

**Continental Philosophy and
Modern Theology**

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An Engagement

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Introduction

This book has a dual aim which means, I hope, that it will prove of use both to the student beginning the study of doctrine and to the professional scholar.

First, the more basic purpose. Several years of teaching undergraduates contemporary issues in doctrine have convinced me that there is a desperate need for the arguments on opposite sides to be set out as clearly and concisely as possible. For so often when one recommends a range of books to be read, the student gets entangled in the details of a particular theologian's argument and is unable to see the wood for the trees. Indeed, for the public at large 'theological' has come to be equated so much with mere assertion that the word has become virtually synonymous with the obscure and dogmatic. So part of my purpose here is an evangelical one of demonstrating that theology is as rational a discipline as any other, with criteria and arguments to be weighed and assessed. To illustrate the disputes I have drawn upon a wide range of theologians (mostly contemporary), so that the students should become familiarized not only with the key points at issue but also the most significant figures in the dispute, as well as a host of lesser scholars who are also mentioned in passing. Given such an overall aim it could perhaps plausibly have been argued that a legitimate excuse existed for not taking sides in various issues. But I think that that would have been the way of cowardice, and so I have always also indicated my own views. A possible advantage in this may be that, rather than sitting back impassively, the reader will also in consequence be challenged to make a positive response of his own to the questions raised.

My second and deeper aim is partly a reflection of my own personal academic interests and partly a desire to make more explicit the wider context in which theology is in fact practised. As is well known,

philosophy as an academic discipline is still largely divided between the analytic tradition as it is practised in the English-speaking world and continental philosophy as found in France and Germany. The result is that names that are marginal to English philosophy like Hegel and Husserl bulk largely on the continent, while the reverse is also true, for example in respect of Frege. The historical reasons for this need not be pursued here. What is important is their effect. For, whereas English-speaking philosophy's preoccupation with linguistic analysis has produced a degree of technicality that has prevented any major influence on other disciplines, continental philosophy's turn instead to an analysis of experience (as in the *Phenomenology of Husserl* or the *Existentialism of Heidegger and Sartre* which grew from it) has had considerable ramifications on the intellectual climate as a whole, not least in theology. The net result is thus that it is impossible to fully comprehend contemporary theology without also having some knowledge of continental philosophy. It is therefore with this end in view that each section has not only a piece on significant theologians but also one on some relevant aspect of philosophy.

Despite the fact that my own background is in analytic philosophy, I have sought to resist the temptation common among English-speaking philosophers of regarding continental philosophy as 'shallow' simply because it is in general more accessible and less technically argued. For the issues it raises are clearly important ones. Also, unlike Anglo-Saxon philosophy, among its numbers it has philosophers of the first rank who are prepared to speak and comment upon essentially theological issues. Here one thinks of men like Levinas or Ricoeur. This makes all the more regrettable the way in which English-speaking theologians are so often content to let their knowledge of continental philosophy be confined to Existentialism and not explore the considerable developments which have taken place since. At any rate, this book has been written in the conviction that not only do existing influences need to be better known but also that there are within current French and German philosophy many untapped sources of useful illumination. Hence the explanation of my hope that what follows will also be of use to the professional theologian.

Inevitably it has sometimes proved necessary to explore the past in order to understand the present and so occasional discussions like the sections on Neo-Platonism or Luther will be found. But these are incidental to my main aim which has been to ensure that the reader emerges with a good grasp of the current range of positions to be found in contemporary theology and continental philosophy. Naturally if the reader also comes to share at least some of the conclusions I reach on the doctrinal issues in question, that will be a very pleasant bonus!¹

Theological Method

In this chapter I shall examine the three most commonly canvassed methods of founding a system of Christian doctrine, appeals to experience, revelation and tradition. Though theologians frequently stress one or other to the virtual or actual exclusion of the rest, I shall maintain that all three need to be held in complementarity. The chapter will then end with a discussion of the implications of Biblical criticism for the use to which the Bible may be put by the systematic theologian.

Reflection on experience

Schleiermacher to Rahner

Schleiermacher (1768–1834) is often described as the father of modern theology. There are a number of ways in which this might be held to be true, for example through the impetus he gave to hermeneutics (of which more later in the chapter). Most fundamental of all is the direction he gave theology towards reflection on experience. In this he can be seen as part of the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment, the experiential turn displayed by European thought in response to the Enlightenment's exclusive exaltation of reason. Thus it is to typical Romantic notions such as intuition and feeling that Schleiermacher appeals in his first famous work, *On Religion: speeches to its cultured despisers* (1799).

