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Contemporary British Philosophy and Christian Belief

At the Town Hall, Oxford, on 31 January 1957, Mr Michael Foster read a paper on the relationships of Christian Belief with contemporary British Philosophy. In this he defended the idea of a Philosophy based on revelation, after he had considered the two-way connection which might be argued between current philosophy and Christian belief. The idea of a two-way relationship leads to the question whether the belief in the mystery of Christianity is contrary to the demands for clarity by philosophers. 'Revelation is of a mystery. A question which specifies the terms in which an answer is to be given, determines in advance that it shall not be mysterious, because mystery, when revealed, exceeds what we could have anticipated.'

The discussion then opened with a reply from Mr Nowell-Smith who said:

First of all I should like to thank Mr Foster for not doing what so many people do, that is talking in vague terms about 'modern philosophers'. Instead he identifies the philosophers with whom he is concerned by name. He says that the philosophers concerned deny that they form a school or movement. This denial has, in my view, been overdone. It was an over-emphatic way of giving a very necessary warning, a warning to those who expect to find a rigid orthodoxy, a party line in the works of the philosophers concerned. There is no party line, no agreed doctrine, no sacred book. It is more like the vague allegiance people had to political parties—for example the Radicals—before there were any whips.

In his printed paper Mr Foster wanted to call us 'positivists'. I am sure this is quite wrong since, historically, this word was first used to describe the anti-metaphysical position of Comte; later it was taken over by the Viennese philosophers to show that they too repudiated metaphysics. But the philosophers Foster speaks of are not necessarily anti-metaphysical. In his talk he withdrew this and used the label 'contemporary'. This is a word I detest as much when applied to philosophy as when applied to furniture. New College (Collegium Novum) was so called because it was supposed to be a quite new departure in education; it is now a very old college and if the name were not just a name it would be very misleading. In the same way if you

call our philosophy contemporary you imply that it will soon vanish altogether; for the name will look very odd if it survives, which I think it will. Foster uses this name to emphasise the revolutionary character of the movement. But I would remind you that most great philosophers have been revolutionaries. Plato starts the Republic by dismissing all traditional morality in order to build on new foundations. Descartes did the same; so did Locke and, in a way, Kant. They saw themselves as clearing the ground of the rubble of previous philosophies so that they or others could erect a permanent building on secure foundations. All such buildings collapse in fifty years or so. So there is nothing new about being revolutionary; this is not a peculiarity of 'contemporary' philosophers. The main difference is that the current revolution is the work of many hands; we have something more like Collective Leadership. With one possible exception, I don't think any of these philosophers will survive as 'great philosophers' in the way that Plato or Kant have survived.

As I said, there is no agreed doctrine; you can't call any of these philosophers Idealists or Realists, Platonists, Thomists or Kantians. But there is an agreed method; and if we must have a label, let it be 'analysts'. But analysis has been employed in defence of many different philosophical positions. What we have in common is (a) the pursuit of clarity, illumination, understanding, and (b) the method of paying close attention to the meanings of ordinary words. There is nothing new in the first of these points. In what he said about the revelatory character of Greek philosophy and its contrast with the post-Baconian outlook, Foster hinted that earlier philosophers were not in pursuit of clarity. But I think that Philosophers have always tried to get things clear and that this is as true of Plato and Spinoza as of any contemporary philosopher. It marks off the people called 'philosophers' from some others, for example poets and mystics. There have been philosophers who were obviously drawn in both directions, even torn by the conflict. Plato's intense hatred of poetry can only be explained on the grounds that he was a poet as well as a philosopher and, to be a philosopher, he had to turn his back on poetry.

I should like to say something about the attitude of contemporary philosophers to metaphysics. Fundamentally metaphysics is the attempt to answer the question 'What is the world ultimately made of?' But you can ask and answer this question in two different ways. You may think that you are giving the right answer, from which it follows that all other answers are wrong. Most of the great metaphysicians

took it in this way. We can look at it in a different way and be more eclectic. We can read Plato and try to see the world as Plato saw it, read Spinoza and try to see the world as Spinoza saw it, without raising the question 'Which of them was right?' We don't usually ask whether Dante's vision or Milton's view was the right one, Michelangelo's or Rembrandt's. Can't we do this with metaphysicians? I should like to put it to Mr Foster like this; if you ask a question, you obviously don't know the answer—or you wouldn't ask. But you must already have in mind the criteria for judging the answer right or wrong. I mean, if you asked how much this match-box weighed and somebody said 'five inches', you would know that this was not the right answer. But the metaphysician is trying to be fundamental, to give a complete answer to everything from the start. He won't allow any ground outside his system from which we can look at it and ask if it is the right system or not. This doesn't mean that metaphysics is useless; I can look at a metaphysical system in a different way, a more aesthetic way, in the way that I look at pictures or literature.

