

# Theological Review

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## ODD MAN OUT IN MODERN THEOLOGY: F.R. TENNANT (1866-1967)

PAUL D.L. AVIS

The Cambridge philosopher and theologian F.R. Tennant (1866-1967), author of the massive *Philosophical Theology*, has been undeservedly neglected in recent study. None of the standard surveys of modern theology makes more than passing mention of his work and in some he is passed over completely. Whether this makes Tennant simply the odd man out in modern theology, or whether, in fact, he is a voice in the wilderness, is a question that deserves discussion. Shortly before Tennant's death, Professor H.D. Lewis claimed that his writings deserved more attention than they were currently receiving, and he expressed the hope that the significance of Tennant's work would soon be rediscovered and his books be widely used again. In spite of a reprint of the two-volume *Philosophical Theology*, Lewis' hopes appear not to have been fulfilled.<sup>(1)</sup>

It could be argued that Tennant brought neglect upon himself by his lack of sympathy with either of the two main options in modern protestant theology. He rejected outright both the experiential immediacy of the tradition of Schleiermacher and the revelational positivism of the school of Barth. 'A plague on both your houses!' sums up his view of the two main lines of development in modern protestant theology.

Not that Tennant was out of tune with all developments in contemporary theology. His stress on the method of metaphysical thinking and his belief in the spiritual ends of the physical universe put him in the company of Alfred North Whitehead and the process theologians, while his critical and historical approach to questions of revelation has much in common with the thought of Pannenberg.

In epistemology, Tennant was the disciple of James Ward (1843-1925), whose *Psychological Principles* he regarded as 'the greatest single work, of any age, on the human mind' (PhTh, I, vii). Ward's view of the purposeful, constructive, heuristic power of mind, while it has pragmatist connotations, links up with the philosophy of mind that Whitehead, Polanyi and Popper hold broadly in common, and which, beginning in the sphere of scientific method, has begun to turn back the tide of post-Enlightenment rationalism even in theology. (Thus, to take a topical example, Nicholas Lash draws on Gadamer's hermeneutics and George Steiner's work on language to criticise the authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate* for, fundamentally, a failure of imagination, a betrayal at the level of philosophy of mind.<sup>(2)</sup>) Tennant himself, however, did not escape rationalism altogether: his view of the Incarnation has more in common with the 'mythographers' than with their critics, and he leaves little room for revelation. But the notion of 'the elusive self', recently defended by H.D. Lewis, derives from James Ward via Tennant, and it is significant that in Tennant's thought our knowledge of the self – elusive, difficult to pin down, impossible to grasp immediately or directly, but nevertheless real and inescapable – is paradigmatic of our knowledge of God – the hidden, elusive God. Tennant develops the analogy between knowledge of the self and knowledge of God: 'Belief in God becomes reasonable if the idea of God

be found as indispensable for explanation of the totality of our scientific knowledge about the world and man as is the idea of the soul for explanation of the totality of our knowledge about the individual mind' (PhTh, II, 254).

To make a systematic study of Tennant's rather demanding works would be a first-class education in philosophical theology and the problems of philosophy of religion. His critical distance from fashionable views would provide a healthy detachment, while the centrality of the issues he tackles would inevitably lead us to the fundamental questions of much modern theology and to a dialogue with its greatest minds. Tennant's distinctive position is most easily approached in *The Nature of Belief* (Centenary Press, 1943), while *Philosophy of the Sciences* (1932) provides a convenient stepping stone to the daunting *Philosophical Theology* (1928, 1930). Tennant's article 'Theology' in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14th edition, might also be mentioned here as a convenient summary of his position.

