# PERSPECTIVE IN THEOLOGY

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Some times theology becomes an art of affixing labels. The theological jargon of our time at least carries a warning on that point. Precarious meanings slip through high sounding words with startling ease. Recently a teacher in a leading seminary, on being inducted into the chair of systematic theology, tried to show that systematic theology is an illusion. A very considerable amount of vagarizing on the nature of system was required to make a case. The effort was widely acclaimed, for it is in accord with our seasonal disposition for making private judgment a court of last appeal. We do this mainly under the form of conceding to "religious experience" the indeterminate right of restricting theology to its apologetic function. To that temptation theologians should not yield. To do so invites the suspicion that truth-seeking is not among the functions of theological discipline. On the contrary, the real business of religious thinking is to explore a qualitative level of experience which makes a paramount difference to mankind, to give a reasonably adequate account of the conditions of ultimate human welfare. If so, the root problem of theology lies near to the truthfulness of its claims.

Theologians today cultivate assiduously the habit of speaking of the Christian faith. That habit carries a double perplexity. When is a faith Christian? In historical transition, faith reveals a shiftng perspective, in relation to which the assumption of an unchanging and permanent core has a difficult role. Normatively, the Christian faith frequently adapts its face to look remarkably like the portrait of some interpreter. Beyond that, however, the history of interpretation within the Christian movement discloses certain instructive patterns. Consider briefly some of the more prominent types..

I.

In one of the most persistent traditions theological system is presented as a derivative of natural science cosmology. When Christianity left the hands of St. Paul it was entrusted to the Hellenized church Fathers. Radical reconception immediately set in. Christianity passed into the Gentile world through the alembic of an alien mind, a mind steeped in speculation concerning the physical world. In representative fashion Justin Martyr proclaimed that Christianity was the true philosophy, and all who lived in obedience to the divine logos were Christians even before the time of Christ. His contention simply records an ever-widening process in which Christian faith was transformed into a theology which derived its chief inspiration from cosmology rather than the distinctively spiritual aspect of human life. At first Scholasticism appears to have broken down the idea of a derivative faith. The reason for that impression lies in the circumstance that it encouraged two incompatible tendencies. On one side revelation had delivered through the church certain inviolable truths. These presuppositions were, however, allowed to operate from the hinterland. They constitute a kind of supreme court, the services of which are strictly occasional. If they were taken seriously all discussion would be summarily ended. Thinking has been paralyzed in advance. One does not ask questions of an inviolable truth that is guaranteed by infallible authority. Accordingly, the merit of faith lies in one's willingness to surrender the integrity of his mind. The scholastics, on the other hand, were great psychologists. They confronted the world with a

monumental development of reason on its purely formal side. Their dialectical acuteness captured attention to a degree that men were set to believing that certain untouchable dogmas could be established by reason. Thus dogmas were doubly guaranteed: by revelation and by reason. Hence, the vocally impressive position of scholastic theology makes an abundant exhibition of a reason which was deeply entangled with Aristotelian cosmology. Revelation functioned as a hidden reserve cable, while the train of faith moved over the peaks of cosmic speculation.

On down the centuries Christian theology has kept trying to pull faith out of theories of the natural world order. This obscure methodology has helped to induce crises between science and religion. The conflict derives directly from a clash between the incompatible ideas of the newer science and older cosmology with which Christianity had encumbered itself. Classic arguments for God serve as an index to what was going on. Philosophers kept stimulating this cosmological perspective. Descartes thought he broke with mediaeval authoritarianism. In many respects that is abundantly true. But in setting the pace for religious thinking he appealed either to formal logic or to the old principle of cause and effect. Spinoza capped the new rationalism by calling God a name for the mathematical-mechanical order of nature. English Empiricism in Locke announced a new beginning in the ways of thought. Yet for all the revolutionary ideas about the nature of experience, Locke and his logical succeessors make religious faith a by-product of scientific cosmology.

With the coming of the social sciences a thoroughgoing revision in the traditional perspective appeared imminent. Human values are thrown into the theological hopper. The language sounds new, but the basic theological principles remain those glorified by classic deism. The debacle of deism should have aroused new trains of thought in the minds of Christian theologians. Nevertheless, the ambiguous principle of causality continued to exercise a surprising tyranny. Not even an explicit agnosticism was able to disturb established trends. Until late in the nineteenth century a vague idea about God the First Great Cause closed the Christian mind to any other alternative. In many essential respects nontheistic humanism only streamlines the old logic. We are haunted with a question. Why does a cosmologically derived theology exercise such influence? The reasons are too numerous to explore. Three of them seem especially familiar. In the first place, man lives in an actual environment of nature; and so his religious faith must provide some interpretation of the natural order. Second, the sciences stand out in our thinking as the road to dependable knowledge, if not the exclusive road. Third, religious thinking has been dominated by the desire for certainty. Consequently intuitionism has found special favor as the religious method **par excellence.** Reduced to its lowest common denominator religious intuition means reliance upon a self-authenticating conviction. In principle religious epistemology has continued to flirt with bankruptcy. Its general method has been notoriously defective. Consequently, wherever the truth-seeking spirit re-affirmed itself Christian theology appeared to have only the option of trying to derive faith as an inference from the logical framework of a scientific cosmology.

