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Three Dimensional Theology

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IF I WANTED TO PLAN a day's walk in the Lake District it would be rather stupid of me to complain that my road map did not have footpaths, woods and quarries marked on it; a road map simply doesn't show these things on it. It isn't that the road map is wrong, but that the road map is made for one purpose and the Ordnance Survey map (the map I really need to plan my walk) for another. Both maps are correct, but each is made for a different purpose—the road map for travelling by car, and the O.S. map for walking. Each map has a different purpose and therefore shows different features; both maps are correct and useful when used for the purposes for which they were made.

In certain theological debates we often make the mistake of complaining that one 'theological map' fails to show the same features as another 'theological map' (or, indeed, a secular map). The point is that as in cartography, each 'theological map' has a different purpose to serve; the two maps show different features because they are approaching their subject matter from a different angle. If we look properly at the two maps we will in fact find that they both show different dimensions of the same unified whole. Yet often, because of the tradition in which we have been nurtured, we fail to realise that the two maps are mapping the same subject but in different ways. We need to remove our spectacles of prejudice and really look not at the map itself, but at the object which the map depicts; then we will see that the two maps do not conflict with one another but dovetail together as two ways of looking at the same thing.¹

It is my purpose in this short essay to look at certain areas in theology where these cartographic problems occur.

1. *Ethics*

THE secular conception of the Christian ethic is the obeying of rules, and in particular biblical rules. That commands form the basis for

Christian morality has been a tradition within the church from its beginnings; the process of prescribing laws for the believer was prominent in the apostolic fathers of the second and third centuries, exemplified by the *Doctrina* and the *Didache*. In the medieval church prescriptions began to appear not only as standards for the Christian but also for punishment and penance. During the Reformation the prescriptive concept of ethics was popular, despite the reformers' stress on salvation by grace alone; Wyclif, Calvin and Richard Baxter all followed in this tradition. In modern Protestantism the tradition is upheld by such writers as Carl Henry and John Murray, both of whom strongly affirm that Christian love must be given content by divine revelation. Murray notes that love alone cannot be the sole criterion for Christian ethics, since we are in fact *commanded* to love;² love is dictated by a consideration that is prior to itself.

Against the idea that Christian morality consists of obeying individual rules Joseph Fletcher protests that it consists of doing the 'loving thing', the 'loving thing' being determined solely by the situation. Jesus, Fletcher notes, ignored the rules of Sabbath observance because doing the 'loving thing' (e.g. healing in the temple) took precedence. If we were to limit our ethics to the observance of rules, then Mother Maria's suicide in the Nazi concentration camp at Belsen, where she chose to die in a gas chamber in the place of a young Jewish girl, was wrong, because prescriptive codes always include the prescription that suicide is wrong. Most of us, I think, would agree with Fletcher in saying that Mother Maria had acted rightly in this situation, had broken the rule against committing suicide, and had instead done the 'loving thing' and laid down her life for another as her Lord had done.³

We have before us then, two opposing views about Christian ethics; the first, the legalistic or prescriptive view, states that Christian ethics consists of obeying moral precepts: the second, the situational, states that Christian ethics consists of doing the 'loving thing' in the situation. Both views, as they stand, are easily criticised, and the propounders of each theory have not been slow to heap abuse one upon the other. The legalistic view does, as we have seen, fail in certain circumstances, e.g. sacrificial suicide, and to answer that a set of rules *could* be made that would admit no exception must fail since such a set would always need constant revision with the onset of new situations. The agapeistic view can be criticised on the ground that without further qualification love has no content. Carl Henry comments: The New Testament knows nothing of lawless believers in Christ. No believer is left to work out his moral solutions by the principles of love alone. . . . The content of love must be defined by divine revelation.⁴ It is interesting to find that Fletcher himself actually belies his own thesis by propounding a moral rule, that love=justice=doing the greatest good for the greatest number.⁵ That rule itself would seem to be non-agapeistic, for on this utilitarian principle it would be right to steal from a rich man

in certain circumstances. Taken in isolation, both versions of the Christian ethic are unsatisfactory.

Just as the two types of map we looked at were made for use in different circumstances and for different purposes, so too are the two ethical methodologies we have been studying; the two are not mutually exclusive. We must look at the ethical situation in hand and discover whether we need our 'situation map' or our 'prescriptive map'; which ever map we use, the ethic will be worked out within a dynamic relation with a living God.⁶ For the situationist and the prescriptivist to believe that they are in opposition to one another is to fail to understand that there may be more than one type of ethical map, each correct in itself, but only presenting a complete picture when used in conjunction with a second map.

