

FAITH AND BELIEF

M. COLIN GRANT

One of the pervasive themes of recent theology has been the concern to distinguish faith from belief and to emphasize the distinctiveness of faith. Emil Brunner insisted that faith belongs in the context of "encounter" in opposition to the emphasis of Roman Catholicism on believing doctrine (dogmatism) and that of Protestant Orthodoxy on believing Scripture (biblicalism). Faith is not this intellectual belief but the justification experienced in the "encounter" with God in Christ and the ensuing obedience this involves.¹

Rudolf Bultmann sets faith in the context of an "event", an "eschatological event", beyond the dimension of knowledge and belief.² Paul Tillich has attempted to combat "the intellectualist distortion of faith" by defining faith as "ultimate concern", so that faith is concern with the Ultimate and concern marked by ultimacy in which the intensity of the concern rather than its direction or content (belief) is emphasized.³

Brunner, Bultmann and Tillich are among the most influential moulders of Christian thought in this century. The distinction between faith and belief which they emphasized has become a cardinal assumption for most contemporary theologians.⁴

1. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN "FAITH" AND "BELIEF"

The basic distinction between "faith" and "belief" contrasts "belief" as intellectual assent with "faith" as a living relationship⁵, or

M. COLIN GRANT is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick, Canada.

¹Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation, Dogmatics*, Vol. III (London: Lutterworth Press, 1962), Chps. 13 and 14.

²Rudolf Bultmann, "Faith as Eschatological Existence", Section 50 in *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. II (London: SCM Press, 1967), pp. 75ff. On his removal of faith from the realms of knowledge and belief, see his treatment of the Resurrection in "New Testament and Mythology" in *Kerygma and Myth*, Vol. I ed. by Hans Werner Bartsch (London: S.P.C.K., 1964) p. 42, and in *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. I (London: SCM Press, 1968), p. 305.

³Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958) pp. 4, 10.

⁴The list of those who insist on the distinctiveness of faith is virtually endless. See: Gerhard Ebeling, *The Nature of Faith*, tr. by Ronald Gregor Smith (London: Fontana Library, 1966); Roger J. Guettinger, S.J., "Faith and Interpersonal Encounter" in *Faith in the Face of Doubt*, ed. by John P. Keating (New York: Paulist Press, 1968), pp. 133-154; Hershel Jonah Matt, "What Does It Mean to Believe in God?", *Theology Today*, Vol. XXX (1973), pp. 256-265; Murray A. McBride, "The Meaning of Faith", *Canadian Journal of Theology*, Vol. IX (1963), pp. 20-28; H. H. Price, "Faith and Belief" in *Faith and the Philosophers*, ed. by John Hick (London: Macmillan & Co., 1964), pp. 3-25; Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Toronto: Mentor Books, 1964), pp. 154-173.

⁵For example, Martin E. Marty, *Varieties of Unbelief* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1966), p. 15.

"belief" as philosophical with "faith" as revelational.⁶ From this base the distinction has been subjected to considerable refinement. This refinement largely focuses on the prepositions and pronouns used with "faith" and "belief".

The most prominent distinction between prepositions used with "faith" and "belief" involves "that" and "in" whereby "that" signifies a basically intellectual, detached assertion while "in" implies a personal stance of trust and commitment.⁷ So, to say, "I believe *that* God exists" is to state an intellectual hypothesis. On the other hand, "I believe *in* God" is a statement of personal commitment.

A further refinement has been suggested⁸ in terms of a distinction between pronouns used with "faith" and "belief". First person pronouns have a performative function. To say "I believe" is to imply that I shall perform accordingly. Second and third person pronouns have a descriptive function. To say "You believe" or "He believes" implies no commitment on the part of the speaker but is rather a description of another's views or commitments based perhaps on assurance from the person to whom reference is made or on inference from observing that person.

If we put these two distinctions together with the basic distinction between belief as intellectual assent and faith as personal commitment, the result is a scale of distinctions ranging from "It is believed that" to "I have faith in" with all variations of knowledge claim and commitment in between. "It is believed that" makes a basic claim to be affirming some generally held perspective without the commitment of the affirmer playing much part. "I have faith in" is a personal declaration where the commitment of the individual is the primary factor.

The complexity of this scale of distinctions raises questions about the usefulness of the whole belief/faith contrast. Indeed, Donald Evans has argued that there is no contrast, as such, but rather at least ten contrasts.⁹ Consideration of four of the more prominent contrasts he identifies will suggest something of the range of the belief/faith distinction.

⁶For example, Michael Novak, *Belief and Unbelief* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966), p. 40.

⁷For example, H. H. Price, "Belief" 'in' and Belief 'That'," *Religious Studies*, Vol. I (1966), pp. 5-27; and "Faith and Belief" in *Faith and the Philosophers*, *op. cit.*

⁸For example, Raziell Abelson, "The Logic of Faith and Belief" in *Religious Experience and Truth*, ed. by Sidney Hook (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1961), pp. 116-129.

⁹Donald Evans, "Faith and Belief", *Religious Studies*, Vol. X, No. 1 (1974) pp. 1-19, continued in Vol. X, No. 2, pp. 199-212.

