On Proving God

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CAN the existence of God be proved? What memories does such a question evoke of past intellectual battles and theological controversies! The question is once again coming to the forefront of the stage in modern theological and philosophical discussion. The Vatican Council still bravely declares that, "The same Holy Mother Church holds and teaches that God, the beginning and end of all things, may be known for certain by the natural light of human reason, by means of created things."[1] The Roman Church has never officially departed from this point of view. In the ranks of Protestant thinkers there is no such confident agreement as to the capacity and role of reason in such high matters. There are those whose reasons for saying "No" to this question are mainly of a philosophical order. They have been convinced that Kant has shown once for all the inability of the speculative reason to pass beyond the limits of the phenomenal world. If God can be known, it must be by some other means, such as our moral sense or religious experience. Others seize upon the ambiguity of the word "prove" and point out that men of undoubted intellectual capacity have not been convinced. This shows that whatever rational arguments may be adduced in favour of belief in God's existence, they obviously fall short of complete demonstration. Otherwise there would be no atheists. Others, such as Dean W. R. Matthews, point out that even if the traditional arguments prove all that they set out to do, our religious interest in their conclusions would be very limited indeed. The God who is reached at the end of a process of philosophical argument simply does not sustain belief in the God whom the Christian in fact worships. For the latter is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, not the *ipsum esse subsistens* of scholastic argument.

In all fairness it should be recognized that much modern Protestant disregard of the rational proofs springs not from Kantian scepticism but from a religious motive. When Luther declared that the *analogia entis* is the invention of the devil, it is perhaps in this sense that he should be understood. He was so profoundly convinced that the only God worth knowing is the redeeming God of the Bible, manifest in Christ, that no additional metaphysical supports are needed. Since it is a fact that men have been justified by faith and reconciled to God without any philosophical knowledge of God at all, let us be content to live in the order of grace. This seems to have been the attitude of the Reformers and is still that of their modern followers. It has a long ancestry and recurs again and again in the Christian church.

Let us examine it carefully, because, if Tertullian's dictum is true that Jerusalem and Athens should have nothing to do with each other, then

1. R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *God: His Existence and Nature*, p. 8.

merely to ask the question of God's existence in terms of rational argument is a waste of time and perhaps a near approach to blasphemy. Kierkegaard evidently thought there was something indecent in talking about proof of God's existence, as there would be in discussion of another person's existence while he is in the same room with us. We may admit at once, in spite of the Thomists, that if by proof is meant the kind of demonstration that is logically coercive in the sense that no sane man who follows the nature of the argument can possibly reject it, there is no proof. If we are thinking of proof in the mathematical sense, it is equally true that such proofs of God are not to be found. It is often assumed, however, that the only alternative to proof in this sense is probability and that, since the religious man cannot worship and trust a mere probability, he can have no interest in arguments which give him such an insubstantial basis for his faith.

We must even go a step farther. If we eliminate at the start all evidence derived from divine revelation and religious experience which is man's response to the divine initiative, our rational conclusions, whatever they are, cannot contain these things. They may be smuggled in surreptitiously at the end of our reasoning, but they will not have been reached by the reasoning process alone and it is dishonest to suggest that they are. Have we not then returned to Luther's position which claims that faith alone gives us all we need, and that what the philosopher adds can be of no vital import for the religious life of the believer?

The position is not so simple. While it is true that Christian faith in God cannot be created in the believer by metaphysical arguments, it is neither possible nor desirable that the Christian apprehension of God should be isolated from every other sphere of knowledge. The Christian knowledge of God, produced by the response of faith to divine acts in history, must be seen in relation to our knowledge of the world given by science and philosophical reflection. If it is not possible to generate religious certainty about the Christian God by metaphysical argument, it may be possible to show that the Christian belief in God is not irreconcilable with the kind of world revealed to us by science and philosophy. The latter may not give us the redeeming God of biblical history, but they may give some knowledge of God as Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Faith and science may then unite in a Christian philosophy which enables the Christian believer to worship God with mind and heart, instead of leaving him with an inward tension destructive of the unity of personal life.

It is not enough, therefore, to put the question in the simple form: Are there any cogent reasons for believing that theism is a more reasonable and satisfactory explanation of the universe and man's destiny in it than any other? The exact kind of theism we are seeking to establish must be defined. If we add the adjective Christian to our theism, then it must be clear what results have been obtained from philosophy and what are given to us in faith. If it is argued that only a knowledge given in faith turns out to be reasonable, the term reason demands definition also.

Our discussion assumes that it is at least legitimate to ask: How much,

if anything, can we claim to know about God by pure philosophy? Let us, then, review the present state of theistic discussion with this in mind.

