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Christian belief in God

Like all the world religions, Christianity has taken and still takes many different forms. This is not only a matter of the major Church communions, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican and the numerous other Protestant denominations, with their more sectarian offshoots. Within each of these groups, Christian men and women manifest considerable differences both in belief and in practice, differences over how the Creed is understood – differences, that is, over *what* is actually believed – and differences in how the Christian way is envisaged – differences, that is, over what attitudes, practices, virtues, policies and ideals are actually enjoined. But even more basic and pervasive are the differences, again cutting across the denominations, between those Christians for whom Christianity is primarily a way of life, those for whom it is a distinctive set of cultic practices, and those for whom it is a set of very specific beliefs. These are not, of course, exclusive versions of Christianity. It is more a question of priorities. It is extremely unlikely, for instance, that Christian beliefs will be held without explicit or implicit commitment to a particular way of life. Maybe it is less unlikely that the Christian way will be embraced without assent to some at least of the beliefs of the Christian creeds. For the beliefs *can* be regarded as less important than, or as figurative or mythological expressions of, the moral and spiritual commitments that make up the Christian way. This lack of symmetry between a practice-orientated and a belief-orientated

understanding of Christianity – the fact that it is easier to think in terms of following the way without adhering to the doctrines than it is to affirm the doctrines without at least attempting to follow the way – might seem to tip the scales in favour of the view that Christianity is *primarily* a way of life. On the other hand, this very natural feeling for the practical priorities of the Christian religion may stem not so much from the greater importance of the way of life as opposed to the doctrines of the Creed. It may reflect the actual subject matter or content of the *beliefs* in question. The practice – and the cult – may not only follow from, but *depend* upon, the truths believed. In that case there will be something very odd about the attempt to detach the ethical and spiritual commitments from their setting in the characteristically Christian framework of belief.

Recently, in Britain, we have been confronted with a striking example of a writer and broadcaster, an academic theologian and a priest of the Church of England, who has set himself to persuade his colleagues and the public that Christianity has been misconstrued when taken to provide, even in part, a framework of belief about the ultimate nature of things. The whole aim and object of Christianity, according to Don Cupitt, is to create and provide an ideal of human life, a set of practices, disciplines and attitudes, by which we can live an authentic human life, even if we ourselves are no more than the chance products of an impersonal physical universe and destined for no more than an ordinary lifespan on the earth's surface. The language of Christianity, he holds, whether of worship or of doctrine, does not *refer* to an objective God beyond the natural world. Rather, it *expresses*, poetically, the ideal of life which Christianity commends. That is what is meant by calling this a purely 'expressivist' view. These are not new ideas. There are nineteenth-century precursors of such a radically human and subjectivist interpretation of Christianity. Already in the

sixties of this century we saw similar interpretations in the writings of J. H. Randall, T. R. Miles, Paul van Buren and the so-called 'death of God' theologians.[1] But such views are still unusual in an ordained Anglican theologian and the effect of their eloquent presentation on the television and in short popular articles, as well as in Cupitt's books, has been to confront the public with the possibility, even perhaps the necessity, not of a 'religionless Christianity' – in one sense, Cupitt's is a very 'religious' vision – but of a 'creedless' or 'doctrineless' Christianity, a Christianity certainly without belief in either an objective God or life after death. Moreover this understanding is presented not only as a possible interpretation or the best interpretation of the meaning of Christianity, but as the only possible one, in the light of modern scientific, philosophical and historical knowledge.

In the present chapter, I aim to contrast this proposal with what, despite the differences between communions and between believers already mentioned, I take to be the characteristic features of traditional Christian belief in God. Throughout the book, I shall refer to this traditional belief as 'objective theism', meaning thereby belief in the reality of God in an unqualified, objective sense. But clearly it will not be enough just to contrast this traditional belief with the purely expressivist version now proposed. The bulk of my reply, in subsequent chapters, will have to be devoted to showing, negatively, how an expressivist reinterpretation of Christianity is very far from being necessary, and, positively, how objective theism is quite credible and indeed most probably true, precisely in and for the modern world. If there is no alternative for religion (including Christianity) in the modern age but to adopt a purely expressivist understanding of itself, then no amount of pointing to the contrast between this view and traditional Christian belief will succeed in undermining its plausibility and force. An expressivist view undoubtedly represents a way out, if objective theism has in

fact become impossible in the light of modern science, philosophy and history. There would still be a question whether this is a tenable view for the Church and its commissioned ministers to adopt – this issue in contemporary ecclesiology will be considered in chapter ten and in the appendix – but the main question is whether it is a necessary view. The bulk of my reply is designed to show that other possibilities exist, moreover that objective theism is not only still possible in the modern world but actually has a great deal to be said for it. I shall argue that modernity not only permits objective theism, but in a sense requires it, if it is not itself to collapse into incoherence.

