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# Autonomy, Immanence and the Loss of Authority

ALAN P. F. SELL

The self-exaltation of supposedly autonomous man, and the attack upon the transcendence of God supernaturally conceived, are generally two sides of the same coin. (We say 'generally', because there are those, for example, who have forsaken belief in a transcendent, supernatural deity, and who have also come to despair of man in his low, *angst*-ridden state.) Among the proximate causes of the recent undermining of the motion of transcendence in theology, is the reaction against Barth's 'wholly other' God: a reaction prompted, *inter alia*, by some of Barth's erstwhile disciples. But the roots of the tendency go back a long way and involve either man's desire to be autonomous in thought, or his declaration of competence in salvation, or both. The consequence is the muffling of the gospel. Thus, for example, Aquinas's view that man's will was fallen but that his intellect was not, came to be associated with the medieval dichotomy between natural and revealed knowledge, reason and faith; and it was only a matter of time before reason was to be exploited in an intellectual environment in which faith had, for many, become redundant. That environment was the post-Renaissance one in which man was, so to speak, flexing his epistemological muscles and feeling that with scientific advance, geographical discovery and the like, the world was his oyster. The naturalists employed presuppositions which effectively ruled God out of his universe, even if many of them (honestly enough, since they had not appreciated the implications of their axioms) retained his name; and the Reformation thrust which saw science as involving the explication of *God's* handiwork was never entirely victorious. In this connection it is not without significance that Galileo (1564–1642) was more concerned with mechanics than with causal explanation: 'Teleological explanation, characteristic of earlier thought, had given way to descriptive *explanation*',[1] and all of this explaining was conducted in harmony with that Renaissance spirit which had inculcated the right of private judgement.[2]

That very judgement was called into question by Descartes, at least for methodological purposes. Whereas the scientists were exploring matter, Descartes, resting on the received dualism and pursuing the

introspective path, concentrated upon spirit, and thus further drove the wedge between the two sides of that dichotomy which had been explicit in Platonism, and which was to foster the bifurcation of reason and faith which had been intimated in the Thomist synthesis. The way was thereby paved for that deism which removed God from the world of matter, and made him a transcendent and occasional visitor. It did not take Hume and the empiricists long to demolish confidence in any such God; Kant averred that the noumenal realm could not, in any case, be rationally apprehended, and that this realisation betokened man's maturity; and it was but a short step to Laplace's declaration that he had no need of the God-hypothesis at all. Matters were but little improved when Schleiermacher made it his policy to remove scientific and ethical considerations from religion's purview. The combined weight of Kant and Schleiermacher was more than adequate to undermine any such suggestion, as that of Berkeley, that it was God himself who held matter and spirit together: we could not *know* that, and we should rejoice that our agnosticism made way for faith. But whether because of his reason or because of his faith, man was still central to his universe. Pope's lines, for many, caught the prevailing mood admirably:

> Know then thyself; presume not God to scan;
> The proper study of mankind is man.

There followed the nineteenth-century mixture of evolutionary optimism, naturalism and immanentism, and through all these, in different ways, man's prowess was extolled and God's 'territory' shrank. Many really believed that 'Man is the goal toward which Nature has been all the while tending',[3] and, to most of those who subscribed to this view, the idea of the supernatural was at best quaint and at worst preposterous.

What shall we make of this general tendency towards human autonomy? We can but record our conviction that man has not truly understood himself unless he sees himself as made in God's image (however defaced it may be) and as thinking God's thoughts after him. To rejoice that 'little man has cast upon God his shadow'[4] would, to us, be perverse; and to the extent that the Archbishop of Wales was correct in lamenting, during the *Honest to God* debate, that 'Modern man, it seems,has become not only the measure of things, but also the measure of God',[5] we would lament with him. Not surprisingly, we have seen more than one indication of that blurring of the creator-creature distinction which does not enable the full force of sin to be taken, and which is consequently satisfied with a less than radical atonement. It thus transpires that, whereas in the debates between Calvinists and Arminians the question was 'How far, if at all, is man able and required to co-operate with God in his own salvation?', the question now becomes, 'Does man need saving at all?'. Not for nothing

did Dr Vincent Taylor see sin as 'self-coronation, wearing God's crown, carrying His sceptre, bearing His orb, mounting His throne. It is like banditry, it is spiritual piracy. It is the soul's proud boast: "We will not have Thee to reign over us".'[6] Small wonder that P. T. Forsyth answered his own question ('What makes some form of Calvinism indispensable and immortal?') thus: 'That it cared more to secure the freedom of God than of man... We must put God's free grace first—far before our free thought or action';[7] and, with an eye to post-Bultmannian theory, we might add that God's free grace in the gospel must come before 'man's existentialised self-understanding' wherein 'even the Reality of God Himself is simply reduced to "what he means for me" in the contingency and necessities of my own life purpose.'[8] The sad upshot is that those who laud man's autonomy cannot do justice to God's freedom, to man's condition and need, to God's provision in Christ. Nor, most ironic of all, can they do justice to man's dignity: 'As the idealists lose individuality in the absolute mind, so the naturalists lose it in "streams of consciousness" when dealing with the matter psychologically, and in "laws of motion" when thinking sociologically.'[9]

## I

So much by way of recapitulation. We shall now advert to certain recent trends in theology which take the suspect positions even further, and underline the need for a reappraisal of the concepts of transcendence, immanence and the supernatural. Since the trends in question are fresh in our minds we may, happily, be brief.[10] Just ten years ago, Professor Gordon Kaufman could write that 'the radical "eclipse of God" (Buber) or even the final irretrievable death of God (Nietzsche) appears to be the most momentous theological fact of our age';[11] and even though the pamphleteering and the broadcasting are done, and the headlines are no more, the issues of the mid-nineteen-sixties are too important to be dismissed with a patronizing or impatient shrug of the shoulders. Nor should the subsequent accession of conservative theological strength in many quarters be taken as necessarily indicating that the claims of the radicals, even if adequately countered, were undermined by major positive constructions of merit.