The fathers of the analytic movement, Russell and Moore, were in fact metaphysicians; Russell obviously so; Moore less obviously, and it would take me too long to defend the statement that Moore was a metaphysician. What about more recent analytical philosophers? I have five comments to make: (1) Some, like myself, went through a definitely anti-metaphysical phase which has probably left its traces. *Language, Truth and Logic* was published when I was an undergraduate; I had about two terms in which to forget everything I had learned and, when it came to schools, I just had to pray that the examiners had read the book. I swallowed it whole; but most of the philosophers Foster mentions were, at that time, either too old to swallow Positivism (or anything else) whole, or too young. For the younger philosophers, positivism is part of the history of philosophy, not a phase in their own development. So, for different reasons, few of those Foster mentions are as anti-metaphysical as I am. (2) Although we have no doctrine and no Bible, I think it is fair to say that, if we had a Bible, it would be Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, which is a very metaphysical book. So also is another very influential book, Professor Ryle's *Concept of Mind*. This book is not, as some people think, a *dissolution* of the metaphysical problem of mind and body, in the way in which the Positivists talked about dissolving problems, that is to say showing them to be pseudo-problems or muddles. Ryle gives an answer to the

mind-body problem, a different answer from Descartes', but an answer all the same. His treatment is not like Ayer's in the last chapter of *Language, Truth and Logic* where all metaphysical problems are dissolved. (3) Contemporary philosophers, particularly the younger ones, think and write about the traditional problems of metaphysics, namely Substance, Time, Mind and Body, Essence and Existence. They sometimes call these problems 'logical'; but the word 'logic' in Oxford has always included metaphysics and the theory of knowledge as well as logic in the narrower sense. (4) The actual title 'metaphysician' is no longer a term of abuse. Mr Strawson once said to me that philosophy just is metaphysics, implying that the other branches, like ethics and logic, are only subsidiary, peripheral or propaedeutic. The real game, what philosophers do when they get down to it, is metaphysics. I am not sure whether Foster would agree about this or not; I hope he will discuss it. (5) Philosophy, as taught in Oxford, is still based on what C. S. Lewis called, in an apt metaphor, 'the right and the left lung of humanism', Plato's Republic and Aristotle's ethics. Of the ten Oxford philosophers Foster mentioned by name, eight are Greats men.

Before turning to the second part of Foster's paper, I want to say something about the last paragraph in Section 4. 'Analysis, according to this view, is what philosophers in the past always have been doing, without realising it, except in so far as their performance of their task has been distorted by their own misconceptions of what the task of philosophy is.' I think this a half-truth. I should say that philosophers in the past have done many things, of which analysis is only one. They tried to tell us how to live, and to support their advice with arguments, even metaphysical proofs. Then again, particularly in the seventeenth century, the philosophers whose names come to mind, Hobbes, Descartes, Leibniz, were engaged in bringing natural science to birth, among other things. (Descartes made the new science respectable in the eyes of the Catholic Church, his metaphysics enabled you to be both a good scientist and a good Catholic, which was very difficult before.) But all these philosophers failed to distinguish adequately between the different things they were doing. I am not criticising them for this; it takes a great philosopher to get these differences clear; and I am not boasting when I say that we are clearer about them and know better what we are doing. After all, we stand on their shoulders.

At this point I should like to say something about Foster's Section 5, the issue between logical analysis and introspection. It is perhaps the

crucial issue; but it is a vast subject and I can only be dogmatic about it. When I wrote, as I did in my book, about the meaning of the word 'ought', I claim to have been writing about *the same* subject that would, in an earlier idiom, have been called 'the Idea of Obligation' or 'the Nature of Obligation'. And I think that our 'New Way of Words' is a better idiom than Locke's 'New Way of Ideas'. For the appeal to what Foster calls the 'inner oracle' seems to me unduly subjective. Contemporary philosophers appeal, not to this inner light, but to what 'we' mean by such and such a word. I know that this 'we' is very vague; but it does give us something publicly ascertainable, some objective standard of criticism. If taken *seriously* the inner oracle seems to make everything subjective; and if we are not to take the metaphor seriously, how are we to take it?

