

4. Faith and certainty

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Preface

It is tempting for anyone involved in intellectual or academic work to exaggerate the significance of the problems with which they wrestle. Good, sound immersion in life and in the needs of others is an excellent way of conquering the temptation. But the traffic is not all one way. Good, sound immersion in life and in the needs of others will also convince us of the need for our intellectual labours. These may or may not be in an academic context and it should not be taken for granted that our academic institutions always provide a helpful or necessary context for the pursuit of some important intellectual questions. Those questions arise all the same. And while it seems hard to figure out just how important questions of faith and certainty are in comparison with other things we might think about, it seems clear that they are important questions.

This extended essay on faith and certainty was written seven years ago. Seven years on, I should write it rather differently but it has been allowed to stand. It contains consistent warnings that short-cuts were being taken for the sake of brevity. In light of these, it is as well to take this opportunity to summarize what is going on in this piece and to clarify some points.

'Faith and certainty' really consists of some ruminations on the grounds of Christian belief and the way in which we might justify our claims to be sure of that which we believe. The governing mood is that of the apologeta. It is not straightforwardly apologetic,

in that it is aimed to get Christians to think about epistemological issues and not to offer to non-Christians directly a case for Christianity. It is really about the logic of certain aspects of believing and the logic of claims to certainty. Yet it is clearly some sort of exercise in persuasion as well. So it attempts both to clarify the logic of belief and certainty from within a Christian framework and to suggest a commendation of Christianity to those not committed to it. But it may be asked whether these are not two separate enterprises. This is best addressed by sketching out the argument of the essay or we shall be debating in the dark.

The biblical witness evinces tremendous confidence in the truth and certainty of its claims. On what is such confidence based? Apparently, principally on religious experience and the evidence of the senses. The decisive example of the latter, as far as Christians are concerned, is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is true that the story is told against the background of Israelite belief in God, and assumptions about the Creator's power to effect this or that in his universe. But it is permissible to examine the accounts of the resurrection without insisting on forming beforehand our own definite judgments about those background beliefs, just to see what kind of phenomenon they bring before us. And we emerge from such an examination convinced that the early Christian community believed, declared and sought to give empirical grounds for the belief that Jesus was risen from the tomb. The alleged resurrection is of universal significance. Is the deity presupposed in and revealed by that account really credible?

Many arguments have been offered to demonstrate the existence of God. But in the end, if one pursues these, demonstration is difficult in practice, whether or not appropriate in principle, and one is left at best with the need to form a personal 'intuitive' sort of judgment on a number of features of the world, which we try to integrate in our thought and into that judgment. It is not a personal judgment that is purely intellectual, where talk of God is concerned. For to talk of God is to talk of one who is personal, and personal beings are known by disposing the heart in certain ways in our relationships, not by approaching them as one might a mathematical theorem. If God is known supremely through Jesus, then we approach the knowledge of God by approaching Jesus.

When we do so, it is clear that the religious issue (the issue of knowing God) is a profoundly moral or spiritual issue, forcing the head to attend to those things that are matters of the heart – sin and guilt, holiness and forgiveness. Further, however much the head may wish to suspend belief, life involves commitment to action, no matter how uncertain we are of our convictions. The model of action with which we are presented in the witness to Jesus is the model of compassionate and serving action, one wherein people find perfect freedom. This portrayal of Jesus, whose basic historical truth we need not doubt, reveals the inner fragmentation of our lives. It simultaneously reveals that religious or spiritual understanding is impossible unless the will is engaged, and disposed to understand and to learn. Acquiring faith and certainty, that is, if they are obtainable, cannot be a merely intellectual exercise in the light of the witness to Jesus. This is crucial.

Still, from an intellectual point of view, can we pass beyond possibility, opinion and scepticism with regard to claims to religious knowledge? In principle we can. There is no need to extend scepticism to the moral domain in the sense that we are entitled to affirm a moral certainty of, for example, the evil of torture. Why, then, dismiss the possibility of religious knowledge and religious certainty in matters of the heart? Ultimately, certainty is the gift of the Holy Spirit, but since we are willing to give grounds for our beliefs – since we are willing to defend the rationality of belief in the resurrection, for example – the appeal to the Holy Spirit is not an escape from reason. Ask me why I believe what I do, and I point to the record of Jesus; ask me why I am certain in my belief, and I must bring in the self-testimony of the Spirit of God. God's special action in a particular space and time, far from being designed to bestow religious knowledge on the very few, occluding the universal knowability of his revelation, exhibits an important logic which we should outline. God, wishing to identify himself with humanity, becomes one of us; but that inevitably means that he is confined by that incarnation to a particular space and time, since humans are creatures of particular space and time. Every step is taken, including the writing of translatable Scriptures and creation of a missionary community, to ensure that knowledge of God is not limited to that particular

space and time in which he became incarnate in Jesus Christ.

So what is going on in 'Faith and certainty'? It might be read as an attempt to demonstrate by reason the plausibility of Christian belief. If so, does it not tumble into an obvious snare? For surely there is no such thing as 'reason', something which is common to all, something we can pretend is neutrally deployed without any presuppositions by believer and unbeliever alike. The production of rational evidences of supposed universal validity is surely a thing of the past at best. At worst, that kind of apologetics was always egregiously wrong anyway.

Stated in that form, I agree with the objection. But it is still possible from within Christian faith to describe and analyse the logic of one's own position; to work out why it is reasonable for me. And that enterprise can involve giving the kind of reason that others may be urged to consider. It is possible to grant that there is no such thing as one 'reason' common to all, and to grant that no-one approaches issues without presuppositions, and yet lay out what we regard as reasonable in a way that challenges others. While I should not concur in everything he says, I might draw attention here to the way forward on this matter provided by John Frame in his work *Apologetics to the Glory of God*.¹ Speaking personally, as I examine the grounds on which I believe in Jesus Christ, I cannot easily separate them from the grounds on which I think anyone should believe in Jesus Christ. Much more could be said about the relationship between what is reasonable from a believing point of view and what is reasonable from another point of view. And there is much to be learned from a figure such as the medieval thinker, Anselm of Canterbury, as we think about the connections between believing thought and theological method, on the one hand, and unbelieving thought and apologetic method, on the other. These points could be expounded further, but I hope that enough has been said to indicate how the following essay should be read.

This is not the place to do much more than reiterate yet again what I said above and what I say throughout – that often brevity has been purchased at the cost of adequacy. What is said, for example, about the meaning and significance of Jesus' proclamation of forgiveness or about the possibilities of moral

knowledge and of moral scepticism, really need expansion and modification. Reasons could have been set out to explain why the essay has been written in this form in a postmodern culture, whatever that means. And throughout it all, I have not forgotten that the witness of the life of the Christian community is the vital context for all that is said in words or thought in arguments. All this is said more in the mode of excuse than repentance, however, for I stand substantially on the ground of what I argue in this piece. If and where I am wrong, my hope is that the readers who correct my thinking will do so in a way that strengthens faith and deepens certainty.

Introduction

Many Christians seem quite sure that what they believe is true. Many non-Christians seem equally sure that what Christians believe is not true. But a large number of people, which includes some who call themselves Christians and some who do not, believe both sides to be mistaken. They do not exactly cry 'a plague on both your houses', because such an attitude would display the wrong spirit in such matters. In these matters, they say, we must avoid dogmatism and practise tolerance. And that is why Christians and non-Christians alike, if they say they are sure, are in the wrong. The proper stock-in-trade in matters of religious belief is opinion and possibility, not dogmatism and certainty, so the argument goes.

Such a position is obviously attractive and strong reasons can be given in its favour. Some have detected its roots in the late seventeenth century and since then the tree of tolerance has blossomed into the largest of growths, with enough room for us twenty-first-century birds of pluralistic culture to make our nests in its branches. It is the fact of pluralism that makes tolerance seem so important. We live in a world and society of fundamental religious and moral differences and the situation is practically irreversible. In such a situation, religious certainty is socially dangerous, let alone intellectually unwarranted. For those who are certain will try to impose their views on others and that makes for arrogance and conflict.

'Epistemology' concerns matters of knowledge and of belief. How do we know what we know, or why do we believe what we believe? In this essay, we shall not pursue the social implications of epistemological questions. But we are indicating the social context which gives importance to such questions. Epistemology is a wide and rich field for exploration which has been ploughed for centuries and long before the coming of Christianity. Our study, although it draws on some of this wealth and engages some of the historical issues, is neither a scholarly nor a rigorous treatment of the questions involved. An appended guide for further reading makes suggestions for any who want to go into things more deeply. But we shall, within severe limits, outline an approach to the issue which we are describing as the question of 'faith and certainty'. Our exercise is preliminary but, it is hoped, worthwhile.

Terminology

A colleague of mine was once told that a clear desk was a sign of insecurity. That should give most of us enough confidence to keep us going for a good while. The definition of terms can likewise look like a bit of insecurity; in the presence of an awesomely large subject we spend our time putting our terms in order. But, as a matter of fact, we do need to say something about our terms and concepts at this stage and to signal some distinctions to keep in mind.

The word 'faith' is used in many senses. It has a non-religious as well as a religious use, although sometimes the uses overlap, as they might well do when I say that I have faith in the mechanic who is attending to my car. Our concern, however, is with religious faith. Here again the word is used in different senses. One distinction that is often made is between faith as an internal something lodged in my heart and faith as an external something – that which is believed. When we talk about 'Christian faith' we might mean either. On the one hand, we may speak of people who are weak or strong in faith. Their Christian faith grows, changes, is lost or gained. On the other hand, we may speak of someone who subscribes to the Christian faith, meaning that the content of what they believe is Jesus Christ, God in man, risen from the dead or however we spell it out. We might make exactly the same

distinction with regard to the word 'belief'. However, some also want to distinguish 'faith' from 'belief'. They think of faith as being wider than belief for belief is an intellectual matter, but faith involves not just giving intellectual assent to something but actively trusting as well. So it may be said that we should have not only a belief that Jesus is risen but also faith in the risen Jesus. 'Belief that ...' may just be a matter of the head; 'faith in ...' a trust of the whole person.

With the word 'certainty' we need to distinguish at this point not different notions of certainty but the difference between 'certainty' and 'knowledge'. (Some have indeed talked about the difference between 'certitude' and 'certainty', but I shall not be using the former word at all, so the distinction does not concern us. And others have been happier to speak of 'assurance' than 'certainty' in phrases like 'assurance of faith', but I shall be using 'assurance' and 'certainty' or 'sure' and 'certain' interchangeably.)

Let us consider an example. Supposing I say that I am certain that the First World War was caused by troops from Luxembourg burning down farms in West Wales. Perhaps my father had told me that as a child. Confidently, I tell you that 'I am sure; I know that was how it was caused.' Then you convince me that I am wrong and that my father, one sincerely hopes, had his tongue well lodged in his cheek. What should I say? I could certainly say that I was certain, because I was certain. And everyone might agree on that. But could I say 'I knew'? No, we should not normally allow that. Why not? Because I got it wrong. Really to know something is to get it right, whereas I can be certain about things which turn out to be wrong. What I should say is: 'I *thought* I knew'; that is, I could not have known really, because I got it wrong. But I need not say: 'I thought I was sure.' I was sure, but certainly wrong. When I say I am certain, I seem to be making a comment about my psychological state: 'This is how I feel about this or that.' But if I *correctly* say that 'I know' something, I seem to be making a comment about the item I am talking about, and not just my psychological state. You can only really know what is true.

These distinctions made, we should make clear what we are aiming to do here. A Christian has faith in Jesus Christ, meaning that he or she trusts in Jesus Christ and has certain beliefs about

Jesus Christ. Doubtless, faith arises in different ways, but trust implies certain beliefs that we have, and mature faith seeks to advance by understanding ever better the truth about Jesus Christ. We shall be concerned with the truth about Christ, or the truth of Christianity. But how should we regard what we think is the truth? If we have faith, is that something which falls short of knowledge? And if it falls short of knowledge, are we ever justified in saying that we are certain? These are the kinds of questions that will exercise us. They are practical and not just intellectual. If I try to go about sharing my faith, I may be accused of false dogmatism, of being certain of things which cannot really be known. And I do not want to be dogmatic where I should not be. If the alternative, however, is to advance faith as a possibility, to be tentative and not assured about it, I have an opposite worry. Am I guilty of failing to trust and believe in God and Jesus Christ properly and doing faith, religion or Christianity an injustice? At the end of the day, what we are trying to do is to find intellectual integrity in relation to Christianity. This is no trivial pursuit.

