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FACTS, FAITH, AND FUNCTIONALISM

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1. BELIEF THAT AND BELIEF IN

The distinction between BELIEF THAT and BELIEF IN is one that will be familiar to readers of this journal. It is related to the distinction commonly made between facts and values. Philippa Foot[1] puts it like this:

> "The truth or falsity of statements of fact is shown by means of evidence; and what counts as evidence is laid down in the meaning of the expressions occurring in the statement of fact . . . With evaluations, however, it is different. An evaluation is not connected logically with the factual statement on which it is based."

Philippa Foot goes on to argue that it is not possible to make so sharp a distinction between matters of fact and matters of value. We accept something as fact only when we are clear as to "what counts as evidence". Our judgment as to "what counts as evidence" may involve an element of "evaluation" – in several possible meanings of that term. Unfortunately, theologians too sometimes speak as if there were only two tenable positions in regard to the relationship between facts, and values or beliefs: either beliefs are deducible from facts, or beliefs are more or less independent of the facts. Either BELIEF THAT and BELIEF IN are identical, or they are quite independent of each other.

I would like to refer here to the highly publicised survey conducted by ABWON (Action for Biblical Witness to Our Nation). According to the report available to me, the ABWON questionaire required bishops to give a public answer to three questions:

1. Do you believe in the Virgin Birth for Christ as a historical event?
2. Do you believe it is necessary for a Christian to believe in the Incarnation of Christ as "God made flesh"?
3. Do you believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ from the tomb on the third day?

When I read this report in the *Church of England Newspaper* for 29th March, 1985, I felt an unexpected pang of compassion for the bishops. The second question, about the reality of the Incarnation, is so badly stated that it appears to require an affirmation that God the Father became incarnate. The first and third questions – and this is more to the point of our enquiry – both require the bishops to affirm their faith by using the BELIEVE IN formula of events which are said to be "historical" or "bodily". The effect of this is to make belief IN Christianity identical with believing THAT certain things actually happened some 2,000 years ago.

It is, of course, the Bishop of Durham who provides the obvious example of a theologian who wishes to reduce or even eliminate the appeal to historical fact as the basis for faith. The *Church of England Newspaper* on 4th April, 1985 published a statement by Bishop Jenkins in which he says that he "cannot tell precisely what happened at the first Easter nor get behind the experiences, encounters and discoveries of the early Church and their way of telling the stories of faith".

The really significant thing about this is that Bishop Jenkins does not seem to think this matters very much. What has perhaps given offence is the impression he conveys that he rather enjoys shocking us with his historical agnosticism. Hence he can quite cheerfully sponsor the highly improbable and rather cynical theory that the disciples stole the body of Jesus after his death.

In fact, it appears that Bishop Jenkins' position on the relationship between fact and faith does not differ substantially from that of an existentialist theologian like Tillich. At any rate it appears that faith is virtually self-authenticating. It neither needs nor desires historical fact to back it up. He is again quoted by the *Church of England Newspaper* as writing in his *Diocesan Newsletter* that historical uncertainty is of no significance for those who experience "the encounters of faith, the assurance of faith, and the practice of faith. This faith claims that the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is so real that it changes our approach to all reality".

British philosophers, such as Gilbert Ryle, tend to treat existentialism – more especially in its German form – as a form of intuitionism. It is easy to see the attraction of an intuitionist approach to religious truth in a sceptical age which places great emphasis on experimental and empirical verification. In fact, some of Bishop Jenkins' remarks sound like a deliberate repudiation of the kind of apologetic which attempts – with painful lack of success – to demonstrate that Christianity is just as surely based on "objective" fact as science itself.

But this raises the point as to why it is that intuitionist, subjective interpretations of Christianity are so much in vogue today. Why is it that the Anglo-Saxon world, which has shown a healthy scepticism in regard to the slightly misty existentialist philosophies of Jaspers and Heidegger, has accorded such reverence to their theological counterparts, like Bultmann and Tillich?

