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‘ Of And About ’

THE philosophical issues of the Christian claim to revelation are very much to the fore amongst theologians. The turn of the philosophical wheel of fortune may now, strangely, yield unexpected support for those who claim the indispensable role of Scripture for revelation in contrast to those who claim experience of God alone as revelation. At best it is hazardous to inject personal experiences into an essay, but I beg the reader's indulgence. It has been disconcerting to find my theological stance juxtaposed simply by a change of geography. In Canada, as an evangelical Christian, I stressed the importance of personal faith. Since coming to the southern United States I find myself cast by some into the role of a 'propositionalist' or 'reformation scholastic'. By this they mean one who advocates not personal religion but credal subscription for faith.

The issue can be stated pointedly: can we have the knowledge of God without the knowledge about God? Existentialist theologians answer, or seem to answer, yes. My answer is, no. The issue is not a new one. It shows itself, though in very general terms, in the continuing transcendentalist stress of German theology in contrast to the empiricism that has conditioned British thought. One might recall the indignation of Dr Austin Farrer at the logical and theological ingenuity of Dr Bultmann, the disjunction between the late Dr John Baillie and Dr Karl Barth, or even the questions argued between Drs Barth and Brunner.

The problem is first how to conceive of the infinite and eternal God, and then how to state what the relationship of the impassible God is to the world. Plato made only the world of ideas and the good real; the phenomenal world is fundamentally unreal and unintelligible, he said. The historical character of the confrontationist claim to revelation and experience is not unlike this. The Christian claim to historical revelation must mean that in at least *some* ways and at *some* times and places history does convey the reality and will of God. How often, how much, and how accurately, are the questions that divide us. This brings into view whether Scripture can be, and ought to be, viewed as revelation, or part of revelation, or revelation in part. The existentialist denies that the term revelation can be used in any other fashion than the direct

confrontation of the soul by God. Sören Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Paul Tillich, Nicholas Berdyaev, among others, are claimed to articulate this concept.

The confrontationist says that God reveals only God; that the meaning of the term revelation can be only 'God speaking to me as God and commanding my obedience', to summarise oft-thundered arguments that I have heard. It goes without question that God reveals God. But no pronouncements backed by reddened necks and dilated eyes should deter us from inquiring whether this is all that the term revelation carries for Christians. The apparent simplicity of the dogma is deceptive. We cannot accept the withdrawal to non-rational categories or the rejection of logical procedures too early in the game. Whoever destroys logic will by logic be destroyed.

In one such debate among a group of students, the confrontationist withdrew to the propositional cliché that 'God speaking to me directly' is the only meaning of revelation. When asked how this came, what it rested upon, or to say one thing about God, we got silence—a silence that seems quite appropriate to the totally subjective character of the claim, and not unlike the silence of the ancient sceptics. The argument ended as follows: 'Do you believe in God?' 'Yes,' he replied. 'Well then, do you believe in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ?' we pursued. 'This I cannot say,' he replied. One might concede that this could be an issue of Dr Tillich's doctrine, let us say, but it is evidently a far cry from the claims to faith in God of apostolic Christianity.

To say that we can have the Christian experience witnessed to by the New Testament without the truth from the New Testament that generates it seems to be a very precarious position indeed. It will be contended here that the saving confrontation with God in Christ depends upon, and takes up into it as part of its reality, historical elements such as the written apostolic word. We cannot claim the transcendent experience, the oneness of the soul with God, or of the soul with God in Christ, without the truth that God gives of Himself, especially in the saving events of history, the truth of which comes to us by historical media.

Fact and theory, faith and knowledge go together inextricably in any reasonable and intelligible religion. Especially is this so of Christianity which claims to be an *historical* religion.

The vitality of faith for life is apparent whether one thinks of Aristotle's predication of the ἀρχαί upon grounds of a settled conviction

(πίστις), St Paul's declaration that 'faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen', Dr Jung's notice that faith is fundamental to the modern man's search of a soul, A. N. Whitehead's argument that science developed on the medieval faith in a rational God who made an intelligible world, or Dr Bronowski's common sense base of science. The solutions to the basic problems of life, not only at the outset of knowledge, but also at its outer limits (for issues like those of history, communion, sin, and death) are made in terms of faith of some sort.