I come now to the second part of Foster's paper, the part about contemporary philosophy and Christian Faith. I am not really the right person to talk about this. Briefly, I would say that it was certainly not impossible for a contemporary philosopher to be friendly towards metaphysics—I think I have shown that—and perhaps not impossible for a contemporary philosopher to be religious, even to believe some kind of Theology. But I do think it impossible for an analyst to be a *Christian*. I know that there are philosophers who claim to be both; but I think they are in an impossible and untenable position. I am quite open to conviction on this; it is not a matter to which I have given much thought, as my own position in each issue is quite clear. But I should say that an analyst must make a sharp distinction between historical and theological statements and that this would undermine the essential and peculiar Christian claim that at least some of his assertions are both historical and theological.

Foster drew attention in his script (though not in his talk) to Mr Mitchell's line that predicates must be understood to change their meaning when applied to God. I think this would have to be extended to saying that 'true' changes its meaning when applied to theological statements. Perhaps not; I will suggest a possible way out. We could say that 'true' means 'worthy of being believed' and that it retained this meaning when applied to theological statements; only the grounds of believing something, what make it worthy of belief, change. But there is still the difficulty that historical and theological grounds would have to be kept distinct. I have studied the historical evidence for the life of Christ in an amateurish way and I find it hard to make up my mind as to whether there was, in an historical sense, a *man* answering

to the description of Christ in the New Testament. There may have been, but the evidence is extremely flimsy. Anyhow this is not the main point. The main point is whether that man, if there was one, was God; and I do not see how this could be an historical question at all. If you take Archbishop Ussher's date for the creation historically, it seems to me just false; for it entails that every statement about something happening before 4004 B.C. is false.

In the last part of Foster's paper I do find some very baffling things, which I should like him to clarify. I think he agrees with my view that contemporary philosophy (of the kind he is concerned with) is really incompatible with the Christian Faith. He says on page 49 that the conclusion that there is no conflict is baffling to a Christian, who feels obscurely that there ought to be a point of conflict but can't locate it. I think his instinct is right here. Then he does try to locate the point of conflict and finds it in the fact that contemporary philosophers insist on clarity, that they avoid and condemn mystery; and mystery is an essential ingredient in the Christian Faith. He thinks that we believe that everything is explicable, that we can, with human powers of understanding, unravel everything; and no Christian can accept this. But this is an ambiguous question. How could one settle it? How could one decide whether or not there are some things that no one can ever understand? Obviously there are many things that we don't understand now; so if we were all to be destroyed by an atomic explosion now, there would remain many unsolved problems. But the question is whether there are problems which are *in principle* insoluble. Equally, we can't explain things that just haven't got an explanation, such as why all Mrs Jones's children were born on a Friday. This is not an insoluble mystery, not a genuine question that we unfortunately can't answer. Are there any *genuine* questions which men are *necessarily* unable to answer? Before answering that I should like to be shown one. Offhand I should say that I couldn't understand such a question, and therefore couldn't even ask it.

I am puzzled to understand Foster's contrast between a philosophy that excludes mystery and one that doesn't. This is connected with a contrast that is much clearer, that between the Baconian spirit of 'putting nature to the question' and the pre-Baconian spirit of wondering, without prevenient questioning. But historically I think he is wrong about the Greeks. I have always thought that what distinguished Greek from all earlier thought was precisely its unremitting scepticism and curiosity. I am reminded of what Collingwood—no

friend either to positivism or to analysis—says about Herodotus. He thought Herodotus a great historian because he didn't just listen to stories and write them down; he questioned with witnesses. He was not a clerk typing out depositions; he was a judge examining the witnesses on their depositions. Of course we do often learn things without framing previous questions. For example, when I read novels by writers like Tolstoy or E. N. Forster, things are revealed to me which are not answers to questions I asked in advance. If this is what Foster means by having things revealed without prevenient questioning, of course it happens. But I don't see how an essential mystery can remain; for if something is revealed to me, it is no longer a mystery.

In his written script Foster condemns what he calls 'armchair' revelation; but this seems to me to destroy the contrast between the two spirits in which philosophy can be done. To get out of one's armchair is presumably to become a Baconian, to start asking one's own question. So, on this criterion, *all* revelation is armchair revelation. I can't quite get the conception of something lying between the Baconian rejection of mystery and armchair revelation; and this is evidently what Foster wants to introduce into philosophy. He wants to introduce a new spirit or reintroduce an old spirit into philosophy, the spirit of wonder or passive acceptance of revealed truth. But, without wishing to dispute about names (in this case the proper application of the title 'philosopher') I should say that anything called 'philosophy' would have to be a *rational* inquiry, an inquiry into something that, however difficult or obscure, was not *essentially* mysterious. To say things like 'credo quia impossibile' is not to do philosophy. But I feel that I may simply have misunderstood the programme for philosophy which Foster sketches in his last pages; and, if this is so, I must, being a philosopher, ask him to clarify it.