There is a certain air of desperation about all this which suggests that we are indeed living in an old age in which theology finds it very hard to justify its own existence. More specifically, theologians find it very hard to present the faith in such a way that it will commend itself to people for whom scepticism is a virtue.

It may be helpful therefore to ask ourselves just what it is that is so very different about the world today from the world of Aquinas or Augustine, or from that of Homer. What I want to suggest is that the difficulties in which Christian apologists find themselves today are mainly claused by the fact that we are trying to operate in terms of an outdated and inadequate world view. It is not so much that our traditional beliefs about God and his relationship with his creation – and therefore also about the relationship between fact and faith – are completely wrong, but rather that our account of these things simply doesn't carry conviction just because our world view is not that of our contemporaries.

Broad accounts of the history of ideas are often rather hazy – and consequently unconvincing. I therefore propose to operate within the framework suggested by Cornelis van Peursen in an article published many years ago, where he distinguishes between the mythological, the ontological and the functional periods in human

history.[3] It will be noted, however, that I have made considerable changes to van Peursen's presentation of the distinctive features of these different eras.

2. FROM MYTH TO ODYSSEY

2.1 The period of myth

The basic religious question is "Why are things the way they are?" I take it that without that kind of imaginative wonderment, the phenomenon we know as "religion" would be unknown. I hope I may also assume that there is a broad measure of agreement with the description of "religion" outlined by the American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz.[4] Geertz argues that a religion always presents a "symbol system" which provides a broad frame of reference for the apprehension of experienced reality. We should also note in passing that van Peursen's scheme of three periods in human thought describes the development of European thought well enough, but does not reflect the progression of human thinking in other cultures such as, for example, African traditional culture.

Nevertheless, for the sake of convenience, we may follow the familiar European progression from ancient Greece to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology! We begin therefore with the Period of Myth. How did the people of that era answer our question, "Why are things the way they are?"

One way of coming closer to an answer is to try to be rather more precise about the sort of things which seemed to people of that time worth asking questions about. What precisely were those experienced realities which in their world seemed to prompt a religious answer?

Again, quite a number of different answers have been given to this, including disaster, defeat and death; barrenness and fertility; the living presence of the departed in dreams; the creative and destructive effects of wind, rain, spring, river and sea; of animals and plants; or of human society itself.

All this might be summed up by saying that the ancients were looking for clues which would enable them to tame – or at any rate, to come to terms with – a hostile and unpredictable environment, in which a man's life seemed to be continually at risk from chaotic forces of destructive power.

In *Before Philosophy*,[5] H. and H. A. Frankfort put it like this:

> "The ancients . . . saw man as always part of society, and society as embedded in nature and dependent upon cosmic forces. For them nature and man did not stand in opposition . . . Natural phenomena were regularly conceived in terms of human experience . . . and human experience was conceived in terms of cosmic events."

However, as Mircea Eliade has been at pains to stress, it is more particularly in terms of the origin of things that myth explains present realities:[6]

> "Myth . . . is always an account of a "creation"; it relates how something was produced, began to be . . . The actors in myths are Supernatural Beings. They are known primarily by what they did in the transcendent times of the "beginnings" . . . In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred . . . into the world. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that establishes the world and makes it what it is today."

Of course, this does not mean that myths are merely stories about the long-dead past. On the contrary, "by knowing the myth, one knows the 'origin' of things and hence can control and manipulate them at will". Nevertheless, there is a heavy emphasis in Mircea Eliade's account of myth on the function of myth as a source of power through knowledge of the origins. The way things came to be explains the way they are. In sharp contrast to, for example, Bultmann, who constantly reiterates that a myth is a story about God or the gods intervening in human affairs, Mircea Eliade argues that on the contrary a myth is a story about the ancient inter-changes between men and the Powers which shape our existence, a story which enables those in possession of the secret of the myth to come to terms with and even to control their environment. In fact, its intended function is much closer to that of modern science than Bultmann likes to recognize. Van Peursen wishes to make a distinction between myth and magic, the latter being "an effort to master reality". On the contrary, it is precisely because man wishes to – indeed needs to – master reality that he asks "Why are things the way they are?" In terms of a mythical frame of reference, the answer will be "Because of what happened at the beginning". And "what happened at the beginning" will be spelt out as a story about man and the world and the "more-than-human", the daimonic forces which even now shape our destiny.

