Verifiable Christianity: From Arnold to Van Buren

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IN HIS RECENT STUDY *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, Based on an Analysis of Its Language*,[1] Paul Van Buren accepts the general outlook of the philosophy of linguistic analysis. He therefore aligns himself with those philosophers who believe that the verification principle should be applied to the language of Christian faith in order to discover what Christianity is all about. In particular, he makes use of the theories of R. B. Braithwaite, which the latter advanced in *An Empiricist's View of Religious Belief*.[2] Braithwaite himself speaks of his close dependence upon Matthew Arnold's religious opinions, as set forth in *Literature and Dogma*. So we have here an interesting sequence: three steps taking us back from our own generation to the era of High Victorianism. The continuity of thought involved invites some further investigation. Light may be shed upon recent fashions in the philosophy of religion by a scrutiny of this link with the past.

I

Arnold's *St. Paul and Protestantism* was published first in 1869 and was followed by *Literature and Dogma* in 1873. If we except Feuerbach (whose *Essence of Christianity* had been translated by George Eliot in 1854), Arnold was the first prominent thinker to submit the Bible to what we now think of as demythologization in the Bultmannian sense. "The object of *Literature and Dogma*," he wrote in his Preface to the popular edition of that work, "is to re-assure those who feel attachment to Christianity, to the Bible, but who recognise growing discredit befalling miracles and the supernatural."[3] Christianity could continue to stand only by its *natural* truth. "It is after this that, among the more serious races of the world, the hearts of men are really feeling; and what really furthers them is to establish it."[4] And so he proposed to establish the natural truth of the Bible upon a verifiable basis, in place of the unverifiable assumptions of the theology of the Christian churches. He accepted the task of separating the timeless gospel from the theological frame in which it had been set heretofore.[5]

1. New York: Macmillan, 1963. 2. Cambridge: University Press, 1955.
3. M. Arnold, *Literature and Dogma: An Essay towards a Better Apprehension of the Bible* (London: Smith, Elder, 1895), p. vii. This Preface was written in 1883.
4. *Ibid.*, p. ix.
5. The same task has been undertaken by the Bishop of Woolwich today. Cf. J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1963), p. 8.

In *St. Paul and Protestantism* Arnold argued that the Apostle was, although a mystic, a moralist first and last. In *Literature and Dogma* he explained that the whole sweep of biblical religion, from the Old Testament to the New, was a concern with conduct. Jesus went beyond the finest ethical teaching of the prophets, because he had a new and different way of putting things. When he spoke, his hearers both knew the difference between ceremony and conduct and also saw "by a flash the true reason of things." He made them feel "that they had a best and real self as opposed to their ordinary and apparent one, and that their happiness depended on saving this best self from being overborne."[6]

But alas, human beings have never been able to stay with beliefs which are natural and verifiable. "That the spirit of man should entertain hopes and anticipations, beyond what it actually knows and can verify, is quite natural."[7] Hence extra-belief—*Aberglaube*—enters the picture. In itself natural, harmless, and inspiring (Goethe: *"der Aberglaube ist die Poesie des Lebens"*), extra-belief becomes hardened into dogma, and then into pseudo-science which degenerates into superstition. So the Old Testament expectation of a Messiah gives birth to the miraculous story of the pre-existent Son of God. Jesus becomes the Second Person of the Trinity—and the result is the Catholic doctrine of the Mass and the Protestant doctrine of Justification. And now the masses are losing the Bible and its religion. The original essence of biblical religion has almost been forgotten, thanks largely to the misguided toil of theologians. The Athanasian creed, for example, is a grotesque mixture "of learned pseudo-science with popular *Aberglaube*."[8]

Arnold was able to launch an early form of demythologizing program because of his competence in literary criticism. He suggested that the Bible must necessarily be misinterpreted if its readers were unacquainted with the nature of literature—which, moreover, was the true key to life and to the spirit of man. The prime error of the theologians was that they confused poetry with science. The Bible, rightly understood, was needful for "the right inculcation of righteousness" and, more particularly, for "the right inculcation of the method and secret of Jesus." That secret was *epieikeia*, the temper of sweet reasonableness. And to read the Bible aright and to profit from our reading was "an experimental process," one which would establish the fundamental truth of religion—its natural truth—*the necessity of righteousness.*[9]

Thus Arnold arrived at his famous account of "the true meaning" of religion as *morality touched by emotion.* So touched, morality became *righteousness* (the word of religion). His claim to have isolated the natural truth of the religious life was founded on his argument that conduct was three-fourths of life. Emotion had to be added to *morality* (the word of philosophical disquisition), because where we were emotionally involved

