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Who are the Liberals now? History, Science, and Christology in N. T. Wright and Alister McGrath

In the current controversy about the appointment of Rowan Williams, 'liberal' and 'conservative' have been used frequently as shorthand to denote different theological positions. Andrew Moore argues that the reality is much more complex, and that evangelical scholarship has been influenced by liberalism more than is often acknowledged.

Maurice Wiles recently asked the rhetorical question, 'Why did liberal theology fail?', and in answering it admitted as 'basically right' the perception that liberal theologians were 'unorthodox'. The doyen of English liberal theology in the last quarter of the last century acknowledged that it risked making 'undue accommodation to the surrounding values of the world'.[1] Compare Archbishop Rowan Williams's statement of his own position regarding liberalism: 'I am wholly in sympathy with challenges to the "liberal" assumption' exemplified by 'adjusting theology to current fashion'.[2] Clearly Williams wishes to distance himself from liberalism, yet this same person who had set out to show what it might mean to live and believe an orthodox faith is now denounced in the name of conservative Christianity, not merely as liberal, but as unorthodox and even as a 'false teacher'.[3] And that not just of Christian ethics (as though the church has ever had a conception of 'orthodoxy' that has been carried over – univocally or analogically – from dogmatic theology to moral theology), but of the dogmatic tradition itself.

Williams's theological work seems to have been written out of a desire to help the church avoid the kind of theological warfare pursued defensively and superficially by means of sticking labels on each other without deep analysis of underlying questions. The irony of the current debate about Williams's theology is that precisely the issue he has worked to help the church think about in a constructive way, and for which he is so widely admired by theologians – namely,

1 Maurice Wiles, 'Theology in the Twenty-First Century', *Theology*, November-December 2000, pp 406f.

2 *On Christian Theology*, Blackwell, Oxford 2000, p 33; cf. p 40. See also the important 'Postscript (Theological)' to Williams's *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, SCM, London 2001², pp 233-45.

3 Dr Garry Williams, *The Sunday Programme*, BBC Radio 4, Sunday 27 October 2002.

what it means to be orthodox – will get lost in the war of words that evangelical Anglicans – or should that be 'Anglican Evangelicals'? – have been fighting. So in this article, rather than trying to prove Williams's orthodoxy or unorthodoxy – a presumptuous project anyway – I want to look at some of the issues that have made contemporary theological debate more complicated than many will allow and also made the use of the labels 'liberal' and 'conservative' rather confusing. It will emerge that when we scrape beneath the surface of the theology of some of those who are widely regarded as 'conservative' leaders and look at the methodological options they chose, they have more in common with 'liberals' than is widely recognized.

Liberalism today

Despite Wiles's acknowledgement that liberal theology has failed, it has certainly not disappeared from the theological scene. It was dominant when most clergy over the age of 40 were trained, so it still has a strong presence in the leadership of the Church of England. It is also well represented in our universities (especially those that have developed out of Anglican colleges of higher education). In 1997 a group of theologians came together at Liverpool Hope University College and formulated what has become known as The Liverpool Statement.[4] Although it admits that liberalism's 'greatest failure was not to appreciate the richness of the Christian tradition', it clearly sees theology principally as an academic discipline more related to society than to the church's preaching and witness to the gospel. 'Theology needs to be "engaged" – to refuse the temptation of sectarianism and take seriously the insights of modernity'.[5]

This is the key issue that defines liberalism: its attitude to modernity. The problem with liberalism is not principally that it is rationalistic and tends to deny the 'mythical' and supernaturalistic elements of religion, nor is it that it is sceptical about the truthfulness of the Bible or the credibility of central Christian doctrines: these are a consequence of Christianity's desire to make itself at home with modernity. Maurice Wiles had this desire in mind when he spoke of liberalism's 'accommodation to the surrounding values of the world'. This stance towards modernity finds clear expression in Professor Gareth Jones's apologia for the Liverpool Statement. He suggests that 'the main issue at stake in ... contemporary British theology' involves 'a claim about the way things really are'.[6] Can any of us claim to know that the world is *this* way rather than *that* way – say, as Christians have traditionally believed, rather than as atheists believe? Jones answers 'No': 'our knowledge of reality is always incomplete because there is no one viewpoint from which people can see and appropriate reality – something which applies to the world just as much as to God'.[7] Jones thinks liberalism is necessary for Christians because, living after Kant, we are obliged to adopt a reverent agnosticism concerning our truth claims. Claims to possess the truth too readily become coercive and 'totalitarian'.

4 The Statement can be found in J'annine Jobling and Ian Markham (eds), *Theological Liberalism: Creative and Critical*, SPCK, London 2000, pp ix-xi.

5 *Theological Liberalism*, pp x, xii.

6 *Theological Liberalism*, pp 190f.

7 *Theological Liberalism*, p 192.