First, there are those who still maintain with undiminished conviction the traditional notion of natural theology, namely, that "from the consideration of finite being, the human mind can arrive, without appeal to religious experience or revelation, at a sure knowledge of a God whose primary character is self-existent Being."[2] Such an infinite and transcendent Being created the world, not because He had to do so, but because He willed to do so. He still would be perfect and complete without any created world at all, though having once created it He is now deeply and lovingly concerned about it. This is the *philosophia perennis*, which finds its most complete expression in Thomas Aquinas and is ably advocated today by Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain and other Thomists. In a modified form, the same thesis is persuasively maintained by Anglicans such as E. L. Mascall and Austin Farrer. Although it would appear that the latter denies the Thomist assumption that God's existence can be "demonstrated" *a posteriori*, i.e., by rational argument from the things that are made, the concept of God he wishes to defend is substantially that of the *philosophia perennis*. The late Dean Inge, despite his notorious antipathy to Roman Catholicism in its institutional expression, nevertheless thought highly of the philosophical theism embodied in scholasticism. Historically, the cosmological and the teleological arguments have been supposed to be convincing rational defences of this idea of God. Thomas rejected the ontological argument, namely, the view that one can pass directly from the idea of God as an infinite and perfect Being to the necessity of His existence. His followers have agreed with him against Anselm and Descartes and at this point, at least, Thomism joins hands with Kantianism.

In the opposing camp are those who insist that theism as thus conceived is not the only form of theism for which there is rational defence. Indeed, Charles Hartshorne of Chicago in a notable series of books[3] has claimed that such a theism is quite incompatible with the basic tenet of the Christian faith that God is love. To argue that God is immutable, complete and perfect in the Thomist sense, to whom nothing can be added which makes any difference, destroys the Christian confidence that God cares for His children with a love like a Father's and shares in the tragedy of their failures and sins that arise from their misuse of freedom. Whatever the perennial philosophy may say about the compatibility of the divine impassibility and Christian love, the plain fact is that they cannot be reconciled. When, therefore, the modern philosopher attacks on philosophical grounds the God of Aquinas and those who share his views, he is not destroying theism but only one possible type of theism which is unsatisfactory both religiously and philosophically.

2. E. L. Mascall, *He who is*, p. ix.
3. C. Hartshorne, *Beyond Humanism; Man's Vision of God; Philosophers Speak of God.*

Hartshorne's alternative form of theism is what he calls panentheism. This means that God is not only complete and perfect in Himself, as the *philosophia perennis* conceived Him, but that He is also complex, changeable, ever incomplete and growing in value. The relation of God to the world is not that of a product of a divine, unnecessitated act of will. The world in some sense is necessary to God, God is such that He could not be content, even with the fullness of the triune life. He had to create and is, therefore, bound up with the temporal order and the sufferings of His creatures in a much more intimate way than was logically possible on the traditional view. The Chicago philosopher rigorously repudiates the charge that this involves a finite, imperfect, limited and struggling God but agrees that it does mean the frank recognition of a temporal aspect of deity and the admission that what happens through human will in the actualities of history does add something to God in a more than metaphorical sense. The existence of children adds something to the life of parents in the realm of actuality, and this must be true of God if He is truly love. There is, therefore, a middle position between traditional theism, with its idea of the *Actus Purus*, (or of God perfect and self-sufficient without a created order), and what is commonly supposed to be the only logical alternative to the traditional view, viz. the idea of a merely limited and finite deity.

This bold attempt to harness William James, Henri Bergson and A. N. Whitehead in the defence of a theism which is both more cogent philosophically and more satisfying religiously certainly introduces an important new element into the modern discussion of theism. Nels Ferré in his *Christian Understanding of God* has evidently been deeply influenced by this kind of argument and there is much in the writings of the present Dean of St. Paul's which suggests that he would be in sympathy at several points with Professor Hartshorne's basic contention.

What, then, shall we say about the proofs of God's existence in the light of this general background? There is obviously no space in a brief article to develop and defend a thesis in detail. Suffice it to state, rather dogmatically, a few of the points which, in the writer's estimation, are beginning to emerge with some clearness from the debate.

(1) While it may be bold to claim that the reign of Kant is coming to an end, it is undoubtedly true that his theory of knowledge has come under increasing attack. The Thomist attacks on Kantianism and the criticisms of Anglicans such as A. E. Taylor deserve to be taken seriously by Protestant thinkers, even when they do not share the ecclesiastical affiliations of these men. The Thomist attack on Kant is not invalidated because it is made by men who hold a doctrine of the Church impossible to Protestants. Professor Hodges, speaking as a philosopher, has admitted that Kant never saw how his transcendental standpoint could be combined with the ontological standpoint and that an agreed correlation of the two has yet to be found.[4] If the Kantian theory of knowledge is not our starting point, then the traditional

4. H. A. Hodges, *Languages, Standpoints and Attitudes*, pp. 40–1.

proofs are not rendered invalid without further consideration. We can discuss them without begging the question beforehand by assuming an epistemological dogma of questionable validity.

