Part I

The 'shape' of reason

1 Clarifications and issues

Faith and proof: Vatican I

Within theological circles in our times there can scarcely be a proposition less likely to meet with approval than that which, on 24 April 1870, the first Vatican Council decreed to be a matter of faith, to be upheld by all Christians, namely:

> that God, the source and end of all things, can be known with certainty from the consideration of created things, by the natural power of human reason: *ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature has been clearly perceived in the things which have been made* [Rm 1, 20]. It was, however, pleasing to his wisdom and goodness to reveal himself and the eternal laws of his will to the human race by another, and that a supernatural, way. This is how the Apostle puts it: *In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son* [Heb 1, 1–2].[1]

Hence,

> The perpetual agreement of the catholic church has maintained and maintains this too: that there is a twofold order of knowledge, distinct not only as regards its source, but also as regards its object. With regard to the source, we know at the one level by natural reason, at the other level by divine faith. With regard to the object, besides those things to which natural reason can attain, there are proposed for our belief mysteries hidden in God which, unless they are divinely revealed, are incapable of being known. (Ibid., p. 808)

Nonetheless,

> Since human beings are totally dependent on God as their creator and lord, and created reason is completely subject to uncreated truth, we are obliged to yield to God the revealer full submission of intellect and will by faith. This faith, which is the beginning of human salvation, the catholic church professes to be a supernatural virtue . . . (Ibid., p. 807)

[1] *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith*, in Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* II, *Trent to Vatican II*, London: Sheed & Ward, p. 806.

Moreover,

> Even though faith is above reason, there can never be any real disagreement between faith and reason, since it is the same God who reveals the mysteries and infuses faith, and who has endowed the human mind with the light of reason. God cannot deny himself, nor can truth ever be in opposition to truth . . . Therefore, we define that every assertion contrary to the truth of enlightened faith is totally false. (Ibid., pp. 808–9)

On the strength of these considerations, therefore, the first Vatican Council issued the following canons:

> 2.1 If anyone says that the one, true God, our creator and lord, cannot be known with certainty from the things that have been made, by the natural light of human reason: let him be anathema. (Ibid., p. 810)

And,

> 3.2 If anyone says that divine faith is not to be distinguished from natural knowledge about God and moral matters, and consequently that for divine faith it is not required that revealed truth should be believed because of the authority of God who reveals it: let him be anathema. (Ibid., p. 810)

Faith and proof: clarifications

Since the purpose of this essay is to provide a theological and philosophical defence of these propositions of the Vatican Council, some preliminary comments by way of clarification seem appropriate. We should first note that these statements are decrees of a council of a Christian church taking responsibility for its own proper concerns, which are with the accurate statement of the nature of Christian faith and belief. As such none of them, not even canon 2.1 above – which is *about* what the natural light of reason can know of God – are intended to be philosophical statements, whose truth is proposed as known by 'the natural light of reason'. That canon is intended as a statement of faith, concerning what a true understanding of faith entails about the capacity of human reason to know God, namely that it *is* possible for human reason to know God and that the God of faith is one and the same God as the God who can be known by reason. But as such, it is not, as it were, some pretentious, cross-disciplinary claim to a merely arbitrary epistemic hegemony of faith as if, say, equivalently, a microbiologist were on grounds of some need of microbiological theory absurdly to require the mathematician to come up with a particular mathematical result regardless of whether it could be defended on mathematical grounds. For, as we shall see (though only towards the end of this essay), if, on grounds of faith, it seems necessary

to conclude that the existence of God is rationally demonstrable, then it must also be the case that that demonstrability of God's existence is knowable rationally – or, at the very least, it must be possible rationally to rebut counter-claims. For, as the Vatican Council says, even though faith is 'above reason', there can never be any real disagreement between faith and reason, for God has created both, and 'God cannot deny himself'. Faith cannot invent rational truths for itself of which reason could not know on its own terms.