Jones's statement jumbles together questions about what there is and how it is composed (ontological issues) with questions concerning how we know what there is (epistemological issues) and how we can speak truthfully about it (semantic issues). But he is right to think that our theology is shaped by our (implicit or explicit) philosophical outlook. It is our attitude toward these questions that defines whether we are 'conservative' or 'liberal' – not, say, our view of the inerrancy of scripture or the factuality of the virginal conception of Jesus. Our approach to these topics is always shaped philosophically.[8] However, whilst Jones is right to emphasize the ontological dimensions of theological enquiry, he is mistaken in thinking that it is Kant (and any philosophical agnosticism dependent on him) who is decisive for characterizing the difference between liberalism and conservatism. Certainly, how we deal with Kant will make a very major difference to how we appropriate the Christian doctrinal tradition today, but as we shall see, the die had already been cast in the seventeenth century. It was during this period that our thinking about what the world is like was shaped in ways which we are only just becoming sufficiently aware of to be able to ask whether we are obliged to go along with them.

The genealogy of liberalism

Two theologians, one Anglican and one Jesuit, can help us understand what I am calling the genealogy of liberalism – that is, the movements of thought that were the intellectual forebears of contemporary liberalism and, I shall argue, contemporary conservatism. Their work has much nourishment for those who love the gospel. On the Anglican side, we have Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*[9] and on the Catholic, Michael Buckley's *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*.[10] The reason you might not have heard of them is that they are subversive of two formative concerns of evangelical thinking: commitment to proving that the Bible is historically reliable and to doing apologetics showing that Christianity is compatible with science.

Hans Frei's work is some of the most influential in contemporary systematic theology and hermeneutics. He is a theologian's theologian. Frei argues that before the seventeenth century, Christians read the Bible as the book in terms of which the whole of reality was to be understood. The Bible set forth the real world in such a way that for its readers and hearers it became their 'symbolic universe'. The story it told of God's dealings with humanity was the true story into which Christians' individual lives were to be fitted. Somewhat in the same way that many of our contemporaries understand their own lives in terms of the narrative worlds of soap operas or cartoon series such as *The Simpsons*, so for our Christian forebears the story of creation, salvation, and final redemption by God told in the Bible provided the context in which they understood the purpose of their lives, their position in the universe, and the context in which political, moral, and personal decisions were to be taken.

8 This is emphatically *not* to suggest that we must get our philosophy right before we can do theology. Since pre-eminence must be given to Jesus Christ who is the head of all rule and authority and in whom all things hold together, our (use of) philosophy must always be subject to Christological critique (Col. 1:17f, 2:10, cf. 2:8).

9 Yale University Press, New Haven 1974.

Frei shows that with the beginnings of deism, empiricism, and rise of modern science in the seventeenth century all that changed. For most of us nowadays, the scientific world-view dominates our horizons. We have to accommodate Christian beliefs to it, rather than the converse. Early in his book, Frei illustrates an older view using a famous passage from Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*. Here Auerbach contrasts the OT with Homer's *Odyssey*:

> Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our reality for a few hours, it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history ... Everything else that happens in the world can only be conceived as an element in this sequence; into it everything that is known about the world ... must be fitted as an ingredient of the divine plan.[11]

When I first read this passage, I was struck by how closely it tied in with the pattern of Bible reading that users of the well-known three year pattern of bible-reading *Search the Scriptures* (IVP) were brought up in. This is hardly surprising. Both Frei and Alan Stibbs (who devised *Search the Scriptures*) had the Reformers as theological heroes. For the Reformers, Frei writes, '[t]he text [of Scripture] did not refer to, it *was* the linguistic presence of God, the fit embodiment of one who was himself "Word"'.[12] Through the words of Scripture, God meets believing readers. They in turn, being animated by the Holy Spirit, grow in knowledge of God, in love of him and in grace.

This probably doesn't seem strange or controversial. Most readers of this journal will agree that the Bible is God's Word. So what's all the fuss about? The key is in Frei's conclusion that for the Reformers the Bible did not *refer* to the Word, but that it was *itself* the Word's fit embodiment.[13] This is where the gulf between the Reformers' views and modern views – whether 'liberal' or 'conservative' – is fixed. We think that if the Bible is true and if it is meaningful to us as God's Word *now*, it is so because it refers to events that took place *then* – for example, to the life and ministry of the *historical* Jesus, the Word incarnate in history. It is these events that make what the text says true. For example, as generations of Christians educated by F. F. Bruce's *The New Testament Documents: Are they reliable?*[14] have come to believe, the Bible can be taken to be intellectually authoritative because its documents are historically reliable and *therefore* spiritually trustworthy.

Frei believes that this kind of thinking is mistaken. His central argument is that in the seventeenth century the old view of the Bible began to be eclipsed. The meaning and truth of the Bible were separated. Frei's study shows that after this time, the Bible was held to be meaningful because it either referred faithfully to historical events or to 'a universal spiritual [or moral] truth known independently of the texts but exemplified by them'.[15] Conversely, if the Bible did not refer to

10 Yale University Press, New Haven 1987.
11 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, Princeton University Press, 1968, p 15, quoted by Frei, *Eclipse*, p 3.
12 Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, Oxford University Press, 1993, p 108.
13 The reason for this was expressly theological: see, *Eclipse*, p 74.
14 Leicester: IVP, 19605; see especially pp 5-9.
15 Frei, *Eclipse*, p 124.

events or to truths independent of it, it ceased to be meaningful. Perhaps the best illustration of the change here is that until the rise of deism, the thought that it might be necessary to go on a 'quest for the historical Jesus' would have been as puzzling to Christians then as the thought that it might not be necessary is puzzling to us now.

