

Professor Wiles

on Historical Christology

Ian Walker

I would like to enter a debate which is centuries old and seems, for the most part, to admit of no satisfactory conclusion. The debate is between what is nowadays sometimes called 'theological relativism' and '(minimal) orthodoxy'.¹ I am not at all happy about these terms (which, in this instance, are John J. Shepherd's) because the issue being debated is, in some degree, to determine what 'orthodoxy' is; and hence, calling oneself 'minimally orthodox' seems to be a method of scoring points before the contest has started (that is, if orthodoxy is thought to be desirable). On the other hand, 'theological relativism' seems, if one looks at the work of exponents of this school, to admit of degrees of relativity. So we have a relative relativism. All this means that just who is being denominated by such labels might prove elusive of description or, at least, amenable to misrepresentation. For these reasons I shall not use these terms henceforth.

The debate centres on the issue of what (if anything) is essential to the Christian faith. Shepherd argues that 'behind the bewildering diversity of forms of faith there is an essential continuing substance of Christian teaching which can, by and large, be traced back to Jesus'.² This 'enduring gospel' consists of propositions about God's nature and his actions, and about Jesus' words and deeds. Professor Wiles, on the other hand, argues 'that there is nothing intrinsically more secure in a knowledge of God which claims to rest on 'certain historical events' whose historicity is regarded as essential [than in] a knowledge of God which claims to rest on a more general historical experience (including that to which Scripture bears witness) but which does not treat any particular events within that broad spectrum as essential.' (CHR, p. 12).

I find the work of both these theologians on this debate unconvincing but cannot, in this short paper, offer what I think is a plausible alternative. Rather, I would like to briefly examine Wiles' contribution to the discussion and raise some questions which I think are pertinent to the issue at hand and are damaging to Wiles' case.

In his paper 'Does Christology Rest on a Mistake?' Wiles notes

that when considering the doctrines of creation and fall we find that, 'in both cases it was for a very long time felt that a certain specific action in history was essential to the possibility of affirming the doctrine, essential to its survival as a meaningful theological doctrine at all' (CRM, p. 70). But he thinks the idea that these doctrines are logically tied to particular events is a mistaken one. The doctrine of creation, for example, 'does *not* require the postulation of any specific divine act within the process as a whole; indeed such an act would be an embarrassment to the expression of that doctrine in its full transcendent reality' (CRM, p. 72). Ignoring the problem of what could possibly be meant by 'full transcendent reality' Wiles goes on to suggest that a parallel can be drawn with Christological doctrines: 'The heart of the suggestion . . . that I want to put forward . . . is that traditional Christology rests on a mistake . . . It arose because it was not unnaturally, yet nonetheless mistakenly, felt that the divine character of redemption in Christ could only be maintained if the person and act of the redeemer were understood to be divine in a direct and special sense. In the parallel case of creation and fall our forefathers had to learn—and it was a painful process—that what they thought was a logically necessary link between the theological assertion and particular occurrences in history was not as logically necessary as they thought it to be' (CRM, p. 72).

If then the doctrines of creation and fall and, by implication, their 'parallel'—the Christological doctrines—are not 'logically tied' to particular historical events then how do we give full expression to these doctrines? Wiles suggests that we tell two different kinds of stories. In relation to the doctrine of creation we tell one story of evolution; after all, 'it is the real world as it has really developed with which the doctrine of creation is concerned, not with some ideal world of the theological imagination' (CRM, p. 73). On the other hand, we tell 'the frankly mythological story about the spirit of God moving on the face of the chaotic waters, about God taking the dust of the earth, making man in his own image . . .' (CRM, p. 73). These two stories can be woven together in 'poetically creative ways' which do not need to come together at some specific point. 'We have to be concerned with the whole story; we do not see that moment within the story as related in a different way to the divine or mythological story, but we still regard it as a part of the story which sheds a particular light on the significance of the story as a whole' (CRM, p. 73). The same can be done, Wiles suggests, with the doctrine of the incarnation and redemption. In fact, what we find in the gospels, he notes, is just such a uniting of the mythological story with the actual life of Jesus. Wiles concludes this paper with the point that 'discussion of the facts of the case and of relevant criteria are important and in many cases may lead

one person or the other to revise his judgment; but there may come a point at which, having been through such a process, there are no more reasons to be given. Each can only commend his vision to the other' (CRM, p. 75).