However, the proposition that faith can know of a purely rational possibility might, at first blush, seem to contain a logical oddity if one notes further that the council offers no support for any particular way of knowing the existence of God by the light of reason, except to say that it can be known thus 'with certainty from the things that have been made'. And since I take the expression 'known with certainty' to mean that the existence of God can be formally and validly proved by rational argument, the logical oddity would seem to be that of declaring *a priori* that a proposition is rationally demonstrable in the absence of any commitment to how and by what means that proposition might be demonstrated. But it is not clear that there is any real logical oddity there, since, as mathematicians say is the case, there are mathematical procedures for proving the provability of a theorem which are not themselves proofs of the theorem; and, in another sort of case, there is no problem knowing that whether there is or is not a cat on the mat is an issue which can be settled empirically even if you have no idea where the cat or the mat actually is or of how to find either of them. That the council knows of the provability of the existence of God by faith without commitment to any particular proof is not, on that same account at least, logically incoherent.

Conversely, the council's claim for a hegemony of faith in respect of reason's capacity is not merely a matter, as it were, of faith's external relations with an alternative source of knowledge of God. Lying within the claim for an autonomous rational theological capacity is a concern with the necessary condition of faith's own self-articulation through the exercise of reason *within* faith, that is to say, with what reason must be capable of in its own terms if it is to serve its purpose within faith's self-exploration as *quaerens intellectum*. The council's decree is as if to say: if human reason is to serve faith, and so theology, within that strategy of 'seeking understanding', then it must be equipped so to do. And the view of Vatican I seems to be that that capacity of reason must be such that the certain knowledge of God from creatures lies within its own reach strictly as reason. Hence, it is not so much that having to hand some rational proof of the existence of God is required by faith, still less that faith can dictate which arguments validly prove it. The council's decree is negative:

to deny reason that capacity in principle is so to attenuate its scope as to limit excessively its service to faith.

But even as thus moderately interpreted (and nowhere in this essay do I defend a stronger interpretation than that), the Vatican Council's doctrinal decree would seem to stand in more than one form of conflict with most philosophical and theological opinion of recent times. To consider just three such opinions, it stands in conflict in one way with the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant, in another with the Protestant theology of Karl Barth, and in yet a third way with certain schools of thought within Roman Catholic theology in the twentieth century.

The 'Kantian' objection

As to Kant, the Vatican decree that the demonstrability of the existence of God by reason alone must be conceded on grounds of faith is *prima facie* exactly to reverse the priorities argued for in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that it is on grounds of faith that such rational demonstrability must be denied. But the conflict is more complex and less direct than any such simple opposition of terms might suggest, if only because Kant argues at length and on purely philosophical grounds not only that all actual arguments for the existence of God fail of validity,[2] but also that all possible arguments of speculative reason for the existence of God must in principle so fail.[3] Moreover, when Kant says that he has 'found it necessary to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for faith',[4] what he means by 'faith' is not the faith the council refers to, Christian faith as such, the divine gift of participation in God's own self-knowledge, but rather a rational moral faith, what he calls a 'postulate of practical reason'. In fact, what is at stake for Kant is the fundamental principle of his 'critical' philosophy, for which all forms of transcendent rational speculation must be denied in so far as to do so is required for the possibility of morality's proper freedom and rationality.

In summary, Kant's argument rests on the proposition that moral agents are free agents. But we cannot know, Kant argues, that we are free agents on the strength of any experience of freedom, for as natural beings our knowledge is limited by the constraints of 'experience' to appearances, and within the limits of appearance our actions are entirely subject to the necessities of causal law. Hence, within the limits of human experience freedom is excluded. Nonetheless, if we cannot 'experience'

[2] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B599–642, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, London: Macmillan, 1965, pp. 487–514.
[3] Ibid., B659–70, pp. 525–531. [4] Ibid., Bxxx, Preface to 2nd edn, p. 29.