One of the earliest pointers to the recent death-of-God theology is the suggestion of J. P. F. Richter (d.1825) to the effect that God is no longer required as the cement of the universe or the explanation of things. Henceforth man may justifiably live without postulating the divine.[12] Hegelian immanentism further assisted the sundering of the posited natural-spiritual dichotomy, not least by its assumption that the divine realizes itself in the human. It was then an easy task for Feuerbach (1804–72) to contend that the spiritual was but a projection of the human. We might rather crudely say that Feuerbach jumped off the Hegelian roundabout at the point where the driver declared (in

1802)[13] that since Kant, Jacobi and Fichte had shown the older metaphysics to be impotent in the matter of demonstrating the existence of God, God must be pronounced dead. The Hegelian ride, of course, continued past that point, and looked forward to the resurrection of the 'all-embracing', 'supreme totality in all its seriousness... into the serenest freedom of its form.' Few were less impressed by this than Nietzsche (1844–1900) who declared that man, having killed God, must now, *qua* superman, assume his role of lord of history: 'God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!... Shall we not ourselves have to become Gods, merely to seem worthy of it?'[14] Meanwhile Karl Marx (1818–83) and Friedrich Engels (1820–95) were filling the space vacated by God with their materialistic-revolutionary idealization of man. Thus the death-of-God theologians inherit a tradition in which more is attempted than the adjustment of thought to new knowledge: what is attempted is the replacement of the old by the novel. Kierkegaard, with his abhorrence of the Hegelian system, is the pre-eminent Christian representative of this objective, as Professor Aiken has well said: 'The philosophical tasks of Marx, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard are therefore only incidentally theoretical. Their aim is nothing less than the construction of a new way of life which will answer to the demand of men who refuse to accept what Matthew Arnold calls "this strange disease of modern life" either as an act of God or as a fatality of reason.'[15] All of this, together with Barth's wholly other God on the one hand, and some of the more nihilistic existentialist influences on the other, lay behind the by no means homogeneous group who were branded 'death-of-God theologians'.

In so far as we may speak of a general tendency in death-of-God theology, it consists in a denial of the transcendent which turns upon the affirmation of the natural (or secular) side of the nature-spirit dichotomy only. Whereas Barth sought to introduce the Word from the other side of the gulf, so to speak, the death-of-God theologians refuse this comfort. They are with Tillich in his aversion to mythological God-talk, but they have no place for his Being-itself. They complain that Bultmann's existentialism was vitiated by its Heideggerian ontologism. However inconsistently, they all affirm the cruciality of Jesus. The following statement makes plain a crucial aspect of their thought:

> There was once a God to whom adoration, praise and trust were appropriate, possible, and even necessary, but that now there is no such God. This is the position of the death of God or radical theology. It is an atheist position, but with a difference. If there was a God, and if there now isn't, it should be possible to indicate why this change took place, when it took place, and who was responsible for it.[16]

On this theme many variations have been played. To Gabriel Vahanian the death of God meant that God had died (for all practical

purposes) in our culture. It is not that God does not exist; the fact is that as far as present western culture is concerned, he is irrelevant. Vahanian has criticized those who have gone further than this, and they in turn have regarded him as unduly conservative in his belief that reason's failure to demonstrate God is theology's opportunity: 'God is not necessary but he is inevitable. He is wholly other and wholly present.'[17] With this position William Hamilton, for one, was by no means content: 'We are not talking about the absence of the experience of God, but about the experience of the absence of God.'[18] Yet Hamilton is claimed by *Jesus*: not, indeed, because in coming to Jesus we 'meet a God hitherto unknown. We come to Jesus because the God we have found apart from him is a kind of absentee enemy who does not make it possible for us either to think or to live as the Christians we wish to be.'[19] This leads us to the note of victory which is strongly sounded by Hamilton. 'Christianity's real contribution is this: when asked what it means by God, it points to the cross. Jesus is Lord by being a servant... He exercises his divinity and his sovereign power from the cross.'[20] But are we not here on the verge of that very unconditionality which requires a less emaciated doctrine of God than Hamilton proposes?

Thomas J. J. Altizer *sounds* the most flamboyantly daring of all the radical theologians, but in some ways—especially in his underlying Hegelianism—he is the most old-fashioned. Thus, he can declare that 'God has actually died in Christ... this death is both a historical and a cosmic event, and, as such, it is a final and irrevocable event, which cannot be reversed by a subsequent religious or cosmic movement.'[21] It follows that 'a Christian confession of the death of God is a response to the real absence of God himself... To speak the name of God in a time of his withdrawal is nothing less than blasphemy...'[22] The Christian is thus impelled 'to seek the presence and the reality of Christ in a world that is totally estranged from Christianity's established vision of the sacred.'[23] He further underlines his point by saying that 'God has died in *our* time, in *our* history, in *our* experience.'[24] Transcendence has collapsed into immanence, and we have now to realize 'a new and awesome human atonomy.'[25] The twentieth century has brought home to us the 'radical immanence of modern man, an immanence dissolving even the memory or the shadow of transcendence.'[26] With Blake (and why not with Marcion?) we must acknowledge that the transcendent God of the Old Testament is no more. But although God has died in history, it is also true that Christ is risen within history; the theatre of Christ's activity is *here*.

We cannot resist the conclusion that as in Tillich we have Hegel clothed with existentialist terminology, so here we have Hegel viewed through spectacles supplied by Dr Altizer's visionary favourites, Blake and Nietzsche, and fitted by process thinkers from Bergson to Hartshorne. The general charges against ultra-immanentism may be deemed

to stand. Dr Altizer cannot accommodate the creator-creature distinction: indeed God's kenosis does away with it in his thought. He has little to say of the God-man relation, its rupture by man's sin and its restoration by God's atoning act in Christ. The horror of deism has driven Altizer within a hair's breadth of pantheism, *methodologically;* but, happily, most of us are better than our theories.[27]