The question arises as to how one should make an ethical decision in a particular case; how does the Christian know which map to use? Firstly, we should bear in mind that the Christian ethic, as I have already said, starts from a dynamic relation with a living God, a relationship of love between the Christian and his Lord, reflecting that relationship of love that exists between the Father and the Son. Secondly, such a love-dynamic must work itself out in love toward the neighbour on behalf of the Christian. These two principles together form the contours of our 'situational map'. However, God has given the Christian certain rules to define the content of love, such as the rules against murder, against stealing, against lying, and so on; the Christian will, in attempting to work out his dynamic love relationship, be guided by these rules. Such rules represent the 'prescriptive map'. The problem occurs when the two appear to conflict. Such conflicts are particularly rife in medical situations concerning life and death, and especially in the fields of euthanasia and abortion. To illustrate the two-map methodology I shall discuss an actual medical case of abortion cited by R. F. R. Gardner:

'An attractive girl of 20 years was seen with her 62 years old mother. She conversed normally and gave a history of being eight weeks' pregnant. Her mother then explained that the girl could not read or write, had a vicious temper, and could not be left alone for any length of time. She could not, for instance, be left in the house with children lest she harmed them, or at least fail to care for them. Her only friends were men, a series of whom took her up until her deficiencies became apparent. She would never be able to marry, rear a family, care for a home. Any man who wished would, without difficulty, be able to persuade her to yield to his advances.'⁷

The Christian who only used his legalistic prescriptive map would be committed to saying that no termination of pregnancy should be allowed, as the Bible forbids murder, abortion of a foetus being a case of murder.⁸ The Christian who had a situation map before him, however, whilst admitting the validity of the rule against murder, would want to say that *in this case* the primary consideration of love,

to both the mother and the unborn child, would lead him to decide in favour of a termination.

The methodology for deciding which map to use then, seems to be as follows:

- i. look at the rule map; if the solution appears to conflict with the principle of love, then—
- ii. look at the situational map; look at the total situation surrounding the problem and work the answer out in a dynamic love-relationship with the living God (i.e. pray about it, think what Christ would have done, etc.).

The type of map we will use in a situation cannot be determined in advance; we need to have both constantly in our possession. Only the situation can determine the map, just as our purpose in going from A to B (a walk, a tour, a hitch-hike, a mercy errand) determines which map we will need (O.S. or road map).⁹

2. *The Origin of Life*

IN 1970 Jaques Monod, a founder of molecular biology and a Nobel prizewinner, published a book entitled *Chance and Necessity*. His central thesis, attacked by scientists, philosophers and theologians alike, was that life is a product of pure chance:

'chance *alone* is at the source of every innovation, of all creation in the biosphere. Pure chance, absolutely free but blind, at the root of the stupendous edifice of evolution: this central concept of modern biology is no longer one among other possibilities or even conceivable hypotheses. It is today the *sole* conceivable hypothesis, the only one compatible with observed and tested fact. And nothing warrants the supposition (or the hope) that conceptions about this should, or ever could, be revised.'¹⁰

Life, according to Monod, is not something that is determined or planned by something that is external to itself, in the same way that a human artifact is seen to be designed by a designer external to itself; that belief comes from forcing an anthropomorphic mould upon the world of nature. We are making an illogical transfer from the realm of the manufactured to the realm of the natural. Living structures, Monod postulates, originated by chance, continue as self-constructing machines. Such structures have three characteristics:

- i. they are endowed with a purpose (teleonomy).
- ii. their form, from their overall shape to their tiniest detail, is determined by interactions within the objects themselves (autonomous morphogenesis).
- iii. they reproduce a structurally identical object (reproductive invariance).¹¹

Thus, what appears to be a structure that is created, is in fact one

that, originating in the field of chance, contains within itself the capacity for purposeful reproduction.