The present article makes no attempt to provide a comprehensive account of Tennant's thought. We shall concentrate instead on his view of the significance of religious experience for theological method. For Tennant's whole approach is governed by his rejection of the notion of immediate experience as developed in philosophy by Hegel and Bradley and in theology by Schleiermacher. For Tennant, knowledge of God – like knowledge of the world, the soul and other selves – is mediated and can only be attained by scientific and metaphysical study of the natural realm. Though first in the *ordo essendi*, God is last in the *ordo cognoscendi*. As Tennant puts it in the preface to *Philosophical Theology*: 'It is through knowledge about the self, mankind and the world that developed belief in God is mediated; and it is in relation to such knowledge, its nature, presuppositions, scope and validity, that the intellectual status of theology, and the reasonableness of theistic conviction, are to be estimated' (PhTh, I, v). Tennant's fundamental conviction, then, is that theological questions should be approached by way of our knowledge of the natural world and by rigorous philosophical argument. We shall have to ask, however, at the conclusion of this study, whether Tennant's proper rejection of the notion of *immediate* experience has not led him to overreach himself in a way that fails to do justice to the nature of religion as such, by ruling out its whole experiential dimension. But we turn now to a more detailed account of Tennant's distinctive method.

### I

Theology, according to Tennant, demands a method that is both empirical and rational. The empirical, a *posteriori* approach follows from his basic epistemology: he believes that there are no 'thought-given realities' and that all knowledge derives from sense-data. These are not, admittedly, pure data – they presuppose some interpretation – but they are all we have to go on. We must begin from the elemental constituents of mental life – 'not with the elements into which they may be analysed, not the concepts which the conceptions of these elements may logically presuppose, nor the metaphysical entities of which observed actualities may be appearances, nor the simpler complexes that preceded them at earlier stages of our mental life' (PhTh, I, 1). By induction from these fundamental facts, we may form a basis for further construction. 'When the data have been described without suppression or mutilation,

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### I

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without gratuitous interpretation in terms of suppositious theory framed according to predilection: then, and only then, can we reasonably proceed to consider what implications they contain and what metaphysical interpretation they may suggest or require' (PhTh, I, 3 cf 65).

This sounds very much like an outdated scientific positivism of the kind effectively discredited by Karl Popper in particular. But Tennant has no illusions about the possibility of pure induction of the type associated with the logic of J.S. Mill. It is true that, broadly speaking, induction must precede deduction - 'generalised premisses must be inductively obtained from the results of observation and experiment, before science can begin to be deductive' - but the act of induction itself, Tennant points out, involves the use of 'particular hypotheses, guesses, *anticipationes Naturae*, as well as fundamental postulates' (PhTh, I, 257ff). Tennant's empiricism is not a flight from theory: it is simply an acknowledgement of the need to submit to what is given. 'If to set out from fact, and to keep in touch with fact, be called empiricism, then, whatever else be found necessary, the empirical method is a *sine qua non* for knowledge of actuality of any sort' (PhTh, I, 5).

It is important to notice at this point - and it brings us to the heart of Tennant's significance for modern theological method - that the empirical, *a posteriori* method, does not lead him into a theological positivism, either experiential or revelational. Against Schleiermacher, Otto and the tradition of experiential theology based on self-authenticating encounter with the divine, Tennant claims that there can be no direct reading off of what is given in religious experience. There are no uniquely religious experiences or feelings: a moment is constituted as religious by virtue of the object that evokes it, and that object is interpreted in religious terms according to a set of beliefs already held on other grounds. Religious experience already presupposes a prior theistic belief and can only be evaluated, therefore, by means of a critical examination of that belief and a psychological analysis of how it arose.

On the other hand, Tennant is equally dismissive of a theological positivism of revelation. The historiographical factor and the phenomenon of development of doctrine decisively preclude this approach. The original data of revelation, on which beliefs are based, are merely postulated; they are not immediately accessible and can only be known at many removes. A positive theological science of revelation, along the lines laid down by Barth and developed by T.F. Torrance on the analogy of the physical sciences, is therefore ruled out by Tennant.

The historiographical data of dogmatic theology are not of such a nature as to allow of that body of beliefs being regarded as certainly a science, or as a department of knowledge, save as knowledge concerning the history of thought. By a science I mean a systematisation of knowledge, or probable belief, based upon indubitable or verifiable fact; and as the original interpreters of their own experiences are, in the present case, not accessible for cross-examination, the data of dogmatic theology cannot be verified as can those of a science, strictly so called (PhSc, 122).