Of all the so-called death-of-God theologians, van Buren offers the position that will have the most familiar ring to those who have been schooled in the English (we use the term advisedly) tradition of linguistic analysis. He brings empiricist analytical techniques to bear upon God-talk with a view to showing that the *word* 'God' is dead.[28] For van Buren there can be no reliable discourse about God: least of all talk of an 'experienced non-objective reality' such as the left-wing Bultmannian Schubert Ogden, himself anti-supernaturalistic, has proposed. We are left with no God who may be said to be transcendent, but we do have commitment to Jesus of Nazareth, the truly free man who frees his followers—and that in a manner which seems to us uncannily reminiscent of that adopted by the erstwhile transcendent God. Professor Ogden, by contrast, criticized (even) Bultmann for being too bound to the past events in Nazareth; and this despite the fact that Ogden could encapsulate Bultmann's reduction of 'the entire contents of the traditional Christian confession' thus: 'I henceforth understand myself no longer in terms of my past, but solely in terms of the future that is here and now disclosed to me as grace in my encounter with the church's proclamation.'[29]

## II

With the mention of Ogden, we have left the death-of-God theologians behind us. We turn now to the process theologians, for they too have contributed to the recent immanentist thrust in theology by opposing what they regard as deficiencies in classical theism. God, according to the classical Greek tradition, exists *a se.* The concept of temporality cannot be applied to him. This, so it is alleged by process thinkers, encouraged the unwholesomely transcendent view of God which, passing from the Aristotelian 'unmoved Mover' through the scholastic *ens realissimum*, reached its climax in deism, where God was understood as static, external, uninvolved. Needless to say, none of these ideas appealed to those who sympathized with the general trend of nineteenth-century evolutionary thought, and wished to forsake the static view of God for the dynamic, the fixed for the developing.

In approaching process thought, it is necessary to keep a sense of perspective. We cannot help but feel that deism and its precursors was ever a minority interest, and one which perhaps had more to do with theorizing than with religion. Thus, for example, the Old Testament tells of a creative God who works through historical events, who addresses his people, who has a purpose for them, and so on. The New

Testament is replete with teleological and eschatological motifs, and, above all, it has the God-man at its heart. How could the Almighty have become *more* involved and closer, we might ask? In post-biblical times, to take random examples only, we find Duns Scotus correcting undue Thomist emphasis on 'being' with his teaching concerning the primacy of the ethical; we find the best of the mystics, Puritans, pietists, Quakers, Moravians and others, experimentally persuaded of the reality of God in their midst; and we find the conviction of the presence of God inspiring phenomena as various as the ecclesiologies of Dissent and the testimonies of Christian existentialists. In all these cases the transcendence of God was regarded much more as a matter of his character (as holy) than as a matter of the *quasi*-geographical distance between him and men. The process theologians have not, therefore, succeeded where *all* others have failed in bringing God near. They have, however,made two radically new proposals. In the first place they have revived the Greek idea, shunned in the orthodox tradition, of a developing God. We recall Plato's words to the effect that 'the Creator, in creating the world, creates himself; he is working out his own being. Considered as not creating, he has neither existence nor concrete meaning.'[30] But, secondly, whereas Plato thought of the self-creating deity as being far removed from the world of matter, with the process thinkers, immanence reigns and emergent evolution was their model.[31] Thus Whitehead could say, 'It is as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God.'[32] He sought to obviate the difficulty bequeathed to us by the old nature-spirit dichotomy, namely, that 'the worst of a gulf is, that it is very difficult to know what is happening on the further side.'[33] Now whilst it is true that Whitehead wished to preserve transcendence by introducing his dipolar theism—according to which God's primordial nature is eternal and beyond human knowledge and his consequent nature is that by which he acts dynamically in the world, lovingly 'luring' it on its evolutionary way towards the goal he has appointed for it—it is the immanentist aspect which exerts the greater pull. Hence Whitehead's disciple, H. N. Wieman, can assert that 'the only creative God we recognize is the creative event itself.'[34] Here transcendence has become so inconsequential—or, at any rate, it has ceased to be anything other than an extension of the world—that it is quite impotent to serve any longer as the bulwark between the process thinker's desiderated panentheism and that full-blown pantheism of which he is rightly suspicious.

Undeterred, such scholars as Professor Ogden and Dr Norman Pittenger persist with process thought, and they both find it necessary to focus on the incarnation—or on what the latter calls 'the event of Jesus Christ'—this event being regarded not so much as the 'supreme anomaly' as the 'classical instance'.[35] In Charles Hartshorne's view, Christ is the supreme symbol of God's activity and meaning in his world. We may agree that 'Jesus is not an isolated "entrance" or

"intervention" of God into a world which otherwise is without his presence and action', but this is by no means to agree that 'the "incarnation" of God in Jesus Christ is focally but not exclusively true of him' (shades of the 'first-among-equals' Jesus of some older liberal theologians). Dr Ogden has no inhibitions at this point. To him God literally participates in men, yet at the same time (following Heidegger) God's being is infinite whilst man's is not. But this seems an extreme statement from one who wishes to oppose the idea of temporal infinity. As Dr Richmond has said, if the philosophical sceptic 'finds "temporal infinity" to be a stark contradiction in terms, he may find "infinite temporality" to be equally, not less, contradictory.'[36]The difficulty of reconciling the absoluteness of God with his temporality, or with process, is the most serious obstacle of all. In this connection it is interesting to juxtapose William Temple's criticism of Whitehead and R. Gregor Smith's criticism of Ogden:

> About the consequent nature of God Professor Whitehead has much to say that is edifying, but it is hard to see by what right he says it. One is glad to know that he has the consolation of believing that 'the love in the world passes into the love in heaven, and floods back again into the world', so that 'in this sense God is the great companion—the fellow-sufferer who understands'. This is very near the Christian Gospel, and if only Professor Whitehead would for creativity say Father, for 'primordial nature of God' say Eternal Word, and for 'consequent nature of God' say Holy Spirit, he would perhaps be able to show ground for his gratifying conclusions. But he cannot use those terms, precisely because each of them imports the notion of Personality as distinct from Organism. The very reason which gives to the Christian scheme its philosophic superiority is that which precludes Professor Whitehead from adopting it.[37]

> Ogden is forced into a very serious inconsistency when he asks us to accept the reality of God as meaning both the abstract principle of all relatedness and the self-creative activity of God. Certainly, this variation of the process philosophies of Whitehead and Hartshorne can help us to grasp the significance of human historical becoming; but it cannot also expect to save the absoluteness of God except as a face-saving gesture, or an idle speculation.[38]

The nub of both criticisms is that the abstract conflicts with the personal; the idea of organism with that of history.