## II.

Telling strokes on behalf of theological liberation were launched along with the Copernican revolution of Immanuel Kant. To a degree the ground for advance was prepared in Kant's initial limitations. Knowledge he identified with the results of mathematical physics, with the science of his day. His

first **Critique** worked out this basic assumption. At that time Kant became convinced about two ideas. First, there is no road through scientific cosmology to the spiritual depths of experience, mainly because knowledge is taken to mean perceptual knowing. The classic arguments for God and an inferential theology are wrong in principle. The whole excursion is a question begging procedure which Kant thought utterly barren. More than that, it is absurd to try to derive an interpretation of the spirit wholly from a cosmic framework constructed by neutral logic. Accordingly, Kant shifted the center of religious interpretation from the physical world to the spiritual nature of man. Here we come upon Kant's second principle: the primary reality of the spiritual life. Reality is more than 'nature'. The spiritual life requires its own categories and an independent kind of understanding. Not only is scientific knowledge limited to nature, but nature itself, when conceptually isolated from the spiritual, is an abstraction. Spiritual values provide us with the best clue to reality in its concrete wholeness, and our valuational judgments bring us a kind of knowledge which stands on a parity with any we can attain.

It will not do to label this revolutionary standpoint a mere rebirth of humanism. In it new ground has been broken and old elements reconceived. The revolution starts with a radical treatment of knowledge theory. The sciences bring us dependable knowledge, but this knowledge is cast in a special mould. It is therefore abstract or oversimplified and fragmentary. It deals only with nature, a segment of reality. Man is more than a child of nature; he is a citizen of a universe which transcends and includes nature. Man's quest for truth, beauty, goodness, and the sacred, obligates the mind to find appropriate concepts. The obligation also witnesses to the spiritual character of the universe. Hence reality cannot be restricted to nature as understood by the sciences. The object of all human striving, and indeed the striving itself, becomes intelligible only in relation to a prior acknowledgment of our highest values, with a privileged place in the scale of reality. Here is the beginning of a world-view that is spiritual through and through, and within which nature forms an auxiliary part.

Kant's revolutionary standpoint constitutes a watershed for Christian theology. We have encountered great difficulty in appreciating its significance, and there seems to be no way of exaggerating its importance. Out of it came Schleiermacher's epoch-making repudiation of current naturalism and a summons to look deep within the human soul for the roots of religion. By a similar token the one-sided emphasis of the Ritschlians, in separating theology from all science and philosophy, receives a partial justification. Ritschlianism is part of a great discovery: that man cannot be submerged in a scientific scheme of nature, because his spiritual life transcends it in scope and in significance. In an unparalleled sense of that word spiritual man can stand on his own feet, and nature becomes his platform. Confidently now man the thinker acknowledges the final reality of the spiritual life which he darkly apprehends. It is true that in the Schleiermacher-Ritschlian tradition theology faces new perils. Schleiermacher opened the door to a stultifying subjectivism. His God floated about like an untethered balloon, and theology became a rationalization for the religious convictions of a given community. Even Ritschl's independent value judgment shrinks into an intuitional defense of doctrines arrived at on other grounds. At length truthfulness in theology became an orphan, whose cries are drowned by the soothing ripples of sentimentalism.

III.

Since Kant these major tendencies in theology have kept up a lively interchange. Between them some interesting combinations and reconceptions are in the making. Obviously theism must make room for both theory of nature and of value-man. Some kind of a higher synthesis, including these basic elements, in traditional modes of theology must be reached. Thus far attempts in this direction might be condensed into three general types: one version is made up of the more deeply tinged among voluntaristic theories. Perhaps the most widely circulated interpretation was inspired by the writings of William James. He sought, I believe, a reconciling point of view between the attempt to ground faith either upon a rationalistic cosmology or upon man's 'feeling' nature. Confronted by a requirement to choose between these two exclusive approaches, James selected neither. Out of the remnants of both he proposed to build a third highway. Four main ideas guided his efforts. First, the validity of scientific knowledge is accepted to the limit of its applicability. In its own realm no rival to science can be tolerated. The sciences have fully justified their procedures. Religious faith must scrupulously respect these claims. The second idea follows logically: nothing in religious faith can stand which is incongruous with the established results of the sciences. James seemed to be more certain about the availability of those results than we can dare to be. But the original premise stands. Faith must revise its affirmations, bringing them into line where they impinge upon the rightful domain of the sciences. The insights of faith may supplement scientific understanding, but not contravene it. In the third place, faith as intuitive insight has earned the right to go beyond the bounds of scientific knowledge. The sciences are good; incomparably good, as far as they go. They go not far enough; frequently they stop short of human need. Out beyond the bounds of accredited knowledge the human spirit does and must venture. Out there faith constructs hypotheses that are living, momentous and forced. To these insights James once attached the name of over-beliefs. Finally, this second best kind of understanding is to be tested and justified by results. Truth happens to an idea. It is made true in the verification process. Just what results are under consideration, or what verification means, is left an open question. One thing is clear. Theology must acknowledge its monitor in the sciences. Religion is tolerated so long as it acknowledges the theoretical superiority of scientific knowledge, and limits itself to certain practical functions. If a sceptic presses the issue concerning the reality of God, for instance, an answer is forthcoming. The God-idea is psychologically potent and sociologically effective. The contention is sound, but irrelevant.