I am aware that Tennant wrote this half a century ago and that it does not take into account more recent developments in philosophy of science that have had the effect of playing down the positivist element in scientific method. I would claim, however, that by focusing on the historiographical problems of Christian doctrine and the problematic nature of the data of theology, Tennant has put his finger on an issue that is not substantially affected by the qualification that needs to be made with regard to current thinking in philosophy of science. Again: when Tennant points out that we cannot cross-question claimants to revelation in the past, he is anticipating the sort of hermeneutical questions that have come to the fore in recent philosophical and theological work, notably in the writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Now while it is true to say that Tennant is not yet aware of the positive possibilities of this approach to hermeneutics, it needs also to be said that there is little sign at present that these developments have been fully reckoned with in theologies of revelation either.

Thus neither form of theological positivism, beginning as they do with an unquestioned given, whether it be the deliverances of religious consciousness with Schleiermacher or the *dogmata* of the Christian creed with Barth, can evade the challenge of thrashing out the arguments at the rational level. For Tennant, theology, like all the sciences, must not be only empirical but rational. Rationality is the second of his two methodological criteria. Reason is the sole instrument and arbiter in the quest for reality and truth - the only adequate tool for its acquisition, appropriation and evaluation. But Tennant is not advocating - or at least in his better moments he is not - the blunt instrument of the merely analytical and discursive reason. While Tennant may not attain to the idealist philosophy of mind associated with Coleridge, Polanyi and Lonergan, his is at least a Butlerian notion of rationality in which probability is the guide to truth and rationalistic ideas of logical proof are renounced. For Tennant, the venture of faith characterises all our knowledge of reality.

Tennant's method is thus open and continuous. He will have no tendentious abstraction of theological data from the whole of our knowledge. For him as for Pannenberg today, enquiry into God involves enquiry into all reality, for God is the ultimate reality that determines all reality. Theology, Tennant asserts, 'is not an isolated nor an isolable science; it is an outgrowth of our knowledge of the world and man. Revealed theology presupposes natural theology, and natural theology has no data other than those which experience supplies to science' (PhSc, 187). There is, for Tennant, an unbroken progression from the basic reading of sense-data to the constructions of natural theology, which is itself presupposed in 'revealed' theology. As Tennant puts it in another place: 'The sciences lead intellectual curiosity on to philosophy. And when philosophy finds its explanation in the supposition that the world and man constitute an organic whole, whose ground is God and whose *raison d'être* is realisation of the good, it passes into natural theology' (PhSc, 191). Tennant's theological method thus involves a primary openness to all sources of knowledge and insight - with, however, one glaring exception: he systematically and programmatically excludes religious experience as a source of theological construction. We must now look more closely at the reasons for this.

Tennant's objections to theologies of experience are developed particularly in response to the thought of Schleiermacher. He is highly critical of Schleiermacher's attempt to establish experience – to the exclusion of metaphysical argument – as the basis of the theological statement in his celebrated definition of Christian doctrine as an account of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech. Schleiermacher's revolutionary proposals would have made theology into a descriptive science founded on the empirical study of Christian consciousness.<sup>(3)</sup>

Tennant believes that he must prescribe a drastic antidote! He attempts to cut at the very root of this method by calling in question Schleiermacher's assumptions about the nature of experience. According to Tennant, concepts like 'immediate feeling of absolute dependence' (in *The Christian Faith*) and 'sense and taste of the infinite' (in the *Speeches to the Cultured Despisers of Religion*) are purely hypothetical: they 'denote experiences that no one has had' (PhTh, I, 326). The sort of experience that these concepts are meant to indicate is only possible, in fact, when a theoretical knowledge of the world has already been elaborated out of the genuine immediacies – sensation and feeling. This, Tennant believes, is the verdict of modern psychological analysis of experience. The method of genetic psychology – not of course available to Schleiermacher – will be found 'to reveal metaphysical assumptions lurking unsuspected in what are taken for data; to detect the mediacy of many supposed immediacies, the acquiredness of much that has passed for innate or *a priori*; and to show that part of what has been ascribed to our nature, is but second nature' (PhTh, I, 11n).