freedom, or establish it on the strength of any inference directly from sensory experience, we can 'think' – postulate – it, because we know that were we not free, then moral obligation would be impossible: for 'ought' implies 'can'. But moral obligation is possible, for the experience of it is a fact. Therefore, we are compelled to 'think' freedom as the condition of the possibility of moral experience, even if it can in no sense be an object of that, or any other, direct experience, for, as Kant says, 'we do not understand [freedom]; but we know it as the condition of the moral law which we do know'.[5]

If in one way freedom is thus a 'postulate of practical reason', so in another way are God and personal immortality. For practical reason can be sure of its hold on our minds and wills as categorical moral obligation only on condition that a moral order as such can be guaranteed. And that there is a moral order requires that virtue in its connection with human happiness is secured untroubled by the arbitrary vicissitudes of our secular condition (in which, *de facto*, they are frequently sundered). But an essential, and not merely contingent, connection between virtue and happiness can be guaranteed only by God and only if we survive beyond the arbitrary circumstances of our *pre-mortem* existence.[6] However, none of these three, God, freedom or immortality, is given to us in any possible experience. All are postulates of practical reason and are in that sense 'faith' (*Glaube*) in that they are known not by any demonstrations of speculative reason from the world of appearance –'nature' – but only as the conditions of the possibility of morality.

Moreover, it is not just that, as 'postulates', they *are not* 'given in experience'. In that morality is possible, they *could not be* knowable within the limits of experience; and therefore the possibility of a demonstration of the existence of God *must be* ruled out for speculative reason in the name of practical reason. For if it were possible speculatively to demonstrate God's existence, or our freedom and immortality, 'from the consideration of created things' (as Vatican I puts it), then that freedom on which the possibility of morality depends would be cancelled thereby. For if causality *in* the world of appearances could be demonstrated to apply transcendently *of* the world – and that is what such a demonstration of God's existence would have to show – then, just as natural causality within

[5] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. and introd. Lewis W. Beck, New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1956, Preface, p. 4.

[6] Kant is, of course, quite clear that happiness cannot be a proper *motive* of virtue, or of moral obligation generally. The connectedness of virtue with happiness must, however, be secured if moral obligation is to be construed as properly rational, that is to say, as having the character of an *order*. On all this see *Critique of Practical Reason*, II.II.v., pp. 128–36.

the world of 'appearances' rules out freedom as an object of experience, so a causality supposed to have application in the transcendent realm beyond appearances would have to rule out freedom there too, and with it the possibility of morality. In order, therefore, to make room for 'faith', that is for human freedom, immortality and God, and so for morality, the pretentious claim of speculative reason to a transcendent reach has to be denied it. And so Kant tells us that 'all attempts to employ reason in any merely speculative manner are altogether fruitless and by their very nature null and void, and . . . the principles of its employment in the study of nature do not lead to any theology whatever. Consequently, the only theology of reason which is possible is that which is based on moral laws'.[7] Hence, the teaching of the Vatican Council that Christian faith entails the possibility of speculative rational proof of God stands in more or less straightforward conflict with Kant's view that moral faith, if not Christian faith as such, excludes just that possibility. At any rate, what the Vatican Council affirms is just that which Kant denies.

The 'Barthian' objection

One different kind of ground for contesting the propositions of the Vatican Council – I shall characterise it in terms which are broadly 'Barthian' – is distinguishable from Kant's in that on this account an authentically Christian faith rules out the standpoint of natural theology as rivalling Christian faith as if with an alternative 'standpoint of unbelief', as Alvin Plantinga puts it.[8] On this account of Barth's position, natural theology is a form of betrayal of the divine purposes of creation, for it would seem that, for a natural theology (these are Plantinga's words again), 'belief in God is rationally acceptable only if it is more likely than not with respect to the deliverances of reason', from which it would seem to follow that a natural theologian's 'ultimate commitment is to the deliverances of reason rather than to God'.[9] This is, perhaps, rather to overstate the case, and the 'Barthian' point can be more sensitively put[10] as consisting less in a hostility to rational proof on the sort of general epistemological grounds on which Kant opposed it than in a subtler and more complex objection

