns of divine behaviour can be observed in the world, even though the Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford is unable to find them. This may all seem unduly critical of a work of this nature; surely we do not want to inflict Maurice Wiles on our rural congregations? But the trouble is that the personalist view, so firmly rooted in the scriptural testimony of a specific community to the truth of many personal apprehensions of Divine action and demand, exposes its own weaknesses with ruthless abandon.

In ch. 14, it is said that "Scripture is . . . the distillation of perceptions of the reality of God which came to a worshipping community under the impact of particular historical events . . ." (54). The process is long and complex. First, events, prophecies or enacted laws; then their impact on a community; then a communal apprehension of God, partly caused by those events; then a distillation of this perception; and finally, I suppose, an editing of various such distillations into the canon of Scripture. A remarkable thing about the report is that it accepts overtly and without qualification a critical view of Scripture. It is noted that Scripture contains contradictions; that Jesus' first followers were mistaken in expecting a Divine intervention in history; that many events reported as historical – such as the rending of the temple veil in Mark – are symbolic, and did not really happen; and that it is virtually impossible to say where God's involvement in history begins and where it ends (61). God is nevertheless said to be the subject of a historical narrative which sets out his character and his nature as involved in the temporal flow of history. To paraphrase this view unkindly, what we are offered is the picture of an agent who cannot be identified, in a story whose beginning and end are both fictional and whose intermediate stages as narrated are too neatly schematised to be true to life. Yet this story is said to tell the truth about God.

When so much is admitted to be false, how can such a narrative be a source of truth? At this point, recourse is made again to the restricted nature of our language and imagery. The models are said to be valid "up to a point", and to express at least partly mistaken views about the coherence of history and the nature of God's moral demands (as in the command to exterminate

Amalekites). What, then, is the criterion for acceptability? It should be a metaphysical theory, we have been told. Unfortunately, the theory is one that identifies God as an agent involved in history, and apprehended as such by a line of prophets or by a worshipping community in Israel. Two major questions now arise: why is non-Hebrew apprehension of the Divine virtually ignored? Could only the Hebrews identify God as a historical agent? Did he only act in the Middle East? How can one explain the particularity of this revelatory tradition? Secondly, while Jesus, like many teachers, may widen the field of understanding of the Divine, why should he be given finality and unique authority? He is said to have had an exceptional degree of personal knowledge of God; to have had a uniquely intimate relationship with God. But it is hard to see how such beliefs about Jesus could possibly be supported by any evidence. When it seems that even an objective resurrection is disputable, claims about Jesus' innermost awareness of God are hardly to be given a greater degree of probable truth.

It may seem that I am writing this assessment as an affronted fundamentalist; but that is not the case. I am seeking to draw attention to what I believe to be a fundamental discrepancy in some contemporary Christian theology. That is, that advanced critical positions are adopted without their proper consequences being drawn. At key points, traditional views are asserted which no longer have an intelligible place in a critical approach. I have focussed briefly on two related issues – the way in which a very personalist and intuitionist account of God is combined with the belief that all images are inadequate and that the Divine is unknowable; and the way in which a rather sceptical approach to the historical accuracy of the Biblical records is combined with an acceptance of certain particularly recondite and irretrievable truths about the uniqueness of Jesus' awareness of God. Thus it is said that "it is impossible to do more than provide a tentative reconstruction" of the life and understanding of Jesus (87). Yet vast claims are made that the object of this tentative reconstruction is "the embodiment of the Word of God" (96). It is all the more odd when it is said that "the God whom Jesus proclaimed was a God whose intervention in history was imminent" (83). This intervention did not occur; yet that failure is said not to render the concept invalid, because the early church was able to interpret the whole life of Jesus as part of the final intervention of God. But is Jesus' conception of himself important? Or is all that matters what the early church came to think of him? The report exemplifies a three-stage process in the interpretation of Jesus. First, is the idea of Jesus as the agent of the Kingdom, with a Messianic role "in some sense". Next, comes the idea of Jesus as expressing God's nature on earth and as securing forgiveness of sins by his death. And third, is the fully-fledged Trinitarian doctrine of inclusion in a cosmic Christ by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. But once one allows so much development of interpretation, so much legendary or myth-making accretion, so much admission of error and culturally limited perception in Jesus and the apostles, how can one be justified in saying, for instance, that Jesus himself had a new and uniquely close relationship with God? And how important is it to say that?

