

The Preacher's Appeal to Intellect

“BE ready always,” wrote the Apostle, “to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you. . . .”¹ The question which arises, particularly for the preacher, is, Can this be done? To what degree and in what sense can preaching be a process of reasoning? This question has theoretical interest, in the light of contemporary philosophy and theology; and for those of us who have the job to do it has also some practical importance.

Contemporary philosophers and theologians, although poles apart in every other respect, seem to be at one in minimising the part which reasoning can play as a means to the attainment or communication of a knowledge of God. To begin with philosophy, it is now two hundred years since David Hume wrote²: “If we take in hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.” Drawing their inspiration from Hume, the Logical Positivists of today similarly limit the scope of reasoning to mathematics and science and consider the only possible forms of verification to be either analytical or empirical. Ayer, for instance, lays it down that “all utterances about the nature of God” are “nonsensical.”³ They have no meaning because there is no way of determining their truth or falsehood. Some propositions can be verified by an analysis which shows them to be tautologies and, therefore, indisputable (e.g. $2 + 2 = 4$ or “white swans are white”); other propositions are verified by empirical observation or experiment which shows them to have a high degree of probability as forecasts of sensation (e.g. “This table is hard” is verified by the sensation of bumping into it, and the oftener you bump the more confidently you assert that it is hard.) Statements about God, such as we make from the pulpit, are verifiable in neither of these ways and, according to Ayer, are consequently meaningless. It should be

¹ 1 Peter iii. 15.

² *Inquiry into Human Understanding*.

³ *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd ed., p. 115.

noticed that he brings the atheist and agnostic under the same condemnation as the theist; it is just as nonsensical to say "God does not exist" or "God may or may not exist" as to say "God does exist," if there is no way of verifying these statements. Bertrand Russell sums up the view of this school to which he himself belongs: "They confess frankly that the human intellect is unable to find conclusive answers to many questions of profound importance to mankind, but they refuse to believe that there is some 'higher' way of knowing by which we can discover truth hidden from science and the intellect."⁴

If he accepts this, the preacher need not conclude that he must stop talking about God altogether, but only that he must stop trying to give a reason. He may still appeal to the hearts of his hearers and try to inflame their passions or arouse their fears; he may still appeal to the will and send them off in all directions to do things. But he is wasting his own time and theirs in making any appeal to intellect, if the Logical Positivists are correct in their account of reasoning and verification.

REASONING AND VERIFICATION

But are they correct? Consider, first, reasoning. When they say that the only meaningful propositions are those of mathematics or science, they restrict the scope of reasoning to these two activities. But, surely, propositions other than those of mathematics or science have meaning. Professor Ayer himself seems to think so in the introduction to the second edition of his book, where he qualifies what he has said about meaning in the first edition: "I do not overlook the fact that the word 'meaning' is commonly used in a variety of senses, and I do not wish to deny that in some of these senses a statement may properly be said to be meaningful even though it is neither analytically nor empirically verifiable."⁵ So, it would appear that, after all, when we talk about God, we are not necessarily talking nonsense.

To reason is to think consistently, and it is possible to do this in more than one way. We use not one logic, but many. There is a method of reasoning appropriate to mathematics, and there are others appropriate to science, art, ethics and religion respectively. No method of reasoning is entitled to set itself up as the arbiter of what has or has not meaning, what is valid or invalid as argument, beyond its own field. It is one of the achievements of modern Logic to have shown that there is not one set of laws of thought applicable to the whole field of reasoning, but many different sets of logical criteria, each applicable within its own field. The logic appropriate to any activity is determined by the purpose which that activity is

⁴ *History of Western Philosophy*, p. 863f.

