

SYMBOLISM AND BELIEF¹

THIS is a work of sane and considerable scholarship covering a field in which, in spite of the work of Père Lagrange, Catholic scholars have shown some measure of diffidence: a field also in which thomist theology has a peculiarly acute responsibility. The problem is stated on p. 25, "The difficulty is that while Christian theology asserts that God is unknowable, it simultaneously asserts that God can be known. And not Christian only, but any form of belief which can be called theistic is bound to assert that in some sense God can be known." The approach to it, "Not to get rid of anthropomorphism, which is impossible if man is going to have any idea of God at all, but to make the division between right and wrong anthropomorphism where it ought to be made—that is the main problem for all philosophy of religion." Already the Catholic theologian has grounds to fear that the edges of the problem have been blurred. Not that, in such a fear, there is any room for sectarian pride or aloofness. Dr. Bevan himself underlines the nature of Catholic responsibility in the matter (p. 317), "It would be quite a mistake to suppose that these discussions (of the theory of analogy) are of interest only to Roman Catholic theologians. The problem with which they grapple is a problem which must confront any modern thinker who believes in any God at all." Further back (p. 315) he says of the same doctrine of analogy, "I cannot profess myself able to make sense of this explanation. But there are two things to be noted. One is that Catholic theologians themselves have not found it easy to understand." All of which is too evidently true. What then is to be said?

Dr. Bevan's own further indications of the nature of the problem may first be quoted (p. 338), ". . . If we say that

¹ *Symbolism and Belief*. (Gifford Lectures.) By Edwyn Bevan. (Allen & Unwin, 1959.)

a logical contradiction between two factors in our conception of God, does not matter because it is only a contradiction in the symbolical imagery, not in the Reality, what possibility of rational criticism do we leave?" . . . "If the ground on which (the believer) thought of God as personal was valid, the demonstration that God could not be a person of the same kind as a human individual, left that positive ground still there. His belief in something unimaginable was not an arbitrary expedient to enable him to go on holding, in some sense, a concept which there was no ground for holding; it was the necessary consequence of two different kinds of consideration bearing upon him both together, one, the positive consideration that the Reality must be of a kind to satisfy certain exigences, two, the critical consideration that God could not be personal in the same way in which a man is personal." Here the statement of the general problem is so well made as to show that, if Dr. Bevan fails to make sense of the theory of analogy, this failure is itself due to the lack of communication between two traditions: that of Catholic scholastic theology and that of English scholarship as applied to the philosophy of religion.

The early and larger part of the book is devoted to an historical examination of the role played in religious thought by such typical and widespread symbols as height (exaltedness), light, spirit, anger, temporal duration. These symbols, purified in the course of the religious history of mankind from the grosser elements of false anthropomorphic imagination, appear as irreducible imaginable signs by which are signified attributes of the divine. Reason, of which the function has been to criticise and refine, eliminating false imagery and retaining the true, comes in now to question the attribution to God of those properties of the divine which are believed to lie behind the symbols. Failing a deeper and more exact metaphysical structure than the book actually possesses, criticism is in a position to make hay of this attribution. The author defends it patiently but falls back in the last chapter into a fideism which was perhaps foregone.

The grounds of belief are found in the "exigences of the spirit," and in an "act of faith, the fundamental act of faith in all religion," that "the world is rational, in the sense of being directed to realise value" (p. 369). The other sense of "reason" or "rational" which alone the author admits is essentially related to "pattern" and the world-order, any inference of reason in this sense being from a perceived part of the universal pattern to an unperceived part. It can infer no existence independent of the world-order. Kant is present here in a great deal more than his shadow. The moral intuition implied by reason of its first sense, receives no support from any truly speculative intuition and so defends itself against a purely discursive and secondary "reason" by asserting itself as an act of faith.

Intelligence as such is not disengaged from the concrete modes of human perception, feeling and imagination; and while the work on religious symbol and metaphor remains valid and valuable, the discontinuity in the signification of terms between the language of religious poetry and that of metaphysics and of theological *science* is not sufficiently appreciated. Penido states emphatically, "Une notion non dépouillée de toute limite est univoque, et convient à la créature comme telle et, partant, n'a aucune valeur théologique." The criticism would be impertinent if the study confined itself to the field in which symbols are valid and necessary² as do, admirably, the early chapters of the book. Dr. Bevan goes further to enquire "just how much truth have these terms (wisdom, love, justice) drawn from the spirit of man, when applied to that Reality?"

