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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

On Discontinuity

by R. L. Sturch

The scandal of discontinuity seems to be as great an obstacle as the scandal of particularity in the minds of some religious thinkers; yet occasional discontinuity, against the background of general continuity, seems to be involved in religious thinking. Dr. Sturch, a faculty member of London Bible College, presents some prolegomena to the study of this subject.

ABRUPT breaks in continuity are always unsettling, and for every one who enjoys being unsettled—who, let us say, suddenly throws up his job and decides to bicycle round the world or row to Australia single-handed—there are dozens who prefer things to go on more or less as they have in the past. Theologians are no exceptions to this rule. Some like to keep their theology as unchanging as they can; others, and these are the concern of this essay, want continuity to be actually embodied in their theology itself. Witness the appeal (for example) of the image of the Remnant that slowly shrinks until it is concentrated in one man, Jesus of Nazareth and then widens out with equal steadiness into the Christian Church. Such an image fits the Saviour into an elegantly developing pattern while saving, indeed emphasizing, His uniqueness; it avoids the jerky, irregular, discontinuous picture that is all the actual records give us. (This is not, of course, to say that it is not a valid way to interpret those records; the point is simply that its appeal lies partly in the greater continuity it gives us—that it has, if you like, an aesthetic appeal as well as a theological.)

Sometimes, however, the insistence on continuity goes much further than this. The classic example, I suppose, is that of the seventeenth and eighteenth century Deists. When Tindal entitled a book *Christianity as old as the Creation*, he meant it; Christianity had not interrupted the orderly progress of nature in the way the orthodox supposed. A very similar line has been taken more recently by Professor Maurice Wiles in his *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*. Naturally, he recognizes the similarity. The difference lies, he suggests in the fact that his own view “allows for a continuing relationship of God to the world as source of existence and giver of purpose to the whole. It is deistic in so far as it refrains from claiming any effective causation on the part of God in relation to particular occurrences”.¹ Continuity does not of course exclude change, provided that the change is continuous; and some “evolutionary” theologies show

¹ *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, p. 38.

almost as strong a concern for the continuous as any Deism, though they have not as a rule gone so far as to eliminate any novelty from their picture of Jesus in the way Deism did.

There are, I think, two ways in which such a continuity might make a rational appeal as well as an aesthetic. In the first place, it might be urged that we have good inductive evidence for believing that the course of nature really is continuous, that any apparent jerks in it are only the product of processes that are not jerky in the least themselves. "Since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation", say the scoffers in 2 Peter 3: 4; and on the whole that is just what things do. Perhaps we have to accommodate a little jerkiness here and there from the quantum physicists—no more. And it might also be urged that God Himself would not be one to chop and change, intervening in His creation in an arbitrary and irrational way. His relationship to us and the world must be a constant one.

Now this last argument depends very much on an understanding of God as temporal rather than timeless; for a timeless God *is* in a constant relationship to the world, however irregular His activities may seem to us *sub specie temporis*. And I do not myself care much for the idea of a temporal God.² But that is another matter. What I want to show now is that without a certain amount of discontinuity nearly all religion, and quite certainly anything that can be called Christianity, becomes a virtual impossibility. This may seem labouring the obvious, but then Tindal considered himself a Christian, and so of course does Canon Wiles; and there may be further efforts along similar lines if people are not warned of the implications in advance.

I

I propose to begin by discussing four theses (not all of the same strength) which seem to imply discontinuity and yet to be tied in with even the most "liberal" sort of religion. Let us begin with the problem of man: for man is involved in all religions, even when God is not. Now man, we are told, has evolved by a continuous process; but if religion has any base to it this cannot be the whole story. In theistic religions at any rate—and here comes our first thesis—"*If God stands to any human being in any sort of personal relationship, or in any sort of relationship other than that of Creator and Preserver in which He stands to all things, then there was some first man or woman to whom He stood in that relationship, before whom there was no-one to whom He did so.*" If, for example, God loves anyone, or values anyone more highly than sparrows, then there was a first

² Cf. my "The Problem of the Divine Eternity", *Religious Studies* 10 (1974), pp. 487ff.

person whom He so loved or valued. This involves no change in God if He is timeless, and no change in His *nature* even if He is not; but it does involve change in His activity in the latter case—and it also involves discontinuity in (shall we say?) the history of the primates.