PROFESSOR COULSON

Before I open the meeting for public discussion, there are two brief comments that I wish to make. The first concerns the attitude of mind shown by our two speakers, to both of whom we are all of us deeply grateful for exceptionally clear and interesting statements of position. It seemed to me that whereas Mr Foster was friendly toward philosophy, and wished to explore the extent to which it would be accommodated within the Christian Faith, Mr Nowell-Smith was anxious that there should be no accommodation. I suspect—as is usually the case in situations of this sort—that *a priori* feelings of this kind have

influenced both speakers in the material which they have used: and it suggests that, whatever claims may or may not be made about this matter, you can no more keep the personal element out of philosophy that you can keep it out of science.

My second comment is related to Mr Foster's interesting reference to mystery. It is true that, from one point of view, the object of science is to answer questions, and so to remove mystery. But that object is never achieved, because the answers must be given in terms which are ultimately just as mysterious as the phenomena which prompt the original questions. Isaac Newton could—on a first glance—be thought to have removed all mystery from the mechanical behaviour of matter, when forces of various sorts act upon it to cause its motion; but—on closer inspection—these very laws of motion for which he is so justly famous, do not remove the mystery. They tell us that if matter were composed of hard, impenetrable, solid spheres, then it would respond in such and such a way to outside influences. But they tell us nothing whatever about these massive impenetrable particles, nor indeed do they force us to believe that such particles really exist. Newton said that 'God in the beginning formed matter' in these particles: we may, with equal accuracy, point out that they were Newton's creation, as much as God's. So the mystery remains, changed in appearance but deepened in character. Is it surprising that the Dutch physicist Stevinus, himself the writer of an early textbook on mechanics, could give it the sub-title: 'A wonder and no wonder'? All this is not to say that I disagree with Mr Foster's remarks, but perhaps it is to warn us against accepting the glib view that in giving man control over his environment, science denies him any sense of mystery.

And now I throw open for discussion both Mr Foster's paper and Mr Nowell-Smith's reply.

MR J. J. EYRE, Balliol College

Mr Nowell-Smith stated he thought that the historical grounds for the life of Christ are flimsy. Would he include the Resurrection in this? Would he comment on this if he thinks this very flimsy.

MR NOWELL-SMITH

Yes; I think the evidence for the Resurrection far flimsier than the evidence for a great many things said to have been done by people in whose existence nobody believes now.

REV. Y. NOLET, Merton College

It has been suggested that metaphysical questions can be dealt with in two different ways. Most metaphysicians think it possible, at least in principle and in some cases, to find answers that are true to the exclusion of any other, and they are interested in actually finding them. Mr Nowell-Smith prefers a more eclectic or aesthetic approach, and of course he has every right to: there is no *need* to raise the question of truth about any metaphysical issue. But whatever approach one adopts, an object either is black or it is not; and in the same way, if two metaphysical theses are mutually contradictory one must be true and the other false—and the question naturally arises which is the true one. Admittedly as a particular thesis is part and parcel of a metaphysical system, we must be allowed to examine the latter in any way we like.

A more important point regards the alleged impossibility for an analyst to be a Christian: one reason given is that Christian doctrine includes some assertions that are both historical and theological. I am not sure that this is the case. But even if Christian doctrine does include such assertions, I do not see what is wrong with them, for presumably they can be analysed, and their two aspects clearly distinguished. It is further suggested, I think, that a statement of one kind (e.g. a statement concerning the life of Jesus) cannot offer a good ground for the truth of a statement of another kind (e.g. a statement concerning the divinity of Jesus). But this is far from obvious. Why should not the life of Christ be good evidence for the truth of his doctrine? Of course I am presuming that his doctrine is intrinsically credible, i.e. is a conceivable object of belief.

My third point I should like to address to Mr Foster. When he says that divine revelation can be the object of rational thought and analysis I could not agree more; for if God cares to reveal himself he clearly means us to understand him, and the human mind must endeavour to open itself to his message. This, Mr Foster rightly says, is theology. But I should like to add that, being theology, it should not be described as philosophy, for we need a word to cover the purely rational effort of man when he comes to grips with the ultimate questions about the world and about himself. This is a view prevalent in an important part of Christendom. For example, all the philosophers of Louvain, though they may differ from each other considerably in other respects, are at one in insisting that philosophy must on no

account be based upon divine revelation. They point out that philosophy has a value of its own, as the crowning-piece of the edifice of science, and that unless it enjoys a full autonomy it loses this value without any benefit to theology: while, by remaining independent, it gives considerable help to theological speculation.