The biblical picture

When some Christians say that they are sure that what they believe is true or that they know that what they believe is true, they may be doing so for a variety of reasons. We are often unprepared to admit these reasons. Sometimes, we are insecure. We do not like this wild world with its innumerable options for thought and action. So we seal ourselves off and refuse to admit doubt. Sometimes, we are arrogant. Some of us are temperamentally unable to be tentative about anything. Dogmatism in all things, doubt in nothing; that is our method in religion. And in fact, the above things often go together. Some of the most strident and dogmatic Christians are secretly insecure.

There is, however, another reason for being certain or maintaining that we know. The Old and New Testaments bear witness to a faith which is assured and believes itself justified in being so assured. We can know the truth of those things which we believe with assurance. We cannot study the ins and outs of biblical terms here, just as we cannot engage in an historical exploration of

epistemological discussions. The attempt to relate biblical to philosophical vocabulary, which is an important theological task, is a large exercise in itself. But a wide variety of phrases in our English Bibles rightly convey a connection between the notions of faith, certainty and knowledge. Examples are Luke's 'so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught' (Luke 1:4); Peter's 'We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God' (John 6:69); the famous connection of faith with certainty in Hebrews 11:1 and the exposition of knowledge and revelation by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2. If we cannot pursue biblical semantics, at least we must comment on some broad lines of biblical religious epistemology.

It is often said that the Bible introduces God without question. There is no investigation of what we mean by the word 'God' nor a preliminary attempt to prove his existence. That does not imply that these questions are entirely ignored throughout the Scriptures, simply that talk of God gets under way as a pure assumption. From an epistemological point of view, the most impressive fact about God in relation to us is that God is *heard*. We are thinking here primarily of the Old Testament. He speaks; there is a word of God and words from God. As we read the account, centuries later, we may be puzzled by this. What exactly was it like to hear God? At times, it appears to be a literal hearing of the ear and we might scrutinize the accounts of the revelation on Mount Sinai, for example, whether to Moses or to the people, in that connection. More often, however, it seems to be an inward hearing, a sense every bit as clear as the outward sense, a clear sense that God is saying or communicating something. We get this impression in the case of Abraham, for example. Clearly, what we have is something which we can label 'religious experience', whereby people are sure of God and of what he is saying. I use the phrase 'are sure'. It is an interesting question and well worth considering whether there are hints in the Old and New Testaments that the coming of Jesus Christ meant the dispersal of doubts that might have lingered in the Israelite mind about God. We must consign this to the growing list of subjects we have no space to treat! At all events, the account of faith in the Old Testament, though tried and tentative and striving, often unconsciously conveys to us a sense of a confidence

people typically had that God has spoken and that we may know what we are supposed to do in obedience to him.

The New Testament scene is dominated, of course, by Jesus Christ. A visible person is now centre stage. The Old Testament had already emphasized the importance of what is seen. Hence extraordinary events and visible phenomena attest to the fact that the Lord really has spoken. The word interprets the events and the events attest the word. But God himself is almost always an unseen presence and those incidents that talk of people seeing God witness to the very exceptional nature of such experience. They also invite consideration of what exactly 'seeing God' means in such a context, for in the New Testament it is stated, in the spirit of the Old, that 'no-one has ever seen God' (John 1:18). This is very striking, since it is stated at a point where the contrast between the old and the new is described: 'For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1:17). Even bearing Moses' experience and Jesus Christ in mind, John goes on to say: 'No-one has ever seen God', but he immediately emphasizes that something has happened now to our knowledge of God: '... God the only [Son], who is at the Father's side, has made him known' (John 1:18; translations vary). In his first letter, John says that the person 'who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen' (1 John 4:20). So the invisibility of God is reasserted in the Johannine witness.

Yet, there is a sense in which, according to that very same witness, we can talk of seeing God, and this in a different way from the old. This is where Jesus Christ makes the difference. The most explicit and deliberate statement of this is the one recorded in John 14:9: 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.' God as he is himself cannot be seen with the physical eye because he is not a physical being; God is 'spirit' (John 4:24). Jesus, like any other human being, possessed both visible characteristics (a body) and those characteristics we discern spiritually (goodness, gentleness, and so on). The New Testament testifies to Jesus as one whose spiritual being was not like that of any other human being, for he was uniquely related to God. Indeed, he is sometimes explicitly called 'God'.² One cannot see the deity of Jesus, in one sense, more that one can see God. However his personal

appearance in particular space and time obviously has deep consequences for religious epistemology. Faith, certainty and knowledge of God are now focused on Jesus Christ.

What accounts for the confidence with which religious claims are voiced in the New Testament? We should distinguish here between two things. The first is the confidence that God exists, that he can speak and has spoken, as we found in the Old Testament. The second is the confidence concerning Jesus that we meet in the New. The first confidence was shared by the disciples and opponents of Jesus alike. No-one tries to prove to the Jewish opponents of Jesus that there is a God and that he spoke in the Old Testament. Christianity is often described as a form of theism, belief in one God, and Judaism, Islam and perhaps some Hindu traditions, are its alternative forms. The New Testament account, to all appearances, presupposes a theistic framework. How we can be confident of that framework is a question it seems not to address. It is a confidence born not of Jesus but of the Old Testament witness. At least, so it seems on the surface and we shall not try to penetrate beneath it here. But there is the 'second confidence'.

Confidence about Jesus comes about in slightly different ways. According to the reports, at least some of those who saw and heard Jesus during his earthly life were convinced by what they saw and heard. Conviction varied amongst his disciples during that period of earthly life, but took solid hold of them as witnesses to the resurrection. On the other hand, the majority in the early churches had neither seen nor heard. They were convinced by the witness to what was seen and heard. No doubt this witness took various forms, but we should not minimize the importance of the words and deeds of Jesus. The gospel writers who set out to portray Jesus report the words and deeds, and, in particular, Luke and John deliberately draw attention to their importance.³ The words 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed' (John 20:29) must not be misunderstood. Clearly, if faith in Jesus was to survive the first generation of disciples, it could not depend on people seeing and hearing Jesus as he was seen and heard on earth. But it might none the less depend on the fact that *others* had seen things, and this is implied by the overall thrust of John's Gospel.

So much for faith and certainty centuries ago, but what has it to do with us? Can our faith be formed in the same way? Is certainty available to us? Can we know? It is tempting to think that the logical order for starting our investigation is to enquire first about the God of Israel and then about Jesus Christ. Doubtless there is more than one way of doing these things and although I am setting out things in a deliberate order, there is no suggestion that this is *the* order in which to look at the matters before us. There is, however, something to be said for starting with Jesus Christ. For although those who first believed him did so presupposing belief in God, it does not follow that all other times and places must first ask about God apart from Jesus before enquiring about Jesus himself. Possibly those of us who have not come up through Hebrew religion will be convinced about God by Jesus. As the four evangelists speak of Jesus in the light of the resurrection, perhaps we should speak of God in the light of Jesus. If we start with Jesus, we at least start with a concrete, historical phenomenon, a datum of history which we almost all agree to be given. We shall not argue here with those who maintain that Jesus never existed; but we shall start with the witness to Jesus and everyone agrees that we have that, even if the witness really had no object! So what are we to make of this?

The hinge

Whenever we consider the witness to some event or other and find ourselves needing to assess it, we do two things. We ponder the nature of the witness and we ponder the character of the witnesses. If an alleged event is an ordinary event and a witness reliable, we normally assume the truth of the report. If an alleged event is an ordinary event and a witness unreliable, we suspend judgment. If an alleged event is highly unusual and a witness unreliable, we are inclined to disbelieve. If an alleged event is highly unusual and a witness reliable, we might find ourselves in a quandary. We believe in accordance with both the nature of what is said and the character of whoever says it and we weigh both to reach a verdict. Assessment can be quite a painstaking business and we admit that in what follows we must take some short-cuts.

What is clear in the case of the witness to Jesus is that it is in its nature highly unusual. That is so from almost any angle, religious as well as non-religious. It is presented not as an ordinary but as an extraordinary story. Biblical critics often argue that we must not naïvely believe that the evangelists were trying to record historical facts. It is not even a case of historical facts in a theological framework. Rather, gospel writers employ a rich and sometimes sophisticated method of weaving together story, rhetoric, event, symbol and theology in a literary way to present us with a whole, powerfully rendered world generated from their religious understanding. Now there are debatable matters here which we must leave aside, as is now our unfailing custom! What is indisputable, however, is that, whatever else is intended, we are intended to believe that an extraordinary person spoke extraordinary words and performed extraordinary deeds. If this witness comes to its climactic point anywhere, it is in the witness to the resurrection. The witness to the resurrection is the hinge on which the New Testament account turns. It launches the *kerygma* and is pivotal for the four evangelists who write their accounts in its light. In fact, the four gospels are preaching *kerygma*. If we start to consider the witness to Jesus anywhere, then, this is a logical place to begin.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ

We are on the trail of faith and certainty, and the resurrection seems an obvious place to start. 'If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith', and '... if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile ...' (1 Cor. 15:14, 17). However, it may seem, at the same time, that we have landed ourselves in a difficult dilemma. If we are enquiring into the credibility of the witness to the resurrection, we surely cannot get too far without making certain assumptions about God, the laws of nature, and the possibility of miracles. Should we not have started by examining these assumptions?

It is, of course, true that most of those who try to evaluate the witness to the resurrection will come to it with preconceptions about its possibility, preconceptions which themselves need to be

tested, if possible, and preconceptions which influence the investigation. Yet, it is quite in order to see how far one can go with the investigation of the data without depending on the aforesaid, often called 'metaphysical', assumptions. We must not be too ready to prescribe in advance just how far we can get. Let us think of it from an historian's point of view. Whatever we say about historical method, the historian deals with the unique. It is difficult to generalize about what the historian may or may not investigate or conclude, because in order to generalize successfully one would have to investigate the whole of history, to see what kind of phenomena crop up in it. Faced with a set of reports about the resurrection of a dead man, the historian may plausibly assume from the outset that he or she cannot settle the matter. But we are not asking anyone to settle the matter at the moment. Just what will emerge from the investigation awaits the investigation itself. We have a religious investigation afoot, but, as a matter of historical fact, a set of reports have played a decisive part in the formation of Christianity, so we simply want to cast a preliminary eye over the reports. Certainly, some will want to lay down a stronger line here: our belief in the possibility of miracles or our beliefs about the laws of nature must be derived from a study of supposed miracles or apparent violations of a law of nature, it may be said. So we *should* start with reports. That may or may not be the case. We simply want to pause with an historical phenomenon to see what, if anything, we can make of it.

The first thing on which we must insist is that the gospels intentionally convey as a matter of historical fact that the tomb was empty and that it could not have been otherwise if the risen Jesus truly was identical with the crucified Jesus. This may seem obvious but it is often obscured. Thus, when he made public pronouncements on this some years ago, the Bishop of Durham made much of the fact that the resurrection was about much more than empty tombs or the fate of bones. In saying that the resurrection was 'much more' than this, he and others are quite right. In fact it would be interesting to discover anyone who had ever denied it. The resurrection has to do with our justification before God, the present lordship of Christ and our future hope. The question is whether it also has to do with an empty tomb; whether it is 'less

than' that, not more than that. Literary and religious wealth in the gospels there may be, but quite obviously they also embody the intention to state certain facts.

A great deal hangs on this. One reason that people either despise or deny the religious importance we should accord to an empty tomb is that they are captivated by the realm of ideas. What is a bundle of reports about women and tombs compared with weighty ideas of sublime divine and human realities? They sound intellectually dull and religiously impoverished. This outlook has elements of truth but far greater elements of error. Christian faith is and always has been more than intellectual acceptance of the claim that certain events have taken place. And if we have been guilty of impoverishing its content, we must put our 'facts' into perspective. But Christianity is not a religion out to generate intellectual excitement. The facts of life are too serious to strive for that *per se*. It is interested rather in our humble acquiescence in the truth. And if the truth be a matter of receiving testimony to event, so be it. The gospels witness not to ideas but to that 'which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched ...' (1 John 1:1)

We should keep in mind the contrast between testimony and idea when we consider the exact form which the witness to the resurrection takes. 'Witness to the resurrection' is not strictly witness to the event of resurrection, for no-one witnessed that. It is nevertheless witness to its fact, by experience of the appearance of the risen Jesus in conjunction with the fact of the empty tomb. There are plenty of conceptual problems that arise here. What is the supposed relation between the continued and the transformed elements in the risen body of Christ? What properties does it supposedly possess after resurrection and what is their relation to any properties which his supposedly ascended body possesses? Some believe that once you begin to ask those questions you get into inextricable difficulties and wish you had not started to talk about 'facts' at all. Conscientious theology will accept that such questions as these may be perfectly valid and take responsibility for responding to them one way or another. But the scriptural testimony stems not from the philosophically or the theologically educated, but from what ordinary people say that they saw. 'We

‘speak of what we know’ (John 3:11), and it is facts, and not concepts, that are presented to the world as the foundation of faith and assurance.