For the typical Enlightenment thinker religious belief had meant no more than deism, belief in a God who, as it were, set the world in motion but then took no further part in it. By contrast, Schleiermacher attempts to place God at the centre of human concerns by insisting that there are certain universal human experiences that cannot help but raise the question of God. Much subsequent theology, particularly

what has usurped for itself the name of 'Liberal Theology', would claim that all theology is in fact of this kind, a reflection on universal human experience, and that even the Bible has to be interpreted in this light. The next section on revelation considers what is wrong with this claim, but first we must examine the more limited areas where there would be general agreement that Schleiermacher was right. For unless there are some elements in our experience that raise for at least some of us the question of God, it is hard to see how theology could even begin to engage our interest.

However, specifying these areas and assessing their epistemological status (what they tell us about God) is far from easy. The nature of the problem can perhaps best be illustrated by contrasting two major twentieth-century theologians, the Protestant Paul Tillich (1886–1965) and the Catholic Karl Rahner (1904–84). Both make appeal to experience central to theology but in characteristically different ways, labelled in what follows the 'metaphysical impulse' (Tillich) and the 'sacramental' (Rahner). Though there are in fact elements of each impulse in both theologians, it seems best to stress that impulse for which each is best known. Both are in any case anticipated by Schleiermacher. Of the two I find Tillich's the more difficult to defend but also the more tempting. As it is a common temptation in theology, it will be profitable to locate first its source and identify what is wrong with it before turning to Rahner's rather different approach.

As many find Tillich's existentialist language hard-going on first encounter, let me first illustrate his basic strategy by reference to a much more straightforward book, Keith Ward's *The Concept of God*. He divides human beings between those who 'tend to view reality, from the first, as a whole' and those who see it 'as a wholly contingent collocation of diverse and essentially unrelated elements'.¹ Not surprisingly, it is the former group whom he identifies as those who find in God a concept that can give coherence to their experience: 'he is the ground of the meaning and value in reality, called one because apprehended under a unitary integrating image.'² Such an appeal to an holistic desire to integrate all of one's experience in a single unifying concept certainly takes up one strand in Schleiermacher's thought. In the 'Second Speech on Religion' he writes: 'The contemplation of the pious is the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things, in and through the Infinite, and of all temporal things in and through the Eternal. Religion is to seek this and find it in all that lives and moves, in all growth and change, in all doing and suffering . . . Where this is found religion is satisfied . . . Wherefore it is a life in the infinite nature of the Whole, in the One and in the All.'³

Now at one level this must be right. For there is no doubt that a key impulse in religion has been identified, something that helps to explain

why even atheistic systems such as Marxism and Theravada Buddhism are sometimes treated as religions. It is because they are all equally concerned to give some overall unity to experience by providing a total, all-encompassing explanation of the way the world is. Moreover, this 'metaphysical' impulse, as we might call it, can also be given some sort of rationale. For, if God is defined as the source of all that exists, then all our experience, deriving as it does from the source, might be expected to reflect something of that original unity. But two qualifications are immediately evident. First, the argument does not work the other way round. That is to say, while, if God exists, we might legitimately expect the world to reflect the divine unity, the mere desire for such unity can of itself provide no reason for believing in the existence of an objective ground to that unity, nor even that that ground would be God. Our desire might be a vain will-o'-the-wisp, and even if it is not, this unity might be explained in another way, for example in the unity of dialectical materialism as Marxists believe. Secondly, and this brings us at last to Tillich, the danger of relying too exclusively on this metaphysical impulse is that it may lead us to oversimplify and thus fail to see difference, where difference should be acknowledged. Think again of the issue from the divine end. What if God has assigned a relative independence to the world? Might that not prevent complete integration, for example of irreconcilable human evil? Again, even in the case of God himself, why should a basic unity be thought to preclude complexity? Would we not be prepared to describe some human beings as totally integrated characters, and yet their complexity remains considerable?