(2) Though the ontological argument is not a proof in the strict sense that it can be demonstrated that a God exists who corresponds to our idea of Him as infinite perfection, it remains true that our possession of the idea of a perfect being and man's spiritual aspiration after union with such a being calls for explanation. Nevertheless, the Thomists are right in refusing to make the case for theism dependent on this famous argument.

(3) The cosmological argument, which does not necessarily depend upon the Aristotelian form of the Thomist statement of it, is still convincing to all who are prepared to admit the real existence of finite and contingent creatures and are not willing to reduce causality to mere association or juxtaposition of psychic events in the manner of Hume. Tillich stresses the fact that the cosmological argument is a failure as an argument. He would interpret it in existential terms as "involving the courage which accepts and overcomes the anxiety of categorical finitude."[5] But if the courage to overcome is not mere bravado, it must depend on belief in the actuality of a Being who is not himself the victim of categorical finitude. This must mean that the cosmological argument has metaphysical as well as existential truth. This would appear to be the thesis defended by Austin Farrer in *Finite and Infinite*. The cosmological argument is based on the assumption that one can reason from the existence of finite being to necessary or self-subsistent Being on which it depends. It is not an argument from ideas in someone's head, but from the existence of a universe of finite creatures, which is not self-explanatory or self-sustaining. This presupposes the existence of a world not dependent entirely on our perception of it. Even though Kant stressed the creative activity of the mind in construing a universe according to the categories by which the mind must inevitably think, his retention of the "thing in itself" testifies to the fact that he never entirely surrendered the realist and therefore ontological reference of knowledge. Our knowledge of the world is not a mere subjective playing with ideas. It refers to some reality not exhaustively explained in terms of the mind's own activity. As Professor Hodges pointed out at the place already referred to, Kant never succeeded in combining the transcendental and the ontological in any satisfactory synthesis, but he never denied the necessity of both. If then there is a world which we can know, what is its character and what are the creatures or substances or units which it contains? Austin Farrer has shown that we can reach solid ground in establishing finite substance only when we come to the human self conceived in terms of will, i.e. purposive activity. This is not a denial of the existence of matter, in the idealist sense, nor a defence of solipsism. Rather it is the assertion that our reasoning from finite creatures to their source or ground must use as its fundamental analogy the willing activity of the self. Dorothy Emmet in *Epiphany Philosophers* has

5. P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 209.

maintained that if we use this analogy, and think of the perfect form of activity, which is God, as goodness on the analogy of our own interior scale of valuable activity, we must give some reason independent of the analogy for holding that this is the most appropriate way of thinking of it rather than on the analogy of the physical conception of "free energy." There seems to be no way out of this dilemma except to say that the first analogy is more fruitful in the sense that it can give a more satisfactory account of other finite creatures, whereas the analogy of free energy makes the existence of the willing self with its valuing activities inexplicable. Yet we are far more certain of the latter than of any notion of "free energy" such as the modern physicist may employ.[6]

(4) Though the teleological argument can no longer be defended in a simple pre-Darwinian form, based on the analogy of the celestial Watchmaker, the acceptance of some form of the evolutionary theory has not banished teleology from the process as a whole. Few can read carefully F. R. Tennant's two great volumes, *Philosophical Theology* or Dean Matthews' *Purpose of God* or Elton Trueblood's *Logic of Belief* without being convinced that the teleological argument is very much alive. There is no space left here for an adequate discussion of this famous argument. Kant admitted it to be the one which most commends itself to commonsense and the minds of ordinary thoughtful people. Dr. Farrer's apt comment on the anti-metaphysical trend of Christian theology in recent years may be quoted as summing up our contention: "If we surrender metaphysical enquiry, we shall vainly invoke supernatural revelation to make up for our metaphysical loss of nerve."[7]

(5) The present writer shares Professor Hartshorne's dislike of the doctrine of impassibility in its traditional form. It certainly creates great difficulties for the defence of biblical theism, but whether the solution is to assert a temporal aspect of deity is as yet by no means clear. I predict considerable discussion on this point in the future.

(6) Despite the logical positivists, who deny that the word *God* has any intelligible meaning, and the Barthians, who are not greatly interested in what the philosophers say, there is good reason to think that natural theology is due for a revival. While we may readily admit with the late William Temple that there is a hunger of the spirit which neither natural theology nor natural religion can satisfy, we may certainly hope that in the near future a more satisfactory account of the relation between reason and faith, philosophy and revelation will be achieved than can be discerned in the somewhat confused theological debate of the past few decades.

6. A. Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (Bampton Lectures). Cf. Chapters IV and V for an illuminating discussion of the metaphysical use of analogy.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 78.