It may be felt that this is a discontinuity which does not affect the lives of these primates directly. God may love people who do now know that He loves them; indeed, traditional orthodoxy would insist very strongly that He does just that. Besides, not all the world's religions are theistic. Let us therefore move on to our second thesis, which may in fact serve to give content to the first: "*If there is any form of life after death, there was some first person who survived his or her death, before whom no-one did so.*" If to use traditional language, anyone has an immortal soul, there was a first person to have one.

But some have believed in the survival of animals? It makes no difference, unless perhaps it is held to apply to *all* animals: not just to dogs and elephants, but to minnows, woodlice, sea-anemones and tapeworms. Otherwise all we should have to do is substitute "animal" for "person". And even if it does apply to all animals, this only means that the origin of life was itself a much greater breach of the continuity of nature than we had realized.

Rather more serious is the possible objection that resurrection of the dead (as opposed to, and in this case unassociated with, immortality of the soul) could be understood in a sense that did not break continuity. If the resurrection took place in a location quite unrelated to any in this space and time, it could not be regarded as breaking any continuity *within* this space and time. (Indeed, this could be applied to immortality of the soul if this were only bestowed at the moment of death.) There would, however, be discontinuity in each individual's history, and there would still be a first person to be so resurrected. Nor would God be related to the whole creation in a uniform manner, though He would be so related to this particular space and time.

A third and rather different thesis runs: "*There was some occasion on which the notions of 'right' and 'wrong' were first used.*" This thesis I take to be less weighty than the first two: first, because these notions are not explicitly religious; secondly, because it is conceivable that they were reached by a process of refinement from more complex though more primitive concepts like "holy", "abomination" or the like. Perhaps we should say "righteous" and "sinful" rather than "right" and "wrong", in which case our first reservation, that these notions are not explicitly religious, would no longer apply.

This discontinuity would fit in, of course, with the Biblical account of the Fall. It does not, however, of itself imply a Fall, as it does not imply any preceding state of innocence; the first person to use these

notions might have been committing the most fearsome atrocities just before his enlightenment, in which case it could be a Rise rather than a Fall. The point remains that in either case there must have been a discontinuity.

It may be objected that the ideas of "righteous" and "sinful" each arise from a combination of two other ideas, namely "God" (or "gods") and "approved of" or "disapproved of", and that these could arise without discontinuity. But they seem to be more a matter of "*properly* approved (or disapproved)" than just of "approved" or "disapproved" by itself; or, to put the same point another way, this approval is not the same thing as mere liking, but has already a moral tinge to it. Still, even if we concede the objections, there is a fourth thesis to come.

This runs, "*There was some first person, if there is a God, to realize that God existed*". This may be rejected at once on the grounds that "realize" is too loaded a term. If it is replaced by "believe", the thesis is true but unimportant; no discontinuity is involved. If it means "observe" or "directly experience", there may well be discontinuity but the thesis is not obviously true; it could be that no-one has ever directly experienced a God. And if it means "*either directly experience or infer from evidence*", then the latter does not imply any discontinuity, and neither therefore does the disjunction.

We may, I think, accept this criticism. The fourth thesis will not do—as it stands. But it will serve very well as a lead into the second part of this essay, which opens with a challenge: "*How does one who repudiates discontinuity justify or defend any religion he professes?*"

II

Normally, a religion would be defended in one of three ways: by appeal to revelation, to religious experience, or to reason. Now of these, revelation seems clearly to be excluded if we are to maintain the principle of continuity. The whole concept of revelation implies that something is known or seen which would not have been known or seen but for a specific act of revelation on God's part. It makes no difference whether revelation is thought of as revelation of propositions, of acts, of images, or of God Himself; the act of revelation is necessarily a breach of the continuity. If it were not, it would be determined by preceding circumstances in exactly the same way as any other event, and these in turn by the circumstances that preceded *them*, and so on; the supposed revelation would have no link with the God whom it is supposed to reveal, or who is supposed to reveal it, which it did not share with every other state of affairs in the universe (including all false, misleading pseudo-revelations). There is one way out of this. One Hindu tradition claims that the Vedas have always existed, from eternity. If this were true, the revelation would be part of God's creation but distinct from all other

parts, and so could be revelatory without breach of continuity. If Christian continuists wish to maintain this view, we cannot quarrel with them; only express surprise.

