Certainly about God

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There have always been questions about God, but it was only recently that these took the form of doubt. Our ancestors studied the Scriptures and enquired from their priests and prophets, not because they expected a final and definitive solution but because they encountered a mystery that gave no rest to a questioning mind. Each answer gave rise to new questions, driving people on in their search, awakening in them a desire for a knowledge that could only be satisfied in the beatific vision.

But for the present generation a new and more basic question has emerged, a question that is of a different kind because it asks to be settled before we engage ourselves in the further search for God. First we need to know whether belief is not based upon an illusion. How are we to be certain about God's existence; how can we dissolve our doubts as to whether the object of our faith is real?

Unfortunately the 'proofs' have done little to convince those who are not already convinced; others are left with their doubts. Most philosophers now profess that God, if he exists, is necessarily beyond the limited scope of our knowledge, a mystery on which every purely rational thought is wasted, a dimension too inaccessable to be explored, a matter of faith rather than of demonstration.

And so, in one sense, we seem to have returned to the time before the Enlightenment when true knowledge of God was given with faith and not with rational insight.

But doubt is still with us, and it would be naive to presume that it will be dissolved in a vigorous faith. For how can faith be vigorous when it begins with doubt? Is it not inevitably somewhat supercilious, conditional because we cannot be certain that it is about anything at all? It is hard to commit oneself to something which may be an illusion, and it is unrealistic to expect that our doubt will be dispelled by a total faith to which that very doubt is an obstacle. I can see no way of breaking through the vicious circle: we seem to have to settle for a kind of religion in which doubt is an essential element, which can be little more than the uncommitted activity that it has become in this our modern society.

All this is meant to lead us to a discussion of Maurice Wiles's latest book, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine,* which is hailed by some and condemned by others as an attempt to reconcile this kind of conditional faith with orthodox christianity. In an article called 'Respectable Doubt about the Divinity of Christ' the religious correspondent of *The Times,* for example, suggests that at long last a respectable scholar—no

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one less than the Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford—has come round to the common-sense christianity of the average non-churchgoing man in the street. Many feel themselves exiled from the official church because they can no longer commit themselves to such absolute truths as God's existence and the divinity of Christ. But now there is that re-assuring word from one who shares in the authority, the consoling judgment from the Chair of Divinity:

> God is not directly and irrefutably given. It is not only the fool who says there is no God. You can be an atheist without being a fool: lots of people are (p. 108).

and

> I have been arguing that that particular doctrine (i.e. that of the unique incarnation of God in Jesus Christ) is not required for the whole pattern of belief to be true, or indeed for our having good grounds for believing it to be true (p. 116).

Wiles realises that these are bold statements for an orthodox theologian to make, and that is why he turns to them in a chapter called 'Final Reflections', so as to forestall any misinterpretation of their intention. Apparently he has not succeeded very well, for most reviewers of the book have read the 'final reflections' as 'final conclusions', so that they took the concessions to the modern spirit of doubt to be the aim of the study instead of a means leading to a deeper understanding of the faith. Knowledge of God's existence and the incarnation is denied only inasmuch as it is taken as a truth by itself which functions then as the absolute foundation of religious belief. What is being rejected is the *character* of this knowledge or the way it is supposed to function as an absolute truth from which all other truth is derived. Strictly speaking, it is therefore not at all excluded that we know God and the incarnation in a different manner, that is not before but as an integral part of our faith, and it is this integrated faith which is the ultimate concern of Wiles's study.

What are the reasons behind his thinking? Wiles argues that a knowledge of God in himself, if it were at all possible, can in no way assist us in coming to a deeper understanding of the divine self-manifestation. On the contrary, such claims to an immediate insight into the origin of all things can only thwart experience as this is always bound to the particular and limited perspective of our life as it is lived here and now. If God is the meaning of life he cannot be given before experience, but only as the ultimate dimension to which the perspective of our experience directs us. The point of departure for theology must therefore not be some absolute truth, but it must fall within that perspective, limited though it may be.