Frei calls this change 'the great reversal'; it marks the origin of movements of thought perpetuated by both contemporary liberalism and conservatism.[16] From this time on the claims of the church and of the Bible had to be shown to be consistent with knowledge of reality that had been established on some other grounds – those of empirical science or of anti-supernatural understandings of history. 'It is no exaggeration to say that all across the theological spectrum the great reversal had taken place; interpretation was a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with another story rather than incorporating that world into the biblical story.'[17]

The outcome of the new pattern of interpretation was that apologetics became indispensable.[18] The church's statements about God and Jesus had to be informed by and conformable with modern understandings of reality and how we obtain knowledge about it. Insofar as it makes a claim about secular knowledge Gareth Jones's claim that '[t]heology needs to be "engaged"... and take seriously the insights of modernity' would have been incomprehensible before the great reversal; that it strikes many of us now as beyond question is a sign of how great the reversal has been.

Whether the insights are those of science or of history, most of us do not question that theology must be correlated and (in Wiles's language) find an accommodation with them. Most of us – liberal and conservative Christians – unquestioningly think that the onus is on us to prove the historical and therefore intellectual reliability of the Bible. We then accommodate our findings with our beliefs – either by modifying our beliefs, if we are liberal, or, if we are conservatives, modifying our view of the site of the Bible's truth (in going on a quest for the historical Jesus, for example). This accommodation is deeply suspect. The quest for the historical Jesus produces unsatisfactory results insofar as it diminishes the ordinary believer's (i.e. any non-professional historian's) confidence that, under the Holy Spirit, Holy Scripture is adequate to render for faith the unique identity of the saviour. Instead, anyone who is not a scholar in the field must wait for the fruits of the historian's work before she can know whether the scriptures are trustworthy. So much for the 'sufficiency' of scripture for the ordinary believer.

This accommodation also takes place in the so-called dialogue between science and religion, perhaps most notably in the fact that the impetus comes principally not from scientists who wonder whether their discoveries are consistent with or

16 For a good illustration of this, see *Theology and Narrative*, pp 200-212.

17 Frei, *Eclipse*, p 130.

18 Frei's statement in opposition to apologetics is relevant: 'it is not the business of Christian theology to argue the *possibility* of Christian truth any more than the instantiation or *actuality* of that truth. The possibility follows logically as well as existentially from its actuality' (*Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, Oxford University Press 1993, p 30).

can be accommodated by the Gospel, but from theologians and apologists who worry that Christian belief might be inconsistent with the latest science. Again, the results (to take two ground-breaking examples) are almost invariably unsatisfactory, either because Christianity is eviscerated (in the case of Arthur Peacocke's christology,[19]) or because they are not sufficiently scientifically informed (as in the case of T. F. Torrance's *Theological Science*[20]).

To raise the question of science is to enter Michael Buckley's territory in *At the Origins of Modern Atheism.* This book has been less influential amongst theologians than Frei's work, but it is indispensable to understanding the history of Christianity since the Enlightenment, and, more particularly, the relationship between philosophy and theology. Buckley's thesis can be put very simply: the failures and inadequacies of theologians in the early seventeenth century produced modern atheism. The rot set in with Leonard Lessius (1554-1623), a Flemish Jesuit, and Marin Mersenne (1588-1648), a French friar; both were amongst the most influential theologians of their time. Atheism was hardly a recognized phenomenon. (Indeed, David Hume professed not to know any atheists one hundred years later.[21]) Yet both figures smelt it on the breeze and set out to rebut it.

The tragedy was that the form of their attempted rebuttals was philosophical rather than theological. Buckley summarizes the outcome of their labours:

> Whatever the metaphysical judgements of such attempts, the theologian will look in vain for a critical position accorded to Christology or religious experience. Both Lessius and Mersenne treated the atheistic question as if it were a philosophic issue, not a religious one. Both acted as if the rising movement were not a rejection of Jesus Christ as the supreme presence of god in human history, whose spirit continued that presence and made it abidingly evocative, but a philosophic stance toward life... Whatever the causes, neither theologian indicated that the understanding of god's self-revelation in the person of Jesus and in the depths of human religious experience had anything to contribute to this most critical issue for the Church.[22]

By dropping christological conviction in favour of philosophy, the church forfeited what is uniquely its own and helped give birth to atheism.[23] The task of rebutting the atheism (now properly so called) of Baron d'Holbach (1723-89) and Denis Diderot (1713-84) fell to the scientist Isaac Newton and the philosopher René Descartes. Hence, when science and faith began to split apart, Christianity had forgotten that it had resources of its own with which to heal the breach. The rest, as they say, is history.

Since the seventeenth century, Christians have usually accepted that the onus of proof is on them to establish their beliefs' intellectual respectability in the face of science. Christianity has ceded its own territory and heritage to the new

19 See his *Science and the Christian Experiment*, Oxford University Press, 1971, p 172.
20 Oxford University Press, 1969.
21 See Buckley, *Origins*, p 27.
22 Buckley, *Origins*, pp 65f.
23 For the purposes of this article I focus on Buckley's claims concerning Christology rather than religious experience.

movement and as a result, since then has felt that it has to make accommodations with, or seek legitimation from secular culture. Just as we saw earlier concerning the meaning and truth of scripture, it is not only liberals who have in some ways let down the cause of the gospel as the church's unique inheritance. To the extent that any Christians debate with unbelief and conduct their internal disputes in ways which marginalize the church's understanding of Jesus Christ and the Bible, they risk preventing the latter from having a constitutive and probative role in those processes. And if they thereby put at the centre of their thinking some secular principle rather than Christology, to this extent any Christian makes the same mistake that liberals make.

