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The Recovery of Harmony

1. *Introduction*

THE Victoria Institute was founded in a day of battle. Verbal conflicts, even between professing Christians, were carried on in those days with a vituperative vehemence that raises the eyebrows of our agnostic age, and it need not surprise us that members of this Institute were in the thick of the fray.

Today, however, the theological climate of debate has changed. It is no longer 'done' for Christians to make scientists the object of venom; and scientists who are not Christians are usually (with a few notable exceptions) content to let sleeping dogs lie. 'Liberal' Christians may still be found freely slandering those whom they call 'fundamentalists'; and the motivation of 'new' theologians may find gross misrepresentation at the hands of some of the 'old'. But by and large a spirit of charity is abroad, and hardly a shot is now fired on the front once manned by the founders of the V.I. Not battle, but 'dialogue', is the watchword of today.

What, then, of the future? Has the need for a forum such as this passed with the discovery (many years before 'Honest to God') of the errors of basing any apologetic on a 'God of the Gaps'? I do not believe so. There is a cry today, arising both within and outside the Christian Church, which demands an effort every whit as intense as that of our founders, to perceive and articulate the relevance of the faith to the thought of our time. This cry is not that 'God is dead', but simply and even wistfully that God is *irrelevant*. This time it is not only the discoveries of our age but also its *habits of thought* that are believed to have left Christianity far behind, speaking to needs no longer felt, in language no longer understood.

Here once again, the effort required is not purely theological. The rise of science, the development of analytic philosophy, the changes in our social structure, the growth of mass communication . . . these and a host of other factors have been invoked in explanation of the change in people's attitudes, and an inter-disciplinary effort no less broadly-based will be required to understand our present situation and to discern

a proper remedy. Nor is this likely to be a short-term task with a limited and definable span; for no one with any sense of history can doubt that each succeeding generation is likely to present a different set of needs to be met by the humble and prayerful integration of Christian faith and contemporary thought.

2. *Harmony*

I have called this paper 'the recovery of harmony'. By 'harmony' I want to denote something far more positive than the slightly uneasy, half-comprehending, mutual tolerance which (we may be thankful enough) has replaced the enmity between the scientists and theologians of yesterday. There are good biblical reasons to doubt that any merely intellectual efforts could suffice to draw those who are now 'outside' into the Christian fold; but I believe that there are several areas in which such efforts are now in place—and urgently required—to remove needless obstacles from their path; and moreover that the manifest recovery of a biblical understanding of our total situation, on the part of Christians, could itself have an apologetic force out of all proportion to its pastoral value.

The scientist who is a Christian, after all, is investigating his Father's world. He is free to develop an autonomous discipline for this purpose; and though biblical theism is relevant in the sense that it encourages him to expect God's world to be 'lawful', the Bible sets no bounds on the range of his enquiries, nor does it significantly foreclose their outcome. 'Harmony' in the sense of the removal of apparent contradictions is therefore not too difficult to achieve. What is more costly, and infinitely more worthwhile, is the kind of active integration that suggests at every point the necessity, rather than the mere possibility, of Christian commitment for even the most scientifically oriented men of our time. This is true harmony—a harmony not only of thought but of motivation and practice. It is the kind of harmony that people are waiting to see—in us—before they will take seriously any claim we would press upon them in the name of our Master.

3. *Starting Points*

It would of course be idle to guess at the outcome of such an enterprise in advance; but in the remainder of this paper I would like to consider a few themes that might offer useful starting points.

Among the commonest theological questions of our day—often popularised with unfortunate overtones by professing Christians—are the following:

(a) Even if science cannot disprove theism, has it not effectively banished God from our world?

(b) Is not the Christian doctrine of man discredited by mechanistic psychology?

(c) Has not linguistic philosophy in any case shown Christian metaphysics to be meaningless?

I do not want to suggest that these present well-formulated problems as they stand; but they indicate well enough, I think, the kinds of topic that need to be tackled in addition to (though certainly not to the exclusion of) the many others that have been our concern in the past. Archaeology, biblical criticism, comparative religion and a host of kindred disciplines must continue to challenge our interest; if I concentrate now on the more radical questions of the day, it is only because without an adequate answer to them our interest in the others will be judged at best academic, and at worst frivolous, by our enquiring contemporaries.

