BEYOND THE CATECHISM

Faith and Reason

John Moffatt

MANY PEOPLE FIND THEMSELVES uncomfortably aware of a sneaking tension between the words that they recite in the Creed on a Sunday and the language in which they think for the other 167 hours of the week. God from God, light from light; of one being with the Father; for us and our salvation; became a human being; the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father. How does this all fit in with our everyday working and family lives?

One great resource for Roman Catholics, but not necessarily only for Catholics, is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The Catechism explains how some of the Creed's formulations arose in the early years of Christian thought. But it will also introduce you to a technical, ancient language of 'substance' and 'persons' or 'hypostases': a language which was alive in fourth-century philosophy and science, but is now very distant from the way in which we actually interpret our world. A process of translation is necessary in order to cross over from the language of the fourth-century Mediterranean to the languages of the modern world.

Equally, there are large areas of twentieth- and twenty-first-century thought that are invisible to the Catechism—the index of citations is very revealing here. This is not a criticism. The job of the Catechism is not to tell us what thinkers are doing now, but what the Church's official formulations of faith and morals are and how they were established. Thus, where twentieth-century thought has had a direct impact on Church teaching, in a council or a papal writing, it will appear in the Catechism; otherwise it is not represented. A small example: in nn.362–368 there is a presentation of the Church's teaching on the soul. In n.364 a reference to scriptural language is supported by an extensive quotation from Vatican II, which emphasizes the unity of body and soul, and therefore the worth of the

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body—a hint at the Council's desire to move the Church away from the more unhelpful forms of disembodied spirituality.

> The human body shares in the dignity of 'the image of God': it is a human body precisely because it is animated by a spiritual soul, and it is the whole human person that is intended to become, in the body of Christ, a temple of the Spirit:
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> 'Man, though made of body and soul, is a unity. Through his very bodily condition he sums up in himself the elements of the material world. Through him they are thus brought to their highest perfection and can raise their voice in praise freely given to the Creator. For this reason man may not despise his bodily life. Rather he is obliged to regard his body as good and to hold it in honour since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day.'[1]

The phrase about human beings 'summing up the elements of the material world' resonates with the efforts of twentieth-century Catholics such as Teilhard de Chardin to reconcile a material understanding of the physical universe with the reality of a spiritual realm. In contrast, when we look at the next paragraph (n. 365) we find the soul is '"form" of the body': that which makes this body a living being. This is the language of Aristotle, taken up by Christian thinkers in the Middle Ages and officially sanctioned by the Council of Vienne in 1312. And then (n. 366) we see two twentieth-century popes, Pius XII and Paul VI, repeating the teaching of the Fifth Lateran Council (1513) that every spiritual soul is created immediately by God. All those nineteenth- and twentieth-century explorations in psychology, neurobiology, philosophy of mind and phenomenology with which we have grown up and which we have take for granted are invisible. It seems that how we integrate the language of soul with our experience and our thought-world is a task which the Catechism leaves up to us.

The problem is compounded, especially in British culture, because the thought-world that shapes us is itself shaped by a deep philosophical scepticism about the supernatural. It contains assumptions about evidence, probability, reason and reality that have only been reinforced by the dramatic success of the natural sciences over the last two

[1] *Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church*, n. 364. And see 1 Corinthians 6: 19–20; 15: 44–45; *Gaudium et spes*, 14 n. 1; Daniel 3: 57–80.

hundred years. It is not an accident, then, that we find it a struggle to make sense of the technical language of faith or to reconcile inherited beliefs about the soul with modern understandings of the human self. A part of us shares the scepticism of the language we use.

Secular and Religious Language

So what do we do at this point? One strategy is simply to deny the value of any thought in the last four hundred years—a kind of equivalent to the way creationists deal with evolution. Forget Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Marx, Freud, Darwin, Wittgenstein, Ayer, Russell and all, and turn to a simplified version of the highly complex world of medieval philosophy. By doing this we hermetically seal our religious minds from the carping uncertainties of secular thought. We denounce the Enlightenment wholesale; we point out the way secular culture oppresses religion; and we cling to our tradition as the rock that saves us from the chaotic seas of modernity. We find ourselves pining for the Catholicism of the 1870s, when we all knew who we were and what we were about. Which is probably a pretty simplified version of the 1870s, as it happens.

