

## AFFIRMING GOD: AN INFORMAL REFLECTION

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THE Bible starts with a deed and a wonder: 'In the beginning God created . . .'. The reader is at once, without preliminaries, told of a power so great that it handles the sum of things, 'heaven and earth', and produces what it handles. Prior to whatever else is going to happen, things, we learn, only are because of 'God'. The statement is familiar—too familiar; but what it says is wonderful, in the sense that it means that the accepted order of things, the world around us, *need not be*. All wonder, all surprise, implies a norm, an accepted order of 'ordinary' reality from which the surprising fact or act seems to deviate as an exception. But here it is the whole ordinarily accepted norm itself, not man's world only but all nature too, that is suddenly presented as an 'exception': it need not have been. The accepted norm is swept aside and another, infinitely more real, appears—God. As for the universe, we know now what it is made of—nothing!

I shall not attempt here to prove this doctrine as a thesis, restating familiar arguments, but only to draw out its meaning a little and then touch on one or two difficulties we may find in holding it firmly.

The doctrine tempts the imagination (witness my first paragraph), but it baffles it too, of course. Our images are always of limited things or activities, and if we try to represent 'creative' activity we have to make shift with such human doings as seem most original—the production of a symphony or poem, of a scientific or philosophical theory: all human things, presupposing at least the man who produces them and some sort of working material. St Augustine, to illustrate the world's moment-by-moment dependence on the Creator, compares it sometimes to a speech or a song; but clearly, the words we speak or sing only partly depend on us: to form them we use our minds and bodies and the air and so forth, all of which were already there, in a sense, waiting to be used. But to the divine and truly creative deed nothing pre-existed; for what God produces is not, like a speech or a song, a particular form of being, a realizing of this or that modification of material, it is very being-ness itself, existence

(*esse*), that by which every such realization stands apart, not merely from others, but from nothing. And giving actual existence, God gives reality to all that exists in any way and to the entire content of each existent. Hence whatever God makes would, but for his making it, be nothing; and therefore, as nothing is presupposed to his making, what God makes is not partly but wholly dependent on him. If the divine self-declaration is *I Am* (*Exodus* iii, 14), the creature's, in this context, could only be *I am because*. . . .

Within the term 'being', then, we distinguish two references: to the self-existent and to the existing-by-another. Yet the latter is inseparably linked to the former by the relation called 'creation', by its receiving of existence. And yet again, just because it calls into being what is not God, creation mysteriously establishes that immeasurable *difference* in being between the creature and God. And yet, strangely enough, we could have no conception of that relation or of this difference if we could not somehow stretch our notion of being to include God without confusing him with creatures. Wittgenstein said, 'The world divides into facts', but we make a prior division, of the world from its Cause; and it is only in so far as our notion of being transcends (analogically) even that prior division that we can both affirm God and make sense of the affirmation.

Now to do this we have to use the term 'is' in a certain 'absolute' way, which is at once quite naively simple and quite easily ignored, and to which philosophers are often reluctant to attach any deep significance (they have their technical difficulties, no doubt). This is to use 'is', not to point to one particular form of being as distinct from any other—as when I say, 'the flower is', meaning that it is not the seed it grew from—nor even to point to some form in itself—'this flower is this flower'—but rather to point to anything as simply not nothing: 'the flower *is*'. The reference, now, is not directly to any form of being at all, but to the *act* of being in being, to existence. For a moment the mind has succeeded in ignoring every form, every particularity. It seems to be holding an object by nothing but a denial of its non-entity and an affirmation of its entity. But—and this is the point—it is precisely this ignoring, this disregarding of all particular forms as such—even the form of the object considered, the flower, for instance—it is just this that brings the mind to its fundamental

questions: 'and what is existence and where is it from?' It is as if a door were opened through the universe and that question were our passage through. Our flower, now, is standing for everything; but we are no longer interested in it, nor in the sum of things it stands for, but only in the source of its and their existence. The door is opened, and as long as it stays open the God-question imperiously presents itself. But if the door is allowed to close that question sinks below consciousness.

I say 'question', not 'belief'; for of course belief in God does not depend, and never has depended, for most people, on the consciously abstractive process I have been trying, so clumsily, to indicate. Usually belief in God has been a quasi-instinctive reference of the world around us to a Power and a Mind within or behind it, a reference supported by social religious traditions. In this way probably most of mankind has believed, explicitly or implicitly, in God. When our Lord revealed God as the Father in heaven this part of his message at least met with little or no resistance, whether from Jews or Greeks. To this extent the world to which Christ came was disposed to receive him. And for many people it is still not particularly difficult to believe in God.

And yet in some ways it can be difficult. After all, the notion of thinking about God at all has something daunting, even frightening in it. Who are we that we should attempt such a thing? Read those chapters in Job (xxxvii to xl) where this question reverberates like thunder. Again, there is the sheer difficulty of attending to God; for the corruptible body, as the author of Wisdom says, weighs down the soul, and if it is a labour to consider even earthly things, how shall we search out heavenly things? (ix, 13-17). We are so frail and carnal, short-lived and short-sighted. Not only our sins but our bodies weigh us down; our animal nature shrinks from all thinking of what utterly transcends the senses. Such difficulties as these, however, are irrelevant to philosophy; they stem from moral situations and physical states, not from the workings of reason itself. The man who is frightened of God or who is conscious that his thoughts are remote from God, is not, as such, a doubter. Doubt has another root. It is reason that asks, 'Does God exist?', and that can find the question a difficult one. It is of course a philosophical question, to be answered philosophically. Nor am I here concerned to supply the answer; I am assuming it. But it is relevant, here, to