MR J. A. ROWE, Christ Church

I should like to ask Mr Foster a question about his motives. Mr Chairman said that he had set out to reconcile contemporary philosophy with the Christian faith; I was under the impression that on the contrary he had shown them to be irreconcilable. Was he, in fact, attempting a reconciliation or not?

REV. DR T. H. CROXALL

I should like to make four remarks:

(1) With regard to the question how history can be used as a basis for a metaphysical position, I should like to draw attention to Kierkegaard's doctrine of Contemporaneity (see his *Philosophical Fragments*). That seems to me to be the most adequate solution of the difficulty.

(2) As to whether Christianity can be reconciled with philosophy, I am on Mr Nowell-Smith's side in saying that ultimately it cannot: though my reactions to this would be different from his no doubt. *Credo quia absurdum* does not mean that belief, in the sense of Christian belief, is contrary to reason and therefore silly, but that it is above reason, and therefore sublime. The term *absurdum* is only used because Reason alone is unable to arrive at the whole of Truth. The best thing the Understanding can do is to understand that it cannot understand everything. They, says Christianity, abide in partial error.

(3) All turns on the meaning of the word Truth. There are of course many kinds of Truth. Christianity arrives at its conception of truth by an act of faith which some philosophers and philosophies refuse to make.

(4) Why do we need to transcend the intellect in order to arrive at Truth? We may answer this by asking Why do we philosophise at all? If we do it for fun, for the joy of battling with paradoxes, so far so good. But does this help us to live? Life to be at its best requires a good deal else than thinking. Christianity says it requires worship, which is the prerogative of Man as opposed to the animals. And there is much else besides which cannot be called strictly intellectual. The

Christian is sure that the Christian way, in its fullness, brings a man far nearer to truth than philosophy only, and his assurance does not rest on objective proof but on subjective experience.

MR I. PETER FLETCHER, Christ Church

What is Mr Nowell-Smith's attitude to Christians who, in all sincerity, say they have made a personal contact with the risen Christ? If what they say is true it is a singularly subjective matter. But it is also objective insofar as they have made a contact with a person outside themselves—another person—in terms of personal relationship or friendship. Since this is both a subjective and an objective matter can one treat this kind of statement in an empirical manner? The only person who can verify this statement is the one who made it.

MR NOWELL-SMITH

If I thought that this person meant what he said quite literally, my attitude towards him would be much the same as my attitude towards someone who claimed to be Napoleon. But, just as it is cruel and dangerous to say to people who claim to be Napoleon exactly what you think of them, so I think it would be cruel and dangerous to say what I think to this person. That is why I don't go about telling people what I think of that sort of claim. I don't quite understand the part about objective and subjective; but the claim literally to have made contact with someone, if it is 'objective', would be an empirical claim and I would treat it as such.

MR J. N. ROBINSON, Keble College

Mr Nowell-Smith has stated that there is a difference between historical and theological statements. Can he give his views on the different logic of the two?

MR NOWELL-SMITH

It would take far too long to do this adequately. I can only say that I would want to apply ordinary canons of historical criticism to the evidence about Christ. I am not a theologian and so I don't know much about the logic of theological statements; but I have written an article about Miracles in the *Hibbert Journal* in which a similar problem is discussed. Even if the historical claims were vindicated, you couldn't derive theological statements from them, and this is what Christians sometimes try to do.

MR R. J. JEANS, Wadham College

Surely you would say to the man who said he had met Napoleon, 'What you say can be demonstrated to be untrue by consultation of records and so on', while to the man who said he had personally had the experience of meeting Christ you would say, 'I don't understand what you mean'. Whether or not one derives comfort from sentences whose meaning one does not understand depends entirely on one's personality.

MR NOWELL-SMITH

Certainly it depends on one's personality; but I have always taken the Christian claim to be something much stronger than that—to be the claim to derive comfort from something which both makes sense and is true. And this has nothing to do with one's personality.

I should agree that if the man who claimed to have made contact with the risen Christ added that he did not mean this literally, my reply would not be like my reply to the man who claimed to be Napoleon. It would be what you say: 'I don't understand you.' The difficulty I have with some Christian assertions is that they seem to oscillate between being straightforward historical assertions, to which I would give one sort of reply, and being theological assertions, to which I would give another. When I take them literally and say they are false, some Christians begin to hedge and tell me that is not quite what they mean; so I have to tackle them differently. If they oscillate very rapidly, my replies have to oscillate rapidly too.