It is a failure to take questions like this with sufficient seriousness that leads Tillich to some of his strangest pronouncements on the nature of God. In his main work, *Systematic Theology*, he adopts what he calls 'the method of correlation'.⁴ We are first to analyse the tensions and questions posed by human existence and, when we find an answer appropriate to them, that answer will be what is meant by God. So, for example, man asks about the ground of his own being and what can resist the threat of non-being. The method of correlation means that God as answer must be the ground of our being, the infinite power which resists non-being. But the argument is not conducted just in general terms. Specific tensions are also identified which are seen as having their ultimate resolution in God. Three such 'polarities' that he mentions⁵ are individualization and participation, form and dynamics (cf. what I am and what I might become) and freedom and destiny. The details need not concern us here. What is worrying is the way in which he goes beyond such specific resolutions to assert that since God is the resolution of all such tensions, he must be beyond all potential sources of conflict. So, for example, he denies that God is properly personal

since this would be to take sides on the issue of individual versus participant. Instead he is envisaged as 'participating in every life as its ground and aim'.⁶ But in response one wants to ask whether in making God 'equally near'⁷ both polarities Tillich has not undermined the aseity or independence of God as a distinct agent. Indeed, decisive confirmation of this comes with the implication that Tillich draws from his conviction that God must also be beyond any potential conflict between essence and existence (roughly, the definition of something and its actuality). He writes: 'God does not exist. He is being itself beyond essence and existence. Therefore to argue that God exists is to deny him.'⁸

This conclusion is just silly. Not only is it, as Tillich admits, in conflict with traditional use of the terms, in effect it puts God beyond the possibility of anything significant at all being said about him, such has been the extravagant blossoming of metaphysical compliments. But in this Tillich is by no means alone. It is one of the objections that might be made against Hindu thought, in which Brahman is also put beyond all attributes, even including good and evil. However, this was not what influenced Tillich. Rather, it was the early nineteenth-century German philosopher Hegel whose philosophy is largely built round the resolution of such opposed polarities, though Tillich would no doubt have wished to ascribe the greater influence to Hegel's slightly younger contemporary Schelling, at least to judge by his remarks about the relative status of the two philosophers in his *Perspectives on 19th and 20th Century Protestant Theology* and elsewhere. But for simplicity's sake we shall continue to emphasise the more famous and more widely influential Hegel.

However that may be, the two main dangers in the metaphysical impulse should now be obvious. First, it may preclude us from taking seriously enough the degree of independence accorded the world (and particularly humanity) by God in creating it. Secondly, it tends to equate unity or wholeness and simplicity, but not only is this identification not nearly as straightforward as may initially appear, as we shall see in more detail in chapter 2 there are good grounds for challenging any such assumption.

The other and I think more plausible impulse that has its basis in experience is what we might call the sacramental impulse, meaning thereby the detection of signs of transcendence in our experience, which need not, of course, imply any overall unity inhering all our experience. An influential example of this kind of approach is to be found in the sociologist Peter Berger's *A Rumour of Angels*. He identifies five 'signals of transcendence' in human experience which move 'inductive faith' to make statements about God.⁹ These are order, play, hope, damnation and humour. As the list indicates, they

are a diverse group. But what they all share is the way in which all such experiences suggest the possibility (but not the proof) of something beyond themselves. This is what makes the use of the label 'sacramental' so appropriate; for like religious sacraments these experiences are seen as pointing to something beyond themselves.

The range of Berger's reference is impressive. Order and hope are a traditional pair. But the other three are less familiar. Play is mentioned because during it time seems suspended and eternity is perhaps glimpsed; damnation because some evils seem so awful that no purely human condemnation will suffice; and humour because our ability to laugh in any situation, even in a concentration camp, implies that 'the imprisonment of the human spirit . . . is not final but will be overcome.'¹⁰ Inevitably, some of his illustrations will be found more persuasive than others, and many will find more persuasive, experiences that he does not consider. I shall mention some of these in a moment. But Berger's little book is important because he challenges the common view that it is only a fairly explicit religious experience that could raise for us the question of God. Instead, hints of the transcendent, 'a rumour of angels', are all about us in our everyday experience.

Schleiermacher is someone who pursued the sacramental impulse in more obviously religious experience, and thereby set the pattern for much subsequent theology. Thus in his most important work, *The Christian Faith* (1821), he appeals to 'a consciousness of absolute dependence' which he defines as 'the consciousness that the whole of our spontaneous activity comes from a source outside of us'.¹¹ I must admit to feeling some sympathy with the reaction of his fellow professor at Berlin. Hegel remarked that, if Schleiermacher's account of the religion impulse were true, then a dog would make the best Christian.¹² For while admittedly recognition of dependence is integral to the idea of worship, it is puzzling why Schleiermacher should have placed such exclusive emphasis on this experience, and also why he should have regarded it as absolute.