But first the contrast between the expressivist understanding of religion and traditional Christian belief in God must be brought out. We need to have before us, in more detail, what it is that is under attack and what it is that will be defended in the chapters that follow.

Not all religions are theistic. But Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, and like devotional Hinduism, Sikhism and much traditional African religion, is certainly a theistic religion. In its origins and development East and West, through the Reformation, and into its engagement with the Enlightenment and its aftermath, Christianity's Gospel of redemption, as realised in present experience and hoped for in the future, has always been preached within the horizon of belief in God – God, the infinite Creator of the world's, including our own, whole being, God, the source of all value, God, present in our midst in both incarnation and inspiration, God, who, it is believed, will in the end take his fragile personal creation, transformed, into the conditions of eternity to know and enjoy him for ever.

Christianity, so the tradition holds, has taught us to see the world as God's creation, given a definite discoverable structure and held stably in being and in God-given potency,

producing out of its own God-given nature a whole world of life. It has taught us to see the human world, especially, as the sphere of God's providential activity, reaching a climax in the Incarnation of one of the personal centres of God's own eternal being within space and time and human history. This God, the source and goal of all there is, as a result of Christianity's unique experience and conception of God incarnate – and also of men and women being taken by inspiration and grace into the very life of God himself – is understood, alone among the theistic religions, in trinitarian terms. For Christianity, God is a relational, internally differentiated God, already the fulness of love given and love received, not needing to create in order to love, but nevertheless overflowing in love to new, finite, dependent creatures – ourselves.

Within this Christian theistic framework, the world around us is seen as in process, a temporary, developing phase in the creative plan, which necessarily, because of the nature of man and of the God who made him and because of the revealed and experienced relation between God and man, requires a future life beyond death in which all created persons will participate for ever and which alone will make the costly, often tragic, process of creation, burdened as it is with suffering and evil, seem worthwhile.

The significance of Jesus Christ for Christianity is inextricably bound up with Christianity's theism; for what he taught and what he achieved can only, it is held, possess the absoluteness which Christianity claims for them if they were the very words and deeds of God himself, entering the structures of creation, and living, as incarnate Son, a perfect life in relation to God the Father. It is God's own presence and closeness to us in Jesus Christ and the fate which he suffered that, according to the Christian Gospel, win our love by his great love and achieve our reconciliation. On this view it is of course God who raised Jesus from the dead and made him for ever the divine/human source and medium of

our life and worship as Christians and the guarantor of our own future resurrection. The fact that Christians claim to anticipate and experience now the risen life through Christ and in the Spirit should not blind us to the fact that in the full sense resurrection to life eternal is affirmed as a future hope, only possible for Christians because of their conviction of the reality of God and of what God has done.

God, then, according to Christian understanding, in a wholly objective, realist, sense, is the source and power of the world, of history, and of our own life as creatures and children of God. It should be noted how all the facets of Christian existence – our identity, our community, our worship, our ethical ideals (both individual and social), our spirituality – are thoroughly *relational* in character. We depend on God, we are reconciled by God, we are loved by God and enabled by God to love him in return; our fellowship and our prayers are inspired and empowered by God; and it is the resources of God that both give us our ethical ideals and spiritual vision and also empower what is realised in us and through us of that vision and that ideal. And just as it is God who here and now begins to draw us into the trinitarian movement and life of God, it is God who will raise us up when we die and change and purify us for the fully realised Kingdom of God in the communion of saints in heaven.

I stress particularly how, for the Christian tradition, both ethics and spirituality are what they are and are enabled to be what they are only in relation to the God of love who inspires and enables them. This does not mean that ethics and spirituality are not found outside the horizon of Christian belief. That would be a preposterous idea. But it does mean that ethics and spirituality, wherever they are found, are believed by Christians to stem from the hidden presence and activity of God. All human goodness and all human spirituality reflect the nature and power of God.

Ethics, on a Christian understanding, is a matter not only

of our free embracing of the good, but of our being enabled to embrace the good by the grace of God working in us. Formation of character, acquisition of virtue, love in its narrower and wider senses (love, that is, of family and friends and disinterested love of the neighbour, with all its social and political implications) are understood, in Christian ethics, in terms of our responsibility before God, our being conformed to Christ, as God's Kingdom is anticipated and experienced and gradually built already this side of the divide between time and eternity. Specifically Christian ethics, then, is understood in relational terms; for the actual relation between God and man determines its source, its provisional realisations and its ultimate goal.

Spirituality, too, on a Christian understanding, is a relational matter, a growth into the dimension of God, and an ever-deepening experience of the knowledge and the love of God. Spiritual disciplines and 'exercises' are not undertaken by Christians for their own sake, as if the states of mind they produce were ends in themselves. Rather, prayer and meditation, whether alone or in the worshipping community, are believed to be the vehicles or media of exploring, enhancing and enjoying the lived relation between men and women and their Creator.