2.2. The period of ontology

By the "period of ontology" van Peursen means that period which begins with Plato and Aristotle and finds it culmination in the scholasticism of the High Middle Ages. Man becomes "a subject that is searching for being as being". Van Peursen sees this as "a liberation from the magical force of myth, which is mastered by the process of human reflection".

It is interesting to note that St Thomas Aquinas argues[7] that it is only because we have Genesis that we know that the world has a beginning. Rational reflection on the observable world is sufficient to lead the enquiring mind to that ultimate reality which is Self-Subsistent Being. This Being, "all men call God" – and as Christians we know He created the world "in the beginning". But in the last analysis, the doctrine of creation is not about how the world began, but about the relationship between created, and therefore contingent, reality, and Uncreated, Self-Subsistent Reality. This account of things certainly provides us with a very sharp constrast with the pattern of mythical thinking as outlined by Mircea Eliade.

Aquinas held that there would be no good reason to suppose that the world was not eternal if it were not for the fact that Scripture reveals that it had a beginning. The world is constituted by a "hierarchy of causes", in which every subordinate member is dependent on the causal

activity of a higher member – higher, that is, in order of being. Thus we have what might be called a "taxonomy of being" – an ordered hierarchy of being which has Being Itself, Self-subsistent, Uncaused Being, which "we call God", at its apex.

Thus Aquinas' point is not that an infinite regress of causes is impossible – it is in fact conceivable that the world had no beginning. What is not conceivable – at least to the rational mind – is that it has no explanation, that it is simply an ordered arrangement of causes which has no reason to be what it is.

On this interpretation of Aquinas, finite effects are taken as evidence for the existence of a Supreme Cause in whose perfections they share to a lesser and imperfect degree. Thus there is a similar pattern of thinking underlying both the Five Ways by which Aquinas attempts to demonstrate the existence of God, and the doctrine of analogy. Both reflect the same basic presuppositions, namely that the rational mind is aware of a "taxonomy of being", and that this in turn leads us to a Supreme Cause on the principle *agens agit simile sibi*.

Unfortunately, however, Aquinas' system is vulnerable at its weakest point, which happens to be the very base of the construction. Aquinas builds on the assumption that there are real universals. In fact, the whole doctrine of analogy is based on the idea that when we "name" a perfection, such as "wisdom", we are referring to an intelligible reality (the *res significatum*, what is signified by the "name") and using a term ("wisdom") which may be applied to beings who exist on different levels in the taxonomy of being. Hence the term "wisdom" has a different, though similar, meaning (*modus significandi*) when applied to animals, or men, or God.

We have to say, I believe, that this simply does not reflect our world view today. We do not see the world in such static terms, nor do we ascribe any more than a purely notional significance to the fact that the same word may be used of many different objects. When Aquinas asked himself, "Why are things the way they are?", the answer he offers fails to convince us, not because of any failure of his logic, but because we do not share his initial premiss.

As is well known, belief in real universals was attacked even during the Middle Ages, and in the end the Nominalists won that particular argument. Once cut adrift from its metaphysical moorings, the arguments from the taxonomy of being re-emerged in the hands of Paley as the argument from design, which in fact was simply an attempt to demonstrate that the design of individual entities (as in the famous example of the watch) could replace the function of the design of the whole structure of being, in the argument for theism. This in turn focussed the argument on to the issue of whether the wholes are ever greater than their parts. Surely complex entities, such as man himself, can only be regarded as skilfully – indeed, divinely – constructed artefacts? In this case, the analogy would be the machine, which has a function greater than its parts – at any rate, from a human perspective.