By contrast, Karl Rahner is much more impressive simply because of the range of experiences to which he points. So, for instance, he draws attention to a common aspect of our experience of love. We find ourselves accepted absolutely and unconditionally by another, or ourselves extend a similar value to others, and yet there seems no satisfactory explanation of this in the person himself. Again, on occasion we experience responsibility as a demand upon us that just cannot be manipulated but instead draws us out beyond ourselves into what can sometimes be seen as an infinite sense of duty. But Rahner is not just content to refer us to what are perhaps the more obvious experiences such as these moral ones, or that are more explicitly

religious like awe before a beautiful landscape. He also claims that such signs of transcendence are present everywhere, even if their presence is denied. 'This unfulfilled transcendental remains, even though it may be pushed to one side. It is at work behind countless phenomena of individual and collective life: in boredom, the mists of which swallow up the variety of real life; in aggressive irritation at the present because it comes at us with such intolerable incompleteness that we are tempted to flee it into a kind of utopian dreamworld of the future.'¹³ And so on.

Rahner's ideas were pursued with most philosophical rigour in *Spirit in the World* and its more theological successor, *Hearers of the Word*, then subsequently mainly through articles which have been usefully gathered together in the numerous volumes of his *Theological Investigations*. But even in his only complete 'popular' presentation of his theology, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, the implications of this style of approach are made entirely clear. The question of God is seen as being raised each time our experience challenges us to go beyond itself. Indeed, adopting a criticism of Hegel against Kant, he argues that for man even to impose limits is already to go beyond them. 'In the fact that he affirms the possibility of a merely finite horizon of questioning, the possibility is already surpassed, and man shows himself a being with an infinite horizon . . . The infinite horizon of human questioning is experienced as a horizon which recedes further and further the more answers man can discover.'¹⁴ The point he is making is that to appreciate something as a limit one has already stepped out to a perspective that is beyond that limit, and so man is constantly pushing beyond his experience as he reflects upon it. It is this that makes so appropriate his designation of God as 'the infinite horizon', 'the unlimited distance' and so forth. It is this too which explains his description of God as 'the sacred mystery' since, if he is perceived in this way, he will always be beyond being grasped by any set limits of description.

Just as Tillich's approach to the use of the metaphysical impulse was influenced by Hegel, so Rahner's here was influenced by another philosopher, the Belgian Jesuit, Josef Maréchal. However, lest the reader be misled by these comments, perhaps I should add that in other ways they share a major philosophical influence upon them, namely the Existentialism of Heidegger (discussed in chapter 3). But for the moment I simply want to highlight one obvious contrast between them, the way in which Rahner through Maréchal belongs to a very different tradition of approach to methodology, an approach which has come to be known as Transcendental Thomism. Both Hegel and Maréchal were reacting to the greatest philosopher of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant (1734–1804). So it is only proper that we should assess the significance of what Rahner is saying against his wider background.

Kant to Maréchal

The significance of Kant for theology is perhaps best summed up in what he himself says at the beginning of his most important work, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that he has abolished knowledge to make room for faith.¹⁵ For it encapsulates his two main contributions: the negative one of ‘abolishing’ the traditional arguments for the existence of God at least to the extent of showing that they cannot be regarded as demonstrably valid, as conclusive deductive proofs; the positive one of none the less insisting that God is necessary as a ‘postulate of practical reason’ in the sense that without such an undergirding belief we could have no reason to hope for complete moral fulfilment in the next life.

On one common reading of his philosophy, Hegel’s reaction to this banishing of God to a merely transcendent hope was to stress his immanence in the world, such that he could even be seen as in some sense emerging from it. How that is possible we shall consider in the next chapter when we look at the theme of creation. In the meantime suffice it to say that, while Tillich would be unhappy with such a comparison, the method prescribed for locating God (i.e. through the resolution of conflicts or polarities) is clearly common to both him and Process Theology (also examined in the following chapter). So despite Tillich’s desire to place God firmly beyond the world and any dependence on it, like Process Theology he can be seen as part of the Hegelian response to the Kantian challenge of the relegation of God to the marginal.

That last remark may seem unfair to Kant, at least in respect of what we have said so far about his views. For does he not still insist on faith? That is true, but one needs to bear in mind that it is a faith that by necessity cannot receive any kind of confirmation in this life. This is because of the thrust of the *Critique* as a whole, in which only knowledge of phenomena, the directly experienced, is admitted, with things-in-themselves remaining beyond our cognition. Admittedly, in the twentieth century thanks to the publication of the *Opus Postumum*, a work unfinished at his death, it is generally agreed that towards the end of his life Kant moved towards a more positive assessment of our ability to speak of God’s involvement in the world, with any suggestion of deism firmly rejected. But this is still in marked contrast to his earlier writings, in which it would be true to say that God remains little more than a hope, not someone of whom one can have experience, far less proof. Indeed, the only work published in his lifetime exclusively devoted to the philosophy of religion, his *Religion within the Limits of Reasons Alone* of 1793 clearly reduces religion to little more than a moral creed, though it has one interesting feature which one might not have expected from the optimism of the Enlightenment, namely stress

on the propensity of human beings to evil. It was this earlier less sympathetic account that was best-known in the nineteenth century and indeed continues to be the best-known. Thus, despite the modifications of Kant's old age, it is this picture that must be borne in mind when considering the reaction of Hegel and indeed even the response of Maréchal.

