

Delusive Radicalism in Modern Theology

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We are familiar enough now with the distinction between *doctrine* and *theology*, between the doctrinal content of the Christian faith as a form of life (an 'experience') and the variety of theological formulations in which this form of life is recognized and registered in the continuing self-awareness of the Christian community. The distinction is not absolute: there are cases in which, for instance, it is extremely difficult to imagine how a particular doctrine could be presented in any but the terms of some particular theology; but in principle at least it is always possible to express the truth of the faith in theological systems which, while of course never actually conflicting, nevertheless diverge considerably from one another in standpoint and procedure. This pluralism of approach has not developed so richly as it might have done because Christian thinking has always been conducted in predominantly European categories and modes of understanding. It may even be that the rapid unification of world culture which we are witnessing today decreases the likelihood that any theology will ever emerge that displays a serious indebtedness to distinctively African or Asiatic approaches to experience. Even if the faith is to survive in these continents at all, it may be bound to do so now in basically European, or post-European, ways of experience and reflexion; but it is clear enough that, at least in principle, there could be some encounter with God in Christ which would take a form sufficiently expressive of originally African or Asiatic approaches to reality to produce a 'spirituality' and a 'theology' radically different from anything hitherto (though words like 'spirituality', 'experience', and 'reflexion' are themselves so profoundly interwoven with European approaches to reality that one wonders how appropriate they may be here at all). God, even God in Christ (perhaps God in Christ above all, because thus God *incarnate*), requires to be encountered, that is loved and worshipped, by *man* – and man is always man in some particular culture, in some particular tradition, in some particular epoch.

It does not make much sense to talk of man in the abstract, as if he were isolable from history and community. A man is what he is in his particular world; his conduct and reflexion occur within the tacitly accepted horizon of meanings and values in his generation and society. We are what we are above all because of the way we have learned to talk, because of our ordinary language. J. L. Austin

used to speak of ordinary language as the embodiment of the experience and acumen of a whole tradition. The structures and resources of the language in which one grows up register the conception of reality (the understanding of being, hence of truth, self and God) at the basis of the whole community. Every language has a concealed horizon: the approach to reality, the sense of relevance, presupposed in the very scope of its syntax. We all know that the very way we think and feel is modified by deepening inwardness with a foreign language; and that this modification increases startlingly with the foreignness of the language – for instance when one breaks out of the circle of Latin-based languages. Any language carries its own more or less distinctive interpretation of reality, and it is the necessity of somehow indicating this whole articulation of experience that often makes the translation of some particular key-concept so tricky. But this is not just a problem *between* languages; it is a problem that arises *within* any language, too. There is, of course, always continuity, but it is evident that we can say a good deal in English now that we could not have said, or perhaps would not have said, fifty or a hundred years ago; and this is because of changes in our sense of relevance, in our approach to reality.

What this amounts to, in effect, is an increasing awareness of the essentially *historical* nature of human life. We are coming to see that our encounter with reality (= the way things strike us) is not something uniform, fixed and immutable in its modes of realisation. On the contrary, it differs profoundly from one major culture to another (say from our own to that of India) and from one significant epoch to another (say from modern to medieval Europe). It is even imaginable that there could be a culture in which it would not be appropriate to speak of an *encounter* with reality in any form at all because it made no sense to employ the subject-object dualism which the word 'encounter' involves. Part of the interest of the work of Martin Heidegger, for instance, is precisely that he raises the question of the permanence and adequacy of the total approach to reality which we take so much for granted that it is ordinarily too obvious, too 'natural', for us even to notice. Whether or not his interpretation of the pre-Socratics is 'correct' or not we need not discuss here; it is worth noting only that he at least makes them *different*, different not only from what they appear to be in the kind of presentation still customary in this country, but credibly different also from ourselves. In fact he uses them as a model to point to what a radically different kind of thinking, or rather approach to reality (experience of being), from our own might be like. He does not, for instance, offer to settle the mind-body problem: instead of that he invites us to get back to a more primitive stage, to see how the problem arose in the first place. He points out that the two-worlds doctrine with which our ordinary language is so deeply penetrated (spiritual/material) need not be so 'ultimate', so *irreducible*, as we ordinarily suppose. This is,

of course, the same kind of issue as is raised in *Individuals*: Mr Strawson is also a descendant of Kant, though a good deal less radical than Heidegger (even the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit*). But it is in the very remarkable first chapter of *The Long Revolution*, by Raymond Williams, that the most original treatment in recent English writing is to be found of subject-object dualism.