We stress the importance of the fact that the gospel intends to bear witness in this particular way, because it confronts any reader with a question that is scarcely avoidable. It is true that we must be sensitive to literary genre, cultural particularities and world-views very different from our own when we try to understand an ancient text. But having worked through all these and any other considerations, the stubborn fact remains. If it is clear that the gospels mean to communicate the fact of an empty tomb and a risen Jesus identical with the crucified Jesus, what is one to make of it? If all this is seriously intended, we are bound to give it a serious response. As a first step we need to recall the text itself.

Even a cursory reading of the texts stumbles upon an irony here. If, indeed, we speak of the evangelists’ interest in historical report and the centrality of the resurrection in their witness, we should expect that report to be as clear as anything we can find in the gospels. If facts matter, we may say, they matter here; but if ever facts are confused, it may be retorted, it is here. When we compare the resurrection narratives in the four gospels, we find a rather bewildering conflict. One does not need to be a nasty-minded semi-pagan sceptic to discover that; it is apparent to anyone reading the accounts in an English, or any other, text. And the conflicts surround what happened at the tomb and the appearances of Jesus, the very things, unfortunately, we have highlighted. So if people suspect that behind this investigation there is a barely hidden agenda, a desire to rest faith and certainty on the reliability of the biblical reports, they will say that we have blundered into a swamp. We have sown our own destruction and the destruction of faith. I shall not rehearse here the familiar account of the conflicts which appear in the text.⁴ But do they help to discredit belief in the historicity of the resurrection and force us to abandon at least this path to faith or certainty?

A ‘conservative’ approach to the biblical material can take many forms at this point. It may be argued that while the resurrection narratives appear to contain discrepancies, they do not in fact do so. Then alternative positions can be taken. It may be urged that

although we have reason to believe that there is no conflict (on the basis of a particular view of Scripture), we cannot actually demonstrate that there is no conflict. The harmony of the accounts is a matter of faith and not of demonstration. Alternatively, one can proceed to essay a demonstration that there is no conflict. On a rather different view of Scripture, it can still be maintained that there are no conflicts, but this time it is not that one believes this on principle; rather, one thinks that a thorough investigation of the data actually reveals that there are no conflicts where we thought there were. Another line is that there are no *significant* discrepancies between the accounts, only minor ones. We could ring many changes on these defences, but it is impossible to trawl through all these options. Their assessment would involve us in a discussion of the nature of Scripture which is theologically important but unmanageable within the limits of our project.

Here let us assume, just for the sake of argument, that there are discrepancies. We need to keep in mind the fact that discrepancies as such do not entail the overall falsity of an account which contains them. We are all perfectly familiar with examples of reports that differ on some things but agree on their main point and are credible at that point. Traffic accidents will be described differently by different witnesses and they will sometimes clash in their descriptions. This clash might be important if one wants to assign blame aright, but the fact of the accident will not be in dispute. Discrepancies can be severe or slight; they can concern things of importance or things of relative unimportance. The weight we attach to them depends on the particular case in point. In relation to the question of the resurrection, the question must be whether any alleged discrepancies are of such a kind as to cast doubt on an empty tomb and make the witness to the appearances of Jesus fundamentally incoherent.

This subject has been discussed for a very long time and predictably we cannot pursue it. What is clear is that the accounts do not collide on the two points at the heart of their witness. They agree on the fact of an empty tomb and a risen Jesus identical with the crucified Jesus. These are the things they want to establish by their witness. Those who wanted to overthrow their testimony would have had to address the two vital issues concerning the

allegedly empty tomb and the alleged appearances of Jesus. And it is the persistence of these very beliefs as we find them in the New Testament documents that is intriguing.

We can indicate this by turning to the familiar evidence contained in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. When Paul wrote to the Corinthian church in the fifties, he was entirely confident of the witness to the resurrection of Jesus and virtually invited doubters to check the stories for themselves (1 Cor. 15:3–8). Many to whom Jesus had appeared were still alive. Paul, at any rate, was probably thoroughly familiar with these testimonies and felt no qualms in referring people to the witnesses. He all but provided questioners with contact numbers and addresses. Although he refers specifically to the appearances and not to an empty tomb, there is no hint that he could conceive of the one without the other, any more than we find them separated in the gospel accounts, and he explicitly speaks of something that happened 'on the third day', which strongly suggests the empty-tomb traditions.

The Pauline testimony is intriguing because it confirms one's convictions that the gospels contain claims that, as far as we can tell, should have been quite vulnerable to refutation. Gospel criticism over the last decades has thrown up a variety of purported reconstructions of the formation of the resurrection narratives. People differ, for example, on whether the accounts of an empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus, conjoined in the gospels that we have, were always associated and both very early. But although we must be tentative in any reconstructions, one is forced to ponder the significance of the emergence of these traditions. It is hard to work out how an empty-tomb tradition could come into being unless the tomb was empty. Even many years on, there should have been no trouble in discovering the burial place. So there should have been no trouble in scotching the story if it were false, and the references to names and places that powder the gospel accounts are most extraordinary if the tomb was occupied. Of course, an empty tomb does not indicate resurrection; according to Matthew, Jews of his day were satisfied that the tomb was empty, but they attributed that fact to theft on the part of the disciples (Matt. 28:15). And, of course, when bodies disappear from tombs it is far more likely that they do so by some natural

causality of that kind than because of resurrection.

Such a general likelihood, however, does not count for very much in this particular context. As the gospel writers saw things, what they reported certainly was unlikely when viewed in terms of general likelihood but compelling in the context it was made, namely that this was a unique, divine intervention in human history. Theology aside, the problem with the theft idea is the widespread claim amongst disciples that Jesus was seen, not in the form of a vision which required no bodily continuity with the crucified Jesus, but in a form which did evidence some bodily continuity.

Now widespread delusions are possible, as are planned conspiracies to proclaim dastardly lies. Strange and sinister things happen in religion, as everywhere else. Furthermore, we are not in a good position to elaborate all the options, let alone assess them, as we speak of an event so long ago and documented in such a way as this. But as far as anyone can judge, if we concede the intention of the gospel witness, we are bound by certain alternatives. The alternative to the truth of the witness really seems to be either deceit or delusion in the case of a considerable number of early disciples. This would of course be a sorry outcome of the life-work of Jesus, who sought to teach the difference between delusion and truth in religion and hypocrisy and sincerity in speech. In fact, Jesus would probably turn out to be the least successful founder of any religion we can think of. Yet the early Christian communities exalted truth-telling in their midst and exuded humble confidence before the God to whom they prayed and to whom they gave such thanks for Jesus Christ. Still, tragedy is the human condition, and there is plenty amiss in religion, to say the least. So we must suspend a positive verdict on this witness.

Now I warned from the outset that we were taking short-cuts. Nevertheless, I hope we have said enough to show that we are confronted with evidence which demands a verdict. If the nature of the biblical witness makes it difficult to accept, the idea we get of the nature of the witnesses, if they were so thoroughly unreliable, is also surely difficult to accept. As a casually interested general reader or as an *historian* one may leave the matter unconcluded. But *personally*, if one is religiously serious, one cannot. According to the gospels, we are dealing with matters of

universal significance here. If Jesus really rose from the dead, then the whole affair seems to impinge dramatically on my existence. The crucial question is whether or not it is plausible to believe in the sort of God supposedly responsible for the sending and raising of Jesus. To this question we now turn.

The existence of God

As we said earlier, it would have been possible to begin our enquiry into faith and certainty by starting with God rather than Jesus. And over the centuries, argument over the existence of God has gone on without reference to Jesus. A number of arguments for the existence of God have been proposed. The topic is still a lively one in contemporary philosophy of religion. These arguments usually deal with theism in general, that is a belief in God shared by many Jews, Christians and Muslims and some others. They include arguments that take their departure from the world about us. How can this universe exist at all without a Creator? Or how can this universe be so orderly unless it has a Designer? Again, there are arguments that take their point of departure not from the world about us but from an examination of our experience. Can religious experience, in all its historical length and cultural breadth, really be illusory? Can our moral sense be explained unless there is one who gave us a moral law? Many people will accept the importance of trying to answer these questions, but there are other arguments which can look very much like the plaything of professional philosophers. Such are the 'ontological' arguments for the existence of God which try to show that the very idea of God leads us to affirm his existence.

Among the traditional arguments for the existence of God, however, there have also been 'historical' arguments and these have had reference to Jesus. Historical arguments, or the arguments from history, purport to show that some phenomena in human history constitute evidence for the existence of God. In the past, the argument from miracles was particularly important here; how can you explain the occurrence of miracles unless God was behind them? The resurrection is a crucial example of a miracle. So an argument is possible to the effect that (a) the resurrection of Jesus

occurred and (b) its occurrence is evidence for the existence of God. Now perhaps we think that it is clearly implied in our discussion so far that this can never work. For it seems that we can believe in the resurrection of Jesus only on the assumption that God exists. If so, we cannot use the resurrection as evidence for God's existence, for we should need to assume the existence of God to believe in the resurrection in the first place.

But we must pause for a moment to notice how our arguments sometimes work. Consider a heavy case that was moved from one spot in my house to another. I am a little baffled because I thought I was the only one strong enough to lift the case. However, the best explanation I can come up with is that my ten-year-old son shifted it. On the assumption that he is strong enough to shift the case, my problem is solved. But why should I make that assumption? Well, actually I make that assumption only because the case has been shifted! I need the assumption to explain the facts, but it is the presence of those facts that generate my assumption. This is logically a perfectly proper procedure.

Our example is not meant to be analogous to the case of resurrection. In our example we are dealing with an indisputable datum: the case was moved. In the case of the resurrection, it is precisely the datum which is at issue. Nevertheless, the example interestingly displays the logic of certain arguments. When I say that I can believe that 'x' occurred only if I assume 'y', that does not stop me from using 'x' as evidence for 'y'. So I may grant that I can never believe in the resurrection unless I make the assumption that there is a God, but studying the witness to resurrection may press me towards that very assumption.⁵

What study of the resurrection reports forces me to do is to consider rather seriously the question of God. To be sure, plenty of other things may force me to do that as well, but the very specificity of Jesus and of resurrection claims sharply focuses the belief that there is a God at work in the world. It may be right to press for explanations of 'the world', 'order', 'morality' and 'religious experience', but these are big and even rather unwieldy sorts of ideas; they are important but it is difficult to get a handle on them because they are in one way more complex and indeed more abstract than a person and a report about an event. The data

is rather harder to hold in one's head while one is trying to think it through. Nevertheless, the attempts have been made. And it is usually conceded that none of the so-called arguments for the existence of God actually offer proof of his existence. Indeed, some thinkers aver that, to the contrary, we can disprove the existence of God or at any rate show that it is highly improbable. What, then, about probability rather than proof? Will the arguments take us some of the way if not all the way to affirming the existence of God? Will they give us some evidence, if not conclusive proof? Or will they not even get us that far?

To repeat our refrain: it is impossible to survey this long-standing debate, still being prosecuted. Some will consider some arguments for God's existence to be stronger than others; likewise, some will consider some arguments against God's existence to be stronger than others. In contemporary philosophy of religion, the arguments offered on different sides of the debate have become technically very rigorous. For example, there has been a celebrated attempt to weigh probabilities in a rather mathematically exact fashion, emerging with the conclusion that the balance of probability is in favour of the existence of God. The problem with this is one common to the debate as a whole. It all calls for logical calculations which most of us cannot make and even for those who can make them, so much weight is put on getting the exact arguments right that if one step in the argument is logically faulty, one has to work out another way of getting to one's conclusions or give up those conclusions. The whole enterprise, almost by its definition, is precarious and unlikely to yield anything conclusive, certainly not for the unphilosophical.