In actual fact the defenders of continuity have normally rejected the idea of revelation. Insight, yes; we can allow that the prophets saw truths which others did not; but this does not differ in principle from the insight of any wise or intelligent man. (It may differ in psychological background, being more ecstatic than the insight of sages.) But there is a problem here. There are insights and insights, and what to me is a penetration into great mysteries may to you be unwarranted rubbish. If it is a matter of reasoning or evidence, disputes can in principle be settled. If we are told that pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall, we can, in theory anyway, check this and see whether it is true or not. But in most cases this will not do. If we take, for example, Professor Wiles' own instance of the prophet Hosea: we are told that "it was the pain of Hosea's continuing love for his unfaithful wife which gave rise to the distinctive emphasis in his oracles on the compassionate love of Yahweh for his erring and suffering people".³ Which may well be so. But what follows? "Such a conviction about God remains on any assumption an unproven judgment of faith". And on the continuity theory this is certainly correct, even though "guesswork" might be nearer the mark than "faith" where Hosea himself is concerned. (We who read him are another matter; we are not guessing for ourselves but trusting his guesses.) But "on any assumption" is going too far. If there is such a thing as revelation, as opposed to insight, then our judgment of faith is unproven only because we cannot be sure that Hosea's oracles were real instances of it. If there is no such thing, then our judgment of faith is unproven because they were *not* instances of revelation; they were pure speculation, arising from Hosea's marital problems, and indeed seriously misunderstood by him—for he thought the Lord had spoken to him, which was not the case. His oracles may express a genuine truth, but neither we nor Hosea himself could have any reason to think that they do.

It may be objected that we are really no worse off than on traditional theories of revelation. Even on them we could not know for certain that Hosea's oracles were genuine. But he himself might have good reason to think them such! Moreover, we could at least know that they *might* be genuine, whereas on the continuity theory there are, strictly speaking, no such things as oracles. Indeed, we may be able to go further. On the traditional view, Hosea was only one in a line of prophets, and the genuineness of, say, Amos bears out that of Hosea. On an "insight" view, Amos's insights only

³ Wiles, *op. cit.* p. 71.

support Hosea's to the extent that they agree; and as a matter of fact since the two were contemporaries they might have influenced one another, so that even this support is less than it seems.

Revelation, then, is out. What of religious experience? Professor Wiles asks the question "What kind of affirmation about God does Christian experience justify?"⁴ (in this respect marking himself off from the deists). But the answer that must be given on the continuity principle is "None". No experience can be of anything except an event or state of affairs within the continuum. There cannot, obviously, be any such thing as an encounter with God or a felt presence of the living Christ. That would break the continuity; to encounter God is to have a novelty introduced into the world from outside, just like being on the receiving end of a miracle. But we cannot even have less directly theistic experiences. We cannot, for example, experience "that which makes ultimate sense of things",⁵ not even if that really means the "ultimate sense" itself rather than the God who makes the sense. If the "ultimate sense" is an item within the universe, it cannot really be that universe's ultimate sense; if it is not, we cannot experience it without discontinuity.

Much the same applies to the various other forms of experience called "religious". A mystical or conversion experience may no doubt be of great interest psychologically, but it must be explicable entirely in terms of antecedent events. An experience of the "numinous" is evidence only of an awesome and fascinating quality in certain states of affairs; we cannot actually say *numen inest* except by way of literary allusion. The *numen* is exhausted in the state of affairs itself. In short, no experience can be any evidence for the truth of a religion, because, even if the religion were false, the experience, being part of what another distinguished continuist has called "the closed web of history"⁶, would have happened just the same.

A case can even be made out for saying that on the continuity principle no experience at all should be possible, except on one of two hypotheses which I shall come to in a moment. For each human life begins a new centre of consciousness. (By this expression I mean that which has the subjective or inner side of experiences—that side which has given rise to philosophers' problems about sense-data, solipsism and the need for proof of an "external world".) There may be some people who are in effect protoplasmic robots, reacting to their surroundings but not, strictly speaking, *aware* of them; there may be, but they are few, if they exist. In the case of most of us, consciousness did not exist, let us say, ten months before our birth,

⁴ Wiles, *op. cit.* p. 32.