The theological method espoused by Schleiermacher, Otto and others, depends on the threefold claim of the immediacy, uniqueness and reality (or preferably, veridical status) of the experiences in question. All three claims are disputed by Tennant.

(a) *Immediacy*. While Schleiermacher speaks of immediate consciousness of absolute dependence as synonymous with being in relation to God, and Otto of a non-rational, irreducible consciousness of the numinous, Tennant remains deeply suspicious of all appeals to 'immediate' experience.<sup>(4)</sup> He makes a fundamental distinction on grounds of genetic psychology, between two kinds of immediacy: the psychic or subjective – how things seem to us – designated by the symbol / , on the one hand, and the psychological or objective – how things really are – designated by the symbol *ps*, on the other. This distinction, based on James Ward's rejection of Bradley's account of 'immediate' experience, is central to Tennant's whole position. What seems immediate to us may be the product of hidden inference and interpretation; and this, Tennant asserts, is precisely the case where experience of God is concerned. 'When the Christian communes with God, his actual experience consists of consolations, upliftings, "feelings" of peace and joy, bracing of will and so forth. It does not necessarily include apprehension of the divine causation of those states, nor face-to-face vision of their alleged cause: "no man hath seen God at any time" (PhTh, I, 329).

(b) *Uniqueness*. Schleiermacher holds that the immediacy

and uniqueness of our intuition of the world's and our own dependence on God secures the distinctiveness of 'piety' (or religious feeling) from 'knowing' (or science) and 'doing' (or morals). He explicitly denies that the feeling of dependence is 'itself conditioned by some previous knowledge about God'. Otto, similarly, alleges that the sense of the numinous is an 'absolutely primary and elementary datum', 'perfectly *sui generis*' and irreducible to any other mental state. Even more emphatically than Schleiermacher, Otto claims that the feeling is not conditioned by any human constructions that we project upon the world: it has 'immediate and primary reference to an object outside the self'.<sup>(5)</sup>

Tennant, on the other hand, asserts that the alleged uniqueness of moments of religious experience is simply the result of interpretation according to theistic beliefs already held on other grounds. It is we who invest objects and experiences with a sacred character; for others, they may reveal nothing out of the ordinary. Psychological analysis can detect nothing unique in the process of apprehension of religious phenomena. What is given in experience is governed by the preconceptions we bring to it. On Schleiermacher's notion of the feeling of absolute dependence as consciousness of God, Tennant comments: 'The intuition in question plainly presupposes a system of abstract ideas, indeed science and philosophy, and is mediated by such knowledge.' He concludes: 'It seems to me difficult to imagine a more extravagant abuse of the word "immediate" than this of Schleiermacher's' (PhSc, 175).

(c) *Reality*. To assume without further ado that all religious intuitions have a veridical character, i.e. that they correspond to reality, is to overlook the distinction that so troubled Descartes, between the reality of ideas in the mind and their correspondence to an actual state of affairs in the real world. As Descartes rather ingenuously remarks, it might all be a dream.<sup>(6)</sup> UFOs, the Cheshire Cat and Never-never Land all exist – in the mind! And as Tennant points out, imaginary and idealised objects can evoke feelings as strong and as sublime as those evoked by 'actual' objects. He adds, for good measure, that, if religious intuitions guaranteed the reality of all that is experienced, 'all the powers and deities of all the mythologies and religions from the crudest nature worship to monotheism are all alike real' (PhSc, 176, 172).