This is not to say that the whole exercise is completely valueless either for the religious believer or for the unbeliever. For arguments are very often attempts to turn intuitions into demonstrations. You may well show me that an argument I produce for the moral superiority of socialism over capitalism is false. I agree that my argument does not hold water, but I think that although my argument is wrong, my conclusion is right. So I look for a better argument. Now perhaps I am pig-headed and should give up my conclusion, but perhaps I am not really pig-headed and quite rightly keep my conclusion but admit that I am not very good at

arguing for it. What I show in such a case is that my belief does not really depend on my ability to argue well for it. And this happens in technical philosophy as well as at a humbler level. Arguments are reformulated, showing that the belief is not the result of an argument. Indeed, if important religious beliefs were the result of argument, we should be in a sorry state, since very few are expert in argument and those that are know how inconclusive arguments are. The underlying 'intuitions', then, or whatever we may want to call them, often precede and survive arguments. These 'intuitions' about the connection between the ideas of God and morality, or God and created order may still be worth investigation.

However, if, as a matter of fact, we are inclined to the existence or non-existence of God less by logical exactness than by a rather more intuitive method, it is also frequently the case that it is not one feature, but an accumulation of features that impress us. What many people have, when they think about it, amounts to an overall impression: the fact of a material world; the elements of order in it; the religious experience of humankind; the mysteries of conscience; the phenomenon of Jesus Christ and perhaps even the puzzles of the ontological argument – together they suggest God to us. We do not make a logical deduction about each item, but a kind of judgment about the whole, though we shall probably give more weight to some things than to others. Our reason is fully involved in that judgment. Our judgment is formed on the basis of pondering different ways of explaining the world, morality or religion, and is formed as we try to think through the implications of these things. However, it is not really a formal and logical deduction.

Now the way we put things together in judgments may be very hard to describe philosophically but it is a very familiar experience. It is as though we often find some intuition working away, not apart from our normal reasoning process but not something we can identify either with just the correct logical steps. 'Intuition' is potentially a dangerous word. It may be used as a cloak for resigning from argument and retreating into the recesses of subjective judgment. This kind of 'subjective judgment' may be difficult to commend to people who simply do not share that intuition. So perhaps we should use the word 'insight' instead of

'intuition', although they can mean different things. But whether we prefer insight to intuition or want a sharp distinction between them, we are pointed to an interesting and crucial reality in our 'epistemic' functioning – jargon for the way we function when it comes to knowing and believing. Things certainly work that way in that most important area, our perceptions of and dealing with other people. Much that rightly passes for wisdom in life is a sort of intuition or insight. We greatly prize the wisdom which understands people and people's motivations. Blessed are we who digest the book of Proverbs! Our insights or intuitions about people can be frighteningly near the mark and are certainly not irrational, but they cannot be explained easily by analysing logical processes. When we think of religion, then, we must make room for intuitive judgments or insights, and when we think in general, we must observe that these function very importantly in our assessment of people. From considering the fact that there are intuitive factors and judgments that play a role when people think about the existence of God, we have moved to the related reminder that insight and wisdom play a decisive role when we are trying to understand other people.

It is important that we connect the two things. The problem with some of the arguments for the existence of God is that they treat God as though he were not a living, personal being to whom we are personally related, but as an object whose existence and nature is subject to disinterested scrutiny. Now certainly there is nothing wrong with treating a person as an object of thought. For certain purposes that is exactly what we must do when we try to understand them. But we do so, or should do so, within a certain context of relationships. We enter into relationships of respect, kindness, service and love or their tragic perversions – heedlessness, cruelty, domination and hatred. It is possible to have wisdom and insight born of bitterness and there is effective witness to this in literature. But we have plenty of reason to believe, too, that the wisdom and insight that best enables us to understand and relate most fruitfully to other people comes in a different context, a context of willingness to learn and to serve, of humility and of love. Understanding in personal relationships, therefore, is neither a merely logical exercise nor something which develops quite

irrespective of our personal attitudes. On the contrary, personal attitudes make all the difference in the world. They can cloud or they can advance our understanding. Understanding is a matter of my attitudes, what we shall term the disposition of the heart, as well as something of the mind.

It is no different in the case of God. *If* there is a personal God, why should we believe that we can advance far in knowledge and understanding by purely intellectual processes? We are assuming here that knowledge of God may have parallels to our knowledge of other people. But, it will be protested, it is all very well to say this if we assume that there is a personal God. Our problem at the moment is that we can make no assumptions either way. The question of the existence of God is an open question. So what is the use of talking about attitudes of humility and so on in relation to the knowledge of God?

The answer is that there is a great deal of use; indeed, that it is vital. According to the Christian witness, if the reality of God's personal being comes into view at any point, it is with the person of Jesus. We have talked about resurrection and about general belief in God. But it is the resurrection *of Jesus* that has been proclaimed, and in the coming of Jesus it is said that God has appeared in his world, no longer a theme of thought that is beyond, above or apart from it, but now personally within it. As we have said, the record of Jesus presupposes the existence of God. Jesus, however, was to be proclaimed, and was proclaimed, to the whole world, including those ignorant of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

According to this proclamation, our attitude to God is brought to light in our attitude to Jesus. Jesus was a person. He can be understood, if at all, only in the mode of personal knowledge. We have found that this is bound to require a certain disposition of heart. It follows that if our enquiry about God takes the form of an enquiry about Jesus, it requires a certain disposition of the heart to conduct it aright. This is not to prejudge the result of the investigation. The candour with which we try to approach the witness to Jesus may lead us to say that Jesus gives us no special reason for us to believe in the existence of God. But this is certainly the direction in which we must now turn.

Approaching Jesus

Although a consideration of Jesus promises to focus our question about God, we may wonder whether the gain in specificity is offset by loss in accessibility. Ideas about God can be entertained, shared and discussed, but understanding a person requires knowing something about a person. And that, it may be said, is our problem here. Jesus as he was is hidden from view, available only according to the impression he made on disciples and believers who do not pretend to be dispassionate. The problem that faces us is often called the problem of the historical Jesus, and the dilemma it causes for faith is accordingly labelled 'the problem of faith and history'. However, since the issues were first formulated in those terms, the biblical and theological scene has changed so much that the formulation can sound dated. Many things contribute to this, whether we think of 'literary' or 'narrative' approaches or the entry of post-modernist or feminist critiques of the entire theological enterprise. If 'faith and history' was once something of a minefield, it is now either much more of a minefield or it is a field falling into disuse, depending on the way one looks at things.

There is no substitute for the need to work through the various options here; neither religious epistemology, nor any other important religious subject, yields its secrets quickly on the academic plane. Nevertheless, we must not be tempted to think that because there is an array of options, we must be plunged into greater uncertainty. A range of proposals indicates that a subject is lively; it does not necessarily mean an increase in the number of plausible proposals compared to a situation where there are fewer options. Furthermore, certain presuppositions can be common to an otherwise varied assortment, or certain explicit contentions always advanced. In rejecting these for any reason, one may be rejecting a great number of options.

What one needs to underline positively here is that, whatever else we say, there is no getting away from the historical element in the biblical testimony. It is obviously found in the gospels. It is all but impossible to read the introduction to Luke's Gospel in any way other than as a declaration of intent to take an interest in historical fact. Luke bears sufficient resemblance to Matthew and

Mark for us to make the same judgment about Matthew and Mark, a judgment we might in any case make if we considered them apart from Luke. Because of its distinctive features and its interpretation over the years, we must leave aside comment on John's Gospel here. But the distinction between the synoptic gospels as more 'historical' and John as more 'theological' is widely recognized as simplistic, to say the least; one can argue either for the 'theological' in the synoptics or the 'historical' in John. Here we should just observe that John presents the material in terms of the historical causes of controversy over Jesus Christ; what was seen and heard of him generated this or that response. And, as hinted earlier, the Johannine literature (specifically John and 1 John) is perhaps the most epistemologically self-conscious literature in the New Testament.

It is important to hold stubbornly to the internal evidence that the evangelists were interested in historical report. (If John causes people problems, one should read 'synoptists' for 'evangelists' from now on.) One should certainly attend to the literary devices of the evangelists, the differences in their reports and the distinct forms which 'historical report' may take. Doubtless we are capable of imposing views of 'history' or 'historical' on the evangelists in a way that obscures what they were doing and which presumes false notions of 'accuracy', 'report' and, indeed, 'fact'. But here, as we found when we touched on the resurrection, if we pursued all this in more detail, we should drift in the direction of discussion of our notion of Scripture. Nor can we ask to what extent the rest of the New Testament bears witness to an historical interest. Opinion differs, for instance, on the place Paul may have allocated to the earthly Jesus in his missionary preaching. What is clear, however, as the emergence of the canon reflects, is that the story of Jesus is an integral part of the witness of the church. For our particular purposes, we isolated the matter of the resurrection, but one cannot do that for long without seeming curiously abstract, despite our talk of historicity. The gospel narratives which report the resurrection are credible only in conjunction with the whole witness to Jesus. If this man really was as he is reported there, the resurrection is, in retrospect, 'fitting' and credible in a way it would not be if we were simply told about a man who lived, died and rose again.

At this juncture, it is enough to draw attention to one singular feature of the evangelists' account. The evangelists wish to present Jesus not only as good, remarkable, authoritative, humble, active in healing and trenchant in teaching. Also they wish to present Jesus as one who proclaimed the forgiveness of sin. And they wish to present Jesus, implicitly but clearly, as himself without sin. We must explore the significance of this for the question of approaching Jesus.

Forgiveness and sin

There are two things that are distinctive about the reports of Jesus' forgiveness. The first is that usually Jesus does not forgive sins directed against himself. It is sometimes rather casually stated that Jews believed that only God could forgive sins; Jesus forgave sins; therefore, Jesus implied his deity. But it is not true that only God could forgive sins. I am supposed to forgive my brother or sister who sins against me, as the Lord's Prayer assumed. What is marked about Jesus is his forgiveness of sins directed against God. And that, of course, is the truth of the point about his claim to deity.

The second distinctive is related to this. Jesus forgives rather than just pronouncing forgiveness. One could modify the claim that Jesus was distinctive if he pronounced the forgiveness of sins directed against God, as the spokesman of God, in prophetic style. He would not then be doing the forgiving; he would be pronouncing the forgiveness of another. But in the case of prophets, as of priests, the last thing a reader of the Old Testament is tempted to do is to accuse prophet or priest of blurring the distinction between God and themselves. In fact, their very presence, which has a mediating function, just underlines the gulf between God and humans. But all the gospels record how Jesus drew attention to himself in a way foreign to prophet and priest. He was quite naturally and quite rightly viewed as a prophet, according to the gospel evidence, but according to that very same evidence, he did not fit the mould. This appears all the way from the contrast with John the Baptist to the eucharistic words in the upper room. In this context, quite apart from the records of the

stories themselves, the forgiveness of Jesus is utterly distinctive.

One might be sceptical about the historicity of these reports, but on what grounds? How does one explain their invention? If, as a matter of fact, Jesus said anything at all about sin, and if he had even a fraction of the prophetic consciousness of its gravity, one would have expected an entirely different report of things from what the gospels offer. We should not get the impression that he himself was always free from sin. Yet the evangelists are implicitly committed to the sinlessness of Jesus. They do not say that in so many words, but their belief in it can be inferred in two ways.

Firstly, while arguments from silence are often dangerous, they are often telling as well. In this case they are. While Jesus talks of others' sins, he does not confess his own. There is no sign of sorrowful penitence or repentance for what he himself has said, thought, done or failed to do from the time of his baptism in the Jordan to his death on the cross. He seems weighed down, yet one cannot find any trace of his being weighed down by his own guilt. Such is the clear presentation of Jesus.

Secondly, the kind of goodness positively portrayed is singularly incompatible with sin. A kind of holiness is manifest, neither an ostentatious separation from the mass nor one that is interwoven with sharp consciousness at one's own ethical distance from a holy God. It is not that the memory of all others always shows traces of their shortcomings. Gautama the Buddha is a striking example. What distinguishes Jesus from Gautama in this respect is not some moral superiority which appears on the surface of the literature. It is that Gautama does not appear in a tradition where the distinction between a holy God and a defiled humanity constitutes the cardinal issue in religion. Where it does, as both Old and New Testaments alike indicate, the appearance of an apparently sinless Jesus is rather extraordinary.