6. Arnold, *Literature and Dogma*, p. 67.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 224–6.

we gave the whole of ourselves, and no partial or passing thought merely, to the right employment of human powers.[10]

In his sensitive study *Matthew Arnold*,[11] Lionel Trilling discusses Arnold's religious views, describing them as confused, yet presenting them sympathetically. He points out that, although the moral emphasis of these views put them in the line of Kant and Ritschl, they were also in the line of Schleiermacher.[12] Trilling's judgment here is based upon the belief that Schleiermacher defended an "emotional subjectivism" (i.e. the attempt to prove God from the sense of God in the heart); but the influence of Spinoza is recognized as well, especially in Arnold's attempt to establish "his transcendent power in the language of naturalism."[13] Spinoza, of course, had been one of the most potent forces acting upon Schleiermacher, whose outlook was more "objective" than Trilling supposes. Be that as it may, we can see that, at the back of Arnold's thinking and only just failing to come forward to be recognized, there lurks a metaphysic.

For instance, he made the assertion that "for science, God is simply *the stream of tendency by which all things seek to fulfil the law of their being.*"[14] Trilling notes that science cannot say more than "all things act as they act," so that Arnold has no right to introduce the name of God at all, in the first place; while even more unscientific is his identification of the law of man's being with morality, in the second place. Yet Arnold seems to have meant by science no more than *what is admittedly certain and verifiable*—certainty and verifiability being measured not by the standards recognized by the physical sciences but by the standards discovered in literature, for, in his perspective, it is through the latter that a true estimate of *moral perception* is to be found. Nothing else can justify his notion of the stream of tendency, which is quite unscientific (as Trilling rightly insists) but wholly in keeping with the reading of "world history" which was common in the nineteenth century. Here Arnold can be seen to be truly in the line of Schleiermacher, who presented Jesus as proof of "the power of development which resides in our human nature," making progress possible.[15] Schleiermacher, before Arnold, had urged that religion saved the best and true self from being overborne by the ordinary and apparent one. As religion was the emergence of "the highest grade of human self-consciousness,"[16] so Jesus came to "quicken the whole human race into higher life."[17] And Schleiermacher, too, had insisted that true religion must be natural, resting upon a *given*.[18]

However, where Schleiermacher had spoken of that which was given in "inner experience" and a "feeling" of absolute dependence, Arnold spoke

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 15–18.
11. 2d ed., New York: Columbia University Press, 1949.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 251f.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 340.
14. Arnold, *Literature and Dogma*, p. 31.
15. F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), p. 63.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 64–68. Cf. Arnold, *Literature and Dogma*, p. 37.

of "righteousness." His outlook seemed more moral than mystical, more psychological than metaphysical. But that it only seemed so can hardly be doubted; for the "emotion" which turned morality into religion was actually the discovery of the real self, the emergence of the true spirit of man, and the declaration of the natural truth of religion in the right employment of human powers. As Trilling notes, Arnold attempted to prove the presence in the world of a transcendent power while using the language of naturalism. It is in this context that we have to read his appeal to *the power not ourselves that makes for righteousness*, the power to which we must give ourselves—if we are to achieve anything of worth—"in grateful and devout self-surrender."[19] In that appeal his view of religion culminated. And his belief that we must gladly surrender to this power-not-ourselves is, in the end, essentially the same as Schleiermacher's belief in the "feeling" (inner experience) of being absolutely dependent.

So it appears that what Arnold calls a "fact of experience: *the necessity of righteousness*" is not a natural fact that can be empirically verified at all. It depends upon a hidden metaphysic supplying us with information about the "real" nature of man and about a transcendent power working in nature and history. Trilling, commenting on the breakdown of Arnold's proposal to show how religion could and should be empirical and "scientific," remarks that it was his old hatred of "system" that betrayed him.[20] He lived by so much that he ignored.