"Drawn from the spirit of man"—that is the phrase upon which, first of all, precision is needed. So long as we define

² cf. Penido. *Le Rôle de l'Analogie en Théologie Dogmatique*: p. 103: Pour que soit sauvegardée l'objectivité de la métaphore, il suffit que l'on compare non pas des natures mais des causalités. En théologie, la métaphore nous renseigne donc sur les *attributs d'action*; elle ébauche toute une étude, des modes divers de la causalité divine. *ibid.* p. 104: Si dans l'être Dieu domme, dans la métaphore, c'est la créature, l'anneau auquel le divin est suspendu. *ibid.* Bref, la métaphore désigne en Dieu les perfections *relatives à nous*.

knowledge in psychological terms in reference to subjective states we can rise to no conception of what St. Thomas means by "*intellectus*." So soon as knowledge is defined in relation to being and to truth, liberation is possible and we may begin to distinguish between intelligence *as such* and the human mode in which we experience its realisation. It is only when our conceptions are drawn, not from the spirit of man, but from the transcendental nature of being as their radical source, that we may begin to think analogically. They remain, obviously, elements of a human knowledge circumscribed by limitations which are precisely human. It is not these limitations which give to our knowledge its character of knowledge. That character is given by its relation to being and to truth.

It is the metaphysics of being, and that alone, which enables an analogical concept to be disengaged from the concrete of human experience and freed from those elements of meaning which render it radically inapplicable to the divine nature. And apart from the purely logical work of removing contradictions, it is only in so far as a positive metaphysic is implicitly present that we can refine a conception and say that its last state is more appropriate to the divine than the first. The critical reasons for preferring the conception of the divine "otherness" to a crude mind-picture of a distant being, resembling a man, somewhere in the sky, reduce to metaphysical reasons. That "otherness" says something about God, while the anthropomorphic image speaks only of the creature, "*l'anneau auquel le divin est suspendu*."

What that "otherness" says is, in the meantime, purely negative; a negation to which we may adhere with metaphysical certainty. But we may also affirm with metaphysical certainty that God is, is good, true and "simple." How are these positive affirmations squared with the repeated assertions of St. Thomas that we can know of God *that* He is but not *what* He is, that negation *in divinis* is more true than affirmation, the "docte ignorance" and "agnosticisme par excès" of Penido? This is the central

problem both for the theory of analogy and for Dr. Bevan.³

An analogical concept, e.g. intelligence, denotes principally, not that concrete mode in which it is discovered in the human, nor yet the mode (*simpliciter ignotum*) in which (*supereminenter*) it is realised in the divine. It denotes a perfection realisable in modes intrinsically diverse—as the knowledge of the senses and the knowledge of the mind—yet somehow the same perfection. Precisely how? It is not simply speaking the same, with a difference merely of degree or of measure, in the sense in which *a* might equal the knowledge of the senses, *a*² that of the mind, *a*ⁿ the knowledge of God. The modes are *intrinsically diverse*. What is verified in them all is a certain similarity of existential proportion.⁴

The activity of sense in the presence of the concrete and particular is not just a lesser knowledge than that of the mind in the presence of the universal and self-evidently true. It is an intuition intrinsically different from that of intelligence. Between the two there is a similarity of proportion; and this is not reducible to any single ingredient of sense-knowledge which, with other things added to it would then become intellectual knowledge. The perfection of sense-knowledge *as knowledge* is to be concrete; of intellectual knowledge *as knowledge* to be true; of the divine knowledge *as knowledge* to be Truth itself.

It is true, of course, that in our physical lives our activities are more or less mixed, and in fact deeply interpenetrate. In human life we cannot point to an act of intelligence from

³ It would not be an impertinence to refer Dr. Bevan to Penido: *Le Rôle de l'Analogie en Théologie Dogmatique* for two reasons: 1, that Penido reveals himself to be the greatest contemporary master of the doctrine; 2, that he approaches the subject from a dual standpoint: that of the validity of the attributions of natural theology, and that of the elucidation of revealed dogma by the light of analogy—an approach in some respects similar, though in a reverse order, to Dr. Bevan's own.

⁴ Apologies must be offered for the difficulty and perhaps obscurity of this and of what follows. The English language will not easily carry the degree of technical abstraction required to explain the structure of analogy. The reader's patience is begged and will not be trespassed upon unduly.

which sense is wholly absent, or an experience of the senses from which intelligence is wholly absent. Nevertheless when we define intelligence as such in relation to being and to truth, we open the way to a knowledge which is truly metaphysical and metaphysically certain, and which we, occupying the threshold of the spiritual creation, may truly possess. We may possess it at the price of purifying it.