Of course, it can be maintained that the evangelists were deeply confused or seriously misunderstood Jesus or that they wilfully turned on its head the message of the one whom they claim led them into God's presence. The only reason for taking this line seems to be the difficulty of believing that Jesus forgave as he did. For if he did, what are we to make of him? Are we prepared to shift from the evangelists on to Jesus the accusation of a confusion or

deceit so radical as to destroy his religious credibility altogether? Even many of those professing no adherence to Christianity will balk at that. The ministry of forgiveness, no less than the resurrection, demands an explanation.

Now this intensely sharpens the situation in which we find ourselves when confronted with any morally impressive person. Even if we will not swallow sinlessness, we should acknowledge that the portrayal of Jesus is a standing judgment on all manner of dispositions: selfishness, greed, hypocrisy, dissimulation, to mention but a few things. But at least we may offer ourselves the somewhat spurious comfort that we are all in the same boat, though widely different in degrees of moral achievement. Still, we can live with our imperfection. Not so when it comes to the portrayal of Jesus. He places the whole question of the relationship between God and ourselves in the most serious conceivable moral context. Indeed, the words 'moral', 'moral achievements' or 'moral superiority' begin to sound rather thin to describe human lives, conditions and relationships exposed to the searchlight of the person of Jesus.

The message is clear. The supreme religious difficulty is not epistemological but moral or, if we have abandoned that word, spiritual. There *is* an epistemological difficulty, there is a problem of religious knowledge, but it is generated by a spiritual condition. That is why we are back with a vengeance to the question of the disposition of the heart. If there is a God to be known through knowing Jesus, God cannot be known without a certain attitude to Jesus. We must press on now to say more about that attitude.

Conditions of understanding

During his imprisonment after being caught in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, Dietrich Bonhoeffer tried to finish a study which eventually came out under the title *Ethics*.⁶ Bonhoeffer had long been reflecting on the nature of Christianity in a world where people thought they could manage without God and certainly where you could explain the world and events within it without recourse to the idea of God. Bonhoeffer was persuaded that a proper presentation of Jesus Christ was the key theological

response to the needs of the day, and in *Ethics* he began by trying to show how two things went together in Jesus Christ: freedom and action. Jesus' freedom lies in his complete unity with the will and word of God. That unity impels him into sustained action whose quality Bonhoeffer captured in a comparison between Jesus, the man of action, and the Pharisee, the man of judgment. It is very strikingly effected.

In delineating the action of Jesus, Bonhoeffer convinces us of the importance of action, not by imparting a conviction to the head, but by impressing its significance on the heart. Here is human life as it is meant to be, entirely oriented to action. And of action, we must say two things.

The first is that it is in some sense inevitable. One may contrast 'action' with 'inaction' or 'contemplation', but we can also rightly think of both inaction and contemplation as forms of action. That is, we are always doing something with our time, however 'inactive' or however 'contemplative'. In this sense, action is not an option; it is the given of human life.

The second is that it is in some sense committed. Judgments and opinions can be suspended; action cannot. I may have reservations about whether I should go to London or not, but the moment I am on the train I have committed myself as fully as the person who goes confidently to London, at least until the next stop. I may be in a moral dilemma about whether I should have an abortion or not, but the moment I have it, it is an entirely committed action. What must happen is that I either do or do not have an abortion and no amount of suspended judgment on its rights and wrongs alters the imperative to act in one way or another. Action is imperative whether or not I can change my mind or do something about consequences.

However much, then, we protest our inability to conclude on weighty matters of religion, we are forced to act. Jesus' action, as Bonhoeffer presents it, is the judge of ours. It judges ours not because Jesus is sniffing out the weaknesses of inferior spirits, but because he is bound to act, as we are, and by the nature of his action he seems both to parade the high vocation of humanity and to convict us of our own failure. One does not have to agree on either of these points. Jesus' action is designed entirely in the

service of his neighbour, but we can say that even if this has some laudable aspects, we disagree with the principle of loving our neighbour as ourselves. And while we admit imperfection, we are certainly not going to get caught calling ourselves failures. So we are not bound to assent to and to live by the light of Jesus' action. But we are bound to action.

This casts in a different light the business of defending or of justifying Christianity. Where positive world-views, religious or otherwise, are propounded in contrast to Christianity, their adherents are in the same position as Christians. They must justify or defend their positions if they require justification or defence from Christians. Where people eschew dogmatism, however, the onus seems to be on Christians to prove their case or at least to show its strength. But that is never the true situation. All are committed in action. Those who would suspend judgment and cannot suspend action may be asked to justify why they act in one way rather than another. If they offer a justification, certain beliefs bound up with the actions will come to light; actions are generally not performed in some entirely beliefless vacuum. And so the people in question are in the same position as the others: if they require a justification from Christians, they must be called to account themselves. Alternatively, they can offer no kind of account or justification or defence of why this and not that action was performed, why they did do this (regarded as morally wrong by others) or did not do this (regarded as morally right by others). But if people refuse to give any sort of account here, it is impossible to demand some sort of justification for Christian belief either, since justifications apparently do not matter.

The kind of vision of action, then, that Jesus offers is a vision of life in the service of others. We are of course making a minimal claim here, neither examining whether Jesus performed miracles nor propounding a doctrine of unique self-giving action in atonement. Are there any reasons for commending this vision rather than other visions?

The answer is that we cannot give decisive reasons, but we can and should draw attention to the importance of compassion. Interestingly enough, one of the most striking expositions of the moral status and nature of compassion comes in the work of one

of the first atheistic philosophers of the West, and one of the first to turn East for inspiration, Arthur Schopenhauer.⁷ Schopenhauer argued that compassion alone has moral worth. And he took compassion to be a very powerful phenomenon. In compassion I mysteriously identify myself with the sufferings of the other. The mystery is that, whereas I seem to experience the sufferings of the other not as mine but as his or hers, I genuinely do experience them myself. There is profound identification. Schopenhauer went on to conclude that the best explanation for this was that, in some way, I am actually one with the other person in my being, and he drew on oriental religious philosophy to expound this point. Here he exalted the superiority of the East over Christianity, although he granted that the discovery of *agape* does indicate one meritorious feature in Christianity.

Schopenhauer argued that the moral life was a matter of advancing the well-being and alleviating the pain of the other. He was shortly thereafter attacked on this point by a far more virulent anti-Christian, namely Nietzsche. But in public life and public pronouncements in the West, an implicitly Schopenhauerian line is taken, independent of any belief in God and to that extent practically, if not theoretically, atheist. Let us, then, take this position seriously. Supposing I grant compassion high, if not highest, moral worth. My life should be suffused with it. Should I not perhaps dedicate my life to the well-being of my neighbour, in every act seeking the good of the other, identifying with the pain of the other not only to empathize but to be empowered in the struggle to alleviate pain?

If I have even struck out in the direction of this conclusion, the portrayal of Jesus indicates the deep fragmentation of my life. Bonhoeffer wrote of the simplicity or integrity of the action of Jesus. He was struck by the fact that knowledge of good and evil, which some people think is a sign of our moral dignity, is a sign of our moral disunity. For we were not created to know good and evil. Knowledge of good and evil is the result of the fall. We were created only to know the good, only to know God, who is the good. Jesus did not live a life choosing between good and evil. This is how Bonhoeffer expresses it:

The freedom of Jesus is not the arbitrary choice of one amongst innumerable possibilities; it consists on the contrary precisely in the complete simplicity of His action, which is never confronted by a plurality of possibilities, conflicts or alternatives, but always only by one thing. This one thing Jesus calls the will of God. He says that to do that will is His meat. This will of God is His life. He lives and acts not by the knowledge of good and evil but by the will of God. There is only one will of God. In it the origin is recovered; in it there is established the freedom and the simplicity of all action.⁸

We, on the other hand, cannot successfully harmonize action and knowledge. What we morally ought to do or to be, we find ourselves unable to do or to be. If I discern some sort of moral pull to do or to be something, then I ought to be able to do or to be that thing. But for whatever reason, I fail. I can bring action and knowledge into line by saying that if I cannot do something, then I was never really obligated to do it anyway. Serious exposure to Jesus shatters that way of thinking. Jesus does not possess a humanity that has nothing to do with my own; I feel demands made upon *my* humanity, confronted with the self-giving service of Jesus. Jesus does not act in a way unrelated to my actions; I feel demands made upon *my* actions, confronted with the self-sacrificial actions of Jesus. True, the early Christians proclaimed the distinction of Jesus and the uniqueness of a sacrificial death. But they summoned believers to live as ones now participating in his risen humanity. His humanity was to be expressed in theirs. For anyone willing to exalt compassion and face the facts, it appears that Jesus possesses an integrity, in the sense of a unity of conviction, will, intention and action, that we do not have.

In Jesus, sinlessness and integrity come together, as we realize that our disunity is not there in him. There is no moral restlessness, excuse or anxiety, no regret at action undertaken or action omitted. While we talk the language of sinlessness we may seem to be talking of an entirely different humanity to our own. Why make out that anyone should feel badly about not being like that? Surely

you cannot have a guilty conscience just because you are not perfect. However, when we think not in terms of sinlessness but in terms of the concrete integrity of conviction and action, it is different. We feel not only something amiss, but something deeply fragmented in our humanity, something that needs healing.

We could say that Jesus is portrayed as an ideal, but that does not ring true. The least we can say is that the biblical witness intends to present us with the singular humanity of Jesus. St Paul and the other converts or disciples sought to integrate in their own humanity faith and love, truth and humility. The proclaimed source of the new creation, as they now regarded themselves, was the risen Jesus. It was the power of personal influence, personal moulding, not the power of an idea that they believed they were experiencing. Ideas as such do not play a large role in biblical Christianity. They are not the source of change. But did Paul and the others, then, *baselessly* suppose there was in Jesus an integrity and influence that moulded them according to his perfection? One can say so. But is it plausible?

So we have arrived at this point. The witness to the resurrection is evidence that demands a verdict. Hence we enquire about God. We find that we will learn of him only if he exists as Christianity thinks he does, if we approach him personally. That entails a disposition of the heart. Jesus is the point of approach. As one who forgives, he identifies the fundamental religious condition as one of spiritual alienation as the root cause of any intellectual perplexity. As one who acts, he brings our actions to judgment. And all along we insist that what we ascribe to Jesus we ascribe to an historical person and not to an idea. Of course, some will remain sceptical. We have not yet tackled the matter of certainty. But one thing surely has become clear. We are incapable of understanding religious faith, certainty or claims to knowledge if we disregard the question of our personal, spiritual disposition.

It is at this point that we must remark on the human will. We are quite used to thinking of the contrast between faith and reason when we reflect on religious belief. There is another contrast, less familiar to many but equally familiar in the history of thought, and that is the contrast between will and intellect or will and understanding. When we act, we often do so after thinking about

it. Both understanding and will are components of action. I may decide that I ought to act in a certain way, but although I may understand that, it does not guarantee the action. Action requires an act of the will. So much is plain enough, but we need to draw attention to other ways in which the will is related to the understanding.

Supposing, for example, you ask me about the effects on the environment of the use of leaded petroleum. I might say to you honestly that I don't exactly know. But I may choose not to know. I may suspect that it is detrimental to the environment but that means the bother of converting my car or changing my life-style, so I don't want to know too much about petrol and the environment. I have a sneaking suspicion that I am causing some damage and I might admit to you quietly that I *ought* to find out and know what there is to know. But I can say quite honestly that I have not looked even casually at the evidence or tried to check the reliability of those statements that tell me that I might be doing damage. So I have chosen ignorance. This is akin to the process we call 'turning a blind eye'. We can genuinely profess ignorance or uncertainty but we might have opted to be in that position. Of course, we might investigate a matter assiduously and remain ignorant or uncertain at the end, but that is a different matter from the ignorance of unwillingness or unconcern. In this case, I have a desire not to find out, so the will has directed the intellect to go and think about something else instead.

Or supposing you are arguing with me about my responsibility to give away more of my money. I am pretty reluctant to do so, but this time I cannot avoid the issue in the middle of an argument with you. Because I wish to come to certain conclusions rather than others, I shall look for arguments. Just how far I can genuinely persuade myself in these things is a matter for separate discussion, but I can certainly advance arguments for a position I wish to hold. Further, if I am sufficiently skilled in argument, I might get the better of you. Possibly you could have come up with an argument that forced me to agree with you, but I am very glad you did not. Here, again, the will affects the intellect. Whatever is going on inside me, the external presentation of my case to the outside world is not the result of a dispassionate consideration of

the arguments for and against. It is the result of selecting a line of argument which gets me to my desired end: that of hanging on to my money. The will has driven the intellect to look for good intellectual moves in the argument.