MR T. C. G. THORNTON, Christ Church

I should like to ask the following question: how much does philosophy, and perhaps theology too, have some kind of limitation set upon itself because it deals only with *statements*? I am well aware that I am liable to correction, but it does seem to me that there is some inherent difficulty in attempting to regard certain matters as being necessarily *statable*. If I have a singular individual experience, how can I necessarily describe it to you in the general terms of our common language so that through these general terms you may be able to understand fully the singular individual experience which I have at this moment? Our common language in which we make our statements does not necessarily deal adequately with all our experiences. Christianity is far more than a series of theological statements.

I would like to illustrate this 'limitation of the scope of statements' from Plato. It is notorious that Plato's dialogues are far from being a systematic exposition of Plato's beliefs, and often their rambling, inconsistent and inconsecutive course of argument is infuriating to some readers. But it would seem from the dialogues that perhaps the main point that Plato is trying to convey to his readers is something not expressible in statements at all. The vision of the Good attained by the rulers in the Republic¹ is surely not attained merely by a process of question-and-answer together with the application of elenchus. (If it was thus attainable, would not Plato have described it for us?) No, the Good can only be apprehended by some kind of illumination or revelation that comes out of living together with others and a long period of joint enquiry into the matter. Such matters cannot be expressed in statements as the other objects of learning can.²

All this is merely an illustration. The point I should like to raise is this: How far may we perhaps say that philosophy and theology are in some sense each limited in scope, because they have to deal entirely with accounts in the form of statements?

MR R. J. A. SHARP, Brasenose College

Mr Nowell-Smith asserted that Christians try to derive theological statements from historical statements and that this procedure is impossible. I should like to ask him how he justifies this assertion. Surely it is not from 'common usage' since vast numbers of Christians do this very thing. If not 'common usage' then the assertion is a metaphysical one. Mr Nowell-Smith is taking up a position which involves just as much 'faith' or 'leaping in the dark' as the Christian position. In that case logical argument will be of no use with him—only 'conversion' could bring him over to the Christian point of view.

MR NOWELL-SMITH

I don't think I have got a general rule by which I can prevent people passing from one kind of statement to another. You have to examine the kinds of statements concerned in each case to see whether or not such steps are valid. This means examining the 'common usage' of historical and theological words; but the question of the validity of

¹ Rep. 540 a.

² Epistle vii. 341 c. Cf. Phædrus 276 c.

such a step has nothing to do with whether it is commonly taken; a fallacy doesn't cease to be a fallacy because many people make it. Historians who interpret history as the working out of God's plan are really making theological statements from the start; and that is logically impeccable.

I would agree that the issue is a metaphysical one and that, in the end, these are not matters of logical argument but of conversion. But if you take that line you can't talk about converting people by logical arguments. In any case my reasons for rejecting Christianity were not mainly metaphysical, but moral.

PROFESSOR COULSON

One conclusion seems to me to be quite evident from our discussions here today. Since the grounds for accepting the Christian faith are not to be restricted to any one type of argument, be it scientific or philosophical or historical, it is rather unlikely that a man will be led to the faith by a mere consideration of one aspect, or element, of his total activity. Only a minority of Christians would claim that on the basis of pure reason a man ought to be led to an effective acceptance of Christianity. For the Christian sees life as a whole, and the pattern of understanding and response that he considers leaps well beyond what most contemporary philosophers would allow. It is evident from the remarks both of Mr Foster and of Mr Nowell-Smith that by limiting itself so much more than in earlier decades, philosophy has abandoned for the time being any serious attempt to understand the business of living. In former times the pulpit and the soap-box were sometimes confused together and both may have been too much in evidence. It seems to a person like myself, with only a relatively second-hand knowledge of these matters, that contemporary philosophy is in grave danger of abandoning both pulpit and soap-box and even any species of involvement in the relationship of people and of things. The Christian insists on this involvement—hence Mr Foster's emphasis on doubt and mystery where it is most deeply experienced—and hence also the infuriating aspect that the Christian appears to possess to the philosopher. When Albert Schweitzer closed his book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, he spoke of how God revealed Himself to those who followed (or 'committed' themselves): 'they will know in their own experience who He is. . . .' It is hard to avoid the conclusion tonight that the Christian is the man with his eyes wide open.

For some purposes, such as acting like a human being, this is a tremendous advantage. But for others, such as explaining what you believe and why you are acting as you are, it may be a disadvantage. What seems essential here is that both parties shall have the humility to see the limitations of their account as it appears to the other party. (A Christian permanently tied to an armchair is nearly as peculiar an idea as a philosopher rising out of it!) And because of the help to this end which both our speakers tonight have given us, we are profoundly grateful.