But if you want to insist on the universality of truth and the primacy of reason and to engage in dialogue with all men and women of good will, as the last council and the last four popes have clearly done, this is unlikely to be the path to take. In addition, there is much to be grateful for in the present time, and in the quality and richness of the thought around us. For all the undoubted vices and failures that are peculiar to our age, there are many successes and virtues—openness to dialogue being one of them.

At the other extreme, another possibility is to accept all the axioms and assumptions of the most critical forms of modern thought without question and to embark on the path of 'demythologizing' our faith and its practices to the very limit. This can be a deeply honest endeavour, but the results can be a little bleak for those who like their faith rooted in reality as we usually understand it. The Cambridge philosopher and theologian Don Cupitt has perhaps followed this road as far as anyone.[2] Cupitt uses some key ideas from Wittgenstein to explain how

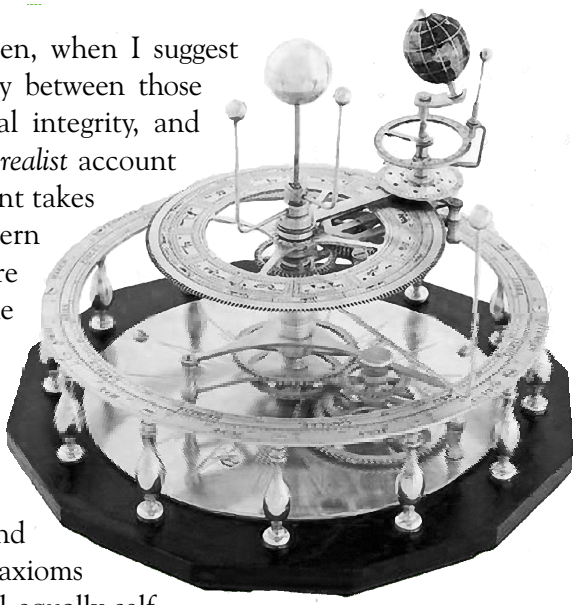
[2] See *Taking Leave of God* (New York: SCM, 1981).

Christianity can be true in a world in which metaphysics has no meaning and ethical authority comes from within.

Wittgenstein argues that when we want to find out what any word means, we do not go around looking for mysterious meanings inside people's heads, we look at how the word is used, in conversation, in life—what the word *does*. The way the word is used *is* its meaning. But we also find that the way we use words will be different according to the different sorts of conversation we are having (different 'language games'), which in turn will relate to the 'form of life' in which those conversations take place. Now in a *scientific* language game, acquiring physical evidence, doing tests, etc. is part of the relevant 'form of life', and whenever we claim 'the sky is blue' in that game we do it because we can look out of the window at an external observable world and find out that way if it is true or false. The truth claims themselves will therefore refer to things-out-there.

But in a *religious* language game, there is a different form of life which includes praying, worshipping, living a good life, and professing certain doctrines about God, about which truth claims are made. However, in this case the truth claims are not dependent on data about the external world—the world of the senses—but instead are intimately bound up with the grammar of the religious form of life itself. It is within the structure of that form of life that these claims are true and, if we ask, 'So what does "God" refer to, when they say "I believe in God"?', the answer is, 'look at how they live'. This is ultimate deconstruction: God exists in the sociolinguistic structures of the community alone. Cupitt calls this sort of Christianity 'Christian Buddhism'—a Christianity without God. What makes it worth carrying on professing this deconstructed faith is the value of the way of life it represents, bound to a narrative of generous, self-giving love.

There are undoubtedly times—sometimes long periods—in the lives of all believers that feel a bit like that: there is a profound emptiness around the word 'God'—an emptiness with which we have to engage. Yet again, for most of us, there are also times where that word is rich in meaning and 'divine presence' is a lived and transforming reality. Cupitt's most lean take on the truth of Christianity does not seem to do justice to that experience. Again, for those who agree with Wittgenstein, you don't *have to* deconstruct your faith in order to play his language games.