The suggestion Heidegger makes, then, is that the very encounter with reality which produces and sustains the sense-giving context of all our knowledge and behaviour can itself be neither final nor exclusive. Other approaches to reality, other experiences of being, must always be possible. But this means that human nature cannot be something given once for all, something immutable and identically the same in every culture and at every epoch. On the contrary, it is the encounter with reality undergone by a particular community or generation which constitutes the people of that community or generation what they are in the first place. And this does not mean that the encounter with reality is merely the *occasion*, in some purely extrinsic and accidental way, of the emergence into history of this community or generation: to suppose so would be simply to maintain the substantialistic metaphysics which Collingwood has taught us to detect in ancient Greek thought: 'Human nature was conceived substantialistically as something static and permanent, an unvarying substratum underlying the course of historical changes and all human activities. History never repeated itself but human nature remained eternally unaltered'. The importance of this for the theory of knowledge is obvious: 'Now a substantialistic metaphysics implies a theory of knowledge according to which only what is unchanging is knowable. But what is unchanging is not historical. What is historical is the transitory event. The substance to which an event happens, or from whose nature it proceeds, is nothing to the historian. Hence the attempt to think historically and the attempt to think in terms of substance were incompatible'. Whether or not Collingwood was right in maintaining that this substantialism kept Graeco-Roman historiography from ever doing justice to the specificity of the historical, it is becoming increasingly clear in theology that the classical tradition of speculation is not entirely free from a similar sort of substantialism, connected no doubt with the Graeco-Roman antecedents of its basic set of interpretative concepts.

It cannot be seriously argued that our theological thinking has ever succumbed irretrievably to the categories of a substantialistic ontology: no orthodox theologian can ever get away from the particular history of Christ. Even where theologians have worked with the presupposition that only the unchanging is properly knowable, they have been forced to recognise the central importance in all Christian theology of knowing Christ (though perhaps a certain crypto-Docetism sometimes lurks here in even quite respectable places). A case can be made out, after all, for tracing the emergence

of the sense for the specifically historical to Christian sources in the first instance: this is largely what Bultmann's Gifford Lectures (*History and Eschatology*) are concerned to show. There can be no doubt whatever that the key figures in the development of the philosophy of history (Hegel, Kierkegaard, Dilthey, Heidegger) found their original stimulus in reflexion on the relationship between Christian theology and Christian experience: was it possible that that experience (faith, commitment, way of life) could ever really be done justice to by a theology working largely, perhaps even decisively, with the categories of a substantialistic ontology? Could a history-centred experience ever be properly approached, that is articulated and hence illuminated, in terms of a substance-orientated metaphysics? But the issue is not so simple: as we have just noted, it was perhaps by using such an ontology to discuss the Christian experience that our awareness of the specificity of the historical broke through to the plane of systematic reflexion in the first place.

But if it is true that we are at least more aware of our essential historicity, and perhaps decisively so in terms of our conception of human nature, than those who shaped the theology with which we still customarily operate, it is not at all surprising that theologians should be attempting to rethink the whole of theology in the light of the possibility that a substantialistic way of proceeding may not have done full justice to such a history-centred experience as Christianity obviously is. This is not merely the old theme of the falsification of Hebrew thought by Hellenization (Harnack) or by Aristotelianism (Luther). It is not a call for 'biblical theology', if by that is meant the back-to-Hebrew-thought school: this is just another sort of sophisticated but characteristically evasive fundamentalism. It is of course an acceptance of the legitimate reproaches and requirements of such critiques, so far as they go; but it is not enough, for instance, to brandish the notion of salvation-history (*Heilsgeschichte*) without going into the whole context which gives this use of the word 'history' its sense in the first place. And yet it is surely obvious that nothing less will ever do for the situation which the impact of *Honest to God* proved to exist. We do need a theology in which we can talk about God in a way that is adequate, not to the mystery that is God (we can never be adequate to that), but to ourselves. For the basic principle of all theology, of all talk about God, is that it is conducted in terms of *man*: man who is the *imago Dei*. Whenever there is some major upheaval in our understanding of man we should expect some equivalent upheaval in our understanding of the One of whom man is the image. This does not mean that every epoch projects its own god; but the idea we have of ourselves, our self-experience, plays the central role, as a kind of catalyst, in our approach to, and subsequent presentation of, the mystery of God. It should be obvious that with the sort of understanding of man we have now – since the Romantic movement,