Unfortunately, the idea that *ontogenesis* – the emergence of being – offers proof of the existence of a Creator rests on the tacit assumption that the story of the evolution of life on this planet is a story of skilful planning brought to a successful conclusion. Presumably the dodo would not agree with this point of view.

However, one or two points emerge from this discussion which may be relevant for the future development of the argument. On the negative side, we may note that the attempt to revive belief in real universals is probably a lost cause,[8] and it follows from this that "theism" – if by that we mean a metaphysical system based on the taxonomy of being – is also unlikely to come back into favour.

Another negative point is that arguments from design, based on the premiss that "the whole is more than the parts", tend to founder on the objection that it may be sheer prejudice on man's part to assume that he is anything other than a chance product of a blind process.

More positively, however, we may note that the argument about God can now be seen to be more closely bound up with the question of man's own role and status in the scheme of things. It may be that what went wrong with the traditional appeal to "design" in one form or another was that its protagonists operated within a world-view which is no longer attractive. Aquinas' vision of the taxonomy of being is not our view of things. Paley's watch does not seem to us at all a good analogy for a living entity. But it is only in regard to living entities that the question as to whether the whole is more than the parts becomes non-trivial. Thus the issue of ontogenesis becomes central to the whole debate. The question "Why are things the way they are?" is construed as a question about the whole creative travail of a universe which has given birth to self-transcendent being – to man.

Finally, we may also note that the "theistic" perspective on things tends to treat order as the principle evidence for faith. It is inevitably rather uncomfortable with the idea of miracles, therefore, since on this view a miracle is a breach in the proper order of things. The tendency to treat miracles as the ab-normal was intensified of course by the progression from theism to deism which the collapse of the metaphysics of the High Middle Ages made inevitable.

Thus Paley and Hume are like two sides of the same coin. Deism at once exalted the notion of order, and distanced the God of order from His world. Miracles could now only be construed as divine breaches with the divinely constituted order of things. Thus, paradoxically, both order and disorder are to be taken as evidence for the existence of God! It is not surprising that Hume found this argument wanting, and drew the conclusion that a man genuinely committed to looking for order would not easily be convinced of the possibility of divinely instigated disorder.

2.3. **Functionalism: the modern era**

It is always difficult to gain enough distance from one's own time to be able to put a label on it. In general, however, there seems to be a measure of agreement that the present era is characterized by a pragmatic spirit. Much stress is laid on the experiential and experimental. Although it has been the occasion of some controversy, Jean-Paul Sartre's dictum that existentialism is the philosophy that existence precedes essence[9] might be taken as a motto for a whole culture. People take it for

granted that there is little point in asking what things *are* except in the context of what they *do*. The dominant image of reality is no longer of a series of *individual objects*, but of a network of *inter-locking systems*.

All this was brought into sharper focus for me by the symposium edited by Erich Jantsch and Conrad H. Waddington *Evolution and Consciousness*.[10] In his introductory summary of the major positions adopted by the contributors, Erich Jantsch notes the following points, among others (pp. 6 & 7 – orginal numbering):

2. Functions (the relations with the environment) and structure determine each other; they are complementary.
3. Deterministic and stochastic (random) features are interdependent; chance and necessity become complementary in a process view.
4. There exist multiple stable regions, or dynamic regimes, for the system; in switching between them, the system has capability of undergoing qualitative change.
12. Evolutionary process implies openness as self-transcendence and thus imperfection, courage and uncertainty, not the deterministic perfection, static security, and certainty inherent in the ideals of the traditional structure-oriented Western world view.