When Christianity is understood in this historical perspective, some leading figures, widely respected in evangelical circles, emerge as belonging to the same family as liberals. In the rest of this article, I want to show that the relationship between Christology and history in Tom Wright's NT scholarship and the relationship between Christology and science in Alister McGrath's proposals for a scientific theology reproduce earlier mistakes that we can avoid if we are prepared to learn from Frei and Buckley. We shall see that the views of both thinkers are unstable since they require us simultaneously to hold views of Christ that are inconsistent with the views they adopt in order to accommodate the demands of the detractors of classical Christianity.

Christology and history in N. T. Wright

Of N. T. Wright's projected six volume work on *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, two have appeared. The first is *The New Testament and the People of God*;[24] the second *Jesus and the Victory of God*.[25] That Wright is a child of 'the great reversal' and an enthusiastic supporter of the new perspective on truth and meaning which it spawned can be seen from his programmatic statement that 'The appeal to history with which the Enlightenment challenged the dogmatic theology of the eighteenth century and after is one which can and must be taken on board within the mainline Christian theological worldview. As Paul put it in a slightly different context, if we are deceived about these things we are of all humans most to be pitied'.[26]

This perspective has many ramifications. To begin with one hinted at in the quotation, Wright thinks that dogmatic theology should only be written on the basis of the harvest of 'truth' from historical research. Theologians who think that the church's faith is an adequate guide to the theological significance of Jesus are exponents of a mere 'would-be orthodoxy'.[27] If Jesus does have any contemporary theological relevance, this 'will result from more serious historical enterprise,

24 SPCK, London 1992; hereinafter *NTPG*.

25 SPCK, London 1996; hereinafter *JVG*.

26 *NTPG*, p 136. Against Wright's dragooning Paul in support of the Enlightenment perspective, compare Markus Bockmuehl in '"To be or not to be": The Possible Futures of New Testament Scholarship', in *Scottish Journal of Theology* (51/3), 1998, pp 183, 300.

27 See for example, *JVG*, pp 9, 660f. Wright suggests that ignoring the quest for the historical Jesus is tantamount to docetism (see, for example *JVG*, pp 9f, 659f, cf p 89, n 24). It is not: docetism is the doctrinal affirmation that Jesus' humanity was apparent rather than real. It is not the view that historical Jesus research is irrelevant to our understanding his person and work. Or would Wright cast Athanasius as a docetist?

although we cannot predict in advance what this relevance might be'.[28] Hence, if – as Wright advocates one should – 'one locates Jesus in first-century Palestine, one risks the possibility that he might have little to say to twentieth-century Europe, America, or anywhere else'.[29] The church's understanding of Jesus Christ is not to be presumed in meeting the Enlightenment challenge; we need to re-engage in the quest for the historical Jesus before doing Christology. This means that in dealing with critics of Christian orthodoxy, Wright has, from the outset, ceded precisely the same decisive feature of Christianity that Buckley shows was ceded by Lessius and Mersenne at the dawn of the Enlightenment.

Insofar as this concession to 'atheism' marked the beginning of the liberal accommodation with secularity, Wright is in methodological terms a liberal. This impression is reinforced by comparing his views with those of Maurice Wiles: 'If we are to give absolute authority to the life of Jesus, we need to have reliable knowledge of that life'.[30] In Frei's terms, if Jesus is to be authoritative or relevant, then what the gospels say about him must be meaningful and for this it must be true. This is why Wiles and Wright believe that the historical Jesus quest is indispensable. The only difference between them is in the conclusions they are prepared to draw from historical criticism. It is hardly surprising if, since the quest for the historical Jesus originated in seventeenth-century deism, contemporary versions of that quest have conservative and liberal versions.[31] The question is, does the conservative version produce genuinely conservative goods, or does it involve some modification of the genuine article? In my view, as I shall go on to show: the latter.

For Wright a further goal of quest for the historical Jesus is to 'legitimate ... that worship which Christianity has traditionally offered to him'.[32] Reimarus (1694-1768), a deist who denied the factuality of the resurrection narratives, is hailed by Wright as 'as a true reformer of Christianity',[33] because he forced the church to legitimate its understanding of Jesus according to the methods and criteria of historical research. Wright accepts the challenge of modernity in fundamentally the same terms as it was laid down by the opponents of orthodoxy.[34] At this point we encounter a major instability in Wright's thought concerning Christology. He is committed to pursuing and meeting the challenge laid down by Reimarus et al., to doing what he repeatedly calls 'serious history'. As we saw earlier, he asserts that 'we cannot predict in advance what... will result from more serious historical enterprise'. Elsewhere, he maintains that the question of how 'the Jesus we discover by doing "history" relate[s] to the contemporary church and world... cannot be allowed to exercise leverage over the course of historical study'.[35] Theological presuppositions must not influence historical research: 'genuine history cannot be