However, judging by the persistent attempts to 'demonstrate' God's reality, there has always been a tendency among believers to transgress these basic rules of theological knowledge. What then made them, and Christians in particular, assume that God can be known in himself? To answer this question is just as important as, or even more important than showing up the fallacies in the 'proofs' of God's existence. For as

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long as we do not understand the driving force behind such attempts, and as long as we fail to bend this force in a different direction, the opposition to claims to such absolute knowledge will have little or no effect. There is no point in trying to subdue the fever as long as we do not cure the illness that causes it.

Now, Wiles proposes that Scripture itself may be the source of this inclination towards absolute knowledge. After all, the Bible is full of stories about people who had a special experience of God, an experience which appears to be denied to others and other times and circumstances. In the midst of ordinary events they suddenly encountered God as if he visited the world from a totally different dimension; heroes are suddenly stirred by his spirit to perform mighty deeds that are quite beyond the natural order of things, prophets receive messages from above, as if there is an Almighty, shut up in his infinite splendour, who only occasionally comes down to manifest himself in only a few chosen people and situations. Such images of interventions from a transcendent abode suggest that there is a God who lives by himself, and who is therefore known before his acting, that is before his involvement in the world.

Thus more is required than simply laying down the rules for a correct functioning of theology by merely stating that we should not try to proceed from some absolute truth. It is also necessary to present the tradition in which our faith is founded in such a manner that it no longer gives rise to this urge for absolute knowledge, without, of course, imposing the rules of theology upon the traditional material which the theologian wants to interpret. In other words, the principles of theology can only be verified in the actual functioning of theology.

Restricted to only five lectures Wiles is not able to give more than the barest possible sketch of what his theology would be like, and the fact that I have to summarise still more won't improve things. However, the rough contour is as follows:

We should not try to deny that God speaks through the prophets or that he manifests himself in special way on particular occasions, for that, of course, would make total nonsense of the biblical narratives. But what we are not requested to do is to separate such divine interventions from the other facts of life. They can be understood rather as occasions that gave rise in man to a sense of divine purpose pointing to a meaning within the world as a whole. Only moments of special significance can bring us that awareness of the divine dimension which would otherwise simply coincide with 'ordinary' experience. They show our experience to be with perspective, a perspective that directs us from individual things and events to a total sense that speaks of God on whom the world depends.

So far so good, and the theory will probably meet with little objection from orthodox christians. After all, they too would find it difficult to see in the Old Testament divine manifestations unique moments of God's-revelation. If it is true that God has revealed himself uniquely, once and for all, in Jesus of Nazareth, it becomes difficult to see in the

Old Testament happenings much more than a very provisional if not symbolic presence of God.

But for Wiles this means that the argument applies with even greater force to the idea of incarnation inasmuch as it emphasises still more the singularity of God's intervention in this world. 'Written into the concept', he says, 'is the need to start from above, to begin with the being of God and then to consider his becoming man' (p. 44). More than anything else the notion of incarnation reinforces, therefore, the idea that God is first given in his own perfection before he makes the descent into our world. Accordingly, as long as christian thinking remains dependent on the idea of incarnation it will not be able to live up to the proper requirements of the theological exercise.

The critique of the New Testament has to be more radical, therefore, than that of the Old, for while the ancient narratives of Israel could be reinterpreted the story of the Incarnation has to be rejected altogether. To do so appears to be, at first sight, making a clean break with the christian tradition in which the idea of incarnation has always been central, but Wiles argues that it is not so fundamental as has always been assumed. He points to the endless controversies about the nature of Christ, his metaphysical status, controversies which flared up almost from the very beginning and have never been resolved. If Christians could disagree so fanatically about this supposedly basic idea, there must have been something else, something still more fundamental, which they had in common which they thought found expression in the idea of incarnation.

Wiles is, of course, fully conscious of the novelty of his suggestion. Is he then so much more clever than any one before him? To claim that kind of originality would go right against the whole trend of the argument which is proposed precisely in opposition to the rationalist approach to theology. So the reason why the point can be made only now has nothing to do with deeper rational insights into the nature of God, but with recent changes in people's thinking effected by factors others than logical argument. Thanks to the development of the modern scientific outlook this present generation is less inclined to assume the existence of a being over and above this world and is therefore also less able to make sense out of the idea of incarnation. The methodological point about the correct functioning of the theology can be made in our age because contemporary man is no longer interested in a God outside this world.

