

In chapter 2 of his book Belief in God in an Age of Scienceⁱ, John Polkinghorne begins by discussing some historical highlights in the development of the field of physics. After describing the evolution of the theory of light, from the antiquated notion that it is emitted by the eye, to the modern wave/particle conception in quantum theory, Polkinghorne delineates what he views as being the key features exhibited by this and other quests for understanding. In brief, Polkinghorne lists the following stages as being characteristic of the growth of knowledge in general (p.29):

1. Moments of radical revision in which new phenomena lead to new insights.
2. A period of confusion in which old and new ideas stand side by side in unresolved tension.
3. Moments of new synthesis and understanding in which a theory is revealed.
4. A continuing wrestling with unsolved problems.
5. Realizations that the new theory has deep implications.

Having established that these features are discernible in scientific development, Polkinghorne goes on to assert that these same features are exhibited in the development of Christian doctrine. While I recognize that such a comparison is a valiant attempt to establish commensurability between science and religion, I neither agree with Polkinghorne's methodology nor with his overly literal doctrinal interpretations and I will therefore raise several points of contention throughout my summary of this chapter. It must be expeditiously pointed out that Polkinghorne holds a strong bias in favor of the supposed objectivity of assertions which are based on scientific method over those based on "contentious" (read "subjective") philosophical enquiry (p.29). However, he does proceed to acknowledge that scientists are not merely interested in "functional success", but are in fact seeking "ontological knowledge" of reality (p.30). Regardless of whether or not the individual scientist is aware of this aspect of the endeavor, I would agree that it is essential to realize that the projects of science are never entirely separable from (nor superior to) those of other means and forms of gnosis. Throughout this chapter, Polkinghorne takes what he believes to be the progressive evolution of Christological doctrine, along with that of the understanding of the nature of light and the development of quantum theory, as the basis of his argument for the analogies between theology and science.

Polkinghorne asserts that, according to stage 1 of his list of the features of knowledge development, it is Jesus' death and resurrection that would have been the 'new phenomena' which initiated 'radical revision' and 'new insights' in the quest for an understanding of the true nature of Jesus Christ (p.32). As 'proof' that the resurrection actually took place, Polkinghorne cites the argument that there could be no other explanation for the "astonishing transformation of the disciples from the demoralized defeated men of Good Friday to the confident proclaimers of the Lordship of Christ at

Pentecost and beyond" (p.33). I must disagree with the assertion that there could be no other explanation for this change in the attitude of the disciples. Thanks to William James and R. D. Laing's contributions in the psychological approach to the study of religion, we can propose that the 'conversion experience' which the disciples underwent was the product of their own spiritual and psychic need to believe that Jesus was more than a mere mortal who could be abandoned by the merciful God in whom they had all had complete faith. The intensity of the disciples' emotional crisis, resulting from the implications of Jesus' death, would have been enough to cause what I suggest was a kind of consensual but unconsciously self-induced conviction among them that Jesus could not possibly be dead in the usual sense, but would, and did, miraculously rise again. There are those who feel that the disciples consciously chose to 'pretend' that a divine Jesus had been resurrected and was therefore the Messiah whom everyone had awaited. However, I do not see how the depths of religious sentiment recorded in the writings of the disciples could possibly have been elicited by such a purposeful deceit. In fact I am convinced that subjective belief can be equally as affecting as objective fact so that, in the ways that really matter to human experience and behavior, both are of equal value and impact.

Polkinghorne compares the paradoxical dilemma regarding the nature of light as simultaneously both wave and particle with that implied in the notion of a divine Christ who was nevertheless subject to being mortally crucified. Polkinghorne states that this "...combination of defeat and victory [results] from the fact that God's way of manifesting saving action is not through naked power but by the acceptance of suffering and the transcendence of death" (p.34). Here, despite what I am certain is meant as a literal conception of transcending death, Polkinghorne demonstrates what I see as an essential and enlightened understanding that human suffering (the existence of evil) does not preclude God's compassion and thus should not present an insurmountable obstacle to faith. This issue of faith in the face of doubt and evil will be tackled in more detail further on. According to Polkinghorne, the period of confusion and tension between old and new ideas, which is the second characteristic stage of knowledge development, is exemplified in the attempts of New Testament writers to come to terms with Christ's simultaneously divine and mundane nature and with the implications of his divinity within a monotheistic understanding of God. Polkinghorne compares the Pauline formula with Bohr's theory of the hydrogen atom (p.37). Unfortunately, I am not familiar enough with either of these to offer any comment on this analogy, however, the overall point of this section is clear enough: If God is claimed to be the unique Lord then how could Jesus also manifest Lordship without being seen as a 'second God'? (p.36). As Polkinghorne points out, this dilemma has since been settled, at least to the satisfaction of the Christian orthodoxy, by the subsequent development of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation.