Standing somewhat apart in confessional allegiance, professional training and mood from the more existentially inclined of the process theologians, and at an even further remove than they from the death-of-God men, we find Teilhard de Chardin. His works have enjoyed a considerable vogue, and it is not uncharitable to refer to some of his more enthusiastic followers as devotees. We regard him as one who creates a mood rather than as one who constructs a logically watertight

system, and perhaps this is what a visionary scientist should do. Setting out *qua* scientist, he seeks to promulgate a variety of panentheism based on observation and description. He finds an evolutionary process punctuated by 'thresholds' such as the emergence of life and of man. From this starting-point he looks forward to creation's reaching its 'Omega point', which is Christ, and of which Christ's self-transcending love is for us the earnest. Professor Macquarrie has cogently argued that if we remain with Teilhard's naturalistic starting-point, we cannot legitimately reach his speculative conclusions; whereas if we embrace his supernaturalist conclusions, we must support them on other than naturalistic foundations.[39] This conclusion is reinforced by Teilhard's employment of the sacramental principle, and his vision of a world in which 'Christ cannot sanctify the Spirit without... uplifting and saving the totality of Matter.'[40] This 'Christification' of all things is anticipated in the Mass.

There can be no doubt that, in declaring against the ideas of God as 'unmoved Mover', 'ruling Caesar', and 'ruthless Moralist', Whitehead was making a salutary anti-deistic protest. Professor Peters has praised process thought for its stand against another worldliness which, regarding God as 'wholly other', 'tends to paralyze theological curiosity and inquiry.'[41] Again, it facilitates the proclamation of the Christian message by focusing attention upon God's revelation in Christ in a way which would be impossible if God absolutely transcended the categories.[42] It proclaims a God who enters into the sufferings of humanity with victorious potential: 'God has nowhere to hide himself from any sorrow or joy whatever, but must share in all the wealth and all the burden of the world.'[43] It exhorts men to a new vision of what it means to be God's co-workers.[44] Above all, it demands an adequate doctrine of immanence: God may not be excluded from any part of his universe, all of which is 'alive with his life'.[45]

And yet we cannot suppress the feeling that these positive points are purchased at too great a price, and that they can be expressed equally well by a theology which does not batten itself to process thought. Indeed, it seems to us that the perils of reductionism are at least as great here as they were in connection with the idealisms of the early part of this century and their Tillichian successors. We have already adverted to the methodological queries raised against process thought by Temple and Smith, but when we view the matter in relation to our understanding of the gospel, the question becomes, 'Is the creator-creature distinction adequately preserved in process thought?' If it is not, then, as we have said so often, we can do justice neither to man's dire need nor to God's gracious provision. David Jenkins has expressed the point admirably:

> Whatever [God's] relationship to continuing processes and developing patterns, he himself is not to be equated with those processes and

> patterns, and he is not dependent for his being God, or his being as God, in any way on the movements, developments, changes in materiality and history. This insight into the transcendent independence of God in his goodness is, I am convinced, a valid one. The God who is nothing but involvement is not the God of biblical encounter nor the God of theistic worship nor the God who is required by, and the fulfilment of, the mystery of personalness and love... God does not exist in order to guarantee man fulfilment. Such a notion is idolatrous anthropomorphism... The true God exists because he is the true God and it is a *consequence* of his transcendentally independent existence both that man exists and that man has the hope of fulfilment as man.[46]

With this affirmation, to which we say 'Amen', we may compare that of James Orr, writing in the hey-day of the earlier impact of evolutionary thought upon theology:

> A God in process is of necessity an incomplete God—can never be a true, personal God. His being is merged in that of the universe; sin, even, is an element of His life. I hold it to be indubitable that God, in order truly to be God, must possess Himself in the eternal fulness and completeness of His own personal life; must possess Himself for Himself, and be raised entirely above the transiency, the incompleteness, and the contingency of the world-process. We are then enabled to think of the world and history, not as the necessary unfolding of a logical process, but as the revelation of a free and holy purpose; and inconsistency is no longer felt in the idea of an action of God along supernatural lines—above the plane of mere nature, as wisdom and love may dictate—for the benefit of His creature man.[47]

These quotations make it abundantly clear not only that there can be divine immanence (properly dear to process thought) if God's independence is posited, but that there cannot be immanence if it is not.[48] They also relieve the Almighty of the difficulty of being less than Absolute, as he almost inevitably must be in process thought (and ought such a one to receive our absolute allegiance?); and they prevent his being at the mercy of the contingent—a kind of celestial heavy-weight boxer, ever 'bobbing and weaving' (as the terrestrial Henry Cooper used to do) as novel eventualities arise.[49] The place of the contingent is, indeed, one of the most intractable questions to be raised by process thought.

Does process thought adequately treat of man? Our hesitations and convictions are implicit in H. H. Farmer's definition: 'To be a person means to be a being who is not a mere item in process, not a mere function of environment, not a mere product of forces which grind on in mechanical necessity to their predetermined end, but rather one which, while rooted in the process, stands in a measure above it and is able to rule it to freely chosen ends.'[50] Now it is true that process thinkers have sought to accommodate genuine freedom for man.

Thus, for example, Professor Hartshorne grants that man is 'capable of departing widely for his proper place in the scheme of things, making himself, as it were, less than a man.'[51] But at this point a different problem arises. So eager are process thinkers to honour the possibilities for good in God's creation that they can appear to give inadequate weight to the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and to the need of a radical atonement. Be that as it may, from the point of view of our immediate concern with the God-man relation, with transcendence and immanence, we may say that, unlike Barth, the process theologians put the weight on the scale-pan marked 'immanence'. But neither they nor Barth have foreclosed discussion on the problem encapsulated long ago by H. R. Mackintosh thus: 'It is the "living" God who says, "I the Lord change not". How these two conceptions can be true at once is an insoluble problem; it is but one of a class of problems not accidental but native to genuine thought concerning God.'[52] Certainly it is not for us to attempt to put asunder what God has joined together in his own person.