4. *The Nature of Religious Language*

Logically if not chronologically first in priority must be the confrontation of our religious discourse with the discipline of 'linguistic philosophy'. Fashions in philosophy come and go, and even an outsider may suspect that the 'linguistic' fashion will gradually give place (if it has not already) to a revival of interest in genuinely philosophical questions. But it would be a great mistake, I think, to suppose that the lessons of language analysis are likely to be unlearnt, or to regard the technique itself as something intrinsically hostile to religion. As always, one can find atheists among its practitioners who invoke their technique in support of their unbelief; but its essential emphasis is as healthy and helpful in a Christian context as one could wish to find.

What do our words *do* for us? How do they come to have meaning, and what is their relation to experience? If a statement cannot be verified or falsified (by us) what distinguishes it from meaningless mumbo-jumbo? Questions like these are like a breath of fresh air to the truth-loving Christian, whether applied to religious or any other language. None of them is rhetorical (though atheists sometimes utter the last

in a religious context as if it were). All, however, invite on-going investigation in a forum such as ours, as a valuable means of bringing our religious language 'down to earth' where alone it was meant to function.

Here (if I may venture just one exploratory thought), it seems likely that the linguistic woes of atomic physics may have a lesson for us. In physics, words like 'electron' or 'photon' admit of no ostensive definition in isolation. We cannot point to an electron. Our basic data are not *entities* as such, but *events*: 'electron-impact', 'photon-emission', 'electron-exchange' and the like. It is these hyphenated expressions that have a definite operational link with our experience, and it is only by virtue of this link that the physicist's talk of electrons, photons and the like is admitted as 'physically meaningful'.

In face of this, some 'operationalists' have run to the extreme view that talk of electrons and the like is 'really' talk about the experiences of the physicist; but the difficulties of this attitude are at least as great as those it seeks to avoid. The lesson for us, I suggest, is a more modest one: that religious language, like physical language, may be more readily seen to be meaningful when we take as our 'semantic units' not the names of entities (such as 'God') but hyphenated expressions denoting events or activities ('receiving-God's-forgiveness', 'asking-God's-guidance' or the like). Let us beware the absurdities of concluding that therefore talk about God is 'really' talk about our experiences; but let us recognise and welcome the implication (Biblical if anything is) that talk about God is meaningless to us except in so far as the linguistic structure of our theology makes contact at some relevant point with our experience.

5. *The Nature of Persons*

The second great area of live encounter is between the Christian doctrine of man and the various disciplines—Freudian psychology, neurophysiology, 'cybernetics' and the like—which have begun to reveal the mechanistic basis of human behaviour.

Here debate takes place on at least two levels. On the one hand, it is possible to find atheistic Freudians who roundly dismiss traditional religious thinking as 'diseased', for reasons which are said to derive from psychoanalysis. On the other, the development of machines with human 'mind-like' capacities, and the parallel growth of mechanistic theories of brain function, are thought by many to demolish the concepts of the soul and human responsibility.

Behind both of these attacks on Christian doctrine I believe there lie presuppositions which, though specious enough to tempt Christians also to accept them, are radically false. They concern the nature and relevance of explanation in psychology. The temptation is to think and talk as if a psychological explanation of a belief or an action were an *exclusive alternative* to the personal significance that we would normally attach to it. Accepting this presupposition, a Christian would then be driven to look for technical flaws in the psychological account proposed by his adversary—but to do so on theological grounds.

This, I think, would be a major blunder. It is not that the technical armour of Freudian psychology is impenetrable. On the contrary, to many scientists (with no religious or other axes to grind) its logical status at some points appears dubious to the point of scandal. The danger indeed is that Christians, finding it all too easy to expose the more pretentious claims made in the name of Freud, might be encouraged to draw false *theological* implications from their success.

If there is pseudo-scientific nonsense in Freudianism, by all means let it be exposed, whether by Christians or others. But the way forward theologically, I suggest, is surely to recognise that if the Freudian story is in fact false, then there is every reason for Christians to expect some other mechanistic story of the same general kind to be true; and that the truth of that story need in no way conflict with what Christianity teaches about the nature of man.[1] To take a well-worn analogy, a complete psychological explanation of the process by which a child comes to acquire the ideas of geometry, and to believe Pythagoras' Theorem, may (we hope) one day be found; but it would be crass folly to suppose that the validity of *what he believes* would then *ipso facto* be thrown in question. The attempt to debunk what Christianity has to say about the soul, sin and salvation by appeal to Freudian theories of conceptual development is equally devoid of logical foundation, and is in fact itself a revealing example of 'wishful un-thinking'. The psychology of religion will make more scientific progress if such reductionism is eradicated.