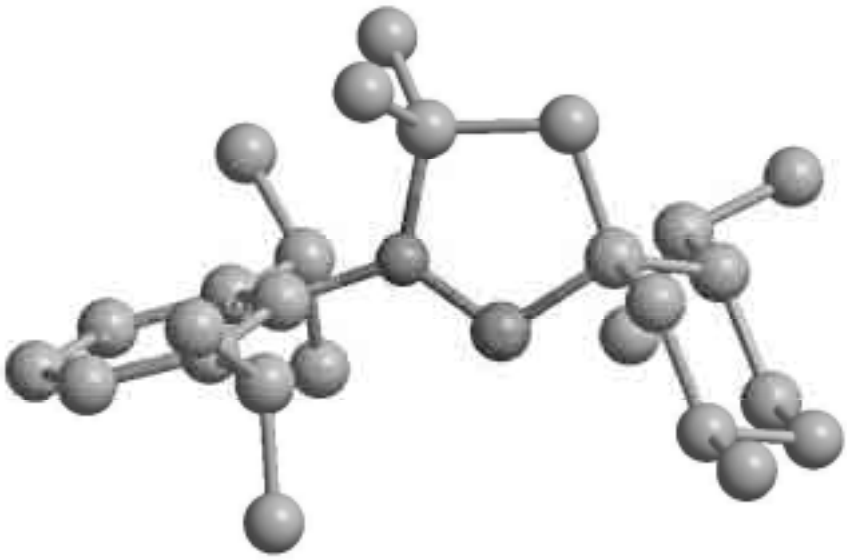
It will come as no surprise, then, when I suggest there continues to be a middle way between those two extremes which has intellectual integrity, and which I would like to call a *critical realist* account of Catholic Christianity. This account takes on board the challenges of modern thought in order to talk more coherently and credibly about the life we have found through this mysterious other we call 'God'.

We need to show that to claim this middle ground is reasonable—rather than just a flight from a reality that is too harsh to bear. And we need to show that the sceptical axioms embedded in our culture are not all equally self-evident—indeed that some of them can legitimately be called into question. One thing which is helpful here (though also unsettling) is to notice that what is considered 'reasonable', even in non-religious thought, can modify over time. I want to suggest in particular that what counts as 'reasonable/rational' is not quite so certain at the beginning of the twenty-first century as it might have seemed at the beginning of the twentieth. This is all a bit abstract, so I shall try to illustrate why it might seem more reasonable for us to talk meaningfully about a God 'out there' now than it did a hundred years ago. It might be useful anyway at this point to remind ourselves of a few key moments in the history of the relationship between theology, science and philosophy.

Theology, Science and Philosophy

If we go back to the fourteenth century we see a world in which science, philosophy and religion contribute to a picture of the universe in which everyone and everything has its place: God, angels, human beings, animals, demons, heaven, hell. Earth sits in the middle and the stars wheel round in the *primum mobile*, driven by the unmoved mover. The narrative of Scripture and Christian tradition can be harmonized seamlessly with the narrative of natural science.

With Copernicus and Galileo that particular holistic picture of the universe was irrecoverably broken. Planet Earth gradually had to take



its place in an infinite universe which offers no place for the old images of heaven. Yet this in itself was not sufficient to undermine the credibility of theology, because the natural sciences, philosophy and theology still all allowed that you could reach substantive metaphysical truth by suitably constructed arguments, side by side with truths that could be established by experiment and observation.

In the eighteenth century the two philosophers Hume and Kant came up with some very compelling reasons for thinking that there was a fundamental problem with claiming *knowledge* of things out there for which there was no evidence from the senses. Hume was as hard on Newton as he was on theology. But Kant made a distinction between the physical world of causal laws, as defined by Newton and relying on experiment, and the world of metaphysical theories based on pure argument. In the former the concepts we frame are matched by experience and therefore, in this realm, we can have knowledge. In the latter our concepts cannot count as knowledge: anyone can spin words and create 'new' concepts, but without experience these concepts are empty. Theology, inevitably shy about experimentation, has found itself on the back foot ever since. This line of argument was pursued to a logical positivist conclusion in the 1920s and 1930s, when the English philosopher A. J. Ayer declared that metaphysical and ethical talk not only was about unknowables but was meaningless. If you want to say anything that is (a) interesting and (b) has any meaning, it has to be

possible to tie it in to an empirical observation. To say that God is dead is just as nonsensical as to say that Jesus lives.