In my view, this issue never constituted a dilemma at all, since I do not insist on a literal/physical

conception of Jesus' divine nature, or on any limited 'personage' of God. As I see it, God's divinity is manifested all over the place and one does not have to assume that this implies polytheism any more than one would claim to be God oneself when one experienced or manifested the gifts of divine Grace. It is possible to hold that God is not a 'being' which is materially separable from any and all of Creation, in which case it becomes unnecessary to define or in any way limit divinity to a particular location or incarnation. In terms of the third stage of knowledge development, Polkinghorne admits that science has proven more successful than theology insofar as scientific methods of experimentation have afforded a greater degree of explanatory theoretical synthesis. Theologians, on the other hand, must attempt to 'know' about a God "...who is not available to be subjected to our testing interrogation" but rather "...is to be encountered in awe and obedience" (p.37). Polkinghorne suggests that the closest that theology has come to theory-making has been the Trinitarian and Christological deliberations of the Councils of Nicea, Constantinople and Chalcedon. These outlined the criteria which would determine "...the range of discussion that could bear acceptable relationship to actual Christian experience" (p.38).

I find this particular aspect of Christianity and of religious orthodoxy in general to be wholly frustrating. How can certain human beings presume to judge the spiritual validity of other human being's personal religious experience and expression? It is this same limiting, dogmatic attitude which leads Polkinghorne to almost lamentingly acknowledge the fact that religious "...discourse will never be able fully to encompass God within the limitations of finite human understanding" (Ibid.). I myself celebrate this very fact, because I see it as a much-needed stumbling block to the Hubris of the human Ego, reminding us that the supreme ultimacy of God can never be limited to the realm of human cognition. Polkinghorne admits that, just like theology, science often must rely on "...partial models affording limited insight", but he then claims that science has been able "to extricate itself from this situation and to go on to discover a theory, a candidate for the verisimilitudinous description of the way things are" (p.39). I would say that most scientific theories about 'the way things are' are equally as incomplete and tentative as religious assertions. Furthermore, I take issue with Polkinghorne's implicit contrasting of 'symbolic' language with 'scientific' language. In fact, all language systems are symbolic inasmuch as they are socially contractual approximate representations of realities of which the essences may only be 'knowable' on some wordless intuitive level.

Continued wrestling with unsolved problems, the fourth stage in Polkinghorne's list, has led to a variety of theological formulations regarding the paradoxical issue of the finite/infinite nature of Christ. For example, the notion of "kenosis" (p.40) - that Christ temporarily gave up his divinity when he took human form - overcomes the cognitive dissonance by essentially separating the 'two natures', making them no longer coextensive. Polkinghorne, on inexplicable grounds, distinguishes this tack from that of

"functional Christology" which speaks of Jesus "...as a man inspired by God, and in obedient union with God, to an unparalleled degree...the new emergent...the latest development in the upward unfolding of human possibility" (Ibid.). Polkinghorne does not accept this idea that Jesus might have been 'only' a mortal man, because how could he then have performed the miracles attributed to him in the Bible? Specifically, Polkinghorne cannot imagine how the miracle of 'salvation' might be effected by the exemplary and encouraging deeds and words of a mere human being. He argues that "much more is needed if we are to be delivered from the plight of our human condition" and that only "the transforming power of divine life...will enable us to become what God wills for us to be. If Jesus were just the new emergent, how would that help us who have so obviously failed to emerge?" (p.41). These points illustrate precisely where my views diverge from Polkinghorne's. Because he and I hold distinct understandings of what is meant by being 'delivered' from the human plight, our conceptions of the mechanism by which redemption occurs are dissimilar. It is clear that what Polkinghorne understands by "the forgiveness that releases us from the entail of past alienation from God" (Ibid.) is a material salvation in redemption from sin, which could only have been made possible by the miraculous alteration of our objective ontology through a literally divine resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Fundamentally, what Polkinghorne is proposing is that if the resurrection of Christ were not a concrete objective truth it would not be possible for us to be redeemed by our faith in the message of that truth. Throughout this paper it has become increasingly obvious that Polkinghorne and I differ in our conceptions of 'truth'. In my Idealist view, truth is subjective belief inasmuch as what one believes to be true is psychologically, and therefore functionally, equivalent to knowledge of an objective fact. As a Realist, on the hand, Polkinghorne would surely disagree. My argument with the Realist stance is based on an assertion that the effects which faith manifests in our lives are not dependent on the facticity of what is believed - to the contrary - faith by definition calls for belief in spite of doubt. If we grant that a blind faith in Jesus' divine resurrection is sufficient to provide a person with a hope capable of transcending despair, then we grant that our faith in the possibility of such deliverance results from the subjective truth-value of the redemptive message, which the resurrection story imparts. It therefore becomes totally irrelevant to its purposes whether or not this story represents an historical fact.