28 *JVG*, p 123.
29 *JVG*, p 117.
30 Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* SCM Press, London 1974, p 48.
31 The radical John Dominic Crossan agrees that Wright and he are pursuing basically the same agenda: see his 'What Victory? What God? A Review Debate with N. T. Wright on *Jesus and the Victory of God*', *Scottish Journal of Theology* (50/3), 1997, p 351.
32 *JVG*, p 120.
33 *JVG*, p 17, cf. pp 661f.
34 Cf. *NTPG*, p 22.
35 *JVG*, p 123, 117.

done on the basis of theological *a prioris*'.[36] Despite all this, Wright is also committed to working as a Christian scholar who thinks that '[a]uthentic Christianity ... has nothing to fear from history'.[37]

It is not hard to see the problem. If Wright thinks that the question of Jesus' relevance is genuinely open and that it should not be allowed leverage over historical research, how can he also assert that authentic Christianity has nothing to fear from history? How can he claim the latter if the former is a genuinely open question? Perhaps historical research will throw up the most radical conclusion: the early church made it all up; Jesus has no relevance whatsoever to life today. How does he know that it would not be better for us to shut up shop and go and watch Wagner?

It is hard to know how Wright can claim that authentic Christianity has nothing to fear from history *before* he has done his historical work. If the task of historical research is yet to legitimate the worship of Jesus, then either the worship currently offered is not legitimate and we should be Unitarians, or we should not be offering worship at all. Yet when he says authentic Christianity has nothing to fear from history, Wright appears to presume that an authentic Christianity will emerge from historical research *come what may*.[38] And if this is the case, then some understanding of the relevance of Jesus Christ, if not of Christian doctrinal claims, is also being presumed. Yet both presumptions are obviously inconsistent with the prohibition on allowing assumptions about whether and how Jesus might be related to the contemporary world being allowed leverage on historical study and with the requirement that genuine history must exclude theological *a prioris*. Until then, logic compels us either to suspend belief or to reject the historians' quest for the historical Jesus.

In other words, accepting the Enlightenment historical agenda seems to force Wright into holding simultaneously two mutually inconsistent views: 'a no-holds-barred history on the one hand and a no-holds-barred faith on the other' – as he summarizes his methodology.[39] On the evidence of Wright's argument it seems to me impossible both to accept the liberalism that results from the Enlightenment's separation of the meaning and truth of the Bible and to be a conservative Christian who professes the creeds believing that they convey a rule for reading scripture adequate for saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Christology and science in Alister McGrath

Whereas Frei's work is fairly explicitly directed towards moving beyond liberalism and in favour of what he called a 'generous orthodoxy' in the church, Buckley does not use his argument explicitly as a launching pad from which to attack liberalism. However, his bemusement at the marginalizing of Christology in the church's wrestling with modernity is eloquent. If Christology is essential to Christianity and

36 'Theology, History and Jesus: A Response to Maurice Casey and Clive Marsh' in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 69 (1998), p 106; cf. *NTPG*, pp 131-137.

37 *JVG*, p 123, cf. p. xiv.

38 Or else, what will emerge is *eo ipso* authentic Christianity.

39 See *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (co-authored with Marcus Borg), SPCK, London 1999, p 18.

its being marginalized allows atheism to take root, it should not be put in abeyance whilst fighting 'the metaphysical authority of science' (Geoffrey Warnock's phrase). We need to exercise far greater caution in our engagement with scientific culture than most of those who contribute to the so-called dialogue between science and religion have shown hitherto. We risk making precisely the kind of accommodation that defines liberalism.

I want to illustrate some of the risks and false steps by examining aspects of Alister McGrath's Christology in the first two volumes of his *A Scientific Theology*.[40] As a prelude, it will be helpful to introduce some of his themes in order to show his general proximity to post-Enlightenment liberalism. Whereas classical understandings of Christianity have stressed the supremacy of theology over other disciplines,[41] McGrath is typical of post-Enlightenment theologians in believing that theology is one amongst many 'other attempts to make sense of the world'. He suggests that theology should eschew the view that it 'offers an account of its own privileged insights' and see itself as 'engaging with publicly available resources, the interpretation of which is open to debate'.[42] This is why we need a scientific theology: theology is just one of several disciplines that pursue a broadly scientific method in explaining its encounter with reality.

McGrath thinks we should work this way because he shares with liberals the defensive assumption that Christians must establish the respectability of Christianity by correlating theological 'insights' with those from the secular realm and thereby demonstrating its own credentials to its critics. He is much more concerned to show that theology can make a valid 'response to the challenges to the Christian faith'[43] and that it is a 'legitimate intellectual discipline'[44] whose principal task is identical with that of natural science – 'to give an ordered account' of reality[45] – than he is with articulating the faith of the church. This is because he thinks that theology, like any (responsible[46]) tradition of thought 'is under an obligation both to demonstrate the grounds and coherence of its own ideas'; it must be prepared to account 'for its own existence'.[47] It is by its power in explaining the reality it encounters that theology shows its legitimacy in modern, scientific culture. In this respect McGrath bears out Buckley's diagnosis of what happened to theology in the wake of Mersenne's search for rapprochement with atheism and the new sciences by positing a philosophical deity whose principal function was explanatory:

> The theists and the putative atheists had to find common ground, and that ground was neither the person of Jesus nor the individual or communal experiences of religion. Common ground was provided by the cosmos...[48]

McGrath wishes to establish the legitimacy of theology by methods learned from the natural sciences' investigation of the cosmos; this, for him is 'common ground'

40 These are: *Volume 1: Nature*, *Volume 2: Reality*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh and New York, 2001, 2002. A third volume on *Theory* is promised for autumn 2003.
41 See for example Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 1, 6, ad 2; cf. *Nature*, p 74.
42 *Nature*, p 300.
43 *Nature*, p xix.
44 *Reality*, p 225.
45 *Nature*, p xix.
46 See *Reality*, p 112, cf p 264.
47 *Reality*, pp xvi-xvii.
48 Buckley, *Origins*, p 345.

with (atheistic) scientific culture.[49] The question is, will his opting for this methodology allow him to conserve that which is distinctive about Christian confession of Jesus, or, in conceding the need for Christianity to legitimise itself before secularity, has he forfeited an adequate Christology?

McGrath seeks to take seriously distinctive aspects of the Christian experience of reality – for example, in *Nature* McGrath argues Christocentrically for natural theology – but as with Wright, serious problems arise in relation to his Christology. The theological consequences of his opting for a method learned from the natural sciences emerges most clearly when, in the climax to the second volume, having set out his four major characteristics of a scientific theology McGrath makes a statement that needs pondering carefully.

> My research... has ... led me to an additional conclusion, which I believe to be correct, yet am aware is potentially controversial. I have therefore decided to include this fifth element as a *postulate* – a hypothesis which I believe to be warranted from within the standpoint of the Christian tradition... The fifth postulate is that a scientific theology is, by virtue of the inner logic of the Christian faith, *Christocentric*.[50]

Where does one begin in commenting on this – with the apologetic tone and the defensive stance towards empirical science; with the (from a Christian point of view) specious modesty of the claim to correctness and warrant; or with the suggestion that the inner logic of the faith permits us to adopt Christocentricity as 'a postulate – a hypothesis'? Christocentricity a *postulate* that might be retained just until a more explanatorily powerful and adequate theory comes along? McGrath can't be serious. A hypothesis? 'I believe in the God the Father Almighty and in the hypothesis of Jesus Christ his only son, our Lord. At least, I do for the moment until I've confirmed my observations and checked my calculations.' Apparently McGrath is serious.

The reason is that McGrath is committed to the view that Christianity is one amongst several contested interpretations of reality. Christianity does not offer 'privileged insights'; it is just one attempt to make explanatory sense of the world. Therefore, Christians cannot affirm a decisive ontological commitment to the fact that the world *is* God's good creation or to the fact that Jesus Christ *is* the incarnation of the second person of the trinity. Rather, 'we *see* nature *as* creation, in that the Christian tradition authorizes and conditions us to do so'. Nevertheless, since we could be wrong, 'we recognize the need to concede and explore rival readings of nature, and aim to allow our reflections upon nature to impact upon our theology'.[51] Similar considerations apply to Jesus. Christians have an 'insight' into who Jesus is and this leads them to 'see [him] as God incarnate', but in a scientific theology, this can only be 'a postulate – a hypothesis'. Others have other, and apparently equally valid insights which should also be brought 'to the study

49 I have argued in detail against making Christian faith analogous to science in my *Realism and Christian Faith: God, Grammar, and Meaning*, Cambridge University Press 2003, pp 40-72.

50 *Reality*, p 246.

51 *Reality*, p 238; cf. *Nature*, p 297f.

of Jesus Christ'. Christians see Jesus Christ *as* the Son of God, but only from their perspective. 'Viewed from within the Christian tradition' Jesus is seen this way,[52] but other perspectives seem to have equal validity.

McGrath's approach here comes close to the kind of cultural and conceptual relativism typical of some versions of liberalism. It is very hard to see how on McGrath's argument any one view or set of views about the identity of Jesus Christ can be said to be more or less true than another. If, as he appears to suggest, Roy Bhaskar's philosophy can help us understand and excuse heresy on cultural and political grounds,[53] then what reason have we against understanding only to condemn orthodoxy on the same grounds? McGrath does not suggest any. This is a perennial problem with perspectivalism. No view is to be privileged over another.

We can now appreciate the full consequences of McGrath's claim that Christians see Jesus *as* the Son of God. At this crucial juncture in his argument, McGrath seems to me to concede the central point of modern Christological controversy, indeed, the principal ground on which Christians should distinguish their beliefs from any others, viz., that it is a *fact* that Jesus Christ *is* the Son of God incarnate. It is not a matter of our seeing him *as* the Son of God whilst Muslims see him *as* a forerunner of Mohammed – as though there were no final truth of the matter. The two perspectives are not of equal worth (either to Christians or Muslims). The church believes that the Holy Spirit has led us into the truth about Christ. Thus, although (epistemically) we have only touched the hem of his garment, this truth cannot be added to or subtracted from by insights gleaned from science.[54] It doesn't matter who you are, where you live or when: Jesus Christ is 'perfect God and perfect man'.[55]

Some understandings of Jesus are simply wrong. For example, those which in their estimations of him exclude invocation of the Holy Spirit and careful exegesis of Scripture,[56] and those which separate theological reflection from the worshipping life of the church, are more likely to be so than others. The church believes that it is a fact that Jesus Christ is the Son of God because God has made it so and has led us into that truth by the Holy Spirit, not because we – from our cultural and historical context – have chosen to interpret reality in this way. The latter view is typical of post-Kantian theology. Recall Gareth Jones's liberal dictum that 'our knowledge of reality is always incomplete because there is no one viewpoint from

52 *Reality*, p 268.