Thus just as Hegel represents one possible reaction to the Kantian challenge – relocating God as essentially immanent in this world of experience, so Maréchal represents another – redefining the conditions for such knowledge. It is a response, however, which is more directly related to Kant's argument and indeed even borrows his terminology. Kant in analysing what makes knowledge possible had proposed various 'transcendental' conditions, the intuition of certain concepts such that without them we could not structure our experience at all or render it intelligible. He has in mind such basic notions as space, time and cause, and he calls them 'synthetic a priori' because they must be known in advance of our experience, if we are to make sense of that experience. In other words, for knowledge to exist at all an active structuring of our experience has to take place with these concepts. Where Maréchal comes in is in questioning whether the existence of God is not presupposed as one of the transcendental conditions of every such active structuring of our experience.

Maréchal develops his argument in the process of a five-volumed work, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique*, which began to be published from 1922 onwards, though the fourth volume only appeared after his death in 1944. The first four volumes trace the history of philosophy from its earliest Greek beginnings to the immediate post-Kantian philosophy of Fichte, though in fact most of two volumes are devoted to Kant. This is in itself significant in that it indicates that long before Vatican II (1962–5) the necessary reorientation of Catholic thought away from too narrow a concentration on Aquinas and towards answering modern challenges to faith was already beginning to take place. Indeed, Rahner and the other major Roman Catholic theologian to be influenced by him, Bernard Lonergan,¹⁶ were both exhibiting his effect upon them long before this revolutionary Council, and so themselves added to the pressure for change. Admittedly, the fact that the position of all three is known as Transcendental Thomism might seem to give the lie to any pretence of revolutionary intellectual implications. But, given the official status of Thomas Aquinas at the time, Maréchal had little alternative but to present his position as still that of Aquinas ('entièrement loyale'¹⁷), even though viewed through the eyes of Kant.

In rough outline, Maréchal's argument might be put as follows. All knowledge involves a structuring of experience, partly by the object

and partly by the subject. But to impose structure implies an awareness of bounds and limits, while to impose a limit is already to transcend that limit. Therefore, every act of knowledge has as the transcendental condition of its possibility the transcending of a limit, and thus knowledge as a whole the transcending of all limits. But that is what we mean by God. Therefore God is implied as the transcendental condition of all knowledge or, as he sums it up: 'Objects in our view are intrinsically related to the Absolute. Their transcendental structure points to Infinite Being, of which they constitute so many finite participations.'¹⁸

Maréchal obviously thought the argument conclusive. However, what it does show is far from clear. Certainly it would be unfair to object that we are not aware of this infinite underlying presence. For, as Rahner points out, the situation might be rather like the way in which we take the existence of light for granted, though we cannot in fact see without it. But even so an infinite beyond limits is hardly necessarily the same thing as God. Yet, to be fair to Maréchal, one reason for his making the identification is the way in which, unlike Kant, he assigns a very active role to the object in structuring the experience. For this in turn might suggest that the ultimate object doing all this structuring is personal.

But there seem just too many contentious steps in the argument for it to be as conclusive as Maréchal would wish. Certainly, writing in the very different tradition of Oxford analytic philosophy, Ralph Walker sees no possibility of assigning any transcendental role to God, though he does maintain that without belief in a divinely 'pre-established harmony' we can have no grounds for trusting that the future pattern of our experience of the world will resemble its present form.¹⁹ (This is not a transcendental condition because we could adapt to very different forms of experience.) But this is not to say that Transcendental Thomism is therefore of no importance. By drawing attention to a wide range of experience where the question of God is raised, it shows that theology is a discipline that is concerned not just with a narrow set of phenomena called 'religious' experience.