point out another way in which reason can cause difficulties—or, as is said, ‘make’ them; not directly by putting objections to theism, but by a sort of evasion of the God-question itself through following lines of enquiry which essentially do not raise it. I refer to the study of natural science, which can and often does have the effect of withdrawing the mind from God. The same, I admit, might be said of history or literature; but the natural sciences have a way of evading the issue which seems particularly influential today. It will be admitted, I suppose, that their method and procedures do, as such, disregard God. They work from the particular to the general, from the concrete to the abstract; but the abstractions they terminate in are predominantly mathematical. They have to stand the test of verification in observed fact, but these they resolve into measurements and relations of quantity, not into statements about being. They disregard existence as such; and so have nothing to say about what is of most interest to the metaphysician. They start from realities—facts and events—but they ignore the notion of reality. They leave this to the philosopher. Hence it is that while they are always engaged in determining causes (in some sense of the term) they never come in sight of the First Cause. To do so they would have to consider creation, and this notion only enters the mind along with that of existence. Disregarding existence as such, science must disregard creation—and so God.<sup>1</sup>

There is nothing wrong with this from the point of view of scientific method. But clearly, a mind accustomed to think of knowledge primarily in these terms, and constantly trained in this direction, may easily come to regard the quest for God as non-rational or sub-rational, as a sort of myth-building which has nothing to do with knowledge in the strict sense. An intellectual—though often unconscious—evasion of God is the result, due to the cultivation of a certain kind of abstraction. It is a kind that St Thomas, incidentally, alludes to in the *Summa*, in the first article of the treatise on creation; where he says that since mathematics abstracts from existence (*esse*) the mathematician as such does not consider efficient causality (the *causa agens*)—nor, consequently, creation.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This paragraph owes much to *Science and Metaphysics* (Sheed and Ward), by J. Russell, S.J.

<sup>2</sup> I, 44, I ad 3.

And if a bias away from the intellectual consideration of God—which we may as well call metaphysics—is not uncommon among scientists (for the reason given) we need not be surprised to find it reflected in the general public which so largely depends on scientists for its notions of what is or is not the field of real knowledge. Hence a widespread disregard of God as an object of knowledge, a tendency to regard the affirmation of God as a product of mere ‘faith’, if not superstition.

And another evasion is at work here, in the public influenced by science, which may recall that oppression of the spirit by matter which the author of *Wisdom* described so eloquently. But this ‘oppression’ takes a characteristically modern form. There is nothing new about the ‘weight’ on the spirit of matter; what is new is the extent to which the material environment affects the spirit precisely through being, far more than ever before in history, something man-made, a product of human technique. Applied science has built up round us a man-made world, and with such success that we are tempted, as men were never tempted before, to think of nature as merely raw material for man to exploit to his own advantage. *Homo faber* has done his job so brilliantly that it seems to require an effort of him not to regard the universe as merely stuff to be used. So the concept of utility is getting out of hand. It has swollen up and almost filled the mind of millions. But from this it is only a short step to atheism, at least to a ‘practical’ atheism; which in turn may be expected, in many cases, to lead to a conscious denial of God, if it is true that the enormous increase of verbal communication in the modern world ensures that any belief or attitude is much less likely than ever before to remain unexpressed and unconscious. In a sense, of course, the world is our raw material; but there comes a point, in thinking of nature *practically*, when one may forget what it signifies in any other way. The more one regards it as potential for man to work upon, the less—very likely—may one be disposed to regard it as *actually* being and doing something, in the sense of presenting an actually existing order that manifests God. In short, one may cease to contemplate; and without some contemplation there is no religion.

At this point poetry also dies—and indeed philosophy too, if the starting point of both is where Aristotle located it: in wonder.<sup>3</sup>

3 *Metaphysics* A, 2, 982 b, 10-20.

The poet, I would interpret, wonders *that* things are as they are and the philosopher (and the 'pure' scientist) wonders *why* things are as they are. Both the poet and the philosopher not only start from things as they are, they are also, in a sense, content with things as they are—in the sense that they do not as such aim to change them into anything else. *That* aim is the practical man's, who is so far less religious—considered in the abstract, as a 'type'—than the poet or philosopher that his chief concern is utility for man, whereas in their activities there is a contemplative element which can lead more directly to an interest in what the universe manifests of God. *Homo faber* has much to be proud of, but he uses, after all, only a part of the mind and not its best part. And if it is conceded, as an ideal, that the full power of the rational soul should be got to work, the contemplative as well as the active, then it would seem that the ideal must include a quest for God such as only knowledge of God can satisfy. For the right object for contemplation is surely intelligible beauty; and how can the beauty of the universe be considered intelligible except as manifesting Intelligence?

We cannot all be poets and we cannot all be technically philosophers, but we can all try to be fully human; and man is by nature a God-seeker. And if this seem too abrupt a conclusion to my random reflections, let me return to my starting point: God the creator. If the universe is really created; if, that is, it does not exist of itself but only by the power of the Self-existent; then we must look to the actual being of things, to their concrete reality, for the natural signs of God. It is starting from this point that man *qua* man is to start on his search for God, if he seeks God at all. And if man does not seek God—whether because his animal part, or his obsession with it, will not let him or because he takes too narrow a view of his own rationality (misled by a one-sided cultivation of mathematical abstractions)—then to that extent he is missing or disregarding the mystery of existence. Why 'mystery'? Because it is through contact with the particular existent, the here and now, the humblest thing, that the mind is stirred to its highest question, the God-question. Here is our nature's starting point:

'... more distant than stars and nearer than the eye'.<sup>4</sup>

4 T. S. Eliot, 'Marina'.