

Surviving Wiles: From Dogmatic Theology to Doctrinal Criticism

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Maurice Wiles, who is Regius Professor of Theology in the University of Oxford as well as Chairman of the Doctrinal Commission of the Church of England, is that rare species, a dogmatic theologian who is neither so deeply entrenched in doctrinal fundamentalism that he sees no need for the introduction of the critical-historical method nor so anxious about its initial effects on the orthodoxy of his own thinking that he prefers to remain almost silent. He obviously does not regard his tenure of weighty and perhaps rather exposed offices as barring him from pursuing a course of enquiry which he himself often refers to in such terms as 'daunting', 'dangerous and disturbing', and the like. One may well want to argue over the detail and the force of some of these critical-historical studies of various Christian doctrines at the most decisive stages of their formation.¹ This the author would certainly welcome. Given that most of these papers have already appeared in learned journals (the earliest in 1957), it is surprising that their intention has not been better understood. Perhaps collecting them like this will help.

In a nutshell, what Wiles proposes is that the kind of critical study of the formation of the Scriptures which began over a century ago should at last be extended systematically to the case of Christian doctrine. The model of biblical criticism suggests the necessity of an equivalent kind of doctrinal criticism (a phrase which Wiles ascribes to the late G. F. Woods). Partly because of his own background in patristic scholarship, but mainly in recognition of the decisive role the Fathers played in the formative period of Christian doctrine, it is the faith of Nicaea and of Chalcedon that Wiles is led to examine and question. There, of course, is where the dangers lie, that he foresees as clearly as anybody, and perhaps far more clearly than many of his critics. For, as he says (page 150), the most important single factor that has enabled the Churches to come to terms with biblical criticism (and that has been a fairly traumatic experience) has been the continued existence, as a kind of refuge and touchstone, of a basic framework of Christian doctrine—rooted, obviously, in the Scriptures, but for all practical purposes quite autonomous and independent. Discoveries, let us say about the midrashic texture of the infancy narra-

¹*Working Papers in Doctrine*, by Maurice Wiles. SCM, London, 1976. 213 pp. £4.95.

tives, could be absorbed so long as the doctrine of the Virgin Birth and the Incarnation of Our Lord remained standing as a monolithic and immemorial fixture. The whole corpus of Christian doctrine has remained secure, undisturbed and inviolate, as if it had no origin or genesis and could never attract critical-historical treatment. The risks in attempting to reconstruct the history of specific doctrines—I mean of the central Trinitarian and Christological dogmas—are obvious; but in all honesty how can anybody who has committed himself to finding the truth draw back from that task now? What Wiles calls a 'remaking' of Christian doctrine, and what others might think of as the kind of 'deconstruction' that Heidegger, some fifty years ago, proposed as the most urgent task for theologians, is, surely, the only worthwhile activity for a dogmatic theologian today. And in the end couldn't doctrinal criticism generate fresh insight into, and personal deepening of, Christian faith, just as biblical criticism is doing?

The programme that Wiles outlines might encourage more young theologians to put their energies into critical thinking about Christian doctrine. If half the effort that has gone into biblical criticism were now to be devoted to doctrinal criticism the evangelical and ecumenical fruits might be very great. The Church of England is certainly fortunate in having a doctrinal critic as chairman of its Doctrinal Commission.

The programme must be welcomed unreservedly; how far Wiles succeeds is another matter. The basic outline of Christian doctrine remains practically unchanged since it was settled at Nicaea and Chalcedon. Neither the schoolmen of the Middle Ages nor the Reformers did any more than write footnotes on the central Trinitarian and Christological doctrines. For all their controversies they never thought of questioning the fundamental concepts which they inherited. In an earlier book, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (reviewed in *New Blackfriars*, February 1975), Professor Wiles caused some stir by asking us to consider whether the notion of incarnation in the traditional doctrine of the Incarnation is as obvious and inevitable a formulation as we are accustomed to suppose. No concept has ever dropped from heaven, and the genesis of a concept is often far more complex and fateful than we realise. In this book it is the doctrine of the Trinity to which Wiles keeps returning, reminding us that this doctrine also has a history and that it may prove, on closer inspection, to be 'an *arbitrary* analysis . . . which though of value in Christian thought and devotion is not of *essential* significance' (page 15, my italics). It may be valuable, it may even be desirable, that we should think of the inmost mystery of God in terms of the doctrine of the Trinity; all that Wiles denies is that it is *necessary* for us to do so (page 17).