So much for the death of God and for process thought. Our final illustration of the modern trend towards immanence will raise acutely the question of authority: that question which was posed forcibly by the work of both Tillich and Barth, and which, we contend, must resolutely be faced if an adequate understanding of transcendence, immanence and the supernatural is to be reached. Our subject is Professor M. F. Wiles, and since he described the 'death of God' as 'a deservedly evanescent concept',[53] we are cautioned that dissatisfaction with older understandings of transcendence emanate from widely differing presuppositional and temperamental quarters.

## III

Dr Wiles is no dogmatist. He thinks aloud with us, and whenever conclusions are in the offing we come to expect the word 'tentative'. His thought is thus consciously *in via*, and for this reason our reflections can have the status of interim comments only. These comments demand to be made, however, for the issues at stake are vital to theology, and thoroughly germane to our particular undertaking. Our general feeling concerning Dr Wiles's work is that an unduly narrow empiricism—derived from, or at least reminiscent of post-Kantian epistemology, in which undue concessions are made to naturalism, or at least to anti-supernaturalism—inhibits him from advancing an entirely satisfactory approach for Christian theologico-philosophical method. What gives rise to such a feeling?

Dr Wiles is acutely aware of the problems which the modern understanding of history poses to Christian affirmation. Even the kerygma, he believes, comes to us conditioned by the circumstances in which it developed, and by the presuppositions of those whose interpretation of the New Testament it was.[54] The fact is that 'the rise of modern

historical consciousness has, in some degree or another, made historical relativists of us all.'[55] In keeping with this fact as he understands it, Dr Wiles radically questions belief in 'a specific incarnation in the person of Jesus',[56] since this belief does not stand in the appropriate relation to 'the experiences of creatureliness or of grace'.[57] All of which seems compatible with Dr Frances Young's pronouncement that 'each man is potentially "God incarnate" ',[58] and this, as Dr Wiles and the other contributors to *The Myth of God Incarnate* would be the first to recognize,[59] is a hoary assertion indeed.

In keeping with his empiricism and relativism, Dr Wiles reminds us that some events in the world arouse in us 'a sense of divine purpose', and that, as it happens, we have found this to be so in a Christian culture.[60] Here and elsewhere the question of truth suggests itself, but it is never really faced, so that we wonder whether we are on the way back to Troeltsch, who argued that, whereas we may have a religion which is true for us, someone else may have one which is true for him.[61] Now we do not for one moment wish to deny that there is a proper subjectivism in religious and other matters. The personal pronouns in Charles Wesley's hymns are very much to the point. But Christ does not originate with my feelings, and the truth of my religious claims does not depend upon them. With all of which Dr Wiles would agree—but ought he to on his presuppositions? He rightly defends Schleiermacher against those who have understood him to teach that 'God is...simply a name for our feeling of absolute dependence';[62] he makes clear his desire to avoid the pitfall of psychologism when he denies that 'the whole concept of God or of divine action is purely subjective in the pejorative sense of that elusive term, which would imply that they were simply ways of describing human feelings.'[63] He contends that 'there is a reality other than the human experiencing, but we are only able to speak of it indirectly by speaking of those experiences within which we are aware of its effective presence.'[64] Our concern is that such language requires more of an ontological context —more 'above' than Dr Wiles provides. For a wise word from a quarter where these matters might be expected to be understood, let us hear Dr Rufus Jones:

> In dwelling, as I shall do, on the upreach of the human spirit and of man's capacity to be an organ of revelation, let no one suppose that I am discounting the importance of the *objective* aspect of revelation, the movement of initiation on the divine side. The search...is a double search. Towers of Babel, built up from below, do not reach far enough. The whole Gospel in the New Testament is the story of the Divine Search and downreach, and the complete story of the meeting and the co-operation of the Above and the below is the Eternal Gospel.[65]

Not indeed that Dr Wiles wishes to deny transcendence,[66] but we

can only speak of it in a naturalistically conditioned way: 'Talk of God's activity is... to be understood as a way of speaking about those events within the natural order or within human history in which God's purpose finds clear expression or special opportunity.'[67] But in the first place, how can *we* know what God's purpose is unless he informs us? This is one point among many at which the question of authority is raised by Dr Wiles, but left unanswered. Secondly, can we properly say that creation *ex nihilo* (which Dr Wiles affirms)[68] and redemption are 'within the natural order or within human history' in the sense intended? If not, we cannot, on the premises advanced, speak of them as acts of God. It is thus not easy to think that Dr Wiles's desired transcendence is much more than a self-transcendence which we *feel* under the necessity of positing. Tillich's 'answering theology' comes to mind here,[69] and we feel cheated, both because an emaciated understanding of transcendence appears to be in use, and because the analysis of that term is slight.

It would be grossly unfair to suggest that Dr Wiles is not aware of the limits of empiricism. He knows that 'if an explanatory account were determined to do without everything that was not directly or irrefutably given in experience, it would certainly cease to explain, even if it did not also cease to exist.'[70] But the qualification does not always adequately avert the narrowly empiricist embargo. Thus he writes: 'We have no other starting-point than our ordinary experience of the world.'[71] But the phrase 'our ordinary experience' begs the question. We need to ask, 'Whose ordinary experience? What is meant by "ordinary"?' There *is* a proper empiricism in religious discourse: it enables the psalmist to say that 'the heavens declare the glory of God'. Again, there is a sense in which grace, though ever a miracle, is ordinary to the believer: it is the air he breathes. Only by giving a naturalistic flavour to 'ordinary' could such claims be denied; but this is what we suspect Dr Wiles wishes to do. Let us offer further grounds for our suspicion.