⁵ P. 15.

designed to serve. Suppose you are playing a game with the alphabet, the point of which is to find an adjective for each letter; then, if you say: "I love my love with an A, because she's adorable, with a B, because she's bashful, with a C, because she's cute," you are reasoning correctly and, within the limits of the game, what you say has meaning; but if you go on: "And I love her with an E, because she is fluffy," you are reasoning incorrectly, and what you say is meaningless. But in a game the 'point' may be of your own invention, whereas in other methods of reasoning the 'point' is given; but, with this difference, the analogy holds good. The purpose served by science, for instance, is the prediction of events in the physical world, and there are logical criteria, appropriate to scientific argument, which determine how this purpose can best be served. If you turn from science to musical composition, however, you find another method of reasoning in operation. "The patterning of a Bach fugue, for instance," wrote Professor Dorothy Emmett in a recent article, "could be called supremely rational, since it does the job intended and it is possible to see the principles on which it does it."⁶ But the reasoning of a composer is governed by different logical criteria from those of a scientist in his laboratory or a child at play. In ethics the purpose of reasoning is to determine duty, what ought to be done. The moralist may answer this question, first, by referring to some rule, generally regarded as right in his community (e.g. that a promise should be kept). But it may be that he considers some such rule, or a particular application of it (e.g. where great evil will follow from keeping a promise) unsatisfactory, and then he will consider the rule as to what is right in the light of more general considerations as to what is good. In all this he is using a method of reasoning different from that of the scientist or the musician, but it is reasoning none the less.

Within some of these fields (e.g. science or ethics) questions arise which cannot be answered in terms used by the method of reasoning appropriate to that field. Suppose the question is asked: "Why do trees bloom in the spring?" The botanist explains the mechanism of it. But the questioner may persist, "Yes, I know all that. I accept the reasons you have given me. But what are the reasons for your reasons? Why do trees bloom in the spring?" All the scientist can say is that he has given you his explanation and you are going beyond the limits of reasoning when you ask him to explain his explanation. Indeed you are going beyond the limits of *his* method of reasoning. But you are not asking a question which is meaningless. Suppose, again, the question is asked: "What ought X to do?" The moralist answers the question by reference to what is right or good or both. But if the questioner asks now: "But why ought he to do what is right and good?" the moralist will reply

⁶ "Reason in Recent Theology," *Political Quarterly*, June, 1955.

that this is not a genuine question. What you are asking is: "Why ought he to do what he ought to do?" because 'what he ought to do' is, by definition, what is right and good. But when a man asks: "Why ought I, or anybody else, do what is right or good?" he is not talking nonsense; his question does mean something; there is something he wants to know; though if he is ever to discover it, he will have to go beyond the limits of that method of reasoning appropriate to ethics. It is this kind of question—the question which takes you beyond the limits of the other methods of reasoning—with which religion is concerned.

There is a point which should be made with some emphasis. If we ask the philosopher to concede that there is a method of reasoning, appropriate to religion, just as there is a method appropriate to science, art or ethics, we must be prepared to accept his demand that religion should confine its activities to its own field and not trespass on others. In other words it must answer questions which go beyond the limits of science or ethics and not intrude within these limits. An illustration will make the point clear. The fundamentalist says, "Everything in the Bible must be taken as true." But much of what the Bible contains is not specifically religious, it is not about what Paul Tillich calls the "revelatory situation" between God and man; it consists in statements of fact or ethics. But if the fundamentalist says: "You must believe this because it is in the Bible," concerning the account of the creation or the record of some historical incident; or if he says: "You must regard this as right because it is laid down in the Bible" concerning some ethical statement or command; then he is applying a criterion "because it is in the Bible" to the questions of fact or morality, in determining which other methods of reasoning are appropriate.

The point could not be better put than it is by Toulmin: "Of course 'theological' arguments, and 'religious' questions and answers—those with which we are concerned here—are on quite a different footing, as a matter of logic, from scientific and ethical arguments, questions and answers. But it is only if we suppose that religious arguments pretend (say) to provide exact knowledge of the future—so competing with science on its own ground—that we can be justified in attempting to apply to them the logical criteria appropriate to scientific explanations; and only if we do this that we have any grounds for concluding (with Ayer) that 'all utterances about the nature of God are nonsensical,' or (with Freud) that religion is an 'illusion.' Provided that we remember that religion has functions other than that of competing with science and ethics on their own grounds, we shall understand that to reject all religious arguments for this reason is to make a serious logical blunder . . ."⁷

When all this is said a question remains, and it is an exceedingly

⁷ *Reason in Ethics*, p. 212.

difficult one. Suppose "religion" is recognised as a distinct method of reasoning, which is as philosophically respectable as the others; then what are the logical criteria appropriate within this field? How, in other words, do you decide the issue of truth and falsehood as between one theological system and another?