Wiles agrees with the tradition, and in particular with Thomas Aquinas, that the only distinctions within the Godhead are distinctions of internal relation and thus that it is logically impossible for us to know anything of the Trinity except by divine revelation. The prob-

lem is that the concept of revelation that prevailed in the formative period of Christian doctrine, and remained unchallenged until about the end of the eighteenth century, is no longer tenable. This does not mean that everybody has abandoned it; fundamentalism in doctrine is by no means uncommon. It is part of the weakness of current dogmatic theology that not many who have abandoned the traditional view of divine revelation have realised the consequences of doing so. It is the practice of biblical criticism that has finally destroyed the notion that God revealed himself in a direct and precise manner in the truths of the Scriptures, and that, for instance, by a proper use of reason, it is possible, on the strength of that body of revealed truths, 'to make affirmations about the nature of God as he is eternally in his own being' (page 101). If by the doctrine of the Trinity we mean that account of the distinctions within the Godhead which the Cappadocian Fathers were most influential in formulating, and which Thomas Aquinas repeats without radical modification, and which indeed remains in all essentials the accepted account in the Church at large down to our own day, then it would appear that 'the doctrine is logically *dependent* on a view of revelation and of the knowledge of God which we cannot share' (page 102). It becomes difficult to see how, on that basis, we can continue to affirm the doctrine of the Trinity as a *necessary* part of Christian faith. It will not do to say that assumptions about revelation which now prove mistaken were only the contingent historical garb in which early Trinitarian doctrine happened to be raised—as if something true about the inmost mystery of the Godhead could continue to be affirmed even after the method of discovering it had proved false. Starting as we must from an entirely different set of assumptions about the nature of revelation we are bound to find ourselves speaking very differently from the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. We might either become as reticent and reluctant to speculate about it as most ordinary Christians have always preferred to be, or else we may speculate about the 'rich manifoldness' of the inmost mystery of God. Professor Wiles draws attention to how the logic of Thomas Aquinas forces him to postulate *five* notions or properties in God (e.g. in Ia, 32, 3), of which two must then be discounted in order to preserve the traditional three; 'but the existence of such a discussion is sufficient evidence that even within the concept of the internal relations of the Godhead there are factors which might tend to push us beyond the number three' (page 17). This is not such an outrageous suggestion as it at first sounds, though if Wiles is going to be as mischievous as all this he really ought to provide a good deal more backing than he does here for his point. His essential case is, however, quite formidable: it is simply the logical conclusion of 'the break-away from the idea of propositional revelation' that the doctrine of the Trinity as traditionally understood must be less than 'necessary'. That there has been a radical change in our understanding of the nature of revelation is undeniable. If the Trinitarian doctrines developed historically on the strength of what has

turned out to be an untenable view of divine revelation, as they surely did, then are we not obliged to re-examine them to see if Wiles is right in suggesting that they are logically dependent on the untenable view? That Wiles is making extremely difficult and demanding work for theologians is not the least of his many merits. Far too much energy is wasted in diligent nit-picking on topics of peripheral interest, as if the central affirmations of the Christian faith stood timelessly immune from thoroughgoing analysis. Clearly, it will not do to protest that Wiles does not believe in the Trinity and to dismiss his questions with a reference to the contagion of 'liberalism', or what we call 'modernism'. The formation of the central structure of Christian dogma certainly occurred on the basis of what we must now regard as an erroneous theory of revelation. To say that the classical formularies owe their existence to a mistake need not mean that they themselves are worthless. Doctrinal criticism might lead us to think, however, that the classical structure of Christian dogma is far more contingent and arbitrary than many of us could at present accept. But then we have forgotten what it is like to be biblical fundamentalists—and a certain seismic alteration in our understanding of the Scriptures has not doomed our faith.