[7] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B664, p. 528.
[8] This is the reading of Barth's position as expounded by Alvin Plantinga in his 'Reason and Belief in God', in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.
[9] Ibid., p. 70.
[10] I am much obliged to Susannah Ticciati, PhD student in the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, and to Dr Karen Kilby of the Department of Theology at the University of Nottingham, for advice which saved me from some egregious errors of interpretation in this chapter.

to the 'standpoint' occupied subjectively by the would-be natural theologian. What seems most to trouble Barth about the project of 'natural theology' in principle is the sort of theological mentality, the intellectual and moral disposition, which motivates it, attaching value to it as to some sort of theological starting point preliminary to, and so 'outside', faith. And it might just about be fair to say that, for Barth, such a mentality amounts in effect to a 'standpoint of unbelief' because the standpoint of faith – understood as the *act* of faith itself in response to our gratuitous *election* – is such as completely to relativise any purely 'natural' standpoint, or standpoint of creation. A 'natural standpoint' can have no true purchase on God precisely in so far as any epistemologically autonomous claims are made for it. For the Christian knows that there *is* nothing 'on the outside' of election, and so neither 'outside' of Christ, not even creation itself. As Barth himself says, 'it is impossible to separate the knowledge of God the Creator and of his work from the knowledge of God's dealings with *man*. Only when we keep before us what the triune God has done for us men in Jesus Christ can we realise what is involved in God the Creator and His work.'[11] Nor has there ever been a condition of 'pure creation', as if to say: there was, chronologically first, the *ex nihilo* of creation, and then, afterwards, the *ex nihilo* of election. On the contrary, for Karl Barth, the creation of the world *ex nihilo* is already and always has been itself within our election *ex nihilo* for, as Susannah Ticciati puts it, 'election is God's gratuitous decision to create in the first place: a decision made in (and also by and for) Jesus Christ. Christ is thus the "space" in which creation comes into being, and exists.'[12] The *ex nihilo* gratuitousness of creation is properly understood only as occurring within and for the gratuitousness of election in Christ.

It follows from this that any attempt to occupy a 'standpoint of creation' *independently* of our election in Jesus Christ will succeed only at the unacceptably high cost of rupturing the nexus between election and creation, thus to set them in *opposition* to each other, the outcome being inevitable: 'always, when man has tried to read the truth from sun, moon and stars or from himself, the result has been an idol'.[13] Since creation *ex nihilo* is, on Barth's account, *already* our election in Christ, a standpoint of 'pure' creation such as appears to be presupposed to the project of natural theology is a standpoint which amounts to the *rejection* of Christ, in whom creation and election are one. In short, the standpoint for which creation is, as Barth puts it, 'a vestibule in which natural theology might

[11] Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson, London: SCM Press, 1949, p. 43.
[12] In a written comment on an earlier draft of this chapter.
[13] Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 43.

find a place'[14] is a symptom of that dislocation and disruption of creation and of our epistemic relation with it which is sin, the improper desire and design of a human reaching out to God by some route other than that which God himself has given us. The natural theologian's distinction between creation and election therefore inevitably becomes a disjunction.

Within that 'fallen' perspective, then, a natural theology appears possible, but only so as to reconfigure the relationship of radical dependence of creature on Creator, and so of the radical asymmetry between them which is implied by the *ex nihilo* of election, misrepresenting it as one of reciprocity and symmetry between the creaturely knowing subject and God as object known. That standpoint of creation, in so far as it is construed as accessible to rational powers alone, would therefore appear, on this 'Barthian' view, to tie God and creation into a relationship which, being governed by reason and bound by its logic, obliterates the freedom of both by obliterating the gratuitousness of their *ex nihilo*. Faith, by contrast, the response to election, is our re-entry into that creation which is at once 'new' and at the same time 'originary', a relationship which continually questions the 'natural' relationship of creature to Creator; it disrupts the seeming epistemic security of a fallen rationality and calls into question the stabilising reciprocities and symmetries between knowing subject and object known which a purely rational standpoint would seem to imply as obtaining between creature and Creator. And so it is our election, our 'new creation' by faith and grace, which is the true *creatio ex nihilo*, relativising every natural standpoint, for our election is given by God in absolute freedom, and is embraced in the absolute freedom of faith by the believer.