[1] W. Alston, 'Psychoanalytic Theory and Theistic Belief', in *Faith and The Philosophers* (edited by John Hick), Macmillan, London, 1964, pp. 63-102. D. M. MacKay, 'On Comparing the Brain with Machines', *The Advancement of Science*, 40 (1954), pp. 402-406, also *American Scientist*, 42 (1954), pp. 261-268, and *Ann. Report of Smithsonian Inst.* (1954), pp. 231-240. 'Complementarity II', *Aristotelian Soc. Suppt.* 32 (1958), pp. 105-122; 'Man as a Mechanism', *Faith and Thought*, 91 (1960), pp. 145-157, also (revised) in *Christianity in a Mechanistic Universe* (edited by D. M. MacKay), Tyndale Press, 1965.

The need for clear and constructive theological thinking is even greater in relation to the 'mind-body problem' as it has been sharpened by the current theory of automata. To speak of 'man' as an automaton would seem to be a contradiction in terms. But is man's *brain* an automaton? The temptation to answer at once in the negative (on theological grounds) should, I think, be resisted. The logic of the relation between 'person-talk' and 'brain-talk' is subtle and complex, and I believe that coming years will see a considerable reformulation of our notions of personality, towards which Christians should have an important contribution to make.

In particular, as I have argued elsewhere,[1] the presupposition that physical determinism would eliminate personal freedom and responsibility is due for a radical re-examination whose consequences, forensic, social and theological, will take much working out. Space will not permit us to follow this thread now; but I believe it leads to a position remarkably congruent with familiar Pauline teaching on human responsibility *vis-à-vis* the sovereignty of God.

6. *The Sovereignty of God*

This brings me to the third area of current concern, which for many is the most notable. What place has science left for the *activity* of God in our world? What point can there be in intercessory prayer, for example, if our world is admitted to unroll according to natural law? Is it just that we feel better for it?

Here it seems to me that the most urgent need is for a rediscovery and a proper outworking of the whole biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God in the natural world. For generations our apologetic has allowed itself to develop internal strains and inconsistencies through piecemeal neglect or repudiation of one aspect or another of this doctrine. Motives have always been of the best. People wished, for example, to excuse God from responsibility for evil acts, or natural catastrophes, or sickness, or the fate of the reprobate; and could see no other way to do so than to deny these things any place in His 'determinate counsel and foreknowledge'.

Here the theological water is deep, and our purpose is not to discuss these particular issues. Suffice it to say that if the sovereignty of God

[1] D. M. MacKay, 'Brain and Will', *The Listener*, 9 and 16 May, 1957, also (revised) *Faith and Thought*, 90 (1958), pp. 103-115, and in *Body and Mind* (edited by G. N. A. Vesey) Allen and Unwin, 1964, pp. 392-402.

were declared to be like that of, say, a railway signalman—a mere *manipulator* of natural events—then the dilemma of the apologists would be understandable. But of course the Bible presents God not as the manipulator but as the *creator* of our world—the One who conceives it, and moment by moment holds it in being. For God-in-eternity the whole time-scale of His creation, though conceived as past, present and future from the standpoint of any one of His creatures, is an accomplished fact.[1] In one clear sense He has determined every twist and turn of events; for only what He has conceived could take its being in His creation. But this determination, so far from being manipulative, and incompatible with our responsibility as agents, is the very condition of it; for it is as responsible agents, no more and no less, that God has conceived us into being.

Thus when (within His drama) one of His creatures prays, and receives an answer, that answer does not require the *ad hoc manipulation* of people or things in the drama. On the contrary, the biblical view-from-eternity sees not merely the answer but also the praying itself as equally part of the 'determinate counsel and creative will'. From this standpoint no question of 'changing God's will' arises; nor, for that matter, need there be any question of 'violating natural law'.