It is only in the last decade or so that Walter Bauer's epoch-making work, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, has begun to make itself felt methodologically. The detailed attack on it by H. E. W. Turner in his Bampton Lectures of 1954, while it scored many local hits, can surely now be seen to be deeply apologetic and polemical in its determination to save the notion of a consistent development of doctrine towards 'orthodoxy'. While Bauer's original and provocative thesis that, in the earliest forms of Christianity, orthodoxy and heresy do not stand in relation to one another as primary to derivative or deviant but that in many regions heresy was the original form, could not be accepted unreservedly by many scholars today, the fact remains that the climate for the study of Christian doctrine in its formative phase has been radically changed, and one must now allow for a much more fluid and amorphous situation at any one point as well as a much more chancy and arbitrary trajectory of development than earlier students could have imagined. As Wiles observes on the concluding page of his book: 'We ought not to underestimate either the extent of the shifts that have taken place in what is regarded as a Christian theology down the ages or the creative character of the conciliar decisions or more gradual processes of change by which those shifts have been effected' (page 193). The elucidation of the creative element in the formation of the Scriptures was the key to biblical criticism. Could it now be that we must reckon with an equivalent factor in the composition of Christian doctrine?

Professor Wiles is so critical in his attitude towards many of the classical doctrines that he clearly feels bound to discuss the question of orthodoxy. He reprints his Oxford inaugural, in which, after invoking the name of Origen (his favourite Father), he raises Henry

Chadwick's question: what is the essence of orthodoxy? He concludes that, while there are some theological judgements which we can properly dismiss as false, there will often not be only one orthodox judgement in a particular case. It would be a mistake, he argues, to think that, while there may be some such plurality of orthodox judgements, there would have to be 'some isolable inner core which will be a necessary component of all such valid judgements' (page 177). The abandonment of any 'essence' of orthodoxy need not entail that anything goes (page 189). It is part of the risk of faith, however, that we might find ourselves having to say that a theological assertion is true, though it might draw so little from the historic Christian tradition and meet with so much resistance from contemporary Christians, that it could not properly be called 'Christian', whereas some other theological judgement may be Christian, in the sense that it represents what Christians have affirmed in the past and generally still do hold, and yet it may be 'something that ought not to be affirmed by Christians or by anyone else' (page 191). The question of what is orthodox must be subordinate to the question of what is true, and here again the apparent platitude is far more explosive than one might at first suppose. Even if some—I wonder how much?—traditional doctrinal affirmation proved false, or anyway inessential, Wiles argues that Christianity would continue provided there were other theological affirmations that could be regarded as true, though they might be far harder to relate to previous affirmations in the tradition than the affirmations to be discarded: 'genuine continuity of life and conviction may be compatible with a transformation of all the isolable elements which go to make up that living entity or the articulated form of that conviction' (page 177).

The Oxford gossip is that many Anglican theologians are disturbed by the notion of doctrinal criticism or at any rate by Wiles's practice of it. Christians in communion with Rome should be the last to take fright at the prospect. A glance at the last edition of Sheehan's *Catholic Doctrine* shows how different what we were taught to believe in 1962 is from what we are free to believe today. This shift has been a landslide. It makes no difference that we have this astounding power of letting things fall into oblivion so suddenly and so completely that we think that what we believe at any given moment is what we always have believed. Forgetting is as important as remembering in the development of Christian doctrine. Christianity has surely a resilience which can survive major shifts in the understanding of doctrine. A church that survived Origen would certainly survive Wiles. It is much to be hoped that a church in which dogmatic theology has long been regarded as the principal theological discipline may be able to contribute positively and creatively to the programme of doctrinal criticism which Maurice Wiles has been courageous enough to inaugurate in a theological climate which is at once too heavy with 'research' and too airy in its avoidance of genuinely radical questions.