The concept of God involved in such an objective theistic understanding of the universe and man's destiny is that of an infinite, absolute, incorporeal, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly wise and good mind or spirit. God must be thought of as infinite and absolute, if he is indeed to be both a metaphysically adequate ground and explanation of the world's being and also a religiously adequate object of worship. He must be thought of as incorporeal, since body is inherently limited and finite. He must be thought of as omnipotent and omniscient, since there is nothing outside him that could restrict his power or knowledge (except by his own will in creation – such self-limiting creation itself being

an exercise of omnipotence). He must be thought of as perfectly wise and good, since nothing could deflect an all-powerful, all-knowing rational will from pursuit of the best. And he must be thought of by analogy with mind or spirit, since only a creative source, endowed with will and purpose – that is, a personal source – can explain the being, nature and destiny of the world and especially of the human world.

These rationally deduced attributes of the objective God of Christian theism are echoed and complemented, so Christians hold, in the revealed attributes of the trinitarian God of love. Specifically Christian theism resolves some of the impasses of ethical monotheism by its recognition of the interpersonal nature of the source and goal of all there is and of how this God can be both transcendent and immanent, God over against us and God within. As already hinted, this trinitarian conception of God stems from experience of God incarnate and of the Spirit's indwelling. But it results in a more rationally, religiously and morally credible form of theism. Into the very life of this internally self-related deity, so Christians believe, finite creatures, men and women, are drawn and raised, both here and in eternity.

The question, of course, arises how all this can be known to be so. Traditional Christianity has offered many different answers to this question, and, as we shall see, this is one of the topics most requiring fresh examination and reformulation in the modern world. But in outline, it can be said that this realist, objective theism has been held to rest partly on testimony, partly on reason, and partly on experience. From another point of view, it can also be said to rest wholly on revelation. All these grounds of Christian belief will need to be discussed at greater length when we come to the impact of modernity on the tradition. Here the briefest of sketches will be offered of the way in which the tradition has spoken of the sources of faith.

Theologically speaking, Christian faith in God is understood as a response to divine revelation. General revelation is the knowledge of God made available to man through the outer and inner world in general. The reality of God is manifested to man's reason and conscience. Special revelation is the knowledge of God made available to man through a particular history and tradition reaching its climax in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The nature and will and action of God are manifested to man's responsive faith through testimony – the testimony of Scripture and the Church to what God has done. Individual (or 'most special') revelation is the knowledge of God made available to each Christian through his or her own experience of interpreting the world and living in the world religiously and Christianly.

Revelation, then, is not one particular source among others of Christian belief in an objective God. It is rather the manifold divine activity that lies behind and is mediated through nature, conscience, history, testimony and experience. Not surprisingly, in pre-critical days, divine revelation was represented much more simplistically as a sequence of particular acts of inspiration (perhaps by a dream), of miraculous intervention in nature and history, or of verbal dictation to a human author. But we do not have to think of revelation, even in a summary account of traditional belief, in such simplistic ways. The notion of discerning the hand of God behind events and words which, from another point of view, can be described without reference to God is not a new idea. Much of what is to be found in Scripture, much traditional preaching, and much Christian theology down the ages already employ that notion.

On the other hand the idea that a completely neutral description can always be given of what Christians think of as the sources of belief in God is foreign to traditional Christianity; and indeed we shall see that it is not very

plausible today. There are some rational considerations, some historical events, some testimonials, and some experiences which stand out from ordinary cases as requiring, or at least suggesting, a theistic interpretation. This will be argued from a thoroughly critical standpoint in due course. Here I simply mention some of the factors that have always weighed with Christian minds when called upon to justify belief in God.

Rational argument for the existence of God played a less central role in the ages of faith, when belief in God was part of the accepted framework in terms of which life in the world was experienced and understood. Yet the idea that the Creator is known in his handiwork and that both the natural world about us and the natural recognition of good and evil, right and wrong, point to an intelligent and moral source of all there is, is not foreign to the tradition. It takes a more philosophical form in the arguments summarised by St Thomas Aquinas in his well-known five ways.[2] They sum up, more technically, the widespread inference to God as the explanation of why there is a world at all, and as the designer of that world's hospitality to life and to personal and moral being. These considerations, as will be shown below, still have a great deal of force.

The special character of Israel's history and the religious faith that developed in conjunction with that history, and of the events surrounding the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth and their aftermath, have always been hard to explain in purely naturalistic terms. The transformation of the disciples after the crucifixion, the rapid spread of Christianity throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond, the quality of saintly lives and of the religious, including mystical, experience which Christianity has fostered and sustained, have always been cited in justification of the reality and power of God.

Human testimony to these happenings and written inter-