Given the direction of my arguments thus far, it follows that my own understanding of the deliverance/redemption formulation is that it is meant as a metaphoric description of the psychological 'conversion' which results from the subjective experience of self-forgiveness and acceptance. Let me be very clear that, unlike Sigmund Freud, what I mean by the subjective 'psychological truth' of Christian belief is not to suggest that it is an illusory product of infantile wish-fulfillment. Rather, I believe that the human psyche incorporates a 'soul' of divine origin and nature, so that the potential for 'deliverance from sin' (transcendence of suffering), which is afforded by the redemptive quality of

unconditional faith and self-love, is a manifestation of God within us. Thus, in opposition to Polkinghorne, I would insist that the psychological force of human inspiration, which in times of personal crisis can be elicited from within the psyche itself by the leap of faith, is quite adequate for empowering an individual to 'emerge' as a functionally 'transformed' being. As I see it, the message of Jesus' crucifixion is that it teaches us to believe that an unconditional faith in God, despite the existential despair of doubt, leads to a sense of acceptance which allows us to effectively transcend suffering and death by changing our attitude toward their ontological significance. The redemptive function of such a message operates in our lives not only in spite of but also because of the presence of doubt and the evil in the world.

Having reached the fifth and last stage in the features of theory development, Polkinghorne discusses the deep implications recognized in the new theory. Although he has pointed out that theology has been unable to establish what science would acknowledge as 'theory', Polkinghorne believes that the insights gained from the attempts at theory-making are nevertheless valuable and suggestive (p.42). He illustrates this in reference to the struggle with the problem of evil and suffering, which he has previously discussed in chapter 1 in terms of "the free-will and free-process defenses". For Polkinghorne, these philosophical rationales, which hold that "...the painful bitterness of the world is not gratuitous but is the ineluctable shadow side of certain other goods" (p.43), are simply too intellectual to have any existential impact. I cannot agree with Polkinghorne here, as I have personally found this very idea of the necessary balance between good and evil in the world to be extremely helpful on an emotional level. Furthermore, in response to Polkinghorne's statement that "...suffering...is a deep existential challenge to human trust in the value and victory of goodness" (Ibid.), I feel I must point out that without this challenge of suffering there would be no need for trust (faith) and no value in goodness, since good only has any meaningful value when it exists in contrast to evil. In describing Christ on the cross as "not just a good man caught and destroyed by the system, but the one true God who...embraces and accepts the bitterness of the world that is divine creation" (p.43), Polkinghorne is assuming that there are only these two extremes in understanding the nature of Jesus. Yet one can argue that Jesus' crucifixion was neither meaningless nor was it a crucifixion of God.

Polkinghorne concludes his chapter with a return to the comparison which he has supposedly been making between science and religion. He offers a twofold argument for his claim that both scientific and religious theories "...give us verisimilitudinous knowledge of the structure of the physical world" (p.44). Firstly, he asserts that all explanatory concepts ought to "...make sense of the world precisely because they bear some relation to the actuality of the world" (Ibid.). As I have tried to show, however, the concept of God as a "...basis for understanding what is happening" (Ibid.) does not require that God exist beyond our collective belief. Polkinghorne insists that "our encounter with the

quantum world and with God...is a real meeting with something other than human thought" (p.45). I must argue that any encounter we have with the world is necessarily experienced with the subjective mind, so can we really say that we ever meet with something other than human thought? I do not see how we can validly make such an assertion. The second part of Polkinghorne's concluding argument for Realism reiterates his stance that it would be impossible for religion to so deeply affect and motivate us if it did not have ontological reference. As I have attempted to argue, once we understand deliverance and redemption as subjective psychological experiences, we can see that it is not necessarily the case that "the functions that Jesus fulfills require a corresponding ontological status to make that possible" (p.41).

Polkinghorne's implicit devaluation of the power of subjective belief is evident as well in his further suggestion that "unless there really is a God...then the cross is no answer to the...problem of suffering...beyond a heroic individual human defiance of it" (p.45). My response to this is to ask what could possibly be more divinely miraculous than just such a defiance?! It seems that Polkinghorne's bias in favor of scientific realism has focused his attention so narrowly on arguing the inadequacies of a 'merely' functional Christology that he has not been willing to recognize any value in the psychological realm of subjective religious experience. I feel strongly that it is only in the psychology of religion that there is to be found the degree of open-endedness which affords unlimited ultimacy to our enquiry into issues of theology. If we really seek commensurability between science and religion, we ought to stop trying to make religion scientific and instead try to explore the ways in which science, which includes human psychology, is an endeavor of existential religious significance.

ⁱ Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1998.