Christian faith is not hung on a sky-hook, but founded securely in fact. One senses that the writers of the New Testament were terribly empirically minded. 'No belief', said Thomas, 'unless I plunge my finger into the nailprint.' 'That which we have heard, seen, and handled declare we unto you', says the writer of the first Johannine epistle. 'We were eyewitnesses', declares St Peter. *The fact-basis of faith is everywhere apparent in Scripture.* This is to claim that faith without truth is impossible to Christians; and that truth is not some aether that haunts the atmosphere or the brain, but something that is the function of statements and that grasps us *when there is conveyed that which is actually the case.* States of mind are not propositions. If the confrontationist claims truth then he must cast it into propositions. He cannot claim ineffability, truth and non-propositionalism. This conclusion is reinforced rather than undercut by the words of our Lord to Thomas, 'Blessed are they that have not seen and have believed', because *their* faith will not stand in the faith of others, nor completely of itself, but in *the word of truth* which can scarcely therefore fall outside the penumbra of the term revelation.

Far from undercutting knowledge or the truth for faith St Paul vindicates it in 1 Cor. i-ii. Against the wisdom of *the world* Paul puts the wisdom of *God* in the act and word of the Cross. Then by a play on an historic philosophical concept (τὸ μὴ ὄν) he declares that the Christian things that are unreal to the world (τὰ μὴ ὄντα) have brought to nothingness the being or realities of the world (τὰ ὄντα). This happens because the *truth of God* fills the void created by the errors of the world. St Paul says that his speech and wisdom are not of men but of God. It is the wisdom in Christ known to the Christian in a mystery: it is *words which the Holy Ghost teaches*, he says, which issue for the Christian in the *mind of Christ* as against the speech and concepts of the natural man. Now, whatever charge of gobbledygook may be passed by men on such mysteries, let it be clear that the apostle claimed a *divinely articulated*

revelation in human language. This is the claim to the revelational function of language in its truth functions for at least a part of the meaning of the term revelation.

Similarly, when the writer of *Hebrews* says 'He that cometh to God must believe that He is', he does not leave the matter there, but adds the perfectly intelligible proposition, 'and that He is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him'. In other words, it is not some god, nor any god, but the God who in fact *exists* and who is *dependable* of whom he speaks. This is not the reign of silence, nor the stab of conjecture, but the triumph of revelation that gives the truth of what is actually the case. If the revelation is historical why cannot God use such finite elements as language? There seems to be no sound reason for excluding *ex hypothesi* either the fact-basis or the revelational function ¹ of language from the faith that is Christian.

For Christians the highest conception of reality is that of persons in interpersonal relations. Such recent readable accounts as Leonard Hodgson's *For Faith and Freedom* and H. D. Lewis' *Our Experience of God* argue this in a highly competent manner.

But the concept of persons in interpersonal relations points up the categories by which we interpret reality as these bear upon the possibility and nature of revelation. Leonard Hodgson has given a very succinct definition of personal life. It is to be the individual subject of experiences mediated through a particular body in space and time. My own definition parallels this in essential respects: to be personal means to be a self, a rational self, a moral self, and a purposing self. Thus we are concerned with the environment (space and time) and the self-moved creature within it (as Plato would put it). The person is not an aggregate of experiences (as the behaviourist says) but the subject of these. This subject has the power of thought and action, in view of moral ends.

Thus, prior to, and more primary than, the questions of the validity and the change by new evidence of such categories as fashion the Ptolemaic, Newtonian, Einsteinian, or post-Einsteinian conceptions of the world, are the categories that make logical thought in the world possible at all. These I would like to call the intellectual and the moral, and the causal and volitional elements of experience.

As a rational creature man grasps the meaning of things, i.e. their sense (which he cannot even begin to do without presupposing the

¹ Note the suggestions of the late M. B. Foster, *Mystery and Philosophy*.

sense he looks for), but this intellectual part cannot be bifurcated from his moral life. He acts in terms of moral ends. In *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, A. N. Prior renews the claim that ethics cannot be built upon a non-ethical footing. The noetic and the moral go together in experience. Response to the truth is moral as well as intellectual. P. T. Forsyth remarked in an apt aphorism, 'the truth we see depends upon the men we are'.

In addition to these are the issues of, first, a dependable world, regular in its function and thus patient of scientific study, yet, second, the claim that contingency makes upon us with its double issue of moral freedom (that seems to threaten causal dependability) and a teleological interpretation of the world according to the will of God. To be personal and moral must mean that choices are real; it must mean that the course of events might have been otherwise and that this difference would have rested upon the decision of some will.