Or supposing, finally, that I hold a certain business practice to be ethically wrong. Other people may defend it, but I am sure it is wrong. One day, still acknowledging its wrong, I yield to the temptation. My yielding becomes occasional and finally habitual. The more I yield, the less the conscience protests. The less the conscience protests, the more open I am to the intellectual persuasion that, after all, it may not be unethical. Five years down the road, you ask me whether this conduct of mine is ethically in order. I answer that whereas I was once certain it was wrong, now I am not so sure; it is an open question on which one should not be dogmatic; personally, I see nothing wrong with it. Again, whether there is some suspicion deep down that I am doing wrong, I do not know. As far as I and other people can judge, I have honestly changed my mind. But note how it happened. It happened when the will to act according to what I understood to be right was weakened. The failure of my will has led to a clouding or changing of my understanding. It does not matter for a moment whether I was right or wrong in the first place. Maybe I was over-scrupulous, legalistic and wrong in the first place. What is interesting is the process by which I have changed.

Now the will is vitally involved in our assessment of the claims of and about Jesus. To follow our first example, I may suspect that Jesus preaches pacifism when I should rather go to war, so I choose not to look into that. To follow our second example, I know that Jesus calls for sexual self-control, but I don't want to exercise it, so I look for arguments against that proposition. To follow the third example, I used to believe that Jesus taught the renunciation of wealth but I have gradually found it hard to obey and now I am really unclear as to whether he taught it or not. We are not concerned here with what Jesus did teach on violence, sex or possessions. We are deliberately choosing areas of vital personal or political concern for many people. The fact is that on the terms that they are presented, Jesus calls for a personal revolution that transforms my practices and my allegiance. If I admit his moral

authority, let alone his claims to be speaking for God, I am bound to change my life or at any rate stop justifying my failure to change my life. In other words, I cannot approach the question of Jesus in a disinterested way. And we may say that more broadly of God. The possibility of God's existence is one of vital existential interest. So while we may profess uncertainty about God or Jesus, we can have our motives, too. We do not want to be sure either of God's existence or of Jesus' authority. Uncertainty, in this case, is the symptom of moral or spiritual fault, not the product of genuine intellectual grappling.

Let us be clear about what is being said. The point is *not* that all lack of faith or certainty is the product of unsound motivation. Indeed, we should remember that the argument cuts both ways: people believe or profess belief as well in order to satisfy certain wishes in a way that is no more 'honest' than those who are religiously evasive. We are making two points. The first is that we must not assume that epistemological issues are just intellectual issues. The second is that where Jesus is concerned, the issue at stake is profoundly existential and not dispassionately cerebral. Yet one may think that if this is true, we are intellectually swamped. If most, if not all, of us approach these issues with our hidden agenda, can we settle arguments on the objective level at all? Are we not all doomed to scepticism? And does that not serve the purposes of irreligion rather than religion? These are questions we must now face.

Scepticism

Loosely, we can characterize scepticism as the claim that nothing can be known by us. It featured long before the coming of Christianity and enjoyed a renaissance around the time of the Reformation and afterwards with the republication of classical sceptical texts. So when rival religious positions sundered the social unity of Europe, scepticism began to come into its own. It is to all appearances an ideal and attractive position to hold in our irreversibly pluralistic culture.

Scepticism, however, is varied, and its alternative forms are interesting. We spoke of the belief that nothing can be known by

us but admitted this was a loose way of speaking. The reason is this. Again, long before the coming of Christianity, some sceptics denied the claim that we can know nothing. They denied it because it was not a piece of consistent scepticism. For to say that we know nothing is to utter a dogmatic proposition. A dogmatic proposition is not a proposition spoken by a dogmatic person or in a dogmatic mood. It is an assertion about something. There is a definite or determinate claim involved. Now if we truly know nothing, how can we claim dogmatically that we know nothing? We are saying that we know that nothing can be known by us. If we were truly sceptical, we should not say dogmatically that nothing can be known by us. We should say that we cannot even know whether or not anything can be known by us.

Life gets rather complicated at this point. For on the one hand, all this may not get us very far; we may deny that we can know that nothing can be known, but every time someone claims to know anything, we shall deny that this thing can be known as well. So perhaps we are back with the original scepticism. On the other hand, the exercise draws attention to the fact that those who deny on principle that anything can be known are being as dogmatic as any religious or other person who insists on the possibility of genuine knowledge. There are two routes we may take in considering the challenge of scepticism. In the first case, we may ask whether quite generally, our scepticism is warranted. In the second, we may ask whether religion has the resources to respond to scepticism. Let us take these in turn.

Is scepticism warranted?

Scepticism can extend to the material world, as when we say we do not know if there is a chair in front of us. We leave aside this kind of scepticism. It can also extend to the world of ideas. Take our moral notions. It is wrong to torture, right to alleviate pain. Can we say we know this? Some will hesitate to extend the realm of knowledge from the realm of 'facts' (the chair over there) to the realms of 'values' (this action is right or wrong). 'Facts' have to do with our five senses. 'Values' are different. We shall linger with this world of values, or this moral world, because it is rather more

helpful for our interest in religion than is the discussion of an external world.

Let us take a tragic case, not in the spirit of clinical analysis, but in order to see if it helps us in our thinking. One reads a report of a two-year-old child beaten or tortured to death. Was that action morally wrong? The majority of people in Britain today would say it was. Every single public comment on such a case either states or assumes it. It is not argued. Why not? Is moral right and wrong not entirely subjective? So it may be said that we should not say: 'this *is* morally wrong', as we might say 'this is 2001', but we should say: 'this is morally wrong for me or for us, as far as I or we are concerned'? Most people would want to say 'this *is* morally wrong', but they might be puzzled all the same, for 'values' are not quite the same as 'facts' about the world. So they are attracted to the case for moral relativism. This is the belief that there are no moral absolutes which we should all accept and which are binding on us whether we like them or not.

According to this view, moral standards are of our devising and not the expression of some universal or absolute truth, not grounded in some given order apart from what we devise. There are some complex questions here about the meaning of 'objective' and 'subjective'. We must avoid them. Only two things can be said here. Firstly, if we say that all moral truths are relative, we seem to be propounding a dogma, and (as with scepticism) why should we accept a dogmatic assertion that all moral truths are relative? Secondly, although people might turn a sympathetic ear to the case for moral relativism in general, they do not adhere to moral relativism in practice. Hear them on the environment, the Tory party, homosexuality, women's liberties, child abuse and they are certainly not relativists. They believe that certain conduct is morally wrong and certain action morally obligatory. And if certain persons or whole cultures think otherwise, it is a sign not of acceptable differences, but of corruption. They should change.

Now in accordance with the practical convictions of the majority, I think we should maintain that some moral certainties are justified and that we have moral knowledge. There is no reason to believe that we should call our understanding anything less than knowledge. I am thinking of the kind of brutality and cruelty in

our torture example. I am not asking things like: should you cause slightly painful torture to a prisoner because if you do, that is the only way to get him to admit where the bomb is planted which will kill several innocent people? And I am not claiming we should be morally certain and can have moral knowledge of everything. But it seems to be that the denial of any moral knowledge whatsoever rests on two false notions.

The first is an unduly restrictive notion of what counts as knowledge. 'Knowledge', for some people, is something within the province of scientific investigation or something which is immediately given in our sense experience or perhaps it is of a mathematical type. The world of moral values has to do with our judgments about things outside the realm of the five senses. So we cannot 'know' here. But why not? What justifies our reservation of the term 'knowledge' just to the realm of mathematics, logic, sense-experience or science? For many people, what justifies this is that for something to be 'knowledge' it must be capable of proof of some kind or it is just evident to our senses. But humans are not constituted so that knowledge is restricted to these things. Sensory experience or truths of logic or mathematics have to do with just one area of human knowing. Moral apprehension is a different area where scientific proofs do not apply but where there can be knowledge all the same. Nor need we discover some moral perceptions that are common to all people. If people at certain times and places do not seem to regard the cruel abuse of children as morally wrong, it does not mean that we must surrender the claim to knowledge any more than we doubt our knowledge that the world is spherical just because some people believe the earth is flat. In both cases, we lament the ignorance involved. The ignorance is sadder if it is moral than if it is scientific.

The second is that some think that knowledge is the kind of thing we need to justify intellectually, whereas doubt is always intellectually respectable unless we can argue someone out of it. The contribution of Descartes is very well known in this respect. Descartes, in the seventeenth century, set out as a matter of intellectual integrity to doubt everything he could, so that anything he claimed to know, he knew after overcoming the doubt. Whether or not this exercise had merit, the fact is that we must ask

why doubt is more fundamental than knowledge, in the sense that I have to justify the latter but not the former. I can express a doubt that this world exists, but that is not to say that there is any good reason for seriously doubting it. Reasons can be offered for seriously doubting it. But why should those reasons strike me as more convincing than my conviction, in common with that of every other sane adult, that this world does exist? Let us put it this way: what justifies our doubting? We should apply this to the moral realm also. The reasons for seriously doubting the wrongness of torture are far weaker than the reasons for accepting the correctness of our moral apprehension, if 'reasons' can take us very far either way.

Does religion have the resources to respond to scepticism?

There are also specifically religious or theological reasons for challenging scepticism. Supposing it is said that nothing can be known by us. From a Christian point of view, that is not just a restriction on human abilities. It places restrictions upon God, as well. If God exists, God may have the capacity to communicate truth to me. If we say 'We can know nothing', what we are saying is really 'There is no God with a capacity for communicating anything to us so that we can know it.' So scepticism turns out to be dogmatic not just in general (when someone says that nothing can be known) but in religion in particular (there is no God of this kind). The issue, then, turns on the question of whether we have grounds for supposing that there is such a God. That is precisely what we have tried to indicate. We have added to this the suggestion that at least in the moral sphere, we have an example of knowledge of things invisible. We cannot rule out such knowledge in religion, then, just because it trades in things not provable by the senses. More than this, we have spoken about moral knowledge without really asking where it comes from. In Christianity, however, the source of our conviction is God himself. There can be no higher authority, if there is a God, and what we apprehend when God communicates something has every entitlement to be labelled 'knowledge'. Here we must speak of the Holy Spirit.

It is said of a preacher that he had scrawled in the margin of a

sermon: 'Shout here: argument weak.' One suspects that this sort of thing happens with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in religious epistemology. Unable to justify our certainties, we appeal to the witness of the Holy Spirit. What is regrettable here is not only the taking of the name of the Lord in vain, but also that it obscures a perfectly proper and important appeal to the epistemological relevance of the Holy Spirit. According to the broad biblical witness, it is the Spirit that enlightens our minds to understand, receive and embrace the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Assurance and knowledge come from God himself by the Spirit. As God created, spoke through the prophets, became incarnate and effects our salvation by grace, so certainty is the gift of God.

The obvious objection to an appeal to the Spirit is that it seems to open the door to all manner of weird and irresponsible claims and it seems to be a strategy open also to more respectable and more credible, non-Christian, religious adherents. That is precisely why we have spent time on grounds for Christian believing. There are grounds to which one can appeal. So it is not a matter of irrational or supra-rational 'anything goes'. But here we meet a vital distinction. *It is the distinction between the logical grounds for our belief and the existential cause of our certainty.* We can give reasons why we believe something, but they do not account for our certainty. We can appeal to the Spirit for certainty, but we can give grounds for what we believe.

An aspect of this process can be explained by observing how debate and persuasion sometimes proceed. Think how much harder it can be to explain how our certainty comes about than to give reasons for our beliefs. Supposing, for example, we are perplexed about the question of abortion. We hear someone argue the case against abortion and find ourselves drawn to it. We think it is quite a strong case, but we lack certainty. The person who argues it, however, is certain, and we find it hard to account for that certainty. So does the other person. She can repeat to us the reasons why she is against abortion and we see the point. For her, however, it is a matter of certainty, for us no more than a plausible position, persuasive on balance, but not entirely convincing. Yet we are examining the same data. We seem to agree on the same things. It is just that where I find that there is still a chance that she is

wrong, she really thinks not. We put it down to a number of factors, one being temperamental difference, perhaps. But over the next months, the more we go over the argument, the more convinced we become. Finally, we share the other's certainty. How did that happen? We do not know. All we know is that the same argument has impressed us more every time. Nothing new has been added. It is just that what once made for probability now makes for certainty.