This brings us to verification. The Logical Positivist is right when he demands that statements, if they are significant and not merely utterances of subjective emotion or private opinion, must be verifiable. There must be some way of testing their truth or falsehood, otherwise they can contribute nothing to knowledge. But need we restrict verification any more than reasoning to those forms of it which are appropriate to mathematics or science? Scientific hypotheses are 'proved' or 'disproved' by means of controlled experiments. The tests appropriate here can be applied with a rigorous exactness, and the scientist can say with a high degree of probability what is and what is not to be regarded as an established conclusion in his field of knowledge. How much easier life for us would be if there were some equally 'objective' method of deciding the theological issues on which we differ! One thing we can say, however, is that verification by controlled experiments is not the only test of truth. Paul Tillich puts it well: "It is not permissible to make the experimental method of verification the exclusive pattern of all verification. Verification can occur within the life-process itself."⁸ He calls this "experiential verification" and he says of it: "This test, of course, is neither repeatable, precise nor final at any particular moment. The life-process itself makes the test. Therefore, the test is indefinite and preliminary; there is an element of risk connected with it. Future states of the same life-process may prove that what seemed to be a bad risk was a good one and vice versa. Nevertheless the risk must be taken . . . experiential verification must go on continually . . . whether it is supported by tests or not." He says that "Physicians, psychotherapists, educators, social reformers, and political leaders" have to use this method as well as theologians.⁹ So, although we find it so difficult to agree among ourselves as to the tests which we will accept in determining the truth or falsehood of each others' theological ideas, we can at least comfort ourselves with the reflection that, when we talk to men about God, we are not talking about that which admits of no verification.

CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

Now we turn to theology. Kirkegaard, a hundred years ago, wrote a great deal about the essential unreason of Christianity. He described Christ as the "Sign of Contradiction" (cf. *Luke* ii.

⁸ *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, p. 114.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 115.

34), and explained: "To be a sign of contradiction is to be another thing which stands in opposition to what one immediately is. Immediately, He is an individual man, just like other men, a lowly, insignificant man; but the contradiction is that He is God."¹⁰ The God-man is the absolute paradox. As such, He is, and always will be, an offence to reason. Reason cannot accept Him, only faith. The Gospel, according to Kirkegaard,¹¹ "says to every individual, 'Thou shalt believe' . . ." It is God's absolute imperative, with no apology nor explanation offered. Faith means believing in spite of, not because of. It involves absolute self-commitment, without reason, even against reason. Only where there is such self-commitment can there be a radical transformation of the existence of men and women in Christ.

Kirkegaard would seem to have regarded any attempt to give a reason in preaching as a kind of treachery to the Gospel. He declared that, if Christianity ever lost its power to offend, it would, at the same time, lose its power to save; for then it would no longer demand that total surrender through which alone there can be transformation of existence. When we attempt to win men for Christ by giving a reason we are misrepresenting Christianity as "an easy thing, a superficial something which neither wounds nor heals profoundly enough."¹²

This is the background of contemporary theology and the most influential theologians nowadays draw their inspiration from the melancholy Dane. It is relevant to consider what these contemporaries say about (a) natural theology, and (b) preaching.

In their famous discussion of natural theology, despite the heat that was generated, Barth and Brunner seem to have been at one on the main point.¹³ Reason, since human nature of which it is a part is totally corrupt, cannot bring men to a saving knowledge of God. "There is," says Brunner at any rate, "a 'general' revelation of God in the natural world, but only the 'spiritual' man, enlightened by the 'special' revelation in Christ, can discern it. The 'natural' man, blinded by sin, cannot see the revelation of God in creation by any exercise of his unregenerate intellect."

Now, it is certainly the case that, while there are 'evidences' of God in nature, there are no 'proofs.' If we tried to argue conclusively from the order and beauty in the world, for instance, or from the fact of personality, to the existence of God, we should be attempting a syllogism which had more in its conclusion than its premises; and this is necessarily so with any attempt to 'prove' a transcendent God from natural premises. But what about the

¹⁰ *Training in Christianity*, p. 125.

¹¹ *The Sickness unto Death*, p. 200.