This particular thesis is then worked out in a general way in Wiles' paper 'In what Sense is Christianity a "Historical" Religion?' and in the last chapter of *Working Papers in Doctrine* called 'The Criteria of Christian Theology'. In the former, Wiles is primarily concerned with the question 'Why should . . . dependence on history be regarded as indispensable to the Christian faith?' (CHR, p. 9). He rightly rejects the 'historical dependence' theory supported, as it sometimes is, on the grounds that it has always been a feature of Christianity throughout its history, or, that it is an element of the Creed. The mere inclusion of a doctrine in the Creed or the maintenance of a long held belief are not sufficient to establish either their veracity or that they are essential to faith.

A further difficulty arises in finding appropriate arguments about what is essential. This has to do partly with the fact that 'the exact historical status of the events traditionally associated with the Christian faith has to be assessed by historical means and the outcome of that investigation will frequently turn out to be 'non-proven' . . . Even those who insist most strongly on the importance of historicity do not claim that Christian faith can be proved thereby. The religious significance (even of the Resurrection) is not self-evident, whatever the degree of confidence with which a historical account of it may be established; it has to be seen or grasped with the eye of faith' (CHR, p. 12). Wiles concludes this paper with a summary of the case he is arguing: 'Some Christians assert, as a kind of self-evident truth, that Christian faith depends absolutely on the historicity of certain past events; and they see this as something essential to and distinctive of Christianity. I have tried to give reasons for questioning the validity of that particular conviction' (CHR, p. 13).

This, in a brief and summary fashion, is Wiles' thesis. I would simply like to ask some questions that strike me as fundamentally important to a thesis such as this and thereby show that there are problems that need to be solved if one is going to follow the Wilesian path.

1 *Can certain specific key beliefs be sensibly believed without certain specific key historical events forming the foundation of these beliefs?*

In WPD (p. 183) Wiles asks, 'Can we find certain specific key beliefs which must have a place in any Christian theology?' Apart from pointing to the great difficulties in answering such a question, Wiles argues, 'It would be absurd to suggest that the inclusion or exclusion of such beliefs as the existence of God or the coming

of Jesus Christ in the flesh made no difference at all with regard to the Christian character of a proposed theology. All that is being claimed now is that they cannot function as precise criteria. In so far as they are able to function as criteria, the evidence suggests that we may need to think not in terms of black and white but of differing shades of grey' (WPD, p. 184). Wiles is right in suggesting that there are grey-shaded areas where these criteria are concerned but there are also some areas of black and white. On the 'black' (negative) side we could point to certain events recorded in the Bible, the historical existence and factuality of which cannot be regarded as essential for faith. For example, most Christians would not be desolate if it turned out that David, King of the Jews, did not annex the feudal holding of Ziklag from the Philistines around the turn of the first millenium B.C. But are there any 'white' areas? The answer is Yes. There are certain facts of logic which cannot be ignored. One such fact is that one cannot regard some historical event or personality as being revelatory without making some interpretation of it (cf. Wiles' 'poetically creative' reconstruction, CRM, p. 73). The Christian faith, being to some extent faith or trust in God or in Jesus, like other interpersonal attitudes, entails some beliefs about its alleged object. It is logically impossible to say that Smith trusts in Jesus without entailing that Smith, at least, believes some propositions about Jesus, e.g. that Jesus has done him some service which engendered his trust, or, that Smith believes that God cares for him, etc. Furthermore, it cannot be logically consistent to maintain that one has faith in an object one does not believe to exist. So the man of faith necessarily believes certain things about God or Jesus. This is the propositional element of faith.

Although, as Wiles rightly suggests, the historical events of the life of Jesus do not prove that he was the revelation of God, they could disprove it: for example, if it could be shown that Jesus was a fraud or that he did not exist. It would seem then that we have what might be called a negative necessary empirical condition of history for the Christian's faith in Jesus. This obviously is not a sufficient condition of faith in Jesus because it would not make sense to say, 'I was a contemporary of Jesus ergo I am a Christian'. But whatever view the Christian might want to take, if he expresses faith in Jesus of Nazareth, then it is a necessary condition of his faith that there was a Jesus of Nazareth. But just how much of the story surrounding this man is essential for what might be called a minimum historical factuality? Is it only that Jesus existed a necessary condition, or should we stipulate more than this as a necessary condition of faith in him? It is obvious that just the establishment of the fact that Jesus existed is not sufficient to support faith in him. That any number of people have existed does not en-