And there is another reason, perhaps still more telling than the agnostic sentiments of our age. We notice a growing awareness among christians that their own religious tradition is only one among many. The inter-religion debate calls in question any absolute claim for the truth of a particular tradition, any belief that God has revealed himself at one point in history to one particular group of people. We must therefore postulate a truth underlying all religions, a general theistic belief in God as creator or God as the source of grace. This is only

possible if our belief is about something which is continuous or, at least, about something of which there are many present instances.

If this is a fair summary of Wiles's argument we must admit that it is by no means agnostic in intention : it does not advocate or support uncertainty in the sense of doubt. On the contrary, it tries to present God's revelation in such a manner that people can become convinced, from within their experiences, that they are encountering the objective dimension of God. As compared with traditional dogmatism this kind of theology does, indeed, seem to lack certainty, for it can never be more than a tentative exploration, bound to be constantly re-made along with the changing perspective of human experience. But this still seems an enormous improvement on the kind of volatile and self-asserting doctrines that dogmatists have to offer, especially in these days of 'new theologies'. *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* is ultimately a plea for a truly professional theology, governed by the proper rules of the discipline, and the more professional a theologian is, the greater respect will he show for his material, that is the tradition. A truly professional theologian will be the first to notice when his presuppositions have led him to disregard both tradition and experience.

Having thus expressed general agreement with the main line of the argument, I would now like to concentrate on what I see as its weak link, i.e. the rejection of the notion incarnation. My objection does not arise so much from the fact that I regard incarnation as sacrosanct; it is above all with 'rejection' that I take issue.

What I mean is this. Wiles's suggestions are to be recommended in that they break through the impasse of the conditional faith which I briefly discussed at the beginning of this article. At the same time they succeed in integrating modern agnosticism into a new religious vision. For modern doubts about God have merely led us away from a particular way of seeing him, i.e. as someone over and above this world, but they will disappear as soon as we have learned to see God in a different way, i.e. as involved in this world.

But this is not so with our doubts about the incarnation, for Wiles argues that there is no place at all for the incarnation in the new vision of God. Although incarnation appears to be an integral part of our religious tradition, it nevertheless needs to be rejected, so that, at this point, doubt becomes indeed an element of faith.

But why do people have doubts about the incarnation? Is it not because they see it in terms of a God coming down from above at one particular time in history; is it not because they have that vision of God which makes him an isolated figure who, initially has nothing to do with this world? In other words, one wonders whether with the *rejection* of incarnation the argument has not fallen victim to the very pattern of religious thought which it tries to oppose.

Surely, Wiles is wrong in saying that the idea of incarnation presupposes the need to start from above. That may be the way we express

it, but it is not necessarily the way we think it. Perhaps I could explain myself by drawing a comparison with the body-soul problem.

We observe that, although man is like other creatures of flesh, he is also different. He is not just body, we say : he is body *and* soul, animated body. And because we start from 'body' we speak as if the soul comes into the body. Now, this can be interpreted, of course, in a crudely dualistic fashion, as if the soul is given before the body as a separate entity which at one particular point in time is infused into the body. Having made the distinction in that way, it becomes absurd, for, as a matter of fact, no one has even seen a soul when he opened a body. The next step would be to conclude that the soul does not exist and that there is therefore nothing that distinguishes men from animals.

Now, it would be rather odd to maintain that the distinction between soul and body cannot be made because some people have given it a dualistic interpretation, and if these people insist on making their interpretation the only possible one, we may well question their motivations for doing so. Does it not reveal a desire to dispose of the soul, an unwillingness to see in man anything more than a higher kind of animal.