In the first chapter of our Bibles we read that God created the cosmos and all life within it; man's own experience certainly leads him on many occasions to believe that the world of nature must be a product of design rather than of chance. When we examine the beautiful structures of nature, the wonderfully constructed body, the beauty of the flowers, the graceful animal world, man is inclined to posit a 'god' of some sort who designed the universe. That it was all created by pure chance seems, to us, to be impossible. Due Noüy calculated that the chance formation of a typical protein molecule made up of 2,000 atoms was of the order of one to 2.02×10^{221} —practically nil! Even if the elements were shaken up at the speed of the vibration of light it would still take 10^{44} billions of years to get the protein molecule for life.¹²

Most Christians would see the two accounts of the origin of life, the 'chance' account of Monod, and the 'creation' account, as mutually exclusive. Ramm, in his book *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*, rejects the 'chance' account, and R. E. D. Clark, in a popular apologetic book on the subject, sees the two as alternative possibilities.¹³ My thesis is that the two accounts represent two maps of the same subject. As I see it, the 'chance' account is the only account open to scientific investigation, for science does not have the apparatus to conclude that there must be a creator or that the universe has a purpose. Looking, as science does, from the 'physical end' of the universe, it can only give an answer to a problem in physical terms—it is not at liberty to say that there is (or that there is not) a creator. As far as the scientist is concerned chance formation of life is the only option open to him. The Christian however, believing that there is a God, believes that life was purposefully created; God himself has revealed this fact to him in the Bible. The two views are not necessarily in conflict—the scientist has given a scientific account, and the Christian a religious one; '... the appearance of randomness judged by human standards need not necessarily be antithetical to superhuman purpose, for the recognition of purpose depends on the point of observation.'¹⁴ The two accounts are not then, in conflict; they represent rather, two different maps of the origin of life. Taken together they represent a true picture; taken alone they represent a half-truth, in which misunderstanding and prejudice are nurtured.

3. Luck and Providence

'GOOD luck' we often say to someone before an exam, or before they take their driving test; 'A'nt I lucky,' says the small boy who receives a sack full of presents on Christmas morning; 'He's extremely lucky to

be alive,' we say of the person who was near to death after a road accident. All these well used phrases assume that the world is not quite 'fair', or not 'just' in its dealings with humanity. A hard working student may fail an exam because the 'right' questions didn't come up; we say that he was unlucky. A drunken driver may be lucky that there was no policeman around when he drove his car into a ditch. A man may be lucky to win the pools at his first attempt. Each of these three incidents points out one of the essential features of luck: it assumes that a man does not always receive what he deserves; a good man may fail to succeed at something whilst a bad man does well. Each does not receive what we would feel that he really deserves: he is either lucky or unlucky. The Christian believes in the idea of providence; this may be defined as '... that continued exercise of the divine energy whereby the Creator preserves all his creatures, is operative in all that comes to pass in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end.'¹⁵ Everything that happens is in God's plan for the world. He is sovereign over the affairs of nations; '... he not only created the whole human race so that they should occupy the entire earth, but he decreed how long each nation should flourish, and what the boundaries of its territories should be.' (Acts. 17:26, *Jerusalem Bible*.) He is lord of the successes and failures of men's lives, dethroning princes and exalting the lowly (Luke 1:52), and because he is so Christians are told not to get anxious about what is to happen in life (Matt. 6:25ff.). He answers the prayers of his people and promises them his protection. The classical example of God's providence is, of course, the history of Israel leading up to the incarnation of Jesus himself, but God still providentially controls the world now as then. Providence itself has two aspects: it exhibits both the characteristics of mercy and redemptive purpose, and also of judgment; the writer of the psalm says that 'He rains coals of fire and brimstone on the wicked, he serves them a scorching wind to swallow down' (Ps. 11:6). With divine providence embodying both these aspects of judgment and redemption, the whole nature of providence can only be understood in relation to the Christian doctrine of salvation.¹⁶ In a way, we can never completely understand how God's providence operates together with man's freedom of choice; all that God providentially orders in history does not in the least restrict the freedom of the individual. These two aspects must be held together in paradox (paradox being no more than an admission that man cannot see what God sees). Attempts have been made to relate the two, perhaps the most popular being that of Butterfield, who likens God to a musical composer: '... we must imagine that the composer himself is only composing the music inch by inch as the orchestra is playing it; so that if you and I play wrong notes he changes his mind and gives a different turn to the bars that come immediately afterwards . . .'¹⁷ The attempt, however, is weak: it fails to keep the idea of paradox and denies the sovereignty of God; we must

say that God works *in* and *through* human mistakes, not within or despite them.

Again then, we have two accounts before us—the account of luck and the account of providence. Again I would contend that these are two ways of charting the same thing. Luck is, of course, the only option open to those who would deny the existence of God, but from the Christian point of view is the description of what happens in the world. Luck is, if you like, looking at providence through a secular pair of spectacles; because it is seen from one vantage point and not another does not mean that we should deny its reality. Indeed, to say that (from a secular point of view) luck is a reality, to admit that the world is not just and fair in its dealings with men, is to do no more than admit that creation has fallen from its original God given form. Luck and providence are two different ways of mapping what occurs on the stage of history, the one a secular account, the other a religious. They are not mutually exclusive concepts.