What we have here is a kind of "Process Teleology". It is a world view with many similarities to that of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who receives a number of favourable mentions in the text. Van Peursen speaks of the "Functional" character of contemporary thinking. It should be noted that this term is used in a different sense in certain other disciplines, but it may nevertheless be a convenient description for the kind of conceptual framework appropriate to a Process Teleology. Process Teleology is, of course, quite different from Hartshorne's "Process Philosophy", which is a form of idealism based on the definition (or "essence") of process as change.[11]

Some of the features of Process Teleology which are particularly significant for religious faith are as follows:

1. There is a move away from the analysis and classification of structures, from the study of nature in the sense of the *nature of things* – independent entities – towards the study of evolving, inter-reacting and inter-related *systems*.
2. Such systems achieve a structure when they become stable, but when we study this structure, what we are actually doing is capturing a "dynamic regime" in a particular phase of its interaction with a specific environment.
3. When a new regime emerges there is a possibility of a qualitative change such that the functions of the new regime are not fully predictable on the basis of our knowledge of the old – and would not be so even if that knowledge were absolutely – and impossibly – complete.
4. Different regimes inter-lock with each other in such a way that what appear to be peculiarities or abnormalities in the behaviour of one regime become intelligible when it is viewed in the context of other regimes to which it may be related either laterally or hierarchically.
5. The possibility of an emerging "metaregime" is also mentioned (p. 5). What is in mind here is a vision of the universe as "evolving, self-generating and self-organizing" (p. 212). The metaregime would emerge at a point where this universe undergoes a transition from "a chain of temporarily stable regimes" to "a metaregime of perpetually transforming patterns" (p. 5).

Jantsch, Waddington and their colleagues do not suggest that this vision of the Universe has anything to contribute to Christian theology, though they speak with approval of Aldous Huxley's idea of a "perennial philosophy" and various Eastern religions (p. 42). But the relevance and legitimacy of the religious question, "Why are things the way they are?" is obvious. Indeed it is immediately apparent that among many possible answers, there are two which immediately suggest themselves, namely "Because that's just the way that things are going", and "Because that's the way we are being led".

With the recovery of the idea of the human adventure as an Odyssey, an expedition into uncharted waters, the transition from the backward-looking world of myth to the forward-looking world of modern technology appears to be complete. In this context, the relevance of those issues with which Christian theology has traditionally concerned itself is immediately apparent. People may still conclude that the theologians are wrong: they are no longer so likely to dismiss them as simply irrelevant.

Viewed from a theological perspective, the issue raised by process teleology resolves itself into the familiar conflict between immanence and transcendence. Is ultimate reality exclusively and exhaustively contained within the historical process, so that whatever emerges is somehow already implicit within it; or is it exclusively and exhaustively outside the process, guiding and directing it from without? Neither view seems entirely satisfactory. Man himself emerges from the process and yet has a (limited) capability to transcend it. It looks as if we need to do justice to both elements in human experience in giving account of the process which gives him birth.

In the perspective of world religions, it is Christianity which stands out as the faith which has made the most consistent attempt to hold together the complementary truths of immanence and transcendence. Bishop Robinson popularized the use of the term "panentheism" to describe the view that God is both transcendent and immanent – in the terms of our discussion, that he is both the source and the goal of the creative process, its beginning and its end. If we believe in any kind of ultimate reality beyond our immediate experience, it is surely that kind of reality which it makes sense to believe in.

3. FACTS AND FAITH ONCE AGAIN

If a religion is a "symbol-system", it is obvious that it is likely to lose its heuristic power once it appears that experienced reality needs no further explanation beyond itself. Materialistic monism is, by definition, such a system. It is no solution to the dilemma of religion in this situation to take refuge in a dualism of matter and mind.

But it now appears that the problem of religion may have its roots in an inadequate Philosophy of Science rather than in religion itself.