MR FOSTER

With regard to 'reconciliation', I am grateful to Mr Rowe for saying what he did, and I accept his account of my position. Without ruling out the possibility of an ultimate reconciliation, I think the need is not to reconcile too quickly, but to point out the conflicts.

To the Chairman about mystery in nature, I cannot say anything which will not be hopelessly inadequate. Our Chairman being who he is, it is almost impertinent for me to question what he says. I had in mind the concept of nature which lies at the root of the 'classical' physics, and am not competent to judge developments in contemporary physics.

The attitude of classical physics seems to me to have required the banishment of mystery from nature. This is also a Christian attitude; compare, for example, the words attributed to a medieval churchman by Colin Wilson in his book *The Outsider*: 'We should marvel at nothing in nature except the redeeming work of Christ.' To remove mystery from nature is not necessarily to remove it from the universe.

Between myself and Father Yves Nolet, I must confess the existence of a domestic difference. In addition to revealed theology, he believes in the competence of rational philosophy to establish truths in the realm which we are discussing, and I know that the whole of what I have said seems to deny or ignore this. I have not quite a good conscience in this, and cannot quite deny the existence of the rational philosophy which he describes, but it is not anything real to me. I think I am working from a basis of revealed truth, and what I am doing is therefore what he could class as theology.

I must now try to say something in reply to Mr Nowell-Smith. First, he insisted that the pursuit of clarity has been common to all philosophers, and that it is not therefore distinctive of contemporary

philosophy. This is true. But there are different ways of pursuing it, and the pursuit of it can be based upon different assumptions. Illumination, understanding, clarity—these are things which *theologians* also pursue. There are different ways of pursuing these things. What I attribute to contemporary philosophy is the pursuit of these things in a certain way which repudiates revelation and trusts in the power of human reason.

Secondly, as to the point of conflict between contemporary philosophy and Christian belief, which in my paper I tried to locate—a certain confusion, or danger of confusion, has been introduced into the discussion by the fact that Mr Nowell-Smith, while agreeing that there is a conflict, has located it at a different point. For him the conflict arises from the fact that Christianity is in a special sense an *historical* religion. I do not minimise the importance of this point of conflict also. It is worthy of an evening to itself. But it is a difficult point, and I do not think I have anything worth saying on it tonight.

The point of conflict which I concentrated on arises from the contemporary conception of metaphysics as something which, although it is allowed to be meaningful, is not capable of being true. I quoted Warnock¹ as holding that metaphysics is a perfectly healthy exercise

¹ The reference is to a passage of Mr Foster's address which is not included in the printed version, but was inserted in the talk as given, in which a quotation was made from Mr G. J. Warnock's essay 'Analysis and Imagination' in the volume *The Revolution in Philosophy*. The gist of this passage was as follows:

Mr Warnock holds that there is such a thing as metaphysics, and that this is, even for the present-day philosopher, a legitimate exercise of the philosophical imagination. The metaphysician, according to him, constructs a schema in which he uses words in queer ways, as a means of jerking us into a new way of looking at the world of our experience; and furthermore, this is what metaphysicians in the past have really been doing. Where they have gone wrong, he thinks, has been in thinking that their way of looking is not only *a* way, but is *the true* way; i.e. that what they are achieving is not only an imaginative construction, but a vision of the truth.

Thus, Mr Warnock says of Berkeley: 'He saw the same world that all of us see, but saw it from a rather different angle.' [This he did by means of his metaphysical construction, and this was a legitimate exercise of metaphysics; but now . . .].

'It ought, of course, to be remembered that this is not all that Berkeley himself would have claimed. He did not think of himself as inventing simply a *new* way of looking at the world, but rather as expounding the *right* way, the only way in which one sees things as they really are. But this, I think, is only to say that he, like other metaphysicians, had his illusions. The builders of

as long as you don't say it is true. I am not quite clear how far Mr Nowell-Smith accepts or how far he repudiates Warnock's view of metaphysics.

MR NOWELL-SMITH

I am roughly in agreement with it.

MR FOSTER

That there is a special sense of truth here, I accept. The Christian revelation is true, but this is not exactly the way in which factual statements are true. Certainly Mr Nowell-Smith is right in saying that Christians have the onus of showing *how* the truth of revelation differs from that of factual statements. This task is an obligation which Christian philosophers should accept. What they must affirm is that Christianity is true in a sense which is exclusive—i.e. in a sense which involves the rejection of other beliefs.

How can I assent to things which I do not know or understand? To do this is the essence of faith; and although my understanding of what I believe may increase indefinitely, it will never achieve the kind of clarity which contemporary philosophers require, but I shall still be in a position of assenting to what I do not understand.