However, ironically, in these same years physics, the hardest of the hard sciences since Newton, was discovering in the world of the sub-atomic particle that it could not function without ideas and models that were both counter-intuitive and beyond direct observation. What is more, the precision of scientific observation was limited fundamentally by the effects of the observation itself. Still in the 1930s, Karl Popper came up with a more modest description of the scientific project than that proposed by Ayer and friends.

According to Popper, all scientific theory is essentially provisional. No scientific theory, however fruitful, coherent or consistent with all observation, can be finally proved. For a hypothesis to be scientifically serious, or 'meaningful' in Ayer's sort of sense, we do not actually have to be able to verify it by an observation, but we should be able to devise an experiment that would show if it were false. If it fails the test we can be sure that it is false. If it passes the test we can provisionally accept it as true until someone devises a more stringent test. As I understand it, this is in fact the way science moves forward, in an interplay between imaginative hypothesis, often based on observation and analogy, followed up by rigorous (negative) testing.

But worse than this erosion of absolute certainty in the natural sciences is a twist that would have very much disturbed Immanuel Kant. Kant banished the kind of (theological or metaphysical) speculation that conjures up entities we cannot observe, and affirmed natural science because its concepts were rooted in the experience of the senses. But modern physics finds that it needs speculation which goes beyond the observable if it is to provide a satisfactory narrative for what it has already, provisionally, established. For instance, observation yields theories in which our universe is successfully described mathematically and there are certain constants in the equations. We ask the question, 'why these equations, these constants?' A theologian answers, 'God made it that way'. Someone who does not want to drag God into physics might prefer to say, 'There are an infinite number of universes with an infinite number of variations and these constants were bound to be in one of them'. Both answers are equally metaphysical in that they go beyond what can or could be observed within the boundaries of our universe.

There is a very significant shift here—which I know some scientists hate. But it would seem to me that if it is legitimate for one person to use the concept of an infinite number of universes unlike our own to explain what we see, then it is equally legitimate for another to use the concept of God for the same purpose. In other words, it is not so unreasonable for us to talk about a God 'out there' now as it might have seemed a hundred years ago.

This I think legitimises sufficiently our project of translation, of trying to engage critically with the reality in which we believe in the light of modern thought. There remain the questions of the sort of language we translate into, and how we are to relate it to the language of the tradition. I shall take the second question first.

We need to preserve our relation to the tradition and so we need to assume that important insights into the nature of things (whether physical or theological) can be successfully expressed in more and less scientifically sophisticated language. Democritus' atomic theory, from 2,500 years ago, successfully gives an insight, by analogy, into how the physical world is structured, though his account lacks the enormous sophistication of modern science. This is important, because, as we have already seen, part of the way we talk about God today uses a philosophical and scientific language which is no longer current outside theology. We need to guarantee the continuity of insight in the different formulations and analogies of different eras. At the same time, however, we must also affirm that all our talk about the things of God, who is both in relation with us and our world and beyond us and our world, can never be more than limited and provisional.

Then, when it comes to *how* we talk about the things of God in relation to our physical world, I would suggest that we explicitly note the metaphysical models that our observational science uses to talk about the boundaries of that physical reality. This boundary metaphysics is obviously fragile, easily undermined by new information or more coherent speculation. But it is a way of respecting the force of the Kantian critique and a way of helping theology enter into dialogue with some of the most powerful thought in our culture. It may help us towards a richer theological narrative of the cosmos and perhaps help us recover something of the cosmic dimension of our relationship with God, which has been eroded in the positivist centuries.

This may seem a bit abstract, but the important thing to note is that this process of re-expressing faith is not new in our tradition, and in fact has always been a necessary dimension of that tradition. Though the process is always complex, involving tensions between authority and reason, obedience and intelligence; whether you look at the first, third, fifth, thirteenth or twentieth centuries, you will find it in the Christian tradition. This is an essential part of who we are: people of faith and reason, of prayer and action, who are not afraid of reality and not afraid to acknowledge our uncertainty as we are led to an ever deeper understanding of a Truth that sets us free.

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