53 See *Reality*, p 306. McGrath's uncritical use of Bhaskar's 'critical realism' offers further grounds for finding him making common cause with liberalism; showing this lies beyond the scope of this article.

54 McGrath's interest in 'complementarity' in quantum physics leads him perilously close to affirming a functionalist Christology (*The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and* Religion, Blackwell, Oxford 1998, p 204).

55 True, the church's *understanding* of Jesus' identity is historically and culturally conditioned. However, *he* is not. He is risen and ascended. All time and all space have been redeemed by God in him. This unique human is made known in our space and time, in our history and culture by the Holy Spirit. Hence formulations of how the church has understood him in differing contexts need neither be in discontinuity with who he really is nor unfaithful to him.

56 McGrath criticizes Milbank for marginalizing scripture (*Reality*, p 114f), but there is virtually no attempt to ground the argument of *Reality* in exegesis of scripture.

which people can see and appropriate reality – something which applies to the world just as much as to God'.[57] McGrath's views at this point are impeccably liberal and inclusivist, but I do not think that they reflect the teaching of scripture or the faith of the church's creeds.[58]

McGrath's attempt to hold together a robust Christianity alongside a sense of the need to meet the challenge posed by Enlightenment thinking suffers a structurally similar instability to Wright's. Elsewhere in *Reality*, McGrath states that 'within a classic conception of Christian faith, Christ functions both as the *foundation* and *criterion* of an authentically Christian theology'.[59] If this is a statement of his own position, it is not immediately obvious how it is logically connected with the views we have been examining. In fact it seems inconsistent with his perspectivism. Consider: McGrath states that

> (1) Christians 'recognize the need to concede and explore rival readings of nature, and aim to allow our reflections upon nature to impact upon our theology'.[60]

He also states that

> (2) '[t]he key assumptions and working methods that the empirical sciences bring to the study of nature, seen as creation, are to be brought by a scientific theology to the study of Jesus Christ, seen as God incarnate'.[61]

The difficulty is this: if we accept (1) and/or (2), it is possible that the Christian view of Jesus Christ might turn out to conflict with the faith of the church. In that case, if theology is to be scientific then the possibility might arise that the church should concede its understanding of Christ to a rival and change its view of him from that which is defined in scripture and the creeds. On this view, the phrase 'Christ functions both as the *foundation* and *criterion* of an authentically Christian theology' might then mean 'Christ *as a scientific theology discovers him to be* functions in this way' – in which case 'authentically Christian theology' just is *whatever* scientific theology with its admixture of empirical scientific methodology determines, even if it has little to do with the 'classic conception of Christian faith' held by the church.

On the other hand, if McGrath's understanding of authentic Christian theology is defined by scripture and the creeds, then (1) and (2) will only hold *so long as* the results of scientific theology do not conflict with this definition. In this case, if, to remain authentically Christian, a person must reject the results of scientific theology, then, on McGrath's own definition, theology will no longer be scientific. And if *that* is so, McGrath (like Wright, *mutatis mutandis*) seems to be faced with a dilemma. Either he is a liberal who is committed to scientific theology come what may, or

57 *Theological Liberalism*, p 192.

58 Note McGrath's claim that 'If the centrality of Christ to the grounding of Christian theology is conceded, it follows that the coherence of any resulting theology will be determined by the adequacy of its representation of Christ within that system' (*Reality*, p 301). He states elsewhere that '[i]f my analysis of the inner logic of the Christian faith is incorrect, I will gladly respond accordingly' (ibid., p 246).

59 *Reality*, p 306.

60 *Reality*, p 238.

61 *Reality*, p 268.

he is not and he will uphold 'a classic conception of Christian faith' against all comers, even to the point of being willing to forego the 'obligation... to demonstrate the grounds and coherence of it own ideas' on the terms set by the empirical sciences.[62]

Conclusion

Leslie Houlden – a respected exponent of liberal NT scholarship – states that 'a single principle may be said to underlie all liberal theological effort: that the claims of truth are ultimately higher than those of revelation, whether known from Scripture or through the church'.[63] Neither Wright nor McGrath explicitly endorses Houlden's principle, nor would we expect them to. But the question I have been asking in this article involves the trajectory of their respective methods. If Wright is really committed to 'rigorous history' in Jesus studies, that is, an 'open-ended investigation ... whose results are not determined in advance' by the faith of the church,[64] is he effectively conceding to the historian the authority to judge the truth of the gospels and withdrawing it from the church?[65] Again, when McGrath suggests that theologians and philosophers 'who have [not been] inducted into the experimental culture of the scientific community' are thereby disqualified from commenting on philosophical and theological questions arising from science, is he putting the scientific community above criticism by the church?[66] For example, does he mean to disqualify the distinguished philosopher of science Mary Hesse from raising the question as to whether science is the new religion?[67] In seemingly conceding to the historian the authority to judge the truth of the Gospels, and in apparently removing from the theologian the right to challenge the scientist on theological grounds, have Wright and McGrath adopted the liberal principle? Have they put truth as conceived by methodological naturalism in history and science above the reach of challenge by the church and revelation?