Other categories which Christians acclaim rest upon these. Some are: Creation, Fall, Grace, Redemption, and Church. All of these turn back upon the conception of reality at its highest as personal; that is, of a creation moved and sustained by God and looking to the sharing of the trinitarian life of God by man.

To speak of persons in interpersonal relations is to raise the question of the meaning of confrontation. What is personal confrontation? Everybody talks of this as if he knows what it is—until precise articulation is required.

There is involved here not only the issue of the divine-human encounter, but also the question how human beings know one another and communicate with one another. Clearly silence is something less than desirable (especially between lovers!), but on the other hand language can include much more than words. Bodily states, such as pleasure, happiness, pain, fear, and disappointment, communicate meanings to others. Facial or bodily gestures do also. Other kinds of symbolic acts are employed by human beings as forms of language. Even the actions we perform in the normal course of living convey meanings to others.

But of the symbols that man employs in very intricate ways to communicate with others, by far the most common and significant is ordinary language. Why should it be thought beneath the dignity of God to employ the language of men to communicate his truth? If Scripture is taken seriously it will be seen that God has used this finite vehicle as one amongst others, yet as the primary one, to communicate His truth.

Surely human confrontations envisage something more than the facings of faces. Something higher, deeper and more meaningful is suggested by the term confrontation. It involves the meeting of minds, of common response to one another—in the truth. Is there ever personal confrontation of any kind unless a word is spoken? Is this not the primary significance of the Johannine employment of *Λόγος* for Jesus Christ as God incarnate? Logos, that is, not in any one of dozens of possible ancient usages, but in that usage now intended by the Holy Ghost to John *and to us*. The confrontation of persons involves the communication of truth. Truth is a function of language.

The Christian revelation and message takes this form. How can we escape the revelational function of language unless we substitute the primacy of theistic mystique for the Gospel which calls for repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ the Lord? This is to judge neither the importance nor the efficacy of the former—we leave that to God—but it is to claim that the truth of God, if it is given in an historical revelation, must involve propositions that articulate it. Can there be meaningful existential confrontation that evacuates events of their historicity? This possibility does not seem to occur to the New Testament Christians.

We now turn to two further issues: the problem of language and the problem of history.

Long ago Christians ought to have given up the idea that words have real meanings. However they must hold tenaciously to the idea that theological language ought to have real referents. Words have real meanings neither in common parlance nor in theological language—they have uses. Minds have meanings. Words convey meanings from one mind to another where the passing of the meaning through the symbols moves successfully; that is, where that passage of meaning is neither broken nor distorted. Words store up meanings for minds. This is the positive side of the problem that words are capable of serious ambiguity. Ambiguity need be an insurmountable barrier only if a stable meaning from mind to mind is impossible; that is, if it is not possible to communicate ideas (that are true) from one mind to another.

We are concerned not just with the coherence of our judgments with one another, but with their ontological reference. They must be true; they must express correctly what is actually the case. This was Aristotle's first criterion for the establishment of the undemonstrable *ἀρχαί*, and one may murmur agreement with H. D. Lewis' argument in *Our*

Experience of God when he insists that the Christian is not satisfied if others concede that religious statements about God are meaningful. The question is, are they true?

Are we to say that the truth of God is known only in immediate confrontation but not discursively? Is such a use of the term truth meaningful, and can it be meaningful for a religion claiming an historical revelation? The non-verbal character of revelation, or its mythological form, is set forward very strongly in arguments that anthropomorphise the wrath of God, for example. But, are there not unaccounted-for judgments of value involved in the simple-minded declaration that God is love, but not a sweet potato, or a bowl of jelly, or some such thing? How do we know that God is love?

While the reality that God is love seems obvious, let us say to the non-verbal forms of revelation doctrine that are agapaic, it was not so obvious to philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, or Spinoza who, because they aimed to guard the impassibility of the divine principle, put love, which suggests passibility, in us, not in God. We know that God is love *historically* (probably before we know it existentially) and we know it as truth through the biblical revelation. The question of 'what is appropriate' to God, to put it in the words of Xenophanes, for Christians cannot be separated from the prophetic and apostolic word of truth.

In the dispute between religions and philosophies that denigrate the actual world, that by supramental knowledge, non-discursive and non-propositional forms, and transcendental events, claim revelation, as against a religion that claims that *the historical events and narratives are the actual forms the eternal realities take*, I believe Christians must declare for the latter.