tail that they are thereby worthy of faith. Here we find that in an endeavour to go beyond the minimum requirement we find ourselves in the grey areas of which Wiles speaks. Is the minimum necessary condition to be something along the lines of that specified by Shepherd, or more, or less? It is not for me to point to the areas of grey that might constitute a sufficient condition for Christian faith. This task, if it is possible, is beyond my present concern; but I believe some form of necessary conditions reaching beyond the mere assertion that Jesus existed is essential if Christian belief is to be either non-vacuous or safeguarded against heresy. Wiles rightly argues that there are many features in any Christian theology that do not derive in any direct way from Jesus (WPD, p. 184) but it does not follow from this that there are not many others that do. Wiles has argued that it is the 'real' world with which we are concerned, not 'the ideal world of theological imagination'. But how can his analysis be anything but theological imaginings if it is not 'tied' (I defer to use the word 'logically' here) to some historical foundation which I would assume to be 'real' enough for Wiles' purposes. After all, we are not dealing with some esoteric sect whose teaching is mysterious and unknown; we are talking about the real Christian Church which finds its historical and theological foundation in the person Jesus of Nazareth.

In relation to the historical events that comprise the life of Jesus, Wiles suggests that the results of an investigation will often be 'non-proven': 'We may come down in favour of one possible historical reconstruction, but it will be a balance of possibilities, a choosing of one hypothesis rather than another' (CHR, p. 12).

Talk of 'balance of possibilities' in relation to historical events can be misleading. Talk of possibility or probability in relation to past events is different from mathematical probability. For example, throwing dice repeatedly produces a number of events, a series, from which certain conclusions can be drawn about the future probability of throwing, say, a double six in two consecutive throws. Here talk of probability is easily understandable and fairly straightforward. But when we are speaking of a past event we are not considering a series of events but one single event. We are not thinking about the future but about the past. So how does probability relate to this? In relation to a past event probability does not come into the issue in the way it does with throwing dice. Either the event happened or it did not. Those are the only possibilities. Either Jesus rose from the dead or he did not. Wiles, in speaking of a 'balance of possibilities, a choosing of one hypothesis rather than another', is really referring to the evidence adduced to support such a statement as either 'Jesus rose from the dead' or 'Jesus did not rise from the dead'. By denying the foundation of historical dependence (in the minimal sense) Wiles extricates himself from

the possible defeasibility or indefeasibility of (certain areas of) Christian belief and thus safeguards his faith in Jesus by placing it in a realm that I suspect is vacuous. He does this by means of his 'tale of two stories'. And this brings me to my second question.

2 *Are the 'stories' of which Wiles speaks a plausible explanation or account of Christian faith?*

First we should note that Wiles' 'stories' are of logically diverse types. On the one hand, we have the 'story' evolution. On the other, we have the 'story' of God creating, making man from dust, etc. Of the ('parallel') doctrine of redemption we have the 'human story of the partial overcoming in human lives of that repudiation of the fellowship with God', e.g. the story of Jesus of Nazareth, and the other 'story' of God's total self-giving, compassionate acceptance of pain.

But here we find that the 'parallel' is not quite what Wiles suggests. The two mythological stories seem to parallel one another in that they are both the history of the gods; but in what way is the 'story' of evolution parallel to the story of Jesus? We find that Wiles' stories include straightforward historical stories about the life of Jesus, which are paralleled by the story of evolution (but surely the latter is not a 'story?'); yet what of stories that are straightforwardly mythological, or presented as history but are only legendary? What parallel would one relate of these? For instance, what two stories would one tell of the doctrine of the resurrection?

Wiles notes that the stories do admit of confluence and admixture: 'We may interweave these two stories in various ways; in the gospels themselves they are already interwoven and for religious purposes we need to have it so. But we do not need—indeed on this analysis we would be wrong—to tie the two stories together by claiming that at one point, namely the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the two stories are literally united with one another' (CRM, p. 73). It seems that Wiles wants to eat his cake and have it too. On the one hand he wants to claim that the life of Jesus has 'a special place as illuminating, as no other life, the significance of the whole story, as bringing home to us effectively the transcendent divine truth which the mythological story in its own way is designed to proclaim' (CRM, p.74), yet at the same time he wants to deny that the two stories are 'tied' to the life of Jesus. But where does this leave us? If we were to extricate the story of the life of Jesus from the analysis, or for that matter, extricate any of the stories that constitute God's supposed action from the salvation-history, then what use would the mythological story be? Indeed the "mythological" story is inextricably bound to the historical and for the most part arises from it. Without a mythological element that can in some way be identified with the