Dr Wiles wishes to argue that 'the church's traditional belief in Christ as both God and man... cannot properly be taken as the starting-point of our enquiry.'[72] So far this seems to be in line with our own inclination to start with gospel, not system. But we question whether the use Dr Wiles makes of his alternative starting-point enables him to take due account of the facts of the Christian case. Our understanding of the gospel leads us to suggest that the church did not face the Christological question apart from the atonement. The pattern was not 'Here is the incarnate God-man; what can he do?' It was rather, 'This is what he has done; redemption is accomplished; who must he be?'[73] In the words of Dr Wiles, however: 'The glory of the created order, the potential for good of the natural setting of our human life, the worth of human relationships—all these are implicit in the kind of theistic belief that I have been developing. They do not logically require belief in the incarnation.'[74] Perhaps not: but if we start with the

gospel we shall need it; and if we begin there, some of the old, thorny Christological problems will not evaporate as easily as Dr Wiles imagines.[75] He is relatively safe so long as he continues to claim, as he has more recently done, that 'the power of God was set at work in the world in a new way through [Christ's] life, ministry, death and resurrection.'[76] We accept the form of words, but apart from the traditional understanding of God's holiness, wrath, mercy and grace, and of man's sin and need, they do not carry the distinctive Christian connotation. But if the facts are as the older theories, however inadequate in themselves, said they were, what we need is a better theory to cover the facts. We cannot help but feel that Dr Wiles is not only unhappy with the older theories, but ill at ease with the facts. Thus, for example, he writes a chapter on the work of Christ without relating the concept of God's holiness to that of man's sin.[77] He sees belief in 'a God-given resurrection [as] the answer to human finitude and death.'[78] But this is a distinctively 'Greek' attenuation. Again, he does not see the need to invoke ' "something beyond history, something transcendent" in the resurrection event of a kind which we would not properly invoke in relation to any other event in history.'[79] Nor will he until he takes more adequate account of the Christian facts. What he offers us as two necessary features of all atonement theory is, first, 'that Christ's passion is in some way a demonstration of what is true of God's eternal nature.'[80] But in *what* way? Was something done, or merely shown? 'The second... is... the recognition that the passion of Christ has been remarkably effective as a historical phenomenon in the transformation of human lives.'[81] So, whatever was done or shown, something works. Will this vague pragmatism suffice? Presumably it must for those who, like Dr Wiles, regard language about the resurrection, for example, as a symbol which speaks 'of conviction that by the grace of God sin and death can be and have been overcome in human life, a conviction made possible for the man whose faith in God is informed by what he finds in the figure of Jesus.'[82] Thus, for all his desire to begin from below, in the end Dr Wiles's symbolism bids fair to disengage him from history altogether. We are reminded of a criticism which Professor Klooster has levelled at W. Pannenberg: 'I seriously question whether any theologian who acknowledges that the living God truly reveals himself in history (as Pannenberg wants to do) can at the same time espouse "the open rationality of the Enlightenment".'[83] Similarly, when we speak of the dealings of the Holy Spirit with us, he is not really dealing with us; we are merely reminding ourselves that 'the love of God is the source of all potentiality for good in the world and that to recognize that fact has a transforming effect upon our apprehension and our realization of that good.'[84]

At times Dr Wiles seems about to embark upon a path of which we approve. He asks a perfectly proper question: 'What kind of belief is appropriate in the light of the evidence available to us about the person

and work of Jesus and about the religious claims associated with him as Christ and as Son of God in the Christian tradition?'[85] But, once again, the way in which the evidence of atonement, sins forgiven, new life, is barely considered, inclines us to the view that once again—and with perhaps too much deference to the more sceptical New Testament critics—naturalism is the victor. The criticism is well nigh taken when Dr Wiles says, 'the whole thrust of the word "incarnation" [and not only of that word] seems to run counter to the lines of approach towards theological knowledge, which on general grounds we are most inclined to adopt.'[86]

For one who wishes to begin from below it must be particularly hard to accept that 'our knowledge about Jesus in himself is at every point tentative and uncertain.'[87] If Christianity is a religion rooted in history, as we believe it to be, and if our 'knowledge of his life and words' is as problematic as Dr Wiles claims that it is, can there ever be a rational Christian assurance? Paul said, 'If Christ was not raised, your faith has nothing in it.'[88] To be able to affirm only tentatively that he may have been raised does not, from the religious point of view, seem much of an improvement upon outright denial of his resurrection. We believe the Christian assurance to be grounded in the fact that the transcendent God has acted immanently for man's salvation in Christ, and that of this the resurrection is the guarantee.

To bring our discussion to a close, we have sadly to record that when Dr Wiles presents his outline account of what it all comes to, his words have a strangely hollow ring. He himself realizes that his description may sound highly intellectualist, but bids us remember that belief in God is never an 'uninvolved type of awareness':

> Man has been created with a capacity for awareness of God and of an ultimate divine purpose for the world. This capacity can become actual through general reflection on the world in which we live . But it is not in fact realized equally and uniformly in all the varied conditions of human existence. Some aspects of human experience give rise to it more frequently and more profoundly than others. In the experience of our culture, the records of the Christ event and occasions of worship which focus on that event are particularly powerful agents in giving rise to such awareness.[89]

Our understanding is that man, created in God's image, knows the holy God. He does not just have a capacity for knowing him. Being a sinner, man seeks to suppress this knowledge. God in mercy acts in Christ to redeem, and the benefits of that action are applied by God the Holy Spirit. We do not refer to language which arises from reflection upon the world bolstered by records and rites. We refer to a miracle of grace which had to be and could only be supernatural, and we are perverse enough to call it a fact—*the* fact. Do our presuppositions make us too dogmatic? Do Dr Wiles's presuppositions make him too

tentative? At all events we have a presuppositional clash upon our hands, and the ultimate appeal can only be to authority, whether 'internal' or 'external', or both.

The sepulchral words of Dr Scroggs epitomize the condition of the man who walks along the road which Dr Wiles appears to favour:

> We are thus in no secure place. We have found no single authoritative standard from the past of what to say or how to live. Neither have we a secure self-understanding erected on the basis of our immediate experience.[90]

Not that all is lost: 'We are kept from falling by the very tension between past and present.' What precisely this means is far from clear, and we may be forgiven for recalling words uttered by P. T. Forsyth seventy years ago: 'The humane subjectivism of the present hour threatens us now as the scientific subjectivism of the Orthodoxies did once.'[91] Is there a court of appeal? Is there authority? Is there—could there be—a word from the Lord? Let those who answer 'Yes' make their voices heard.