Factuality involves us in the question of the historical events. Theologically, Nicaea settled for the Church that the real incarnation involves Christians in real history. But historical events, like archaeological specimens, are very dead, and very much subject to conflicting interpretations about their significance. What can we say about this?

We are not so prone now to contrast the alleged inexactness of historical conclusions with those of the physical sciences, not because the problems of historiography are less severe, but because the firmness of scientific conclusions has given way to the concept of *trends* of events under scientific study. Witness the work of Dr Bronowski, Dr Coulson, and others in many recent monographs on this question. Nevertheless, the claim to an historical revelation must meet full-face the issue of the

variables of historical interpretation. If the revelation is given finitely, at least history is finite.

Event and interpretation go together in *our* world. This an important vehicle used by God in His revealing activity. The Cross is the vital instance of this. For Pilate the Cross concluded a distasteful bit of judicial juggling. To the Jewish leaders it was a crude but effective way of disposing of a troublesome meddler. And it brought the world of the disciples crumbling at their feet. But what *was* the Cross? That it was the act of God for the world's salvation—this fact, this truth—comes because we have the Cross as the apostolically interpreted event, given to the insight of faith, and enscripturated for our faith also. This is the significance of St Paul's declaration 'we thus judge' in relation to the theology of the Cross.

Christianity has to do not simply with dead events of the past, but with events that are actual in the past and alive in the present because their true significance reaches us today in and by the Gospel. The historical reality is thus vital for faith despite the claim of Dr Tillich that history cannot unseat faith.¹

In the New Testament the events are not abstract and timeless, but real: they are concrete, particular, actual. While the Christian cannot claim to have solved how eternity is related to time, he does make the common sense claim that neither in time nor in eternity are 'events' events unless they happen, and to this he adds the claim to the continuity of that life with the life that now is. While the definition of eternity as unending time is unsatisfactory, the identity and continuity of personal life in both states must be maintained. The historical Jesus and the eternal Christ therefore do go together, indivisibly and irrevocably. This is the theological thrust of the Ascension. And if, as is likely, the understanding of these things will be clearer as we grasp the quality of the life that now is in Christ, we can escape neither the force of its reality nor of statements that say this truly.

To conclude: Can we rest the case for Christianity solely upon unhistorical parables, myths, or events? Is the confrontation of persons meaningful unless a word happens? This seems to demand a language of some kind. I submit that ordinary language, used by men of God in extraordinary ways, conveys the revelation of God in statements that tell the truth. How truth can be disjoined finally from revelation has not been shown. What do the words *truth of person* mean? This

¹ *Interpretation of History*, pp. 242-243, 264; *Systematic Theology I*, pp. 129-130.

difficulty is increased when *truth of person* is contrasted with *truth about person*. Ought we not to grapple with the concept *truth from person*?

What the eternal state will be is not known to us now, nor do we know fully what event means for us both in history and eternity. The living quality of historical events is clearest to us in the saving significance of the Cross; and that life into which the Cross calls us, the fellowship of the trinitarian life of God, is adumbrated in John xvii. But for both we are dependent upon that apostolic word of Scripture that is normative of the vital experience of Christ we now know. We do not imitate the experiences of the apostles, nor is our experience normed by that of our contemporaries. Existentialist theologians are singularly reluctant to advance either their own or some extra-biblical saint's experience as the norm and content of revelation. But references to biblical persons, to the words of the Bible, and to the record to Jesus Christ abound in their writings. In this the Holy Scriptures, whose words give the truth of God, find dramatic vindication of their revelatory function.

The claim of Kierkegaard, and other existentialists, that the knight of faith knows the truth because he grasps the paradox of faith which calls upon him to do the grotesque thing, the irrational or the mad thing, cannot stand if by this is meant that the universal he answers to is only in himself. The moral law of God, the truth of God, or the knowledge of God stands in the universal revelation of his power and righteousness (the distortion, not adequacy, of which is in question) *and* in the specific communication of the will of God by the Logos to men capable of receiving the truth. The universal, the truth, is not given abstractly and timelessly only, but historically and concretely. This is that word of truth of the salvation of God that we have in Holy Scripture vindicated to faith by the Holy Spirit. The vitality of Christian life and witness stands in the joyous fullness of a *Gospel*, not in the dark face of existential leap.