Susannah Ticciati therefore puts the case against 'natural theology' succinctly and somewhat more subtly than does Plantinga. She writes,[15] in Barthian spirit, that

> election is to be understood as more fundamental than creation. This gives rise to a historical ontology in which there is no point of stability other than God's faithful activity of questioning, which calls everything else into question. A rational proof of the existence of God would be such a stable point outside this activity of God. But in so far as God brings the questioning and reasoning self itself into question, such a 'proof', being a function of the rationality of this self, is also called into question and uprooted. It is possible [consistently with this] to concede that the human's purpose exists in asking questions about that which lies beyond human comprehension, but such questioning results in a historical transformation in which the human being probes deeper and deeper into God and self [and] there is nothing outside this historical transformation that assures the existence of God at the end of the questioning . . . Only God's faithful interrogation can constitute this assurance and continuity. All else is continually uprooted in its being transformed.

[14] Ibid. [15] In a written comment on an earlier draft of this chapter.

It is not, therefore, Karl Barth himself who sees the natural standpoint of creation and that of election as polarised. Rather, it is Barth's view that creation and election *become* polarised within any theological project which allows for an independent natural theology. Consequently, the position of Vatican I does on this account stand condemned – in principle – in so far as it allows room for the possibility of a purely rational and certain knowledge of God. I shall examine in the next chapter one, neo-Barthian, revival of an aspect of this critique of natural theology, that of Colin Gunton, who supposes that any 'natural' doctrine of creation, such as is found (as both he and I believe) in Thomas Aquinas, must work against the freedom of God to create and the freedom of the creature's response. Such a reading of what is implied by Thomas's theology of creation cannot, I shall argue, be defended. In the meantime, however, some provisional comment is required on the general proposition that the standpoint of faith precludes the possibility of any standpoint of 'pure' creation 'external' to it, and so external to faith's historical specificity as the divine 'election' – as any such standpoint as that of a natural theology would seem to make claim to.

Powerfully as Ticciati's case is made, it seems to share with Barth's the likelihood of its being truer in what it affirms than in what it denies, for while the 'Barthian' and the Vatican Council are at one in affirming the epistemic authority of faith over reason, and the primacy of the historical events of salvation over the non-historical, timeless, standpoint of 'nature', all that would seem obviously to follow from that priority is the tautology that faith must exclude as false any standpoint which is defined or posited as 'natural' in some sense of 'natural' which *a priori* rivals faith as a 'standpoint'. At any rate we should at least note – if at this stage of the argument we do no more than note it – that when Barth says that 'what God does as the Creator can in the Christian sense only be seen and understood as a reflection, as a shadowing forth of [the] inner relationship between God the Father and the Son',[16] Thomas Aquinas agrees[17] with the reservation that in thus far agreeing with Barth he appears to observe no inconsistency with saying also that the Creator God can be known by reason. For Thomas, Barth is right except for his 'only'. Indeed, otherwise than on the assumptions of a Kantian agnostic rational

[16] Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 43.

[17] The 'Father has caused the creature through his Word, which is the Son; and through his Love, which is the Holy Spirit. On this account it is the processions of the Persons which are the source-principles of the production of creatures in so far as they include the essential attributes of knowledge and will.' – 'Et Deus Pater operatus est creaturam per suum Verbum, quod est Filius; et per suum Amorem, qui est Spiritus Sanctus. Et secundum hoc processiones Personarum sunt rationes productionis creaturarum, inquantum includant essentialia attributa, quae sunt scientia et voluntas.' *ST* 1a q45 a6 *corp*.