historical 'story' we have nothing more than fanciful fairy tales whose relation to the 'real' world is arbitrary in the extreme. Wiles criticizes the 'historical dependence' theory which ends in 'a balance of possibilities, a choosing of one hypothesis rather than another', but his 'tale-of-two-stories' thesis is no more than this itself. In fact, it is rather more arbitrary. He offers us observation statements about the 'real' world, viz. the 'story' of evolution, the life of Jesus; and the theistic hypothesis, viz. the mythological story. As Wiles analyses it, the former neither provides inductive support for nor probabilifies the latter but, as a poet, he is able to 'combine logically disparate images into new and illuminating wholes' (CRM, p. 73). Though the facts of the case are relevant and in some sense determine the parameters of the theist's decision about the matter, these facts may 'in many cases lead one person or other to revise his judgment' (CRM, p. 75) but, in the end, the subsumption of the factual and mythological stories into the doctrinal statement actually represent the vision of the theist. Is this no more than a weighing of the possibilities, a choice between possible hypotheses? Does not the mythological story in Wiles' examples function as no more than an hypothesis which explains the 'real' story? What makes Wiles' account any more than the expression of a personal conviction (or vision, if you like)?

Finally, I would like to raise the question concerned with one element missed in the debate: the nature of the events themselves. And this has a bearing on the credibility of the whole enterprise.

3 *Is it possible to know or understand what the 'real' world of past events that form an important part of the Christian faith is?*

In his Hibbert Lectures of 1888, Edwin Hatch writes:³

'The Christian revelation is, at least primarily, a setting forth of certain facts. It does not in itself afford a guarantee of the certainty of the speculations which are built upon those facts. All such speculations are *dogmas* in the original sense of the word. They are simply personal convictions. To the statement of one man's convictions others may assent: but they can never be quite sure that they understand its terms in the precise sense in which the original framer of the statement understood them. The belief that metaphysical theology is more than this, is the chief bequest of Greece to religious thought and it has been *damnosa hereditas*. It has given to later Christianity that part of it which is doomed to perish, and which yet, while it lives, holds the key to the prison-house of many souls.'

The point of interest here has to do with the understanding of the 'evidence' of the stories (whether 'real' or 'mythological') to which Wiles refers and commends as the foundation of his vision.

That Wiles believes he can produce a dichotomy between mythological as opposed to factual, or that he can even discern mythological elements in a 'unified' story is puzzling. Wiles warns 'to ask for some further ontological justification of that vision would be to succumb to the category mistake of confusing the human historical story with the divine mythological story' (CRM, p. 75). I am not wanting to suggest that such an ontological justification is either possible or desirable (although I can't see that Wiles shows why it is undesirable) but I do want to suggest that Wiles is confused in believing that he knows either how these stories are or may be made separate, or even that he understands these stories at all. Let me give a rather extended example which comes from Dr Hugh Price.⁴ He suggests that we consider the meaning of the words 'glory' (*doxa*) and 'cloud' (*nephele*) which often appear together in the Bible. In consulting the LXX version of the Old Testament we find that these words appear there as well as the New Testament: 'Some of the most frequent occurrences of these words are in the book of Exodus. When we look at the fifty or so occurrences of the Greek word *nephele* in the Pentateuch we find that all four of them, which are found in the the book of Genesis, are to be found in the account we find in the other four books of the Pentateuch of the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt to Canaan, and in all cases *nephele* is used to translate the same Hebrew word. The four occurrences in the book of Genesis are in the story of Noah in the ninth chapter. When we study these passages carefully it seems that the word is not being used in what we would now take to be the most frequent meaning of the word 'cloud' in English—though the Greek word did have that meaning too. Of about thirty occurrences of the Greek word *doxa* in the Pentateuch just about half of them are occurrences in which the word *doxa* does not seem to mean what the word 'glory' usually means in English, though the Greek word did have that meaning too . . . There are many other passages in the Septuagint where the words *nephele* and *doxa* seem to be used with the same meaning as they have in the Pentateuch. The question we need to ask is: 'What is their meaning?' Their occurrences in the New Testament should throw some light on this. Here one should mention one or two things about the word *doxa*. It is the word which Plato so often uses which is usually translated into English as 'opinion' or 'belief'—it has the sense of 'appearance' or 'something that seems to be the case'. It is interesting to note that the Septuagint translators should have used this Greek word to translate the Hebrew word *chabod*; because it indicates, I think, that they took the Hebrew word in the relevant passages to refer to something which people saw or to something which, as we might say, appeared to people. One of the few occurrences of the word in the gospel of St

John is in the first chapter where St John writes: 'And we beheld his glory, as the glory of the only begotten of the Father'—a verse which some have taken as a reference to Christ's transfiguration'.