⁵ Wiles, *op. cit.* p. 34.

⁶ R. Bultmann, in *Kerygma and Myth*, vol. i, p. 197.

and it did exist, let us say, five years after it. Nor was it composed of preexisting elements; it was something new, outside the continuity of nature.

Now there are, as I said, two possible ways of avoiding this argument and maintaining the continuity principle while acknowledging the reality of experiences. Both, however, lead to possibly unwelcome conclusions. The first goes something like this: When we fall asleep, consciousness (in the normal sense) ceases, to begin again when we wake up. The "centre of consciousness" is thus clearly capable of existing even when it is not actually conscious of anything. It is therefore possible that it existed before our birth or conception; so that if some form of reincarnation be true, the continuity principle could be maintained. (It would have to be reincarnation, not just pre-existence, for birth into this world from another would break the closed web. For this reason, reincarnation as generally taught in the Hindu and Buddhist religions would not be available; for in these, I believe, it is usually held that one can be reborn into a heaven or hell that is not part of this universe, and it is also possible to attain release or Nirvana, thus producing a discontinuity by subtraction from this universe instead of addition to it.)

I think the only other way in which a continuist could escape would be by invoking a doctrine of "emergence". He might assert that whenever (say) a brain reached a particular level of complexity a centre of consciousness came into being associated with it. This would be a law of nature, applying everywhere, and part of God's creative plan. Many continuists, I imagine, would prefer this alternative. It might lead to startling possibilities where computers are concerned; but that point has been covered by others in the form of science-fiction stories. In any case, it might well be that those who dislike unique discontinuities, such as the Incarnation, or irregular ones, such as miracles, could swallow a pattern of discontinuities that were governed by law. Their source would not be God directly but God through the medium of nature, rather like the sub-atomic discontinuities of physics. So perhaps we can leave this particular point and leave the continuist to reflect on robots and reincarnation.

It does seem, however, that a supporter of continuity is driven to exclude religious experience (whether existential, mystical, evangelical or numinous) from the bases of his religion. He is bound not only to discard miracle, revelation, Incarnation, immortality and resurrection (Christ's or ours), but to base whatever he does not discard either on nothing at all, so that this theology consists avowedly of ungrounded and unwarranted guesses, or on reason alone. He must reinstate natural theology, and this not merely as an aid to religion but as its sole foundation. But is even this all?

There is a well-known line of argument—it is associated in the

minds of many Christians with the late Dr. C. S. Lewis in particular, though it did not originate with him⁷—which runs something like this: if my thoughts are to be in any way reliable as guides in life, they cannot be determined entirely by antecedent causes (such as brain-processes). They must, at times anyway, be determined by patterns of rationality, not of physics or psychology. Otherwise, while they may by sheer luck happen to be rational, they cannot be relied on, and indeed we cannot recognize when they really are rational and when they are not, as our “recognition” would itself be non-rationally determined and would happen whether it was justified or not. This argument has been much disputed, and I think it needs qualification, but basically I think it is sound. If so, it follows that not even natural theology will help the continuist. For a rational natural theology will require a great many discontinuities going on in the world, every time in fact the theologian thinks logically. These would be human discontinuities, not divine: but they would not be natural, law-generated ones like the “emergences” discussed above; for the whole point of our argument just now lay in the contention that reliable reasoning has to be governed by laws of logic, not of nature.

I conclude, therefore, that anyone who thinks along what I have called “continuist” lines—whether explicitly or as a matter of unrecognized habit—should consider how the above problems should be dealt with. I do not say they are insoluble. But I should doubt whether they are soluble within a Christian context, and it would be interesting to see any proposed solution. Failing that, what we need is a systematic consideration of what kinds of discontinuity are needed in a Christian theology. I hope I may get to work on this at some point, if no-one better qualified steps in first; in the meantime, the above rather negative points are submitted for consideration.

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⁷ It certainly goes back to McTaggart (*Philosophical Studies*, p. 193).