Currently, there are two other notable forms of the right-to-believe construction. Both of them emanate from unexpected sources. In his notable volume on **The Problem of Religious Knowledge,** Professor Macintosh tries to make explicit the epistemological foundations of a Christian faith. His reasoning about the need is cogent. Whereas man will always act as if natural objects are real whatever his knowledge theory, the case for religion is different. One dare not infer that a man "will always act as if God were real, whatever his theory of religious knowledge." Macintosh then posts the conclusion that "the value of religious epistemology is the value of religion itself." The careful student, however, soon suspects that he is following an attempt at a justification of a faith otherwise established. An epistemology is made explicit in the expectation that it will bolster that faith. The clearest witness to this interpretation lies in the final tension between empirical knowledge of God and an intuitional-

imaginative faith that is warranted by ethical consequences. We have, says Macintosh, knowledge of the immanent God; and only a reasonable faith in the transcendently divine. In the latter case we may, he says, "continue to exercise our intuitive faith in the reality of the God we need in order to live as we ought, and to exercise this faith and this critical will to believe as an ethical right." In this dualistic solution is found a rare and admirable candor. Here is no ready choice of an exclusive road, but an honest attempt to acknowledge the obstacles which bar the way to an easy-going theism. If the unity of the world of nature and of the spiritual life lies enfolded in some pre-established harmony, that fact is not obvious to an honest mind.

In his attack upon this problem F. R. Tennant moves a previous consideration. First he recognizes the abstract character of a scientific interpretation of nature. The constructions of the sciences are made for specific purposes; they are not intended to be taken literally in their ontological bearing. Current scientific theory cannot, apart from misconception, be made the sole foundation of a metaphysical venture. A second step carries Tennant nearer the core of the knowing process. Knowledge, belief, faith are all alike rooted in conation. No hard and fast line can be drawn between them. Belief and faith pervade the whole of experience. They are not precious china in a religious cabinet. Similarly, theoretical propositions issue from the spirit of venture upon surmise, not an infallible reading off from self-complete 'fact'. Thus having acknowledged the psychological factors in all knowing, Tennant is ready to ground the theistic interpretation of the world in a presupposition commonly acknowledged as belief in the rational order of the world. A strongly phenomenalistic mode of thought sets the stage for a devotion that is religious in quality. What remains secure is the hull of a dismantled ship. The passengers have gone overboard.

## IV.

The common element underlying these versions of voluntarism emerge through reliance upon some form of intuitionism. Two considerations are, in the main, responsible for this choice. A first lesson has been learned from the dubious results worked out under the influence of modern naturalisms. Every attempt to lay hold upon the divine through scientific methodology has transformed theology into a concoction of bloodless categories. Values simply cannot be comprehended by an epistemology designed to interpret the physical world in provisional terms. **The divine value-object is different in nature from the world of things.** Apprehension of its meaning requires a mode of thinking which differs radically from techniques based primarily upon perceptual judgments. Perceptual judgments are always involved in the interpretation of religious phenomena. They deal however with concomitant features, not with the central values that are religion. The perennial life found in intuitionism is nourished on the idea that the spiritual can be apprehended by its own distinctive modes. Valuational judgment alone supplies the necessary instrument. Just here a second consideration enters. Apparently intuitionism is unable to conceive of religious understanding as a cumulative judgmental process. After the analogy of a perceptual event, intuitionism relies upon self-authenticating convictions. That supposedly non-judgmental operation readily dignifies itself with the chameleon name of faith. All knowledge, it is said, rests ultimately upon faith. If so, theology has a right to make its own choice of basic principles, without interference from science or philosophy. Theology has its own independent sources of insight. It can be criticized only from within, i.e., in terms of its own internal

convictions. The insights of faith were here long before men heard of science. They are independent also of philosophical speculation. Indeed faith precedes all knowledge and makes it possible. All that philosophical method can do is to clear obstacles from faith's highway. A double function is involved. Critical thought can remove encrustations which creep into a religious faith from time to time. It can also examine the 'data of experience' to see whether or not they accord with "the central affirmations of all religion." Apparently, faith is made up of two parts. It is a string of independent and self-authenticating affirmations; and, after that, faith becomes an imperious attitude which commands the resources of reason to explicate and defend those affirmations. The catastrophic mood induced by two world wars in a single generation accentuates and glorifies this general perspective.