II

R. B. Braithwaite begins his empirical appraisal of religion by arguing that ordinary religious statements are not empirically verifiable. (Of course not, Arnold would have said—they express *Aberglaube*.) But, like moral statements, they indicate the ways in which an individual intends to act, declaring his allegiance to certain moral principles. What is special about religious statements, however, is that they are associated always with particular stories which further the intention of the individual and strengthen his will by adding psychological support. Even though the stories in question are not believed to be true, they still can serve as a stimulus for action by helping to form a certain state of mind. Thus, when Christians assert that God is love or *agape*, they are declaring their intention to follow an agapeistic way of life. "To say that it is belief in the dogmas of religion which is the cause of the believer's intending to behave as he does is to put the cart before the horse: it is the intention to behave which constitutes what is known as religious conviction."[21]

Braithwaite admits his appreciation of Arnold's view of religion as morality tinged with emotion, and suggests that his own view is somewhat

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 21f.
20. Trilling, *Matthew Arnold*, p. 358.
21. Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of Religious Belief*, p. 16.

similar.[22] But it is noteworthy that he shows no tendency to follow Arnold into speculation concerning any power-not-ourselves which helps us to realize our intentions in action by strengthening our wills. Rather, he assumes that the religious story (or myth) is sufficiently described once it has been shown to satisfy a psychological need. Indeed, he is careful not to suggest any reason why such a need is felt or why its satisfaction should have so decisive an effect. So he stays within the empirical perspective, though at the cost of inconclusiveness. We may well wonder why religious faith has been such an immense force for good and evil in the history of mankind, if it is really no more than an emotional prop for moral effort. This presentation, moreover, seems unduly detached from the concrete situations in which believers practise their faith. It is general, rather than specific. Designed to cover all varieties of religion, it fails to be really convincing about any.

Paul Van Buren's *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* makes a resolute effort to remedy this last defect in Braithwaite's approach. He does not try merely to explain how an empiricist views religion in general, but instead is concerned to present Christian faith within empirical categories —in many ways a more exacting effort, and a uniquely promising one.

Agreeing with Braithwaite that ordinary religious language deals in statements not empirically verifiable and therefore meaningless, Van Buren believes that an empiricist will not talk about *God*. In the Bible (and in pre-scientific religious belief broadly) we meet with "simple literal theism," where God is included in the universe of everyday experience. But scientific knowledge has banished such a God—the God of Elijah on Mount Carmel no longer sends down fire from heaven to prove himself. Some today try to fill the gap with "qualified literal theism" and an appeal to the reality of the *ground and end of all things* or *transcendence*. But any God-substitute of this kind leads us off into the wilderness of metaphysics, and is equally non-empirical. Yet Christianity can survive the death of God. Christian faith has always had its focus in Christ, the historical figure whose name was Jesus of Nazareth. Here, then, is the empirical basis for this particular religion; and, because we can speak meaningfully on this basis about religious faith (when it means to "believe in Jesus Christ"), we can proceed also to argue the principles of Christian theology.

The Bible and the Church Fathers and Councils, it is true, used the language of simple theism. Nevertheless, they open up to us the empirical factors always present in the experience of the Christian community. They tell us, in their own terms, what Christianity is; and unless we attend to them we are likely to depart radically from the full and rich truth of the Gospel. So what we have to do is to translate the language of simple theism into equivalent terms in the language acceptable today, the language of the secular world (i.e. of every one today who does not preserve a "religious" side of himself which thinks quite differently from his everyday self).

The *kerygma* of the early Church put the Resurrection in the first place

22. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

of importance as constituting the reason for faith in Jesus as Lord and Christ. In an empirical view, this means that Jesus, who lived a life conspicuously free from all that restricts human existence, became the founder of a "contagious" freedom. "The Christian Gospel is the news of a free man who did not merely challenge men to become free; he set men free."[23] After the Resurrection, the disciples "to their joy . . . received a new perspective upon Jesus and then upon all things . . . they became free with a measure of the freedom which had been Jesus' during his life."[24]

Now at this point we may be tempted to ask, if we are empiricists: What is so special about freedom? Why should we not feel ourselves sufficiently free, for all practical purposes, without exposing ourselves to the Christian contagion? And if we want more freedom, how should we win it without striving for it ourselves, exactly as we must strive for all other desirable ends in life?