The problem seems to me acute. If the Scriptures were infallibly protected from error, one might be able to say that God himself shows himself to be self-giving love, suffering love, in Jesus. But if they are so uncertain, how can they provide privileged information about God himself? Must one not simply say that such ideas of God arose in the community which came into being after Jesus' death? That it is unjustifiable to project them back onto an unrecoverable historical person, and unnecessary to do so? The whole tenor of the report's treatment of revelation tends in the latter direction; but the conclusion is never bluntly drawn. For if it were, it would be apparent that God does not *in fact* disclose his nature by particular historical acts. And then the underlying idea of God as calling people to respond to his voice would be so dehistoricised and dematerialised that it would no longer have a uniquely authoritative place among the world's very varied images of the Ultimately Real.

I am suggesting that the idea of God espoused by the report is, by the logic of its own argumentation, a rather restricted one, based on foundations which cannot give it a position of special authority. This point emerges forcefully in considering the treatment of the Trinity. A fascinating attempt is made to ground a doctrine of the Trinity in the experience of prayer. It is doomed to fail. "Does a deepening relationship to God in prayer . . . allow one to remain satisfied with a simple undifferentiated monotheism?", the report asks. Jews and Muslims would unhesitatingly answer, "Yes". To justify a negative answer, a very complex idea of prayer as God's conversation with himself, in which people are caught up, is developed. I am not able to comment much on this, except to remark that it sounds remarkably like parts of Hegel. The report itself notes the lack of feminine imagery in the tradition, and does not seem clear as to whether it is Christ or the Spirit who prays within and through us. An observer might well think that this is only *one* experience of prayer, and that even it does not really produce the Christian Trinity, with its triad of persons who differ "only in number and relation"(105). The experiential foundations are too weak for such a grand doctrine; and the restriction to one tradition, with only a token nod in the direction of other faiths, seems slightly myopic.

Still, the Christian doctrine of God *is* distinctive; and one main feature the report stresses is that of the cross, as showing the suffering of God with his creatures. This is a popular theme these days; and perhaps I could end with a few words about it. The Church Fathers generally agreed that God suffered, in his human nature. But they refused to mitigate Divine omnipotence. God may restrain the exercise of his power; but he could never be weak, and it was never remotely possible for him to suffer defeat. There are stray remarks in the report which suggest a temptation to deny omnipotence. On the cross, God is said at one point to endure "in patient weakness", and come "perilously close to defeat"(121). In the final chapter, the model of a saviour-king is recommended, and it is commented that "it is not by the will of the king that poverty and oppression exist"(149). Then another model, of a sculptor, is canvassed; one who reaches out towards a vision not yet fully formulated, who is constrained by the nature of his material. All these remarks picture a God who does his best with very

recalcitrant material; the ghost of Whitehead almost materialises. But he is driven off at the last moment; God is said to choose the material too, and his victory is assured. All these remarks are tantalising in the extreme; but it is clear that the main image of God being recommended is of a sensitive, persuasive, loving, suffering and sympathetic person. That may be a pleasing image to have; but does it really make it any easier to understand how *such* a God could have freely chosen to bring into existence so much pain and sadness, for himself as well as for his creatures? Where is the savagery, the judgment, the terror of the God who is a consuming fire and an invincible destroyer? Perhaps we are better off without him. But at least he seemed to fit in with most human experiences of the world better than the tremendously sympathetic Divine artist who carefully shapes our lives around so much distress.

I end with an apology for seeming to be so terribly negative. That is a besetting sin of my profession. The report in fact contains many good things. Its full acceptance of critical scholarship; its emphasis on the objectivity of the Divine being; its stress on the multiplicity of images for speaking of God; and its presentation of a God of suffering and redeeming love seem to me of very great value. What I have perhaps really done in this short paper is to set out my own perplexities, as I have found them mirrored in the text. Perhaps it is true, however, that this is a very Anglican report – expressing enormous sympathy and tolerance, while at the same time remaining wedded to a slightly restrictive and comfortably civilised idea of a very decently sympathetic God.

It is pleasant to know that the doctrine commission believes in God. Perhaps the God they believe in, however, is just too vague, sentimental and well-meaning to be wholly credible either in terms of the total Biblical witness or of the world in which most human beings live. I do wish that what they said was true; but then I suffer from sentimentality myself.

#### FOOTNOTE

1. *We Believe in God. A Report by the Doctrine Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England.* London: Church House Publishing, 1987. Professor Ward wishes it to be made known that the paper was not written on his own initiative, but commissioned as a contribution to the Cheyneygates Seminar. The paper is being published at the request of the *King's Theological Review*.