Needless to say, Schleiermacher has no intention of taking on board any and every twinge of Christian feeling. He believes that the deliverances of the contemporary Christian consciousness must be tested against the normative expressions of Christian feeling in the New Testament (not the Old), the creeds and the protestant confessions. The process of evaluation is confined within the theological circle; it is entirely a process of *self-criticism*. This does indeed go some way towards meeting Tennant's rather crudely expressed objection. But it does not go nearly far enough. Tennant would not be satisfied with merely self-criticism from within the closed circuit of Christian commitment. He would claim that Christian belief must take its chance in the wide arena of academic enquiry and that it must be willing to submit itself to externally accepted criteria of validity. Among these tests – the use of historical and other empirical evidence, moral adequacy, logical coherence, for example – metaphysical argument must, for

Tennant, have a significant place. It is interesting that Tennant's position has been corroborated, from outside the circle of Christian commitment, by Ronald Hepburn in *Christianity and Paradox* when he argues that 'the theologians' embargo on philosophising about the religious encounter' must be lifted, and calls upon the philosopher of religion to 'step outside the felt experiences themselves' in critical reflection about their validity. Time and again in this book, one feels that it could be Tennant speaking.<sup>(7)</sup>

To sum up Tennant's response to Schleiermacher over the nature of religious experience: when the claim is made that Christian theology is derived from a study of experience, it is necessary to point out that 'primarily and fundamentally, religious experience presupposes the theological concept of the divine or the numinous and owes its uniqueness to saturation with that concept' (PhSc, 178). The true task of theology is, therefore, to establish by philosophical argument and in the light of all our knowledge, the validity of theism and its superiority to rival views of the world. The argument will thus be grounded in what may rationally be inferred from discursive enquiry into the nature of the world, man and history. From these alone, according to Tennant, are derived our notions of the numinous, the spiritual and the concept of God. Only then may we go back to experience and feel free to interpret it in the light of the beliefs we have reached on less direct grounds.

If theology is not derivable from religious experience because religious experience already presupposes a theological and interpretative factor derived elsewhere, it follows that it is by a more circuitous path than the short cut of alleged immediacy, and by trespass on property other than that of religion as confined to alleged unique data, that theology must arrive, if it can arrive, at beliefs such as other sciences would account reasonable (PhSc, 180).

Tennant's position has been stated at length: some appraisal is now due.

### III

Tennant is a valuable critic of closed, positivistic, types of theological method, whether these are theologies of experience, following Schleiermacher, or theologies of revelation, following Barth. The data of the former presuppose theistic beliefs acquired on other grounds; the original data of the latter are not accessible to us in any direct way: no theology of revelation can short-cut the ambiguities and contingencies entailed in hermeneutical work on the tradition which now mediates revelation to us. Theology is therefore obliged to adopt a position of openness and receptivity to what may be learned from other traditions, and it is bound to incorporate philosophical argument into its characteristic method. Tennant is right not to foreclose in advance the question of the sources and data of theology.

His claim that theological truth must be able to meet the same standards of rationality as truth in any other department of knowledge, and his stress on probability as the guide of life, are both sound. His recall to the importance of theory in the interpretation of 'fact' puts him in the same camp as Whitehead and Popper. And finally, Tennant rightly points out that revealed theology (to use the customary, but misleading term for theology that concerns itself with

revelation) cannot stand in splendid isolation but presupposes natural theology. But there are also confusions and fallacies in Tennant's thought: these centre on his failure to do justice to the complex dynamics of reality – in particular, to the fundamental epistemic principle of reciprocity: the reciprocal relation between theory and fact, subject and object, insight and inference, immanence and transcendence.

(a) Tennant does not make adequate allowance for the reciprocity of theory and fact. He wants to begin empirically from fact, admitting however that there are no pure uninterpreted facts – all sensation is germinal perception – and that there is no pure induction – theory is present from the first. What Tennant, with his stress on metaphysical thinking, apparently fails to see is that there are no pure theories either. We cannot build our conceptual apparatus from scratch, as Descartes tried to do. We stand in a tradition: our theories are usually secondhand, our concepts are imperfectly understood, and our words belong in a living context of usage and reference that governs the way they behave. Tennant cannot avoid an *a priori* element by beginning from facts: as he admits, there are no facts without theory, but theories too contain *a priori* elements. It is more realistic to recognise that we are plunged into a complex situation where fact and theory interpenetrate and interact from beginning to end.