The first step in analogy is to purify our conception from those marks which bind it specifically to the human mode in which we experience its realisation; and this step is not fully taken until we have penetrated to that infinitely supple existential proportion in which alone its metaphysical value resides. And its theological value. (Une notion non depouillée de toute limite . . . n'a aucune valeur théologique.) A question is whether a conception so purified has any content at all. In the sense of a mind-picture it has none. Intelligence *as such* is unimaginable. Its content is a *diversely realisable proportion, of which the exigences are binding on thought as necessary and certain no matter of what mode of being they are predicated*, even the divine.

But our conceptions cannot be purified by metaphysics from those marks which bind them generically to the human. In applying an analogical attribute to God we say with metaphysical certainty, e.g. that God is possessed of wisdom or of goodness, and the distinction between the divine attributes is binding on our thought. It is, simply speaking, false to confuse the divine truth with the divine goodness, or either of these attributes with the divine simplicity; although we may know that in the divine nature as it really is they are identified in the divine simplicity. God is not "true." To name Him so is to set Him in a row with creatures. God is identically the Truth. God is not "good"; He is identically the Good. But God is not the kind of mixture which results from confounding truth and goodness.

The doctrine that the divine attributes are *virtually* distinct from the divine essence and from each other while identified in the divine simplicity is not a mere paradox. It means that in respect of these attributes we may not lay

aside the laws of thought but must rigorously observe them. We may not, as Dr. Bevan has been misled to believe, simply substitute one attribute for another ad nutum. *Secundum modum nostrum concipiendi*, the virtual distinction is equivalent to a real distinction. We have not and cannot have a simple comprehensive concept of God. The mode of thought in which, inseparably, intelligence is discovered in ourselves, intrinsically includes a plurality of concepts. We must, by an exigence of our intellectual nature as human, divide in order to unite. We have metaphysical knowledge of intelligence as such by denying to the analogue what belongs intrinsically to its realisation in the human, as human. We appear to affirm *positively* that the divine mode of knowledge is absolutely simple—une vérité qui se pense. In doing so, by an inescapable law of our human intelligence we separate Truth from itself and from its act of thinking in order to affirm that they are not separate.

And our intelligence as generically opposed to the divine can affirm nothing of the divine mode of being or of the divine knowledge without an implicit denial of the mode in which we are actually thinking. God is *infinite, incomprehensible, unparticipated* perfection.⁵ Only the proportion holds, the proportion which "perfection" indicates, and that is a proportion intrinsically implying *diverse* realisations. An agnosticism, says Penido, by excess of light. We know that God is, not *what* He is.⁶ If negative knowledge of the divine is all we ultimately attain by philosophy, it is nevertheless certain knowledge and has nothing in common with philosophic doubt. At least it is a "*docte ignorance*," and the metaphysician, brought by it to the verge of theology, will be less likely now to mistake the creature for the creator.

⁵ Note that the proofs for the existence of God (the five ways, which do not include the ontological proof nor reduce to it) affirm from the examination of participated and contingent beings that there must exist a being of a mode utterly *not* their own (*unmoved mover, uncaused cause, necesse esse*) which is implied (the proportion which holds) by their actual existence—which is experienced. *Ergo Deus est.*

⁶ Better still: *Illud est ultimum cognitionis humanae de Deo, quod sciat se Deum nescire.* (St. Thomas, quoted by Penido. *op.cit.*)

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Analogy does not stand only in the department of purely natural theology as the answer to a single philosophical problem. It penetrates, and is the intimate structure of, the whole of thomist metaphysics. Of itself it leads to the threshold of theology, properly so called, and its role in scholastic theology is of capital importance. It enables the theologian to shed floods of light on the radical difference between Revelation, knowledge of the divine nature and life as God Himself reveals it, and the attributes discoverable by metaphysics. In an historical study like that under review it was perhaps inevitable that the boundaries of theological, metaphysical and psychological problems should have been blurred, since in the concrete of human history they so intimately interpenetrate. Revelation and inspiration are not adequately distinguished, neither are the grounds on which either may be claimed to have taken place made clear. Allowance must be made for the restrictions placed on a Gifford lecturer. The author is aware of the total inadequacy of Modernism (which he designates as a half-way house Rationalism) to solve his problems, which are not only philosophical but ultimately theological—the nature of Revelation itself. Whatever in the book is matter for regret reduces to the one lament: that the solid and informed good-sense with which Dr. Bevan repulses the anthropological intimidations of J. G. Frazer and Sigmund Freud is ineffective against the epistemological intimidation of Kant.

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