In such a case, there are no *separate reasons* for being certain added on to the reason for believing something to be likely. There is some parallel to this in the case of religious belief. We admit that when we consider the arguments for the resurrection, the possibility of God's existence and the person of Jesus, we can show up to a point why we believe what we believe and therefore show that our beliefs are not groundless. What we cannot do is to show how we can pass beyond merely believing in the sense of deeming something likely. That is because the reason for being certain is the action of the Holy Spirit on us.

It is instructive here to recall the efforts John Locke made in the late seventeenth century to work out the principles of religious epistemology.⁹ Locke first set about outlining the principles of epistemology in general, without reference to religion. Here faith and knowledge stood in contrast and both were the product of reason. When we work something out from our reason and think something is probable but we cannot be sure, we end up with faith. When we work something out from our reason and demonstrate the certainty of something, we end up with knowledge. All this happens when reason is trying to work its own way to conclusions. But what happens when someone claims a different source of knowledge, a source in revelation? Locke agrees that if something comes from God, we may be assured of its truth. We can use the word 'faith' in its peculiarly religious sense now to describe our response to God's revelation. The problem is: how do we assess claims that revelation occurred? By reason, says Locke. Reason makes sure that we understand what is being said; that what is said does not contradict anything known to itself; that there are good grounds for believing, like miracles or reliable witnesses. But Locke's difficulty was this: the most that could be shown by reason

was that a claim to revelation was *probably* true. And yet, if God has revealed something it is *certainly* true. Locke had some difficulty in showing how certainty could emerge from probability.

What he did not do was to speak of the witness of the Holy Spirit. His reason for this was his great fear of what he called 'enthusiasm' – groundless, wild and irresponsible claims that we should believe all manner of things with assurance because the Spirit told us so. Had Locke given room to the Spirit, he would have improved his account of things. We must be careful here. We are not suggesting that *first*, we get as far as we can by something called reason and *then*, having reached possibility or probability by reason, speak of the Spirit as giving us certainty. How people become certain varies. 'The wind blows wherever it pleases' (John 3:8). We are saying simply that reasons or grounds can be given for what we believe. Whether or not it brings us to high probability is a point I shall leave aside; 'probability', whatever its uses, is too large an area for us here. The point is that when it comes to laying out the logic of our epistemology, we should hold together the grounds and reasons on the one hand and the certainty on the other.

The memorable description of Christian assurance in this connection comes from the pen of John Calvin.¹⁰ Calvin asked how it was that we knew the Bible was the word of God. We know it by a kind of intuition on our part, as we know the difference between bitter and sweet, or black and white. But we can come to such conviction only by the Spirit and the 'internal witness of the Holy Spirit', where 'internal' (in all probability) means 'within us'. Calvin went on to say that there were, however, evidences that the Bible was the word of God. Commentators have long argued about how important these were to Calvin. Some maintain that they are important in his scheme; others that they can be omitted. But however we interpret Calvin, pride of place goes to the witness of the Spirit. 'Evidences' may support or show that we are intellectually responsible when we believe, but they do not convince. That is the work of God the Spirit.

We need not go all the way with Calvin to appreciate that he was right in pinpointing the importance of the Spirit. Some will want to deny Calvin's equation of the Bible with the word of God;

others will accept it, but refuse the suggestion, if Calvin meant it, that it all becomes *clearly* the word of God in the light of the Spirit. Not for the first time, we steer clear here of the wider questions of Scripture. We have concentrated on Christian faith understood as the witness to Jesus, perfect, divine and risen. We conclude simply this. It is through the Spirit that we may be assured and know the truth of what we believe as we reflect on the biblical witness. We can have faith and certainty.

The logic of Christology

Does that make sense? If there is a God who wants people to know of his existence, nature and purposes, would he not have made himself clear? Would not religious certainty be our common experience? There are a variety of ways in which people have tried to answer this question. We cannot cover all aspects of it, but it deserves some consideration.

Supposing, then, that there is a God of the kind that Christians believe in. If no-one anywhere at any time could justifiably say 'I know there is such a God' or 'I am sure there is such a God', then, indeed, we might well doubt the likelihood of such a God. A God universally hidden would not be personal in the sense that Christians have had in mind: personally concerned, able to communicate, with purposes to fulfil. That, indeed, is one reason why notions of God which describe him just as 'the Real', whose nature is unknowable by us, who might be personal or impersonal, are quite unsatisfactory from a Christian point of view. For if we never have very good reason to believe that there is a personal God, then God, if he exists, is either unable or unwilling to communicate with us. Neither divine inability nor divine unwillingness fit in with a Christian view of God as personal. So universal hiddenness implies that this 'Reality' is not personal in any sense Christians have believed him to be. But is the alternative this: if there is a personal God, he should be universally known?

Now of course, people may hold beliefs or know things that they never disclose to us. To that extent, the breadth or nature of religious conviction is not easily amenable to empirical proof. Some knowledge, though unconfessed, is involuntary. That applies

in the non-religious realm. You may have told me that you were once imprisoned for theft. I wish I had never known, but now that you have told me, I don't have much choice in the matter. I am stuck with that knowledge or, if you prefer, that belief. I may never tell anyone and may seem to know nothing. I can deny that I was told anything when it is put to me. I can do something else, too: I can 'suppress' the knowledge. I can tell myself not to believe it; talk myself into disbelieving it. How far I can get with that I do not know, but people can go a startlingly long way in these things. They persuade themselves of something so thoroughly that as far as they are consciously aware, they really do believe it, and it takes some unusual confrontation, trauma or therapy to reveal something suppressed. This is obviously relevant in the case of religious conviction. It is logically possible (to put it at no more than that) that many suppress unwanted beliefs or convictions.

This is related, of course, to what we said earlier about 'disposition'. Pascal, whose *Pensées* is required reading for any concerned with the issues in this essay, emphasized that God's disclosure of himself was congruous with the fact that humans can be closed as well as open to God in their spirit.¹¹ Several times, he drives home the fittingness of the fact that God can be hidden as well as revealed: there is enough light for those who really seek God to find him, but God does not reveal himself to everyone, being hidden from those who do not seek him. And Calvin, whom we cited earlier, himself emphasizes the way humans have suppressed the knowledge of God so that while they cannot get it out of their system entirely, they can certainly obscure that knowledge effectively.

Now it will seem absolutely preposterous to many people if it is suggested that this is universally the case with the knowledge of God. However, my purpose here is not to explore this position, but rather to draw attention to the way moral and dispositional factors can affect our knowing or claiming to know. The line I wish to take here is rather different, consistent with an acceptance or rejection of Pascal and Calvin on the terms that we have presented them. I want to think rather of the logic of special disclosure in particular space and time.

One of the most common and surely the weightiest of

objections to Christian belief stems from the fact of suffering or the manifestation of evil. In my view this is so important that it merits a few words in connection with the theme of this essay, for what we say of faith and certainty may lack much force while that issue is before us. So I have included a short appendix in relation to it. At this point, we introduce it in the context of thinking about revelation and the knowledge of God. For many people, suffering or evil is hard enough to reconcile with the existence of God, but if God himself is immune from suffering, the situation becomes intolerable. If God is credible, he must suffer.

Different views have been held on the question of God and suffering in Christian theology. So let us ask two questions at the same time. Supposing God is personal and wants to show himself and suppose God is concerned to share in human suffering. What is the best indication that could be given of this? Well, God might communicate with everyone telling them that he is both personal and that he suffers. But then we might say 'Prove it!'

So what is the highest proof? Presumably the highest proof is to make a personal entry into his own world in human form, if that is possible, to show through humanity his own being and nature and to suffer as a human being. But to be human in our world and to suffer as a human in our world is to be restricted to particular space and time. So if God is personal and suffers, it must be as a human in particular space and time. It does not help to suggest that he ought to do it several times over, in several particular spaces and times. What about the fact that you can be in only one place at one time, so that you could not in any case, during your earthly life, be in more than one place? Is it harder to believe in the incarnation in one place and time than to believe in successive reincarnations, so that the same person is a first-century Palestinian Jew, a second-century Egyptian, a third-century Irishman, and so on? And we are not even touching on the question of an atoning act in human history. We are concerned simply to note that what seems arbitrary for God, namely special revelation in particular space and time, turns out to be quite the opposite: it is the condition of revealing his nature and sharing human suffering.

Let us press it further. If God is eager for people to know him, you would expect him to find a way of telling us about this

historical appearance. And how better than by someone writing about it? If you write, you write in a particular language. If humans write, they write as humans write, with all their cultural distinctives. Any piece of writing is subject to our problems of translating, interpreting, understanding, and so on. Yet we are still talking about the importance of a personal appearance and personal communication on the part of God. We are outlining its logic. Our procedure must not be misunderstood here. We are not really starting from an idea of a personal God and trying to work out the likelihood of an incarnation and a Scripture. What we are saying is that when people believe in an incarnation and in its testimony in Scripture, it has a logic to it which we can describe in response to those who say that if there is a personal God, everyone would be sure of it. Faith is the conviction of things not seen (Heb. 11:1). Since it trades in unseen things, it is faith rather than sight, but since it deals with an invisible God, it can be certain, not subject to perpetual uncertainty. It is pinned on Christ and the comprehension of Christ is its strength.

Conclusion

When one is writing an essay on a huge subject, one is almost certain to do two things. The first is to leave questions open which in another context one may want to be decisive about. So one often appears more tentative than one really is. The other is to be dogmatic on issues which in another context require cautious and painstaking elaboration rather than definite assertion. Please bear in mind!

Doubt is common in Christian experience. It has many roots and takes many forms. Sometimes we seem to experience a mixture of faith and of doubt. There may be doubt in cases where we, as far as we can judge, are trying honestly to understand or get at the truth of something. There is nothing whatsoever to fear in that. It is far better than one-eyed dogmatism. Openness of heart and of mind is what God requires of us in all things, and those who patiently seek, living according to the light given to them, are rewarded, although it is not always ours to know how or in what form the reward comes along. Why some and not others are certain

is a question we do not need to answer comprehensively, because it is part of an even wider question of why some believe while others do not, a question which we need not feel that we must be able to answer.

There are doubts of other kinds. No-one writes more plainly and straightforwardly in the New Testament than James, but we may be tempted to think that bluntness has given way to harshness when he writes as follows:

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does (Jas. 1:5–8).

James is talking specifically about 'wisdom'. Whatever the scope of that concept, we must heed his words in our broader context. The doubt that James has in mind is not what we may label 'honest doubt'. We do well to read his words here in connection with what is written later in the epistle about asking and not receiving, because one asks with wrong motives (Jas. 4:2–3). James is concerned with doubts that stem from 'double-mindedness'. Most of us are drawn by a variety of things and in a variety of directions that are very attractive and although these are at odds with our religious or our moral convictions, we compromise. We often try to acknowledge God but are rather selective in our obedience. We are not single-hearted and single-minded. It is no wonder that when we ask and pray we doubt, and even less wonder that we do not receive the wisdom which is from above. It is ours to search as diligently as we can and when we find, to obey; it is God's to reveal himself and to assure. Yet such is his concern that he is the fount of our searching and strength of our obedience.

'There are only three sorts of people', said Pascal: 'those who have found God and serve him; those who are busy seeking him and have not found him; those who live without either seeking or

finding him'.¹² Of course, there is no point in seeking if we are quite sure he is not there to be found. Those who profess atheism must be persuaded of the genuine possibility of their error. Those so persuaded must in all integrity seek. And those who seek must come finally to a conscientious resolution of the question 'Who do you say I am?' (Mark 8:29). Life is busy and short, so there is no time to ask questions merely to satisfy intellectual curiosity. While searching, we act. But while acting we meet Jesus again. 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life' (John 8:12). The man or woman of faith believes that if there is such a thing as truth, Jesus is its embodiment. Where there is certainty, we should express it less by saying 'We have the truth', than by saying 'He is the truth.' The truth about God, Jesus and ourselves awaits its public, evident and outward demonstration. Such knowledge as we have is fragmentary, partial and open to the charge of being mere opinion. But that should not make us insecure. Christian faith appropriates a promise that the world will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. Until then, said the prophet who wrote those words, we live by faith (Hab. 2:4, 14).