Having admitted the success of Kant's critique of the traditional arguments and denied complete success to Maréchal's response, what then are we to say of the role of justificatory arguments for theology? One major trend in England has been to treat the various arguments as 'cumulative', as together amounting to a plausible inductive case, though none conclusive in themselves. In *The Justification of Religious Belief* Basil Mitchell found illustration for this type of approach from disciplines as varied as history and natural sciences. His successor as professor of the philosophy of religion at Oxford in *The Existence of God*²⁰ gives a detailed argument of this kind for the existence of God.

In so doing Swinburne relies heavily on religious experience and the argument is presented with considerable scientific rigour, making use of, as it does, confirmation theory. For my part I seriously doubt whether such rigour is plausible. There are just too many uncertain quantities. But this should not be taken as discounting either the possibility or the need to show the essential reasonableness of religious belief. Nor should the absence of rigour or absolute conclusiveness make us despair. After all, in the other two main areas of value, in morals and aesthetics, the foundations are equally contentious and equally hard to establish definitively. Above all we need today to learn a rather different lesson from Kant. His contemporaries rightly had their over-confidence in the power of reason to produce conclusive proof deflated. In our case we need constantly to be on our guard against minimalizing, against supposing that where there is room for doubt, no more can be said. The challenge Maréchal offers us is that throughout the whole range of our experience we are being interrogated as to the possibility of whether there may not indeed be much, much more.

The appeal to revelation

Barth and Troeltsch

So far we have been looking at the treatment by theologians of what has been variously labelled 'natural theology' (as opposed to revealed theology), or 'the anthropological method' (because it starts from man's experience), or 'general revelation' (because it considers experiences which, unlike 'special revelation', could theoretically be had by all men). But, however labelled, one thing is clear. Karl Barth's theology is at the opposite extreme both in method and content, and indeed was forged in reaction to it. In assessing how far his enormous influence this century has been justified, it will be helpful first to look at some positive points that can be made in his defence before turning to some of the difficulties raised, in particular Troeltsch's claim that the rules of the historical method preclude belief in such a God.

The more exclusively the anthropological method is adopted the more we have what goes under the name of Liberal Theology. To the uninitiated it might seem that no theology could claim to be Christian without assigning some authority to revelation over and above human experience, and in one sense this is of course right. But it is important to be clear about the very limited sense in which much Liberal Theology is prepared to accord a special status to revelation. For in effect all it understands by special revelation is general revelation at its best, man at the maximum point of insight but with the direction

remaining entirely from man to God. There is no special divine initiative. The world remains exactly as it always was. So anyone could have acquired the same insight if he had been sufficiently attuned to the possibilities of his experience.

One recurrent problem in theology is that theologians seldom come clean about the extent to which they would accept this implication. So appeal is made to Scripture as though that necessarily added weight to the argument, whereas it could only do so if some special divine initiative were involved. Otherwise it must remain subject to the same canons of evaluation as any insight you or I might have. It was one of the merits of Barth that he not only saw this clearly, he realized that, if this anthropological method were allowed sway, our knowledge of God, coming as it would only through such universal insights, would be drastically curtailed.

So, for example, commenting on Schleiermacher in his survey of intellectual thought *From Rousseau to Ritschl*, he is concerned to point out that, whatever he may have thought to the contrary, his method has in effect led Schleiermacher to a denial of the doctrine of the Incarnation. This is because he defines Christ's consciousness of God as human self-consciousness perfected. But this is only to make a quantitative and not a qualitative difference between him and us and so 'according to the premises . . . he was bound to renounce the idea of the Deity of Christ.'²¹ Barth does not offer other examples, but they are not hard to find. Indeed, one question raised by exclusive concentration on this method is whether it could ever yield very much knowledge at all about God and his purposes for man. To take a very basic Christian belief, God as our Father, is it really plausible to claim that this is an insight that could potentially be had by anyone on the basis of their experience? Does not the status of Christ's teaching rather derive from the fact that God first came close to him and so opened a way in which this might become true for all of us? Or again, take the question of life after death. Why should it be thought that God is so involved with humanity that he should want to take us all up into a higher life? Does not most of ordinary human experience suggest that God is at a distance from us? What gives conviction that there might be something beyond is thus not our own mundane experience, far less a universal human experience, but the witness of those to whom God seems to have come particularly close, particularly in the midst of their suffering, and given them the assurance of a love beckoning them to something beyond. The fact that the so-called death of God theology, typified by Altizer's 1960s classic, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*,²² could question whether we experience anything at all of the nature of God except his absence, should in any case give pause for serious reflection about the viability of this method.