- (1) Intentional/non-intentional — faith implies an intention to act whereas belief may not.
- (2) Attitudinal/non-attitudinal — faith implies a favorable attitude to what is affirmed whereas belief may not.
- (3) Existential/non-existential — faith is only known from inside, my existence and way of life are involved whereas belief may be entertained more casually.
- (4) Unfalsifiable/falsifiable — faith cannot be refuted from outside whereas belief may be refuted. These distinctions involve at least three base areas: the first two deal with the nature of faith or belief considered in themselves; the third deals with the context of faith or belief; the fourth deals with the content of faith or belief. This wide-ranging distinction might be more intelligible in the light of the background from which this concern to emphasize the distinctiveness of faith has emerged.

2. REASONS FOR THE DISTINCTION

The background to this emphasis on the distinctiveness of faith may be partly linguistic. The English noun "faith" has no verbal form ("Let's faith it!" is a pun.). The verb is "believe" which does have a substantive form, "belief". Thus faith could easily be identified with "believing" and so be reduced from total personal involvement to intellectual assent. Nor did this situation originate with the English language. Latin had a somewhat similar predicament, with nouns *fides* and *fiducia* meaning "faith" in various senses, and the verb *credere* meaning "to believe".¹⁰ This peculiarity of language may be an element in the background to the concern to distinguish faith from belief, but it can be little more than the occasion for, not the source of, the confusion of faith with belief. For German has a noun for "faith" (*Glaube*) which has a direct verbal equivalent (*glauben*), and theologians of German extraction are among the most vociferous advocates of the distinction between faith and belief.

Behind the linguistic situation which facilitated an equation of faith with belief there are more basic historical developments which have prompted the concern to emphasize the distinctiveness of faith. Among these we may identify four basic reasons.

- (1) The primary source of the emphasis lies in the application of the Reformation principle of justification by faith to the sphere of

¹⁰See Brunner, *Dogmatics*, Vol. III, op. cit., pp. 176ff.; and C.E.B. Cranfield, "The Message of James", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. XVIII (1965); William Hordern, *The Case For A New Reformation Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), pp. 35-36.

thought.¹¹ Luther appropriated the Pauline principle in the sphere in which Paul enunciated it, the context of salvation. Salvation is by faith not by works. The insight of recent theology is that faith itself may become "works" if faith is equated with belief and salvation is made conditional on the orthodoxy of one's belief. Against this confusion, theologians who emphasize the distinctiveness of faith insist that faith is a justifying relationship, not an accomplished possession which it could be if it were equated with belief.

(2) The other basic positive source of the emphasis on the distinctiveness of faith is to be found in the influence of existentialist philosophy. The concern with the living reality of faith made existentialism attractive in its insistence that the fundamental issues of life are not issues of thought but of existence, not susceptible to the detached analysis of the spectator but available only to the involved participant. Thus in this cardinal perspective of existentialism, theologians found added incentive and assistance in distinguishing faith as a living relationship from belief as an intellectual assent to propositions. In addition to these positive sources of the emphasis on the distinctiveness of faith, we may identify two negative sources, two developments which made the distinction useful in meeting challenges both from within and from without the circle of faith.

(3) From within the circle of faith the distinction often represented a reaction against identifying faith with assent to dogma or acceptance of the words of Scripture, as in Brunner, or against identifying faith with hypotheses on the model of science, as in Bultmann and Tillich. Against these intellectualistic views of faith, theologians insisted that faith was a living reality which is irreducible to dogmatic or theoretical beliefs.

(4) From outside the circle of faith, a further impetus to the emphasis on the distinctiveness of faith followed from the impact of science in the post-Kantian identification of knowledge with "scientific knowledge" and the philosophy which developed from this perspective insisting that every meaningful statement be "verifiable" or at least "falsifiable". The existentialist alternative provided a welcome shelter from these challenges to belief in shifting the focus to a demand for authentic faith.

Thus among the main sources of the concern to distinguish faith from belief are the positive appreciation of the Pauline-Reformation principle of justification by faith augmented by the central perspective of existentialism that the basic issues of life are decided by living

¹¹See Van A. Harvey, "Faith and Belief in Contemporary Theology", *Theology Today*, Vol. XVIII (1962), p. 465.

rather than by thought. The distinction received further impetus from the equation of faith with belief within the circle of faith and the external challenge to justify religious beliefs by the standards of a scientific culture.

3. EVALUATION OF THE DISTINCTION

We have seen that the distinction between faith and belief covers at least three basic areas: the nature of faith and belief, the context of faith and belief, and the content of faith and belief. If we compare this expansive result with the reasons we have identified behind the concern to emphasize the distinctiveness of faith, there is reason to believe that the distinction has over-reached the original intention with unfavourable consequences.