But—it may be objected—surely all this amounts to saying that prayer makes no real difference? Whether we talk in terms of divine sovereignty or physical determinacy, is not the outcome bound to be the same whether we pray or not? Here we come to what I believe to be the key to most misunderstandings of this doctrine. It is usually presupposed that if a statement of the sort in the previous paragraph is valid from the standpoint of eternity, then whether we know it or not, and like it or not, it must be valid for us now. Oddly enough, for simple logical reasons, *this is not the case.*

Think for example of the 'eternal present-tense' statements that we ourselves make when describing, say, the fortunes of a Shakespearean character such as Hamlet. 'Hamlet decides to kill the king', we say. For us, outside of Hamlet's space-time, this is a 'statement of fact'. But if we ask whether Hamlet, before making up his mind, would have

[1] R. L. F. Boyd, 'Reason, Revelation and Faith', in *Christianity in a Mechanistic Universe* (edited by D. M. MacKay), Tyndale Press, 1965; D. M. MacKay, 'Divine Activity in a Scientific World', *Faith and Thought*, **91** (1959–60), pp. 75–96; *Science and Christian Faith Today*, Falcon Press, 1960; 'Science and Religion', in *Science in its Context* (edited by J. K. Brierley), Heinemann, 1963, pp. 305–318.

been correct to believe this 'statement of fact' of ours, we see at once an absurdity in the very notion. It is not just that Hamlet is unable to learn of our statement, but rather that for Hamlet at that point *our statement would have no validity*. His believing it would invalidate the basis on which we ourselves accept it; for a 'Hamlet' who believed it then would not be the 'Hamlet' to whom it applied.

Similarly (though this is a very sketchy outline of the argument) if we attempt to interpret the doctrine of Divine sovereignty as meaning that there exist now a set of exact specifications of our future, unknown to us but binding upon us whether we know them or not, or like them or not—then this interpretation is logically fallacious. To say (after praying) 'I need not have prayed, since the outcome would have been the same' is to miss the point that a world in which I had *not* prayed would have been a different creation, and therefore I could have no basis for concluding that the outcome would not also have been different. In short, I must after all pray as if the outcome depended on my praying; for in a precise and logically inescapable sense, it does.

7. *Conclusion*

It will be clear that under each of the foregoing heads we have merely sampled the flavour of the 'frontier discussion' that needs to be carried on, among Christians themselves as much as between Christians and others. Though I have only hinted at some of the lines of thought that seem promising, it may be worth while in conclusion to point out the close relation that exists between them.

In the last section we have had to recognise that certain conclusions, which might have seemed to follow logically from statements about God-in-eternity, would be *systematically invalid* for an agent within the space-time that God has created. Traditional logic can thus be treacherous in matters theological, for a sober reason which has nothing in common with emotional arguments against 'being too logical in theology'. For here it is logic itself that uncovers the impropriety in question. Statements from the standpoint of God-in-eternity belong demonstrably to a *different logical system* from those defined from the standpoint of an agent within the creation itself. Careless mixing of terms and concepts from the two systems is the source of much confusion.

Here we have a direct link with our second topic, the relation of 'brain-talk' and 'person-talk'. These two levels of discourse also

constitute distinct but logically complementary language-systems; and much of the foregoing argument can in fact be applied *mutatis mutandis* to the establishment of human responsibility in face of mechanistic theories of brain function.

It will be seen that our second and third topics in conjunction have in fact a close link with our first—the nature of religious language. The suggestion I would like to repeat here [1] is that we may gain important clues to the nature of talk about God by looking more closely and with fresh eyes at talk about persons. Despite the obvious contrasts, there are many philosophical questions that can be raised in similar terms about both; and our familiarity with at least some pragmatic answers in the latter case could be expected to suggest a few useful lines of thought in the former.

What I would most emphasise, however, is again that all intellectual exercise of this sort, as far as our agnostic contemporaries are concerned, can be no more than useful ground-clearing. What they want to know is not whether Christianity is possible, or even plausible, but whether it is *true*. The knowledge that it is, according to our Lord, is not ours to give. It comes only out of that ongoing personal transaction between each man and his Creator in which God becomes not 'it' or even 'He' but 'Thou'. Am I wrong in believing that on this crucial point our apologetic is most out of contact with the men of our day?

Christ and his apostles had much to say about epistemological barriers to the knowledge of God that deserves close study in terms of our present situation. Many barriers are unwittingly self-erected, especially those arising from unwillingness to face the consequences of knowing and obeying the Truth. But many more are constituted—let us face it—by the absence of overt evidence in the lives of professing Christians that for them obedience to truth and obedience to God are one and the same and alike joyful and free. Here, I think, is our highest *raison d'être*. If our Institute continues to function with its priorities geared to these realities, then by the blessing of God its next 100 years may be of at least as great service as its first.

[1] D. M. MacKay, 'Man as a Mechanism', *Faith and Thought* (*loc. cit.*), p. 157.