(b) Tennant's view of the subject-object relation in experience is one-sided. While he allows for the role of theory in shaping what we experience, he does not sufficiently reckon with the extent to which theory is itself moulded by experience. This is evidently the obverse of point (a), but it needs to be stressed in its own right. Theory is not static and the mind is not strait-jacketed by rigid conceptual categories. Theories are free, flexible and responsive, as developments in philosophy of science and general epistemology since Tennant have served to remind us. Perception is not merely the imposing of a conceptual grid on inchoate *sensa*, not merely the creation of form, but, as Dorothy Emmet has put it, 'creation of form arising out of an initial situation of interrelated processes' within which 'the experiencing subject is a responsive centre'.<sup>(8)</sup>

(c) The third area in which the principle of reciprocity operates concerns the relation between insight and inference. Tennant's openness at the genetic level – the level of sources, of data – does not find a corresponding openness at the noetic level, that is to say, in the apprehension of truth. Tennant's philosophy of mind is ultimately rationalistic: he has no room for insight. His proper rejection of immediacy and self-authenticating intuitions leads him to an over-rationalised view of experience as purely inferential. The world, the soul, other selves and God are all mediate inferences to account for what is given in sensory experience. While Tennant rightly sees that intuition is present in every act of inference (PhTh, I, 379), this does not lead him to conjecture that we have the power of insight whereby we may apprehend realities that elude the plodding procedure of formal inference. Tennant's openness of method is vitiated at the noetic level by the exclusion of insight and with it the real givenness of religious experience.

(d) Our assessment of Tennant's position impinges, finally, on the polarity – or, to stay with the terminology used above, the reciprocal relation – of immanence and transcendence. We have seen that Tennant's weakness lies

in the crucial transition from the facts or phenomena of the world and experience to the religious interpretation of those 'facts'. Tennant's assertion that mere reflection and inference are sufficient to explain this transition does not convince. We can only do justice to the phenomena of religious experience by parting company with the inhibiting rationalism of the philosophy of mind espoused by Tennant and by calling upon the resources of an alternative epistemological tradition. We need to postulate the transcendent capacity of mind working in the tacit dimension – to invoke Plato's 'leaping spark', the *lumen siccum* of the Cambridge Platonists, Coleridge's 'Reason', Polanyi's 'personal knowledge', Lonergan's 'insight'.

The insight of faith arises from the sheer givenness of our experience of God in which we now encounter a reality that questions, judges and reforms the theories and pre-conception that we bring to it. This insight can be sparked off by aesthetic or moral experience and by the limit situations of life. It may be mediated by natural or personal symbols of the divine. It will certainly reflect our cultural background and intellectual history. But *if*, as Tennant would have it, theistic belief could only ever be read *into* experience and never read *out* of it, it would never arise in the first place. Now Tennant himself admits that God's immanence in the world is an active, not merely a passive relation (PhTh, II, 211). But if this is the case, we can go on to draw the conclusion that Tennant himself will not draw and to say that if God can be inferred *from* the world, it is solely because he is already apprehended *through* the

world.<sup>(9)</sup> Here, however, we seem to approach the limits of purely philosophical enquiry into the nature of religious experience, for when Christian theology itself speaks of the givenness of our knowledge of God, it is speaking the language of *grace*.

1. J. MacQuarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, Loandon 1963, 71ff; J. Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, Harmondsworth 1968, 541; W. Nicholls, *Systematic and Philosophical Theology*, Harmondsworth 1969; H.D. Lewis, *Philosophy of Religion* (Teach Yourself Books), London 1965, 140, 224, F.R. Tennant, *Philosophical Theology*, 2 vols, Cambridge 1928, 1930 (hereinafter cited in the text as PhTh); *ibid.* in *Philosophy of the Sciences*, Cambridge 1932 (hereinafter cited in the text as PhSc).
2. N.L.A. Lash in M. Goulder, ed, *Incarnation and Myth: the Debate Continued*, London 1979, 19ff.
3. F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ET Edinburgh 1928, 76. See also my article, 'Friedrich Schleiermacher and the Science of Theology', *S.J.T.*, xxxii (1979), 19-43.
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