PROFESSOR COULSON

On your behalf and on my own I should like to say thank you to both the major speakers. It is an extremely healthy sign that we are able to have a discussion of this kind without the fur flying. My thanks also to those who have organised this meeting.

such imaginative systems have always been prone to claim, not that they were inventing something new, but that they were discovering something real, penetrating the disguises of Reality. But such claims are fatal as well as unfounded' (p. 122).

This, surely, is the point of conflict. It is true that the Christian revelation is not a metaphysic; but it does contain a way of looking at the world, a way of seeing things, and it must claim that this is not only *a* way of seeing things but that it is the true way, that to see things in this light is to see them as they really are.

There is a lot which requires further explication at this point. For example: What does it *mean* to claim for a revelation that it is true, when you do not mean that the propositions in which it is expressed are true in the way in which factual propositions are true?

But I will venture to maintain that *this* is a point at which a Christian is bound to affirm something which contemporary philosophy as a whole denies.

*Written Communication**From MR C. W. HUME*

I should like to challenge Mr Michael Foster's statement (p. 48) that 'a statement of faith is something different from an historical statement or a scientific one' in logical form. Obviously the statement 'God exists' and the statement 'You exist' are poles apart in content, but I submit that in logical form they fall into the same class. A philosophy can be judged by the way it faces or shirks the problem of solipsism, which is closely analogous to agnosticism. If I say that you, Sir, the author, exist, I am using my own mind as a symbol of yours ; for I cannot see your mind, I can only see my own, and the latter is a very imperfect symbol, for the greater part of your mind is not only unknown to but inconceivable by me. Thus the meaning of the proposition 'You exist' is analogous to anthropomorphism in theology.

Turning from the logical form of the statement to its truth, one may ask why confidence is felt that the proposition 'You exist' is true? The feeling of certainty is a function of habit far more than of evidence, and the evidence for the existence of persons other than oneself turns out, on examination, to be slender, for similar evidence would prove the reality of persons one converses with in dreams; but habit masks the weakness of the evidence so effectively that many people are incapable of recognising that weakness. It is the same with belief in any given law of nature, which, as I have pointed out elsewhere,¹ entails at least three acts of faith in series.

The point of these remarks is that we are not in a position to evaluate the logical form and credibility of theological propositions until we have applied an equally rigorous scepticism to the deliverances of common sense, and recognised the common characteristics of these two classes of propositions.

MR FOSTER writes in reply:

I don't think that I can controvert Mr Hume's contention that the statement 'God exists' has an identical logical form with 'You exist', and I appreciate the force of his argument. What I doubt is whether it has any application to the distinction which I drew between empirical (i.e. historical or scientific) statements and statements of faith, because I cannot recognise 'You exist' as a typical example of the

¹ *The Status of Animals in the Christian Religion*, p. 86.

former class. It is indeed difficult to imagine a context outside a philosophical discussion in which 'You exist' would naturally be said. If we substitute for it a more ordinary example of empirical statement, I think that the distinction which I have drawn still stands. The empirical statement, e.g., 'There is someone in my room at the present moment' (I am not dreaming nor suffering from hallucination) may be verified or falsified by tests which would be accepted by any sane man as conclusive (Mr Humè might indeed argue that an act of faith is involved in this, but it is a faith in which all sane men share); whereas statements of faith in the proper sense, such as 'God created the world', are not of such a kind that they can be proved by evidence which any sane man would accept. If they were, where would be the *commitment* in believing?

It is true that a difference in respect of evidence might be admitted without conceding my contention that there is a logical difference between the two kinds of statement. The difference could be held to be wholly in the adequacy or lack of adequacy of the available evidence to the proof of the statement made. Scientific statements would be those which the evidence sufficed to prove, statements of faith would be statements which the available evidence did not suffice to prove but at best to render probable (in the way in which the strongest evidence of comparative form may render it probable but will never render it certain that a given horse will win), leaving a gap which has to be leaped by faith.

I suspect that the difference between the two kinds of statement has sometimes been presented in this way in the past, but I am arguing that we should discard this way of thinking. The act of believing itself, the *credal* act of faith, is a different act from the acceptance of a scientific conclusion, whether this is proved or only made probable. The statement expressing the belief must indeed be held to be 'factual' if 'factual' means 'capable of being true or false', but not if 'factual' means 'empirically verifiable or falsifiable'. Contemporary philosophy helps, or perhaps forces, Christians to realise the distinctive character of statements of faith, but they need to realise it for Christianity's sake.

[Further problems are raised by the fact that some articles of the Christian creed are themselves historical in character. I have not considered the implications of this fact and do not know how to relate it to my argument.]