Religious intuition often wears the garb of emergency conditions under which organized Christianity operates. War conditions stimulate fearful hearts in running true to form, and in giving premature birth to their theological ideas. Yet that is not the whole story. Back of every confessional faith lies a fundamental neglect of the knowing process. Hence the alternative of a revelation, in relation to which faith means decision. In the end faith always returns from its sessions with revelation laden with selected historical dogmas. Appeal to external authority becomes the only available defense against explicit agnosticism. Thus uncertainty about its epistemological foundations works a result in which faith is ever at the mercy of what currently promises a feeling of assurance. Thereby faith is always being transposed into a believing attitude, with a subsequent neglect of its content.

One way to attack these problems is to question the familiar restrictions imposed upon the religious situation. Among other things the continuous transformations of Christian faith through the centuries suggest that human experience is open to the ever-changing influence of the whole of reality within which man lives the life, not of a slave, but a citizen. Let us set down tentatively some of the pointer readings within a larger persepective:

1. We can explore the presupposition, rediscovered by Kant, concerning the prime reality of the spiritual. Too long have modern modes of thinking been enslaved to the category of 'existence' as the ultimate norm. Instead of asking about the existence of God, or anything else, let us discuss the meaning, significance, of value. Meaning, not existence, gives us a better clue to the reality of anything, and accords with the idea of the primary spiritual significance of any object-situation. Such a presupposition makes experience intelligible, in a way that the category of existence cannot.

2. Religious faith is not merely a believing process, but rather an appropriate kind of knowledge. It is far more than a conviction which supplements or transcends the 'knowing' process. Faith is a hard-won kind of spiritual understanding, capable of a validity equal to any knowledge we may possess.

3: Faith goes beyond ordinary kinds of knowledge, for two reasons. One is that terms for knowing are usually restricted to combinations of the mathematical-perceptual interpretation of experience. Ordinarily, reason is limited to its formal and abstractive functions. Commonsense observation, the physical sciences, and formal logic serve as the grand models. Those functions are thoroughly justified; they should not be taken as the acme of perfection, or as the sole capacity of reason. A second ground for extension of the knowing process lies with the acknowledgment of spiritual values by which we live, which acknowledgment defies all

reductionistic attempts to equate value with its psychological and social concomitants. The spiritual confronts us in its own right and language.

4. Reason has its spiritual functions assured in a continuous operation, through value judgments. In creative art; in the struggle for a higher justice; in exploring the sacramental meanings of common life; indeed, in the very normative processes of thinking itself, reason serves as man's spiritual monitor. Re-enforcing steps toward the liberation of reason from its erstwhile cave of "existence" constitutes a major achievement of voluntaristic interpretations. More significant action is still to be taken. Theology stands in need of a more critical value theory, as the basis for a new **rapport** between moral and religious values.

5. Cosmological theologies acknowledge an instinct concerning one essential chapter. Christians live in a world, not a vacuum. A competent interpretation of scientific nature is a standing order within every religious outlook. Theologians must learn to utilize the sciences, without being victimized by naturalistic philosophies frequently associated with their misuse. Theology is radically metaphysical. The great difference between world-views lies with what aspect of experience is taken to be of central significance. If nature and spiritual man are related as higher and lower aspects within a scale of reality, a teleological perspective is clearly indicated. Nature is the soil in God's garden; man is the co-laborer with God in working out the divine purpose toward which all creation moves. Within that dynamic perfection nature becomes sacramental and man acquires the status of a Son of God.

6. Theology can be Christian in the best sense when it accepts the responsibility for resting its authority upon the truthfulness of its claims, including the presentation of evidence for its claims to validity. Doctrines are not made Christian simply by the **ipse dixit** of a person who assumes a common label. Historic claims perform an indispensable function: they contitute part of the testing process by which truth concerning the divine can come to birth. The great Christian doctrines show their greatness in providing a place to stand while more rigid disciplinary operations are employed to enlarge our vision. Obviously, theology can be Christian in a triple sense: in the circumstance that our Spiritual fathers have partly found the truth concerning the divine self-giving; in respect also of the vigilance whereby all claims to validity have been sifted and established; and in respect of that larger light still in process of dawning upon disciplined seekers after the truth.