Similar observation can be made with respect to our understanding of the idea of incarnation. Indeed, the notion presupposes a 'coming' of God into the flesh, but that does not necessarily mean that he is given before that, just as it is not necessary to assume that the soul is known as a separate entity apart from the body. I cannot see why it should be inherent in the notion of incarnation that God came into the flesh at one particular moment in time from a position which previously had nothing to do with this involvement. When we say that God is the life-giving power keeping things in existence, we are speaking of incarnation. Just as the soul expresses the humanity of the body, so the incarnate divinity expresses that the world is borne in God. Incarnation is a term that may be used to denote God's lasting involvement in the world, from the beginning. When the people of the Old Testament thought—as indeed they did—to encounter God in their kings, they believed in the incarnation, and when ancient religious texts from the Middle East inform us that the redeemer God descends into the womb of the earth, this too expresses belief in the incarnation.

I am, of course, aware of the fact that many of us would reserve the term incarnation for what happened in Jesus Christ, and, indeed, I shall have to show how this incarnation can be subsumed under the idea of God's lasting involvement in the world.

At any rate, the life and death of Jesus are never seen as an isolated incident; he is the fulfilment, and fulfilment would belie itself if it does not encompass all events, past and future. Jesus is not the fulfilment by means of the incarnation, for he *is,* in his very being, the incarnate God. If then he is the fulfilment, the incarnation in him relates essentially to the presence of God the creator in the world. Incarnation does not belong to Jesus exclusively; on the contrary, we are saying that in him comes true that which should have been the condition of the world, but which sin has not allowed to be.

Now, it seems to me that Wiles's essay fails to do justice to the idea of fulfilment on two accounts. Firstly it describes incarnation as an isolated moment, and secondly it assumes too quickly that God's involvement in this world (i.e. the incarnation to which the incarnation of Jesus relates) is known by all men in their present condition. When Paul writes in the letter to the Romans that ever since the creation of the world God's invisible nature, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made, he expresses the same ideal of knowledge of God to which Wiles subscribes. But he then continues, 'Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles'. Apparently it is too much for man to live with this invisible God, the source of existence and life, driving us beyond the boundaries of the present form of this world. He is an upsetting force, disturbing the established order and leading us into a mystery which seems so dark because it eludes our grasp. Deep inside us we are certain of this God, but it is a certainty too near to the heart, too close to our very being which came forth from nothingness and will return to it. Man prefers a different kind of certainty, the certainty of a God who can be made visible as an object outside us, clear as the sky, a God with a shape and form, a God who can be expressed in systems and ideologies.

Many names have been given to this idol-god whose false light obscures the mystery of existence in which the true God manifests himself, and although today it is no longer fashionable to call him divine, men still put their trust in the same kind of oppressive and illusory certainty. What we are seeking in faith is not a greater certainty about God, but a different one, less obvious, more mysterious, a certainty which we may fear because it leads us to what is truly unknown and falls outside the perspective which we have given to experience.

'In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets: but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world'. Thus the writer of the letter to the Hebrews describes how God had tried again and again to break man's stubbornness. The Creator had been present in this world, incarnate, in things and people and more specifically in the king as the representative of the generative power in all things. But the king, instead of being the source of life, became the symbol of the established order. God, unwilling to be imprisoned by such limits, persisted and raised up prophets, men who spoke up for the poor and oppressed, for all that the rulers did not allow to exist. They cause unrest in the hearts of those in power, prophesying that all that was achieved would come to nothing unless mankind would stop being misled by its splendour. That is why the prophets were killed; they were killed because men tried to overshadow the incarnate God with idol-worship.

Faith through Jesus means professing that ultimately God is not defeated in his work, that in spite of all evidence to the contrary incar-

nation will free itself from idolatry and manifest itself fully to the world.

And so we may agree with Wiles that the aim of theology is to bring us to the knowledge of God as someone who is not above this world but involved in it. And yet, this knowledge is conditioned by the dislodging of the powers of heaven, the breaking through the ceiling which is imposed upon existence. The God above this world may be an illusion, but he is nevertheless real inasmuch as he is the certainty to which we have subjected ourselves. The incarnation, although in the last analysis coming from below, also presupposes an initiative from above, a decisive intervention in that other realm, a victory in heaven and the descent of grace through which the earth will come to fruition. And so we pray: Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

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