Other passages in the New Testament where these words appear also present a difficulty in interpretation, e.g. the transfiguration, the ascension, St Paul's Damascus Road experience. Price concludes from an examination of the passages that it is difficult to take the sense of the words 'glory' and 'cloud' in a metaphorical way. Here, he writes, 'we have accounts of events which were witnessed by people, who according to the accounts themselves had no proper understanding of them. They are referred to in the Bible as wonders, and we find that they are not isolated events but occur at intervals throughout the times to which the Bible refers.' The difficulty for us arises from the fact that we often assume that we understand the language involved. Price is questioning this assumption. He concludes, 'If we do not understand these words, then we are not able to say that we have a complete understanding of the revelations we find in the Bible which are so central to both Judaism and Christianity'.

Of course, this difficulty relates to more than just the words *doxa* and *nephele*. At numerous points throughout, say, the life of Jesus, we find stories that seem to me to lie beyond our understanding. Would Wiles claim to understand what, for example, the accounts of the conception of Jesus, the transfiguration, the resurrection and the ascension, are really about? It seems to me that if we manage to hurdle these linguistic difficulties there still remain intractable historical and metaphysical ones yet to conquer. Even this is too simplistic: these linguistic difficulties are historical—and may even be metaphysical. If Wiles does not understand these events, as I assume he does not, how is it possible for him to determine what is 'real' as opposed to what is 'frankly mythological'? How does he make sense of St Paul's words to Timothy?

'There can be no doubt about it, our religion is something which is quite beyond our understanding:

Who became a man in human flesh,

Became perfected through the Spirit,

Appeared with angels,

Who has been preached among the nations,

Believed on throughout the world,

Taken heavenwards in glory.'

(I Tim. 3:16)

1 The debate has taken many and varied forms and for the most part reflects the different attitudes of the debaters to Scripture. Some examples of the participants in

the debate in recent times are, G. Turner, 'He was Raised and Appeared: Evidence and Faith', *New Blackfriars*, April, 1977; F. Kerr, 'Paul's Experience: Sighting or Theophany?' *New Blackfriars*, July, 1977; M. Dummett, 'Biblical Exegesis and the Resurrection', *New Blackfriars*, February, 1977. I shall be more concerned with the arguments advanced by Prof. M. Wiles (on the 'relativist' side): 'In what Sense is Christianity a "Historical" Religion?' *Theology*, January, 1978, Vol. LXXXI, No. 679, (hereinafter called CHR); 'Does Christology Rest on a Mistake?' (CRM), *Religious Studies*, 6, 1970, pp. 69-76, and, *Working Papers in Doctrine*, (WPD), SCM, London, 1976, particularly chapter 14. See also, John J. Shepherd (representing 'minimal orthodoxy'): 'Criteria of Christian Believing' *Theology*, March, 1978, Vol. LXXXI, No. 680.

- 2 Op. cit. p. 85, see also Shepherd's 'The Essence of Christian Believing', *Religious Studies*, 12, 1976, pp. 231-7.
- 3 *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church*, pp. 137-138, Williams and Norgate, London, 1890, reprinted 1907.
- 4 *Downside Review* April 1978. A review of D. Z. Phillips' *Religion Without Explanation*.

Faith and Experience V:

Religious "Natural History"

Simon Tugwell O.P.

The Religious Experience Research Unit in Oxford embodies a brave and ambitious project devised by Sir Alister Hardy, to turn theology into a science comparable with other modern sciences.¹ As a biologist, Sir Alister is convinced that "religion" is a side of man's experience which can no longer be neglected by empirical science. He believes that there are scientific, as well as philosophical, grounds for attacking materialistic monism (DF p. 23); and he considers such an attack necessary, for otherwise "civilization may yet cut its throat with Occam's razor if it does not realize in time that materialism is ignoring a large part of the data of experience" (DF p. 228). In his Gifford Lectures of 1963-5, the second series of which make up *The Divine Flame* now happily made available