Van Buren's answer is that we are to reckon with the phenomenon which traditional theology calls *faith*. He himself finds the empirical approach to faith to be best expressed in the conception of a fundamental attitude or *blik*, leading to commitment.[25] The *blik* is a non-cognitive concept and is not verifiable. It is a set of presuppositions about the world, which, in fact, every individual must have; and, although explaining nothing, it gives the individual a perspective upon life and history determining all his actions. It follows that not every one will adopt the Christian *blik*, nor can the Christian argue the non-believer into believing. A *blik* just arrives in a particular situation—as is indicated in the old terminology of conversion, revelation, Easter, and the illumination of the Holy Spirit.[26]

This certainly takes us beyond Braithwaite's description of belief as an intention to behave in a certain manner, which is reinforced emotionally by the telling of a story. The religious believer, according to Van Buren, accepts the story as existentially true for him as it is expressed in terms of his *blik*. But the *blik* looks suspiciously like *Aberglaube*. If Van Buren is telling us that the Christian *blik* is something like revelation, and that its content is contagious freedom caught from Jesus, then it seems that he is repeating Arnold's attempt to establish a transcendent power in the language of naturalism. Previously the magic word was *righteousness*; and now it is *freedom*. The result is the same.

III

Everything which Van Buren says about the Christian *blik* reinforces such a conclusion. He argues that, in the perspective of faith, the Christian is

23. Van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, p. 169.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 169f.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 91. The word *blik* has been adopted from the usage of R. M. Hare. Cf. A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (eds.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: S. C. M. Press, 1955), pp. 99–105.
26. Van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, p. 143.

conscious of his *blik* as not being selected by him but as that by which he is "grasped" and "held." "The language of faith, by referring to *a transcendent element*, indicates that something has happened to the believer, rather than that he has done something."[27]

It is a little hard to see how one can start by insisting that an empirically orientated Christianity needs neither a simple literal theism ("God") nor a qualified literal theism ("transcendence") and end up by saying that the language of faith refers to a transcendent element. A philosophical theologian like Paul Tillich may speak quite properly of being "grasped" by the power of Being; for he has posited from the first an ontologically guaranteed deity, Being-Itself. But Van Buren, who has ruled out any kind of deity, should surely maintain that any language appealing to the trans-empirical is meaningless. He writes: "For the believer, the world he sees is the world as it 'really' is."[28] Empirically speaking, this is no different from saying that, for the mentally deranged person, the world he sees is the world as it "really" is. In this case, we are back with Braithwaite, and religion means telling oneself a story—any story, true or untrue—with profitable results. Yet it is clear that Van Buren means more than this. He is speaking very much as Arnold spoke when he said that Jesus allowed men to see "by a flash the true reason of things." He is suggesting that the believer's *blik* may be true; and therefore to be consistent he should have argued that the secularist ought to admit the possibility of at least a qualified literal theism.

Trilling remarks how, just as some people need to establish God for metaphysical completeness, Arnold needed religion to bring a sense of joy and of being fully alive.[29] Evidently Van Buren, too, wishes to be assured of joy (the joy of the disciples at Easter); and so he talks about contagious freedom and "convictions that life is worth living in a certain way."[30] He admits that words such as free, love, and discernment are not "empirically grounded" in the strict sense—which is why he uses the more general term *secular* to describe the meaning which the gospel has for him.[31] The point is that his explanatory language is no more empirical than Arnold's was verifiable. He says, for example, that he uses the word freedom instead of faith because the former does not lead us "onto the slippery ground of the nonempirical."[32] Yet his preferred word is itself what is commonly termed a "weasel word," and when used "positively" (as he insists upon using it),[33] takes us from the empirical realm to the metaphysical, as linguistic philosophers have shown.[34]

Arnold stood in the line of Schleiermacher, finding in our experience of the world a "given"—the power not ourselves which makes for righteousness. Van Buren stands in the same line, at a later stage, finding the power

27. *Ibid.*, p. 141 (italics mine). 28. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
29. Trilling, *Matthew Arnold*, p. 352.
30. Van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, p. 194.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 195. 32. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
33. Cf. *ibid.*
34. See, for example, Maurice Cranston, *Freedom: A New Analysis* (London: Longmans, 1953).

not ourselves which makes for freedom. The attempt to build on that which is "admittedly certain and verifiable" is a vain one, nevertheless, since it turns out to be simply "convictions that life is worth living in a certain way." And these convictions themselves are based on a hidden claim that the universe is such that it advances the values of life. The "proof" of this perspective upon life and history is found in the life of Jesus. Jesus both illustrates the highest point of the development of human nature and also, by virtue of possessing that spirit which is the true spirit of man, is able to "quicken the whole human race into higher life."

The *blik* asserting that life has a transcendent element and that Jesus links us to the transcendent may be a Christianized philosophy of life, but it is certainly not the historic Christian gospel. Arnold did not convert the Victorian churches to his secular creed, and it is unlikely that Braithwaite or Van Buren will succeed by issuing their revised versions for the great-grandchildren of those who first read *Literature and Dogma.*