**THE REV. DR ALAN P. F. SELL** is Principal Lecturer in Religious Studies, West Midlands College of Higher Education.

## NOTES

1 Ian G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (SCM Press, London 1966) p.26.
2 P. T. Forsyth was among those who argued that this right was not, contrary to popular belief, a product of the Reformation: 'The Reformation certainly made religion personal, but it did not make it individualistic... What the Reformation said was that the layman with his Bible in his hand had at his side the same Holy Spirit as the minister.' See his *The Principle of Authority* (Independent Press, London [1913]1952) p.283. Further, the Reformers were not so sanguine as the humanists concerning the competence of man's reason and conscience when unaided by the Spirit.
3 We have been unable to verify this quotation, which is attributed to Fiske, *Man's Destiny*.
4 The words are Schaeder's, quoted by Sydney Cave, *The Doctrines of the Christian Faith* (Independent Press, London 1952) p.83.
5 Edwin Morris in *The Observer*, 24 March 1963, quoted by J. M. Morrison, *Honesty and God* (The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh 1966) p.38.
6 V. Taylor, *Doctrine and Evangelism* (Epworth Press, London 1953) p.25.
7 ibid., p.255.
8 T. F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (OUP, London 1971) p.60.
9 R. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 vols. (Nisbet, London 1943) 1, p.24.
10 The movements to which we are to refer in this section and the next, engendered sometimes heated debates, spawned numerous slogans, and, doubtless, led to the felling of many a forest in order to feed the paperback presses. Much was ephemeral, and we cannot note it all. The following are among contributions to which we have found it helpful to return after the lapse of time: Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God* (Braziller, New York 1961) and *No Other God* (Braziller, New York 1966); Daniel Jenkins, *Beyond Religion* (SCM Press, London 1962); E. L. Mascall, *Up and Down in Adria* (Faith Press, London 1963) and *The Secularisation of Christianity* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1965); Leon Morris, *The Abolition of Religion*

(IVF, London 1965); Alan Richardson, *Religion in Contemporary Debate* (SCM Press, London 1966); Colin Williams, *Faith in a Secular Age* (Collins Fontana, London 1966); Thomas W. Ogletree, *Is God Dead?* (SCM Press, London 1966); David Cairns, *God Up There?* (The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1967); B. Towers, *Teilhard de Chardin* (Lutterworth, London 1966); N. M. Wildiers, *An Introduction to Teilhard de Chardin* (Collins Fontana, London 1967); A. T. Hanson, ed., *Teilhard Reassessed* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1970); Norman Pittenger, *God in Process* (SCM Press, London 1967); Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Pearman, eds., *New Theology 5* (Macmillan, New York 1968); Vernon Sproxton, *Teilhard de Chardin* (SCM Press, London 1971); J. A. B. Holland, 'The Debate about *Honest to God*', *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, 107, 1964, pp.257–78; Fred H. Klooster, 'The Death-of-God Theology: Historical Background', *Calvin Theological Journal*, 2, 1967, pp.22–45; W. Lillie, 'Reflections on *The Death of God*', *The Expository Times*, 79, 1968, pp.292–6; articles on process theology by N. Pittenger in *The Expository Times* for June 1965, Oct. 1969, Oct. 1970, Dec. 1971; C. G. Gunton, 'A Critique of Process Theology', *The Expository Times*, 84, July 1973, and N. Pittenger's reply, *ET*, 85, Nov. 1973.

11 Gordon D. Kaufman, 'On the Meaning of "God": Transcendence without Mythology', *Harvard Theological Review*, 59, 1966, p.105.

12 See his 'Speech of the Dead Christ', (ET) in *Flower, Fruit and Thorn Pieces*, 2 vols, (Leipzig 1871) 1, pp.278–85.

13 We are here indebted to R. Gregor Smith, *Secular Christianity* (Collins, London 1966) p.160, where some sentences of Hegel's *Glauben und Wissen (Sämtliche Werke*, Jubiläumsausgabe, 1927, pp.277–433) are translated. Professor Klooster reminds us that Hegel is said to have been influenced by the lines in Johannes Rist's Good Friday hymn of 1641: '*O grosse Not! Gott selbst ist tot...*'. He also notes Clyde R. McCormack's study of the variations upon the lines in Lutheran hymnals which 'indicates the struggle with and embarrassment caused by this stark statement', art.cit., p.32.

14 F. W. Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom* in *Works* X (Foulis, Edinburgh and London 1910).

15 H. D. Aiken, *The Age of Ideology* (Mentor Books, New York 1956) pp.185–6.

16 T. J. J. Altizer and W. Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1968) p.14.

17 G. Vahanian, *Wait Without Idols* (Braziller, New York 1964) p.46.

18 Hamilton, op.cit., p.40.

19 id., *The New Essence of Christianity* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1966) p.68.

20 ibid., p.82.

21 T. J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Collins, London 1966) p.103.

22 id., 'Creative Negation in Theology', *Christian Century*, 7, July 1965, quoted by Richard Wolff, *Is God Dead?* (Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton 1966) p.19.

23 id., *Christian Atheism*, p.103.

24 id., *Radical Theology*, p.102.

25 ibid., p.30.

26 id., *Christian Atheism*, p.22.

27 We say this in no patronizing way, and we trust the same will be said (as doubtless it needs to be) of us.

28 Paul M. Van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1968) p.108.

29 See Schubert M. Ogden, *Christ Without Myth* (Collins, London 1962) p.133.

30 See Plato's *Timaeus*.

31 See A. P. F. Sell, 'Evolution, Theory and Theme', *Faith and Thought*, 104, 1977–8, pp.202–20.

32 A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (Simon & Schuster, New York 1960) p.528.

33 id., *Adventures of Ideas* (CUP, Cambridge 1935) p.217.