It might be asked whether the Christian can ever use the category of luck. A Christian who says that the new job he has just obtained was not lucky but providential, might be quite happy to say that his little boy was lucky when he threw a six with the dice whilst playing at ludo. Two issues must be separated here. Firstly, the Christian *can* use the concept of luck, because, as I have said, luck is in itself a valid way of describing what happens in the world, a valid map of events, although it is a *secular* map. As all Christians are of this world, are, in other words, secular, they are quite at liberty to use secular terminology in order to make themselves understood in a secular world. It may be, however, that they want to convey to their audience (Christian or non-Christian) what their Christian commitment means to them in a particular situation, in which case they will use the Christian terminology of providence, and not the secular terminology of luck. The Christian, qua secular, is at liberty to use the word luck in any situation, whether in describing the creation of the world or in describing the result of a game of ludo; the Christian, qua Christian, however, can only use the terminology of providence. But here our second issue comes to light: can God really be at work in an unimportant game of ludo? If we believe that everything that happens in the world is in God's plan, if Jesus tells us that the very hairs on our heads are numbered, then we must logically include the outcome of a game of ludo in our description of providence. It may be that God, like us, does not regard the game as very important, but that is no reason to exclude its description as providence; it may in fact be the case that a win at ludo, insignificant as it may seem to us, may be very meaningful and important for someone else—for example, it may boost a person's self-confidence, or conversely deflate his ego: God can work through a game of ludo just as he can work through the creation of life itself.

4. *Religious Knowledge*

IN a recent book Prof. Thomas F. Torrance claims that God can be known scientifically.¹⁰ Scientific knowledge, according to Torrance, is achieved by getting to know an object of investigation through the means directed by the object itself. Thus knowledge about a table is achieved by the means indicated by the table itself, namely biological and chemical analysis; similarly with personal knowledge, where again, the means of knowledge (what Torrance calls the 'mode of rationality') is dictated by the object—the person we are seeking to know; in this case the means dictated is that of personal encounter, in particular through speech communication. God too is known by the means of knowledge or the mode of rationality that God himself dictates, and this means through knowledge of the Word of God, the incarnate Jesus Christ. Knowledge of Christ, true knowledge of Christ, involves repentance on man's part; God cannot be known apart from a relationship of reconciliation and salvation. To know about God is to know God; knowledge is, therefore, in the words of Karl Barth '... only possible as an act of faith, in the determination of human action by listening, and as obedience towards Jesus Christ.'¹¹

Prof. Ninian Smart, in distinction from Prof. Torrance, claims that religious knowledge does not involve an act of faith. In criticising Torrance's idea that knowledge about Christianity involves an experience of Christ, Smart puts forward a secular analogy: 'To turn to a secular example, I may know what love is like (I love my wife), but does this precisely tell me what it is like for Onassis to love Jackie? The answer is: with sufficient imagination I can gain some understanding of what it is like.'¹² Smart tells us then, that just as we may understand in some measure the nature of love between two individuals, so similarly we may understand the nature of religion even though, in both cases, we remain an 'outsider'. Knowledge of religion can be obtained from the 'outside', by looking at the externals on phenomena of religion, which Smart divides into two categories—the beliefs and the practical manifestations. Through the study of external forms we can obtain religious knowledge.

It is usually assumed that these two accounts of religious knowledge are opposed to one another; again, I would put forward the contention that they are complementary. Smart's picture, if you like, gives us one dimension of knowledge, Torrance's gives us another. Each on its own remains incomplete, and the nature of religious knowledge is only understood when we see them both charting religious belief, but each from a different standpoint: Torrance from 'within' the christian faith, Smart from the 'outside'. To deny that the two epistemologies can fit together is either to claim that the Christian religion has no external forms, or, from the other side, to deny that religious faith in God is meaningful.¹¹

5. *Conclusion: Three Dimensional Theology*

MUCH that is done in the name of theology is confused because of the failure to recognise that a theological topic may be mapped in more than one way; the cartographers of one 'theological map' have been so busy criticising another's cartography that they have failed to look through the model of the map to the reality that the map depicts. They have therefore failed to see that the two apparently different maps are in fact two different ways of representing the one reality. In the realm of pure science this problem has been overcome: for example, light may be thought of in terms of both rays and waves, and the description used in research will depend on the stance from which the research is being taken. In psychology the fact that our emotions may be described in terms of chemical processes does not mean that they cannot also be described in terms of human action. In philosophy the notion of cause is not seen to rule out the concept of free will. In each case two different maps are being drawn of the same subject, but each from a different standpoint, and each mapping different sorts of features.