Appendix: The problem of suffering

This is a question of such importance that although we cannot treat it, we must refer to it. In the light of it, it is easy to imagine people thinking of the argument in this essay as a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

The problem in the form it takes for Christians lies in the difficulties of reconciling three claims. The first is that God is sufficiently powerful to prevent suffering. The second is that God is perfect in goodness. The third is that suffering exists. If we take for granted the third of these, how can we possibly believe both the others? It seems that we must surrender either the power of God or the goodness of God or both, and to many people this last alternative is best, to the point of surrendering belief in God's existence altogether.

The problem of suffering impinges on the account I have given of faith and certainty in at least two ways. The first stems from

belief in the resurrection of Jesus. If God raised Jesus from the dead, he is capable of working miracles in history. If he is capable of doing that, why is his intervention rare, if not completely absent, when it comes to alleviating suffering? The second is broader, but very important. It may be said that we arrive at positive conclusions about religious faith and assurance only by concentrating on certain issues and turning a blind eye to that which stands in the way of faith, namely the fact of suffering. Walking by faith and not by sight turns out to be a matter of closing our eyes altogether to the human condition.

These are serious objections which deserve a response that we shall not attempt here. I shall make, however, three preliminary points.

Firstly, the facts of suffering reinforce the emphasis we place on action in the argument of this essay. If there is any insight available on these matters, we are not entitled to think that it will come to us just when we sit down and think about it. We can hope for it only if we act to do what we can in relation to suffering. Love, which means action, is a pathway to understanding.

Secondly, many of those who deny the existence of God in light of the facts of suffering seem deep down to be questioning his goodness rather than his existence. Deep bitterness and profound anger are often signs that there is an underlying suspicion that God does exist, for you cannot get bitter or angry at a being who does not exist. So it may be that what suffering really induces in people is frequently not refusal to believe in God's existence but a sense that God couldn't care less about what the rest of us go through.

Thirdly, the problem of suffering for religious belief surely lies not in the quantity but in the quality of suffering. Even if all the human race had to suffer in minor ways, we might not hold that it disrupted belief in God. When we think of it, we might conclude that it is not the sheer number who suffer that generates the theological problem, say 70% as opposed to 8% of the world population. Rather, our problem is the *kind* of suffering, its quality and intensity, that is often found. An individual case, such as that of little James Bulger, causes the problem, though tragically we know there are cases of equal cruelty.

Of course, a variety of answers are offered. One line that is taken

is that if humans are to attain the highest good, they can do so only if they are given a measure of freedom, but if they have a measure of freedom, there is the risk of its terrible abuse in an evil way. Again, a world in which there are possibilities of moral good and moral evil must have possibilities of natural good and natural evil too; the only way you can have a world in which one has the moral freedom to break another's arm is if arms are frail and subject to damage in natural ways. Further, the eschatological element is often introduced; there is an order that is yet to come where the evils, injustices and sufferings of this life will be remedied.

Certainly one can ask of all these things whether they contain some truth. Even if they do, however, they do not necessarily contain the answers. Perhaps humans do have some freedom and that is why moral evil is sometimes perpetrated. But did God have to create a world this way? If this is the only possible world, would it not have been better not to have created it? If God can sometimes intervene, why so rarely? The same may be said in relation to natural evil. The eschatological perspective raises in one of its many forms the whole question of faith and reason. If one believes that there is an after-life, it certainly puts a perspective on suffering which we need to take into account as we try to reconcile divine goodness and power with the fact of suffering. Yet, if one asks without presupposing religious truth 'Is it *possible* that the future could at all "compensate" for the suffering of the present?', we might have to remain agnostic. How could we know what amounts to 'compensation', which sounds a very crude word? How could *anything*, we may say, justify misery of *this* intensity? Further, our initial set of questions, asked in relation to human freedom, remain.

I do not think there is an easy answer to the question 'If God can feed, heal or convert hearts, and so on in one case, why does he not do it in many more, if not every case?' What we do need to ponder is this: what exactly are we asking for? Are we committed to believing that the *only* world of people consistent with the existence of God is a world where *all* evil actions were thwarted and *no* suffering permitted? Some people are so committed, quite understandably. Or one can try to envisage a reduction in the intensity or kinds of suffering, though in such a world its

inhabitants might ask exactly the questions we ask. While there are no easy answers and perhaps no answers at all, it is important to recall that our problem is not placed before Christianity and introduced from outside it. The biblical vision of new heavens and a new earth remind us that the only world ultimately tolerable to God is one where he cast out sin, with all the evil and suffering that comes in its train. Further, the more one considers the account of the fall in the early chapters of Genesis, the more one realizes that it is the Bible itself which presents us with the mystery of evil with suffering in its train. The serpent in the garden, however we understand the narrative, has a character and contact with humans whose origin is quite unfathomable. The book of Revelation, in which the serpent is identified with the devil, reminds us that there are dimensions to the human condition that are beyond our power to comprehend. It also reminds us of the battle Christ fought. He was indeed raised from the dead by a mighty act, but it was he too who suffered most intensely. If we hold that God suffers not only in Jesus Christ but in all suffering, this will not 'answer' our problem, but it will alter our mood and make us more ready to believe in the compatibility of the existence of God with the fact of suffering, though we do not understand how.

We said that the problem of suffering impinges on our theme not just because we refer to an act of God in history (resurrection as an instance of miracle), but because we can be accused of pursuing faith and certainty by turning a blind eye to the most significant facts about the human condition. The point is a fair one, but it cuts both ways and this is vital for us to understand in relation to this problem. Let us take an example which risks trivializing the issue, but need not do so if we keep its purpose in mind. Supposing I insist that my son is the best footballer in his village team. You then pick on one of the most vital features of the game, namely his ability to score goals. You point out that he lags far behind in this respect and there are several ahead of him. So how can he be the best footballer in the team? I agree that his goal-scoring performance is actually pretty feeble. But I then speak about his defensive ability; his ability to read the game; his ability to head the ball. I then run through a comparison with all the other players in all significant features of the game and conclude

that overall he must be deemed the best player in the team.

There is nothing wrong with that procedure. As long as I concentrate on one phase, my claims seem to come unstuck, but while I look at the overall picture they are upheld. Now this is *not* an analogy. It just makes a point. From a Christian standpoint, one may well conclude that as long as we simply concentrate on suffering, the case against God looks strong. But we cannot possibly arrive at general conclusions about God by selecting one significant feature of the human condition. Against the fact of suffering we place other facts: the fact of Jesus, the fact of the existence of a cosmos, for example. We may say that we cannot believe in God because of suffering; but we may also say that we cannot explain the mystery of the goodness of Jesus unless there is a God.

This essay has looked at only one side of things. That side of things remains even if we consider suffering and evil. As we are concerned with the question of faith and certainty, strictly speaking, it has been impossible to take on the problem of human suffering, a suffering which is at the very heart of our concern as disciples. Spending time considering the nature of faith in Christ should not lead us away from the problem of suffering. On the contrary, it should guarantee as nothing else that we shall not evade it.

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Notes

¹ J. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994).

² For a swift note on the main candidate passages, see Christopher B. Kaiser, *The Doctrine of God* (Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1982), pp. 29–32.

³ Luke 1:1–4 is, of course, an important text, whereas John, throughout his gospel, is conscious of the empirical bases of faith.

⁴ These range from the number of angels or messengers at the tomb to the location of Jesus' manifestations.

⁵ This example is adapted from the work of William Abraham,

whose book on *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism* can be commended as a whole (OUP, 1982).

⁶ D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Macmillan, 1965).

⁷ *On the Basis of Morality* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 30.

⁹ See details in 'Guide to further reading' below.

¹⁰ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by F. L. Battles (SCM, 1961), vol. i, starting at Book 1.1.

¹¹ B. Pascal, *Pensées*; see details in 'Guide to further reading' below.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 82, para. 160.

Guide to further reading

Although it is not specifically about epistemology, Colin Brown's *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (IVP, 1968) is a good general historical introduction to themes and thinkers that helps us set epistemological questions against their wider background. Brown has rewritten and considerably expanded this account in *Christianity and Western Thought*, Vol. 1 (Apollos, 1990).

Although his theological conclusions on several points need to be challenged, Hans Küng always introduces his material clearly and the sections of *Does God Exist?* (Collins, 1980) which describe different thinkers, including their epistemological contributions, are well worth reading.

Standard introductions to the philosophy of religion are usually the best place to go for someone who wishes to get to grips with the contemporary debates in religious epistemology. There are several of these, including a number of good ones, and they continue to be produced. Two are selected here for special mention. One is that of William Abraham, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Prentice-Hall, 1985); the other is chosen because it is both very recent and readable: M. Petersen et al, *Reason and Religious Belief* (OUP, 1991; 2nd edn, 1998). Both devote a decent amount of coverage to epistemological issues. Peterson et al. have also edited *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (OUP, 1996). See too Paul Helm (ed.), *Faith and Reason* (OUP, 1999).

A general introduction, extending beyond the bounds of

religion, is that of D. L. Wolfe, *Epistemology: the Justification of Belief* (IVP, 1982). But if one wants to delve further into contributions specifically in philosophy of religion, there is a vast and still growing literature. Despite the way that the debate has moved on to some extent (on which the introductions report), two works produced some years ago may be mentioned. The first is Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (Macmillan, 1973), whose approach is judicious and whose argument is still widely discussed. The kind of painstaking and careful investigation of a range of concepts that must take place in any serious study of our issues is well-illustrated in the second work, that of H. P. Owen, *The Christian Knowledge of God* (Athlone, 1969).

Epistemology is of interest to theologians as well as philosophers. Particularly lively contributions have come from the pen of Lesslie Newbigin in recent years and these have two merits. First, they are oriented to the needs of the church and not to the academy. Secondly, they are part of a vigorous attempt at a 'missionary encounter with modern culture'. Although the historical judgments are sketchy and questionable at points, and although I believe Newbigin is insufficiently critical of 'narrative' approaches to the Bible stemming from the Yale school, it is important to digest his contributions. They are: *The Other Side of 1984* (World Council of Churches, 1984); *Foolishness to the Greeks* (SPCK, 1986); *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (SPCK, 1989); *Truth to Tell: the Gospel as Public Truth* (SPCK, 1991). Epistemological issues are discussed mainly in the earlier sections of these books.

It is often the case that pithy or substantial contributions of great usefulness are tucked away in works which do not appear on a standard reading list. Two examples are mentioned here. The first is that of Karl Barth in chapter 11 ('Doubt') of *Evangelical Theology* (Fontana, 1965). The value of this brief treatment lies in its pastoral sensitivity. The second is an older work, probably little read today though its author is still well respected. I refer to John Baillie's work, *The Interpretation of Religion* (T. & T. Clark, 1929), whose seventh chapter, 'The Foundations of Belief', rewards attention.

And of course one should dip into some of the great classical

treatments. I have referred to the contributions of Locke and of Pascal. Locke was one of the most formative thinkers England ever produced and his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Clarendon, 1975), which appeared in 1690, inaugurated a new era. His discussion of religious epistemology is brief but very important and appears towards the end of Book IV in chapters 18 and 19. However, one will miss the deeper significance of these discussions unless one ploughs through the whole work; possibly the argument can be picked up to some extent at IV.xiv.

Pascal's *Pensées*, which emerged earlier in the seventeenth century, is in a class of its own (Penguin, 1966). Whether or not Pascal appeals, much of his literature hits on its head the nail of modernity today as it did in his own day. His discussions of issues in religious epistemology appear at intervals throughout the work, including both his classified and his unclassified papers.

Finally, some regard Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (Blackwell, 1969) as a modern classic. The literature surrounding Wittgenstein, one of the most influential philosophers of our century, is voluminous. It is impossible to comment on his book *On Certainty* in this space; equally, one hardly dares to neglect mentioning it in an essay bearing the title: 'Faith and certainty'.

Finally, as the text touches on the question of the historical Jesus and the resurrection, it is well just to refer readers to one or two books in this area. Generally, despite the bewildering twists and turns of the 'historical Jesus' debate, one should consult both Howard Marshall, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus* (Hodder, 1977) and Craig Blomberg's more recent book, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (IVP, 1987). On the resurrection in particular, there is the enormously detailed investigation by William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1989). We should also refer to the unexpectedly 'conservative' conclusions on this matter that emerged in the treatment of one of the leading German theologians of our day, Wolfhart Pannenberg, in *Jesus – God and Man* (SCM, 1968), chapter 3, section IV.