Though I think Altizer goes too far, I personally believe in the essential soundness of Barth's analysis of the limitations of the method.²³ But, whether the reader is persuaded of the necessity of such appeals to the authority of others' 'revelatory' experience or not, such considerations lead naturally into the second positive feature of Barth's theology to which I want to draw attention. This is his emphasis on the shocking or surprising quality of revelation, that it is not at all something that natural reflection would suggest. It is at this point that it becomes important to recall the precise historical situation in which Barth's theology was forged. Having been trained in the Liberal theological tradition before the First World War, it was while he was a parish minister in the small country village of Safenwil in the north-east of Switzerland that he heard not only of the outbreak of the war but also of the fact that ninety-three German intellectuals, including most of his former professors, had issued a manifesto supporting the Kaiser's declaration of war. The fact that theology in the tradition of Schleiermacher should so closely identify itself with the prevailing culture led him to question its credentials, as also how his own preaching of the Gospel was to be distinguished from the mere word of man. The result was *The Epistle to the Romans*, first published in 1919. It is a clarion call to see God once again as the proper object of theology and not man, and it was a theme which he continued to emphasize in his massive and most important systematic work, *Church Dogmatics*, which he continued working at almost up to his death in 1968.

In *The Epistle to the Romans* God is described as he 'who is distinguished qualitatively from men and from everything human, and must never be identified with anything which we name, or experience, or conceive, or worship, as God'. So in revelation what happens is that 'above and beyond the apparently infinite series of possibilities and visibilities in this world there breaks forth, like a flash of lightning . . . the Truth of God which is now hidden.'²⁴ Little wonder, then, that he rejects all natural theology and is led to the belief that it is only possible to preach to the world, not argue with it. Indeed, not only does *Church Dogmatics* sometimes read like a sermon, it is even the case that bound with the Index are 'Aids for the Preacher' with appropriate references to the text.

Such hostility is in marked continuity with the Reformed tradition to which he belonged, and he shares at least one reason for this hostility in common with Calvin, and for that matter Luther. This is the conviction that the Fall has so defaced the image of God in man as to make impossible any human move towards God. We are too blinded by sin to achieve any true perceptions on our own. 'Man has completely lost the capacity for God.'²⁵ The result is that he wishes to substitute an

analogia fidei ('analogy of faith') for the traditional *analogia entis* ('analogy of being' – the view that God and man share sufficient in common to justify the use of the same predicates, however greatly qualified). By this he means that instead of the meaning of religious terms gaining their meaning first from the secular context and then being transferred to the religious, the process should be seen as being reversed. Meaning first comes from the context of revelation. So, for example, he would hold that it is not the case that we first understand the meaning of 'father' from everyday discourse and then apply it by analogy to God. Rather, we have no clear idea of what the word properly means until that meaning is disclosed in the context of revelation.

But to all this there are two clear objections. First, it is hard to see how we could recognize 'father' as an appropriate term, unless we had first discovered its positive character elsewhere. In other words, language cannot function as a bolt out of the blue. Revelation could modify our understandings of the correct way in which a word is to be used; it could not simply create it. If this linguistic point is difficult to understand, essentially the same argument can be expressed non-linguistically. For it is impossible to see how man could respond to revelation unless there was something there first that enabled him to see such revelation positively as answering his questions. Otherwise it would simply appear as an irrelevance. So a total lack of previous contact is equally ruled out in this way. But, secondly, the Calvinist view of man's prior condition is not just derogatory of man, it is also demeaning of God. For it suggests that, rather than being seen as their ultimate author, God is indifferent to all those splendid outpourings of human creativity that do not explicitly bear his name.

That in his rejection of Liberal Theology he erred too much in the opposite direction, Barth seems to have come slowly to appreciate. At all events, in a brief autobiographical passage in *Church Dogmatics* he remarks in passing that 'in the attempt to free ourselves . . . from these early forms of one-sidedness . . . we took the surest possible way to make ourselves guilty of a new one-sidedness',²⁶ while in a later volume there is a fascinating passage where, contrary to what one might expect from his theology, there is a eulogy of Mozart 'because he knew something about creation in its total goodness' and that despite the fact that he 'does not seem to have been a particularly active Christian and was a Roman Catholic'.²⁷ But the clearest indication of a change of heart is in his 1956 lectures on *The Humanity of God*, where he admits to being 'only partially in the right' in his earlier theology.²⁸ But even so there is no acknowledgement of the essential rightness of natural theology, and that is a pity. Barth's strength lies in the denial that that is all there is. But equally, as we saw earlier, without some natural

theology it is impossible to see why revelation should be of interest. It only becomes so when we see that there are certain questions posed by human experience to which it could possibly be the answer.