In a functional perspective, the issue of faith and fact, and therefore also the more specific problems of miracles, appears in quite a different light. This kind of thinking makes us familiar with the idea of a hierarchy of systems and regimes. In certain circumstances, anomalies within systems operating at one level may be regarded as evidence for the operation of a more inclusive regime at another level. It may be that this affords an analogy which would enable us to work out in more detail the criteria which might be applied in the case of supposedly miraculous events.

As we have seen, mediaeval metaphysics was virtually doomed to drift into deism, and the God of the deists is too remote from his creation to play any role within it. But the Christian God is not so much the Archi-tect as the Arche-telos of his creation, its first principle and its final goal. It is easier to express such an idea in terms of functionalism than it was in terms of the metaphysics of the Middle Ages. One need no longer think in terms of the "interference" of one entity with another, or of the "intervention" of God within His world. But one would expect a "miracle" to have a "proleptic" character: to be a pointer to the "over-ruling" of the "regimes" of this world by the Kingdom of God, and an indication of the future which is to come. In other words, as the Fourth Gospel puts it, to be a sign – and not merely a *miraculum*, wonder.

It is possible to BELIEVE IN a sign – that is, to accept that something for which there is good evidence but which appears to run counter to our normal expectations is an example of the divine "over-ruling". It is not possible to BELIEVE IN a wonder. A wonder is simply a supposed event which astonishes us with its extreme improbability.

In their attitude to the question of miracles the Bishop of Durham and his critics seem to share some deist-type assumptions. Deism is associated with a conceptual framework in terms of which signs are always misinterpreted as wonders. If this is our perspective, then we must agree with Hume that no sensibly sceptical person can expect to find good enough evidence for belief in miracles. On the other hand, we would also have to agree with those people who argue if for some reason we happened to have incontrovertible evidence that something so odd had happened that its very abnormality required us to accept it as a miracle, then we would certainly have to become theists. Whether that kind of BELIEF THAT there is a God is really the same as BELIEF IN God is, of course, another matter.

Obviously the suggestions made here require fuller discussion. But it seems to me that, as far as miracles are concerned, my position is similar to that of the Archbishop of Canterbury, who offered the comment that while the Resurrection – which is after all the supreme and archetypal miracle as far as Christians are concerned – does not compel faith, it certainly invites it. In other words, the Archbishop, apparently differing from both the Bishop of Durham and his critics, believes that there are cases when BELIEF THAT may constitute evidence in favour of BELIEF IN. This is surely intuitively correct. It is, I believe a strength of the position suggested here that it allows us to give a coherent account of such a view.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Philippa Foot, "Moral Beliefs", in *Fundamental Problems in Philosophy*, ed. Oswald Hanfling, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 2nd. ed. (1989), p. 267.
2. Gilbert Ryle, "Phenomenology", *Proc. Aristoc. Soc., Supp.* Vol. XI, (1932), p. 73.
3. C. A. van Peursen, "Man and Reality – the History of Human Thought", *A Reader in Contemporary Theology*, ed. John Bowden and James Richmond, S.C.M., London (1967).
4. See, *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. M. Banton, Tavistock, London (1966), pp. 4 ff.
5. H. & H. A. Frankfort, *Before Philosophy*, Penguin Books, London (1949), p. 12.
6. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, George Allen and Unwin, London (1964), p. 6.
7. See E. L. Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, Longmans, Green, London (1949) p. 7, for refs. and for some further comments on this point.
8. In spite of the efforts of Chomsky and some of his disciples – *Language and Other Abstract Objects*, by Jerrold Katz, Basil Blackwell, Oxford (1981).
9. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* (1946), tr. Philip Mairet, Methuen, London (1948), pp. 27 ff.
10. Erich Jantsch and Conrad H. Waddington (eds.), *Evolution and Consciousness, Human Systems in Transition*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, Massachusetts (1976).
11. Charles Hartshorne, *The Logic of Perfection, and other essays in Neo-Classical Metaphysics*, Open Court, Lasalle, Illinois (1965).