say, since Hegel, Marx, Freud and all the rest of the recognised shapers of our self-awareness – we should be confronted by the necessity, and passionately excited by the challenge, of rethinking our theology in terms of the experience we are accustomed to invoke and explore, after all, in literary criticism, in the social sciences, in psychotherapy, in the way we think about politics, in the way we look at films, in almost all the ways we have of becoming articulate about ourselves – except theology. There has been a whole revolution in human self-understanding since the formation of the theology on which we have been reared: our self-understanding as illuminated also by the experience of faith has only just begun to catch up with the far richer, or anyway significantly different, image of man (and of his world) which dawned in the West some three or four centuries ago, and which became predominant, not to say dramatic, in the course of the nineteenth century.

This may seem a very long way round to saying something about Paul van Buren's celebrated book, now available in a cheap edition¹; but it is important to establish some sense of the seriousness of the challenge facing the theologian today. For it should be made clear that, despite the excited litany of commendation assembled for the blurb from the original reviewage, van Buren's book does not have very much to offer to anybody seriously concerned with radical rethinking in Christian theology. There is a great deal of pseudo-radicalism in modern theology which turns out on detailed inspection to be nothing more than eclecticising adaptatory liberalism. One really wonders, for instance, if van Buren has any idea of how difficult rethinking in theology is. Nothing would be more desirable at the present time than some speculation in systematic theology in the light of the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein: one of the reviewers (Christopher Driver in the *Guardian*) is quoted as saying that 'there is a creative tension set up by the very idea of a Barthian setting out to expound the Christian gospel via the techniques of linguistic analysis which began with Ayer and Wittgenstein'. This is certainly true, though it might be suggested that no philosopher could be more in harmony with the early Barth than the early Ayer: metaphysics seemed nonsense to both of them. It is true that van Buren (an Anglican) did his doctorate under Barth but it seems to me highly debatable whether he can be counted as any kind of 'Barthian'. His sheer weakness on the theological side has already been exposed by Dr Mascall, in *The Secularisation of Christianity*. It is perhaps worth recalling, in the particular context of what we have been saying, the exposure of van Buren's weakness on the philosophical side which was made by Roger White in his review of the hard-covered edition of the book²: 'despite the hurried

¹*The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, SCM Press, 15s.

²*Life of the Spirit*, April 1964

genueflections to Wittgenstein throughout this book, no serious attempt has been made to come to terms with his thought'.

In a sense this is even more damning than the weakness on the theological side. After all, the great cry of people like van Buren is that theology must be revised in the light of 'modern thought': his concern here is clearly to analyse the meaning of theological assertions in terms acceptable to what he refers to as 'linguistic analysis'. It is odd enough that Christopher Driver should associate Ayer and Wittgenstein with the beginning of linguistic analysis; it is extraordinary that van Buren should suppose that Wittgenstein was some kind of British empiricist. Indeed, although van Buren does not refer even in passing to Ayer, it would seem to be rather to a potted version of *Language, Truth and Logic* that he owes his philosophy than to either the *Tractatus* or the *Philosophical Investigations*. His whole concern is to place theological assertions with reference to empiricism, which he frequently tells us is the philosophical standpoint of modern man. There is no need to argue here that it is at any rate not the standpoint of Wittgenstein, at any period in his development. One might ask, however, whether it is even the standpoint of modern man; or rather, if it is, whether it is not a standpoint which must be *changed*, not only before any attempt is made to discuss theological assertions with reference to it but before any attempt is made to discuss anything at all. We have to develop an interpretation of the gospel, so van Buren tells us, on the basis of certain empirical attitudes – well, one jibs at his very crude and reductive conception of the experience which is the starting-point of this empiricism. Van Buren appears to suppose that all our knowledge derives from sense-impressions: he is in fact embarked on the same attempt to reconcile theism with empiricism which one finds also in the work of Ian Ramsey and R. B. Braithwaite. But it is ultimately David Hume with whom one is trying to reconcile oneself, and surely the plain fact of the matter is that this kind of empiricism is radically incompatible with any interpretation of the gospel which does not trivialize it in exactly the way that Dr Mascall accuses van Buren of doing? The importance of the later Wittgenstein, for example, might be focused in the way that he showed that this sort of empiricism is radically incoherent – that it is *philosophically* unacceptable.³ It is precisely because van Buren has not seen the possibility of this that one refuses to take seriously his invocations of Wittgenstein. He thus provides us with a paradigm instance of delusive radicalism in theology: he thinks that he has got on to the way to rethink, or reinterpret, theological assertions in terms acceptable to modern thought, but he has not undertaken the radical examination of 'modern thought' which would have shown him that it is itself in the process of surmounting the crude empiricism so embarrassing to any traditional theologian.