¹² *Training in Christianity*, p. 139.

¹³ *Natural Theology*, comprising "Nature and Grace" by Brunner and "No" by Barth.

'evidences' of God? The question, of practical importance for the preacher, is, Is it only the converted Christian whose attention should be drawn to these, and are we wasting our time, if we talk about them to the unbeliever?

It would almost seem so from some of the things which Bultmann says in a powerful passage on preaching. Preaching " thrusts upon the hearer the decision question."¹⁴ It is not a preparatory instruction which precedes the actual demand for faith, but is itself the call for faith or the challenge to give up one's previous self-understanding . . . the salvation-occurrence is nowhere present except in the proclaiming, accosting, demanding and promising word of preaching . . . in the proclamation Christ Himself, indeed God Himself, encounters the hearer. . . ."¹⁵ This is a very high view of preaching, but it leaves us wondering. If the point of our preaching is simply to thrust the decision-question on men, to demand faith, to present Christ as the 'sign of contradiction,' then we are indeed wasting time when we try to give a reason. Surely, there is more to preaching than this? You may feel that we are failing to observe the difference between the 'kerygma' and the 'didache'; but while that distinction is useful in theory, in actual practice it is impossible to hold apart the two functions of herald and teacher. The preacher is called upon to be both, and at one and the same time.

Undoubtedly the end of preaching is to bring men to decision. And, if they make the act of commitment at all, they must do so freely; not because they are coerced by their own reasoning or ours, but in faith. But it flies in the face of facts to say that men and women come, and must come, to this decision apart altogether from any process of reasoning. Some may, but many do not. It is after a process of reasoning that many embrace the Faith, just as, when their faith is challenged later on, it is with the help of a process of reasoning that they retain it. The preacher can and should help them here.

There are two types of argument which the preacher can use, viz. (1) *The conditional argument.* The preacher cannot demonstrate the existence of God, but he can ask his hearers to accept it as hypothesis. If God exists, then what follows? The most obvious example would be—if God exists, then there is some sort of 'explanation' of the order and beauty in the world. But if He does not, how are you to account for them? Or again, if Christ rose from the dead, then there is an 'explanation' of the rise and growth of the Church; but if He did not, then how are you to account for it? No one supposes that this kind of argument can establish demonstrably the existence of God or the resurrection, but it has

¹⁴ *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. I, p. 303.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 301f.

helped many to attain or regain a belief in them. (2) *The exposure of rationalisation*. Reasoning can be a retreat from truth as well as a means to it. The intellectual doubts which many people say stand in the way of their acceptance of Christianity may be simply the rationalisation of their reluctance to accept it on grounds other than intellectual. Christianity may make moral demands upon them which they are unwilling to concede. Reasoning can be a means, not of bringing the unbeliever to Christianity but, at least, of driving him out of the retreats in which he hides from its claims. Of course, if he is minded to escape from Christianity, he will not be particularly amenable to reasoning which undermines his intellectual doubts and, if driven from one position, he will quickly take up another. But, if preaching is preparing the way of the Lord, a clearing of the path for Christ as the 'sign of contradiction,' then the kind of reasoning which shakes the unbeliever's confidence in his own rationalisations has a purpose to serve and is part of the preacher's job.

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Horses and Chariots, ed. J. Eric Fenn. (British & Foreign Bible Society, 1s.).

In this, the Bible Society's Popular Report for 1956, the editorial secretary maintains the high standard of previous years, giving against the background of world events a comprehensive and absorbing account, well illustrated by photographs, of the work of the Society in all the lands through another twelve months. The story of how the Scriptures are being offered to men of all nationalities, sometimes in turbulent circumstances—and especially by the valiant company of colporteurs—is a thrilling one. As presented skilfully here it should prompt its readers to give all possible support to the work of one of the most significant societies associated with the Christian Church. The Golden Jubilee of the Baptist World Alliance is mistakenly referred to on page 69 as the Silver Jubilee.

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with the real difficulties, and presents its own standpoint (as well as that of others) in an admirably balanced and unpolemical manner. The book is well-produced, and convenient to refer to; a brief summary of the argument precedes each major section, and there are three indices and two appendices on the Gospels.

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