But there is another question and it is this: Is Christian truth to be measured on the same scale, construed in the same terms, as scientific and historical truth? Wright and McGrath seem to want to have it both ways: they wish to grant normativity to both Christian truth and to scientific and historical truth. My argument is that this option is not open to us: Christian truth is revealed principally in the person of Jesus Christ. It is unique because he is unique. In his triune relations with the Father and the Spirit, he makes true all that is true. He is the head of all authority and the arbiter of all truth. Jesus is what the Lutheran Aquinas scholar Bruce Marshall calls 'epistemic trumps'.[68]

62 *Reality*, p xvif.

63 In Alister McGrath (ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Modern Christian Thought*, Blackwell, Oxford 1993, p 321.

64 *JVG*, p 8, n 15.

65 Cf. Stephen Evans's 'Methodological Naturalism in Historical Biblical Scholarship' in Carey C. Newman (ed.) *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright's* Jesus and the Victory of God, Paternoster Press, Carlisle 1999, pp 206-24.

66 *Nature*, p 74.

67 See Mary Hesse, 'Is Science the New Religion?' in Fraser Watts (ed.), *Science Meets Faith*, SPCK, London pp 120-135. Cf. also the work of the Catholic philosopher of science Bas van Fraassen.

68 See *Trinity and Truth*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

So it seems to me that Christians are presented with a methodological either/or: either we accommodate Christianity to secularity's norms, or we uphold the normative primacy of God's unique self-revelation in Christ. Depending on which we choose, we will be liberals or conservatives. The instabilities in the Christologies of Wright and McGrath arise because they seem not to acknowledge the choice that needs to be made at this point.

In closing, three theses on the kind of theology I envisage.[69] First, it will uphold the uniqueness of the work of God in Jesus Christ. This is a work principally of reconciliation and therefore of divine self-revelation. That this theology will be biblical goes without saying, but it will be so in virtue of the fact that, like scripture, it is a response to what God has done. The ontological will take methodological priority over the epistemological.

Second, it will be a theology that is grounded in and nurtures the life of the church. The church has its being in and from Jesus Christ. It is the community of those who have been called to new life by God-in-Christ. The church is therefore a unique cognitive community with a unique treasure to share: the gospel. Theology's summons is to hear this message with the whole church; its service is to teach it obediently and thereby help keep the church's preaching faithful to the gospel. Theology is answerable to God; it does not need to seek legitimation from, or to form fashionable alliances with secular culture.

However, because it springs from God's mission to the world in Jesus Christ and from the founding of the new humanity in him, this theology will be missionary in its orientation towards the world. McGrath criticizes theology's 'intellectual insularity'. The way to overcome this is not to seek more points of contact with the world's thinking by ever more sophisticated apologetic bridge-building; that is to court a fatal worldly respectability, to take the path of wisdom and power criticized by Paul in 1 Corinthians. Rather, the church and its theologians need to take the path of folly and weakness trodden by Jesus. Then, when we have begun to learn to take up our intellectual crosses and to be vulnerable, it might be granted to us to 'destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ'.[70]

Third, this will be a joyful and confident theology. Joyful because it is the fruit of hearts and minds that have been brought to new life by the risen Lord Jesus; confident because it has learned that Jesus has overcome the prince of this world, and that this victory is being brought to fruition even now in the dark recesses of our own lives. In other words, this is a theology that is animated by the Holy Spirit and is itself an act of worship. It follows that this theology will not be arrogant or conceited. It is theology born from having been captivated by the God by whom we must be humbled and abased if we are to be lifted up and exalted. It is theology

69 See further John Webster's *Theological Theology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1998, and 'Discovering Dogmatics' in Darren C. Marks: *Shaping a Theological Mind: Theological Context and Methodology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 129-36.

70 2 Cor. 10:5 (RSV). For a sustained exposition of this verse, see Bruce Marshall's *Trinity and Truth*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

that has begun to learn the fear of the Lord and begun to be delivered from the proud imagination – whether of an individual, a church party, or a denomination – which says that one has something original and uniquely one's own to offer to the church.

This leads us back to our starting point. The church cannot afford the luxury of artificial divisions on party grounds or, on what turn out on examination to be specious, intellectual grounds. This would be to turn Christianity into an ideology. However, there *are* divisions in the church, but these are genuine divisions about the nature of the gospel, of the church, of truth, and about the way in which Jesus Christ relates to our culture. These divisions cut across party and denominational boundaries. (One of the great blessings of ecumenism is that it has helped us see this.) We probably cannot avoid the language of 'liberal' and 'conservative'. These are convenient short-hand terms that have a job to do and I hope that this article will lead to their being used in a more informed way. But they are neither a substitute for thought, nor an excuse for not thinking, hard.

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