I have entitled this article 'Three Dimensional Theology'; I have given it this title because I believe that each 'map' that we have outlined represents a dimension of a unified whole. For example, in our last section describing religious knowledge, we might say that Smart's description of knowledge will give us a two-dimensional picture of religion, of Christian belief; only when we have added Torrance's description do we get a truer, three-dimensional picture. Only when the two different pictures are put together do we get a proper description in three-dimensional terms. To complain that only one picture or map is correct is to leave us in a two-dimensional world, rather static and lifeless, lacking congruence with reality. It is only when we see the picture in a three-dimensional way that we see it as it should be seen—do we see it as it is. The concept of three dimensions helps us to see how our maps fit together. Each map contours two dimensions of a three-dimensional whole; when the two are seen together, when we look through the symbols of the map to the reality which they represent, we see a three-dimensional universe. The two maps then, fit together in the same way that a road map (which gives no indication of height, railway lines, types of forest, etc.) might fit together with an O.S. map, or in the same way that an O.S. map (which gives no indication of rock strata, geological faults, etc.) might fit together with a geological map. It is not that the two map the same features on a different scale, but that each is drawn from a different vantage point and with a different purpose.

We may not (or more correctly, we probably will not) see, from our vantage point, exactly how the two different maps, or the two different dimensions, fit together; this is to be expected rather than bewailed. Only God himself can see how the various dimensions interlock; the

human responsibility is to hold them in, what must be for us, paradox. Nevertheless, three dimensions there must be, and much that is bigoted and two-dimensional in Christian theology must face up to the fact that it has misunderstood the nature of reality and of theology—it is three-dimensional and not two-dimensional.

¹ I owe my analogy of the map to S. Toulmin, *The Philosophy of Science* (Hutchinson Univ. Library, London, 1967), ch. 4.

² J. Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Tyndale Press, London, 1957), p. 23f.

³ J. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics* (SCM, London, 1966), p. 74.

⁴ Quoted from E. L. Long Jr., *A Survey of Christian Ethics* (OUP, New York, 1967), p. 86; cf. also K. Grayston, 'New Testament Moral Codes and Situation Ethics', in *The Church Quarterly* vol. 3, 1971.

⁵ J. Fletcher, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

⁶ Again, this aspect has (wrongly) been propounded as an approach and method sufficient in itself: cf. e.g. D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Fontana, London 1964), and K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh), 11/2.

⁷ R. F. R. Gardner, *Abortion: The Personal Dilemma* (Paternoster, Exeter, 1972), p. 173.

⁸ It is interesting to note that J. Murray, *op. cit.*, fails to discuss the issue of abortion, even though he devotes a chapter to discussing the sanctity of life.

⁹ For a fuller discussion of this topic cf. E. L. Long Jr., *op. cit.*, esp. chs. 19 and 20, and P. Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics* (S. J. T. Occasional Paper no. 11, 1965), esp. ch. 5. A good example of this method put into practice occurs in Gardner's book.

¹⁰ J. Monod, *Chance and Necessity* (Fontana, London, 1974), p. 110.

¹¹ J. Monod, *op. cit.*, ch. 1.

¹² From B. Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Paternoster, Exeter, 1964), pp. 102-3.

¹³ R. E. D. Clark, *The Universe: Plan or Accident?* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1972).

¹⁴ M. A. Jeeves, *The Scientific Enterprise and Christian Faith* (Tyndale Press, London, 1969), p. 105.

¹⁵ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Banner of Truth, London, 1958), p. 166.

¹⁶ J. McIntyre, *The Christian Doctrine of History* (Oliver and Boyd, London and Edinburgh, 1957), ch. 4.

¹⁷ H. Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (G. Bell, London 1949), p. 95.

¹⁸ T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (OUP, London, 1969).

¹⁹ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1936) I/1, p. 18.

²⁰ N. Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion* (Macmillan, London, 1973) p. 31.

²¹ For a fuller description of the relationship between the epistemologies of Torrance and Smart cf. my own article, 'The Nature of Knowledge and Religious Education', in *Learning for Living*, vol. 14, Sept., 1974.