If that is one criticism one might make of Barth, another stems from a label that is frequently applied to his theology, Neo-orthodoxy or the new orthodoxy. For although *Church Dogmatics* is full of marvellous exegeses of Scripture, there is very little to suggest that his orthodoxy took seriously the questions posed by historical criticism of the Bible. That at least could not be said of the Liberal theologians like Harnack and Troeltsch against whom he was reacting. But whether they produced the right conclusions is quite another matter. Admittedly, in so far as Barth sometimes retreats in sharply differentiating 'a maxim of faith' and 'a maxim of historical knowledge'²⁹ and seems to imply that the one can be had without the other, that must be pronounced entirely wrong. The Christian, no more than anyone else, can escape from questions of historicity. But it is one thing to admit this, and quite another to say that it follows from this that a particular world-view or the world-view most commonly adopted by historians must therefore also be accepted. Here Barth's instincts were quite right.

The danger of giving normative status to the secular world-view is well illustrated by the case of Harnack. Already a distinguished historian in virtue of his seven-volumed *History of Dogma*, in 1900 he brought out his celebrated book on the essence of Christianity, *What is Christianity?* Though obviously much of what he says about criticism of the Bible is valid, the method reduces itself to absurdity when all we are in effect left with is Jesus promulgating the same sort of values as any German liberal intellectual at the turn of the century.³⁰ Despite this inherent danger of simply endorsing the secular culture, it is still widely accepted that his younger contemporary, Ernst Troeltsch, offered a successful means of drawing a distinction between improperly accepting the world-view of one's own culture and endorsing the world-view that is an essential prerequisite of doing historical research at all.

So, for example, the American scholar Van Harvey in *The Historian and the Believer* uses Troeltsch's criteria to attack Barth for accepting the historicity of the Resurrection: 'The issue is, by what right does Barth in this particular case suspend those warrants he normally uses and which he applies when, say, dealing with the story of Jonah or Joshua?'³¹ The argument of the 1898 essay in which Troeltsch most clearly presents his case, *Über historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie*,³² can be briefly presented. It is that there are three main criteria with which the historical method operates, and that all three must inevitably rule out of court any theology which appeals to miracle or assigns a specific causal role to the supernatural. The three in question are criticism (by which he means that historical judgements

are always subject to revision and so never get beyond the status of assessments of probability), analogy (the need to assess such probability by comparison with our own experience and what we know to have happened elsewhere) and correlation (the assumption that events are intelligible only in so far as they can be shown to be part of an already existing causal pattern). As a rough characterization of the way in which historians operate, this is no doubt correct. It is also true that in consequence most would exclude the action of the supernatural as part of their explanation of what has happened. None the less it does not follow from this that such exclusion is integral to the method.

So, for example, in respect of the principle of correlation, precisely because God is regarded as personal and not arbitrary, his actions can be seen as relating to a wider causal context of personal interaction. Again with analogy, though we may have no experience of our own to give confidence in the possibility of miracle, that does not mean that belief in them becomes entirely arbitrary. One can set each alleged case against what we believe to be the general pattern of divine motives for action. Thus Barth might have justified himself by saying that what we know about the nature of God from the Bible as a whole makes it inherently unlikely that he would halt the sun for Joshua and his men to 'avenge themselves upon their enemies',³³ whereas there were particularly good reasons why he might raise Christ from the dead. So what a Christian historian who accepts the Resurrection as a miracle is doing is not opting out of the normal canons of historical method, but supplementing them with the conviction that there is an additional personal agent to be taken into account, i.e. God – supplementing because, apart from this proviso, the usual questions about reliability of sources, alternative explanations and so forth will still apply.

But, it may be said, I have misunderstood Troeltsch's main point. For how could belief in such a God be derived if not from the historical facts. But no historical fact could be the basis of such a belief. For following the rule of analogy with our present experience would prevent us from ever taking any alleged instance seriously. But this is to ignore the way in which shifts of perspective occur. It is not a matter of isolated instances, but of doubts occurring over a whole range of cases such that there then eventually occurs what Thomas Kuhn in his influential *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* has called a paradigm shift.³⁴ The supreme irony is that Troeltsch's editors have placed immediately after the present essay under discussion another one published eleven years later, *Zur Frage des religiösen Apriori*, in which he finds himself forced to admit that 'for the pure psychologist and positivist my theory of religion is just as grossly superstitious as papal encyclicals.'³⁵ The reason is that he too views the world through a perspective that is in conflict with much modern thought and which