34 H. N. Wieman, *The Source of Human Good* (Chicago UP, Chicago 1946) p.7.
35 N. Pittenger, 'The Doctrine of Christ in Process Theology', *The Expository Times*, 82, Oct. 1970, p.9.
36 J. Richmond, 'God, Time and Process Philosophy', *Theology*, 68, 1965, p.241.
37 William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (Macmillan, London 1934) p.259. E. S. Brightman's finite God comes to mind; and E. L. Mascall's view that Whitehead's 'God' is really the principle of creativity *(The Openness of Being* [Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1971] p.160).
38 R. Gregor Smith, *The Doctrine of God* (Collins, London 1970) p.157.
39 J. Macquarrie, 'The Natural Theology of Teilhard de Chardin', *The Expository Times*, 72, 1961, pp.335–8.
40 T. de Chardin, *The Future of Man* (Collins, London 1959) p.94.
41 Eugene H. Peters, 'A Framework for Christian Thought', *Journal of Religion*, 46, 1966, p.375.
42 ibid., p.379.
43 C. Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God* (Archon Books, Hamden, Conn. 1964) p.198.
44 Though, on the other hand, a process or a theology of hope future-fixation could inspire an avoidance of mission of Thessalonican proportions. Hence Rubem Alves labels the idea of the coming of God of the future a new docetism, and welcomes revolutionary thought as a defence against it: the revolutionary cannot overlook the brutality of the present on the ground that the future alone matters. See his *A Theology of Human Hope* (Abbey Press, St Meinrad, Ind. 1972).
45 John 1:4.
46 David E. Jenkins, *The Glory of Man* (SCM Press, London 1967) p.108.
47 James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (James Clarke, London 1901) pp. 323–4 n.
48 In his article 'Advantages and Disadvantages in the Process Approach to God', *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 44, 1977, pp.31–8, E. R. Baltazar states a preference for process thought over against alleged Thomist substance-staticism. In a reply (ibid., 1977, pp.232–42) Maurice Curtin employs a homely illustration: 'Parents can exercise a certain concern for their children which in a certain sense is total. And the reason is that they are independent of their children. But the concern of children for their parents can never be more than partial. God can dominate the whole span of time and history and exercise an absolutely total concern for everything in its individuality. A dependent God, a God affected by the process of creation, is really a contradiction' (p.238). It is worth remembering, too, that many Thomists place greatest reliance upon the third of the five ways which, moving as it does from contingency to necessity (however validly or invalidly—that is not our present point) does acknowledge immanence. cf. A. Caldecott and H. R. Mackintosh, *Selections from the Literature of Theism* (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1931) p.26n. J. A. T. Robinson, for example, has not taken this point, as a reference to Aquinas makes clear. See his *Exploration into God* (SCM Press, London 1967) p.95.
49 Hugo Meynell makes the point in 'The Theology of Hartshorne', *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 24, 1973, p.153.
50 H. H. Farmer, *The World and God* (Nisbet, London 1942) p.6.
51 C. Hartshorne, 'A Philosopher's Assessment of Christianity', in W. Leibrecht, ed., *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honour of Paul Tillich* (Harper, New York 1959) p.179.
52 H. R. Mackintosh, *Some Aspects of Christian Belief* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, n.d. but preface has 1923) p.58.
53 M. F. Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (SCM Press, London 1974) p.21.
54 ibid., p.12.
55 ibid., p.45.
56 ibid., p.113. 57 loc. cit.
58 F. Young in John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (SCM Press, London 1977) p.47, n.47. Dr Young, however, still feels the need of a 'Cavalry-centred religious myth' (p.34).

59 ibid., preface, p.x: 'There is nothing new in the main theme of this book and we make no pretence to originality.'
60 Wiles, *Remaking*, pp.38, 32.
61 E. Troeltsch, 'The Place of Christianity Among the World Religions', in his posthumous *Christian Thought, its History and Application* (London UP, London 1923) pp.3–35.
62 Wiles, *Remaking*, p.26.
63 Wiles, 'Religious Authority and Divine Action', *Religious Studies*, 7, 1971, p.7. Among the more successful attempts to maintain the place of internal, as over against external, authorities was that of the self-styled evangelical modernist, the erudite C. J. Cadoux. See his *Catholicism and Christianity* (Allen & Unwin, London 1928) chs 6–8; and for a sample: 'The ultimacy of the Inner Light does not for a moment mean (what it is often criticized as meaning) that our religious beliefs are purely human productions, evolved solely out of our own minds. The Inner Light is always thought of as the light of God, the presence of His Holy Spirit; and private judgement is carried back to God's own gift of reason...' (p.149).
64 Wiles, *Remaking*, p.27.
65 R. M. Jones, *The Eternal Gospel* (Macmillan, New York 1938) p.20.
66 Wiles, *Remaking*, p.33.
67 ibid., p.38.
68 ibid., p.33.
69 P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Nisbet, London 1953) 1, p.8 etc.
70 Wiles, *Remaking*, p.108.
71 ibid., p.25.
72 ibid., p.43.
73 Professor Hick *has* appreciated more overtly the significance of the 'Christian experience of reconciliation with God'. See *The Myth of God Incarnate*, p.176.
74 Wiles, *Remaking*, p.119.
75 ibid., p.122.
76 Wiles in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, p.9.
77 When he does mention sin—and Augustine—Dr Wiles lowers his guard and is less than customarily judicious. He says *(Remaking*, p.95) that on Augustine's line there is no escape 'from a doctrine of predestination which strikes at the roots of morality, of true humanity and of belief in a loving God'. If such an adverse judgement is not supported, it were better not made. In any case, as we have elsewhere shown, there is a reading of Augustine which is more wholesome than this. See A. P. F. Sell, 'Augustine versus Pelagius: A Cautionary Tale of Perennial Importance', *Calvin Theological Journal*, 12, 1977, pp.117–43.
78 Wiles, *Remaking*, p.76.
79 ibid., p.77.
80 ibid., p.79.
81 ibid., pp.79,80.
82 Church of England, Doctrine Commission, *Christian Believing* (SPCK, London 1976) p.129.
83 Fred H. Klooster, 'Historical Method and the Resurrection in Pannenberg's Theology', *Calvin Theological Journal*, 11, 1976, p.32.
84 Wiles, *Remaking*, p.98.
85 ibid., p.42.
86 ibid., p.44. 87 ibid., p.49.
88 1 Corinthians 15:17.
89 Wiles, *Remaking*, pp.100–1.
90 R. Scroggs, 'Tradition, Freedom and the Abyss', *The Chicago Theological Seminary Register*, 60, May 1970, quoted by D. Bloesch, 'The Missing Dimension', *Reformed Review*, 26, 1973, pp.165–6.
91 P. T. Forsyth, 'A Rallying Ground for the Free Churches: The Reality of Grace', *The Hibbert Journal*, 4, 1906, p.841.