³Cf. Anthony Kenny's contribution to *Theology and the University* (1964).

This does not mean that the general intellectual atmosphere has become notably more ozonic for the practice of theology, but it does mean that a theologian with his wits about him could win recognition for the contribution he is particularly well placed to make to the ongoing debate on the need for clarificatory concepts that remain faithful to experience: 'to clarify experience', as Raymond Williams almost says, 'and to remain faithful to it'. For we are always being confronted, as he says, 'with a persistent tendency to describe living processes in terms that confer on them the apparent status of fixed and separable objects'. In this respect the programme in *The Long Revolution* is remarkably similar to that in *Sein und Zeit*. It is perhaps in John Macmurray's concern for the 'form of the personal' that this whole issue is most accessibly approached in current writing in English⁴ – significantly enough in a series of Gifford Lectures given by a philosopher who has learned a good deal from studying Hegel and Marx. But Macmurray is not unsympathetic to 'linguistic analysis': in fact he sees the wider implications of this approach because for him the centrality of language for the philosopher is only the recognition of the mutuality of the personal, and his whole concern is to invent the categories through which the personal may be properly conceived: categories appropriate to the personal, as opposed to the organic and the material, to which the categories we ordinarily apply to the personal are more appropriate. It perhaps cannot be said that Macmurray has actually provided many such categories, except in the sense that he has shown the limits of the categories we normally employ, and that in itself may be enough to transform them. In the end, however, as Macmurray insists, the personal is constituted by relatedness: persons are persons at all only in relation; but this can be appreciated only if the self is primarily an agent ('a self is primarily agent, and as such in active relation with the Other of which he forms part'). For no just account of the personal is possible so long as we maintain the traditional starting-point for the philosophy of man, which is always (so Macmurray would argue) the *cogito*, the self as spectator, long before it was actually recognised as such by Descartes. It would thus be in the reinterpretation of all we say about thinking in terms of the primacy of action in human life that the programme for the philosopher would now lie. It would not be difficult to show that this is in fact what Heidegger and Wittgenstein were trying to do, each in his own way, and it is surely also the significance of J. L. Austin's dislodgement of the statemental in favour of the performative utterance.

At any rate, so it would seem to us, this is where the radical debate occurs and it is by his alertness to the possibility of participation in it that the modern theologian's seriousness about his job must be measured. Perhaps it has not yet fully impinged upon many

⁴*The Self as Agent* (1957), *Persons in Relation* (1961).

theologians that the conception of man with which they operate is not really very satisfactory; but if this is true of traditionalists it is just as true of would-be revisionists: there is no use in taking over holus-bolus the uncriticized presuppositions of modern thought if this modern thought is mere empiricism. We are only beginning to understand the difficulties in the way of our speaking really to the point about ourselves, we are on the threshold of a great invention of more relevant categories, and it seems a pity whenever a theologian as natively gifted and open as Paul van Buren plainly is gets side-tracked into peripheral and ruinous lucubrations.

The Deterrent

'How ignorant in all Mechanical Knowledge were those Nations that were not acquainted with it, so as to have no other Arms but Bows, Clubs, and Spears, made of Wood. There's one Thing indeed we have, which it's a Question whether it has done more harm or good, and that is Gun-powder made of Nitre and Brimstone. At first indeed it seem'd as if we had got a more secure Defense that former Ages against all Assaults, and could easily guard our Towns, by the wonderful Strength of that Invention, against all hostile Invasions: but now we find it has rather encouraged them, and at the same time been no small Occasion of the Decay of Valour, by rendring it and Strength almost useless in War. Had the *Grecian* Emperor who said, *Virtue was ruin'd* only when Slings and Rams first came into use, liv'd in our Days, he might well have complain'd; especially of Bombs, against which neither Art nor Nature is of sufficient Proof: but which lays every Thing, Castles and Towers, be they never so strong, even with the Ground. If for nothing else, yet upon this one account, I think we had better have been without the Discovery.'

From *The Celestial Worlds Discover'd* by Christiaan Huygens (English edition of 1722).