The positive sources of the distinction, the principle of justification by faith and the existentialist evaluation of existence over thought, are primarily concerned with the nature and context of faith and belief. Justification is by faith, not belief, and so involves an ongoing relation rather than being a possession which it could be if faith were equated with belief. In existentialist terms, faith involves basic commitments and ways of life rather than the intellectual affirmations of detached belief. But while the positive sources of the distinction are primarily concerned with the nature and context of faith and belief, the negative sources raise the question of content both from within and without the circle of faith. From within, the orthodox believer, which is probably the majority of believers, wants to know what he can believe. From without, the analytic philosopher wants to know what Christians mean by their beliefs. The distinction between faith and belief provides a ready answer, or rather a ready means of avoiding an answer. In response to the bewildered believer or curious sceptic, the theologian simply changes the focus from belief to faith — the issue is not static belief but dynamic faith. The defense is invulnerable, but it is bought at high cost. The cost consists in the minimization, if not the elimination, of the whole area of affirmation involved in belief.

The cost of the emphasis on the distinctiveness of faith is seen most clearly in Tillich. First, having moved from belief to faith it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to reinstate belief in this context of dynamic faith. Faith is ultimate concern, concern with the Ultimate and concern marked by ultimacy. If one raises the question of the content of concern (i.e. belief, "what should I be concerned about?") the question is turned back on the questioner ("What is Ultimate for you?") One cannot discuss the Ultimate outside the

context of ultimate concern.¹² The important thing is the intensity, not the direction, of the concern. Thus atheism may be as religious as theism (perhaps Tillich would say atheism is more religious), doubt may be as religious as faith.¹³ Faith is distinguished by the intensity of concern, and belief, the content or direction of the concern, is a matter for the individual.¹⁴

Second, not only is belief privatized in this emphasis on the distinctiveness of faith, but in the process the principle of justification by faith is seriously modified. Tillich's redefinition of faith as ultimate concern is an application of what he calls "the Protestant principle"¹⁵, the principle that nothing human is ultimate so that faith cannot give the security of beliefs but must remain a courageous acceptance of insecurity. It is in this context that doubt becomes as laudable as faith.¹⁶ Tillich's "Protestant principle" is the result of applying the Reformation principle of justification by faith to epistemology, to the context of religious knowledge as opposed to the context of salvation which was the Reformation concern and the setting for the Pauline enunciation of the principle. But the application of the principle to this context yields a very different result. In the context of salvation, the principle asserts that salvation is not achieved by works. The insight of recent theology is that faith itself can become "works" if it is identified with belief and salvation is conditional on the orthodoxy of belief. Yet belief is not accorded even the status of works. On the original principle, works were denied value in earning justification, but this did not imply that works, as such, were unimportant or dispensable. Works were expected as the fruits of faith (for Paul, faith without works is not dead, as it is for the author of the Epistle of James, rather, for Paul, faith without works is impossible), and works might serve as the avenue to faith as they did for Paul and Luther. But in applying the "Protestant principle" to the sphere of thought, not only belief viewed as works, but belief, as such, is virtually aban-

¹²Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, pp. 10-11.

¹³See Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (London: Fontana Library, 1963), p. 125 where he elevates the direction of faith over its intensity in explicit opposition to Tillich.

¹⁴Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 4. Yet in spite of reducing the direction or content of faith to a matter for the individual (each person must decide what is ultimate), Tillich does denounce what he judges to be false ultimates such as success and nationalism, pp. 11-12. See: William Warren Bartley III, *The Retreat to Commitment* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), p. 100.

¹⁵Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), "Author's Introduction".

¹⁶M. Holmes Hartshorne has developed this positive appreciation of doubt in *The Faith to Doubt* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1963), but he affirms a very un-Tillichian belief basis for this faith to doubt in "Faith Without Doubt is Dead", *Theology Today*, Vol. 13 (1956), pp. 63-71, where he contends that one can doubt everything if one confesses Christ crucified and risen.

done. One would expect that belief would retain at least the status of works — the fruits of faith and a possible avenue to faith. That this is not the result must be due to some factor besides “the Protestant principle”, and the most likely candidate is the apologetic situation, what we identified as the negative sources of the attempt to emphasize the distinctiveness of faith in contrast to belief. It seems that what began as an attempt to purify faith became a means of avoiding challenges to belief, and in the process belief itself is avoided. For belief is substituted the mysticism or illusion of “encounter”, “eschatological existence”, “ultimate concern”, etc.

It may be that there is no basis for discussing belief apart from the context of faith, but the result of much recent theology leaves the impression that there is no basis for discussing belief at all. The faith which is made so central is the faith for which Kant made room by limiting knowledge to the phenomenal world. Unfortunately this faith is vacuous, being at the whim of individual inclinations or feeling for any content to be attributed to it. A more positive direction for the consideration of faith might be found in the application of Kant's criteria for knowledge to the realm of faith. Adapting his dictum for relating the percepts of the senses to the concepts of the mind, we might say that “Belief without faith is blind; faith without belief is empty”. It is this latter option which plagues recent theology in its almost exclusive insistence on the former. Having long ago conceded all claims to knowledge to the sciences, theology seems determined to relinquish even claims to belief. While we may appreciate the recovery of the vitality of living faith in recent theology, we can hardly count it all gain, unless we are also willing to relinquish all claim to belief. What we seem to be offered in recent theology is the admonition to believe in faith.

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