

Paradox in Religion

I

In *Reasons and Faiths* Ninian Smart, after quoting a characteristic assertion from the *Iśa Upaniṣad*: 'It is both far and near; It is within all this and it is outside all this', remarks that such 'paradoxical pronouncements fulfil such a number of functions that by understanding the gist of them one can penetrate to the heart of the philosophy of religion'.¹ In *Christianity and Paradox* Dr Ronald Hepburn considering more practically theism, comments that 'paradoxical and near-paradoxical language is the *staple* of accounts of God's nature and is not confined to rhetorical extravaganzas'.² It seems then as if religious discourse not only revels in paradox but considers it illuminating. Here seem to be, if anywhere, what Professor John Wisdom would call revealing improprieties.³

But such reflections lead directly to the question with which I shall be concerned in this paper: can we do anything to distinguish illuminating and revealing improprieties from those which merely bewilder and confound us? It is a question which Hepburn himself raises early in his book: 'When is a contradiction not a *mere* contradiction, but a sublime Paradox, a mystery?' Though Hepburn has a number of constructive suggestions to make I think he would say that for the most part the religious discourse he examines displays vicious muddle rather than revealing improprieties, so we are still left with the question on our hands. What Hepburn has done is to make the question all the more urgent and challenging. If certain paradoxes preserve and reveal something, what do they reveal, and how? Can we give any clues by which to recognize illuminating improprieties, revealing absurdities?⁴ For our present purpose and without claiming that

¹ *Reasons and Faiths*, Ninian Smart. Kegan Paul, p. 20.

² *Christianity and Paradox*, Ronald W. Hepburn. Watts, p. 16.

³ *Philosophy and Psycho-analysis*, John Wisdom. Blackwell, p. 112.

⁴ Cp. Professor Gilbert Ryle who concludes his article on *Categories* in *Logic and Language* (2nd series), ed. A. G. N. Flew, Blackwell, p. 81, with the question: 'What are the tests of absurdity?'

our classification is either definitive or exhaustive but merely an attempt to bring some sort of order into a vast and complex topic, let us begin by distinguishing the following brands of paradox: First, there is what we might call *avoidable paradox* which spotlights some confusion or other, as for example when a blunder in argument leads to a plain and obvious self-contradiction. Since the muddle can often be cleared up by retracing the steps of our argument, and since (at best) it may have a useful negative point to make, we might speak of this brand of avoidable paradox as *retrospectively negative*.

On the other hand, there is paradox which, while it is avoidable, is only avoided when we are led forward to a new assertion which somehow arises out of the two original assertions. Since there thus arises some positive significance from the paradox, as and when it is resolved, we may say that it is *subsequently significant*. This is the case with an antimony (as with Kant) and with dialectic in general, but not, I think, with Hegelian dialectic in particular. For with Hegel, while any paradox of thesis and antithesis was resolvable in a synthesis, this immediately generated another paradox waiting to be resolved. So the Hegelian dialectic would be a better example of unavoidable paradox claiming to have some sort of rational structure.

This brings us to our second group: *unavoidable paradox*. The significance of such paradox (it would be claimed) arises from and is bound up with its permanence and unavoidability. But within this group there arises the possibility of an important sub-division. Such unavoidable paradox may have a discernible, if curious, structure in virtue of which it becomes revealing; alternatively, the paradox may permit of no such structure being discerned. The paradox will then be permanent without permitting of any logical examination or assessment and we might call it *(b) logically inaccessible*, to distinguish it from the former brand which we might call *(a) logically explorable*.

What I propose to do in this paper is to examine cases of paradox in religion which fall into each of these two categories and their two subdivisions.

II

Let us look first at what we have called avoidable paradox which

is retrospectively negative, and begin with two examples from non-religious discourse.

1 An example which Ryle gives: the child finding it a paradox that 'the Equator can be crossed but not seen', for whatever can be crossed, like roads, bridges, hills, can generally be seen. Here paradox arises because of a failure to distinguish cartographical language and physical object language. But the paradox might also arise as a declaration that, having distinguished these two languages, we are at a loss as to how to relate them.

2 As a second example take the assertion: 'Since all roots inevitably benefit from treatment with ammonium nitrate, so then must the roots of quadratics.' But obviously the roots of quadratics cannot be treated with nitrate. Here is self-contradiction which arises from failing to recognize that here are two different uses of the token 'root'. Once we recognize this, it is clear that the paradox is sheer absurdity, and its negative point of little value.

Now religious discourse includes examples of paradox which may be regarded as of this negative and resolvable kind, and we will try to give parallel examples to the two we have just given.

1 As an example of religious paradox closely similar to the Equator case, let us recall an aphorism of William Temple's, 'I believe in the Holy Catholic Church and sincerely regret that it does not at present exist.'⁵ Compare: 'I believe I can cross the Equator, but regret that it does not exist to be seen.' Here is paradox all right. But once again it has only a negative point to make, viz. that the word 'Church' used in a credal profession, and the word 'Church' used of a visible community, belong to two different logical areas. The problem of their relationship it leaves on our hands.

2 As with our second general example, let us now take a case of religious paradox which displays sheer confusion and utter muddle. I am bold to say that this seems to me to occur at a certain stage in the development of Trinitarian doctrine as H. A. Wolfson describes it.⁶ He argues that in Judaism there was a pre-existent Wisdom and a pre-existent Messiah, though (he says) the two were never identified. We might have expected that to be a merit,

⁵ *Life of William Temple*, F. A. Iremonger, p. 387, quoted by P. Hartill, *The Unity of God*, p. 139, and called (rightly) 'a paradoxical bit of rhetoric intended to focus attention on the sin of disunion'.

⁶ *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, H. A. Wolfson, O.U.P.

pre-existent Wisdom = pre-existent Messiah = Holy Spirit
(St Paul)
= pre-existent
Logos (Philo)

III

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Starting once again with a non-religious illustration, let us recall the familiar example of wave and particle theories in contemporary scientific method. To bring out the paradoxical character of this example, I think we have to formulate it as follows. Certain physical phenomena are best treated in terms of particle mechanics which presupposes that matter is discontinuous; at the same time, other physical phenomena are best treated in terms of wave mechanics which presupposes that matter is continuous. The world, therefore, is both continuous and discontinuous; a plain self-contradiction.

It might be said that this paradox belongs really to the first group, for 'matter' and the 'world' do not obviously belong to the same logical areas. But let us set that possibility aside and for the purpose of our present example notice only that the scientist working with this paradox does so with the intention that it must somehow and eventually be overcome in a more comprehensive and therefore more illuminating hypothesis. Whether or not this has been attained in the present instance by Bohm and others who talk about hidden parameters uniting the areas, I am not competent to say, but the possibility of their being right is enough to record for our purpose.

Granted that such paradox and procedure is not only justified but illuminating in science, what of possible theological parallels? Hepburn, who takes the example as a paradigm for understanding religious paradox, has no difficulty in showing that whether in assuming a parallel ontology, or some kind of similarity between a theological and scientific 'hypothesis', the scientific near-parallel at crucial points breaks down. But could we ever expect it to be otherwise? If the theological case were identical with the scientific, theology, like science, would be concerned with no more than observables. But—to raise already a major point to which I return presently—can there be any distinctively *religious* language which talks of nothing more than observables?

Even so, let us agree with Hepburn so far as to admit that *some* religious paradox has a *prima facie* affinity with the scientific case and I may take specifically an example from Christology. The doctrine of the *Communicatio Idiomatum*, sponsored by Cyril of Alexandria and receiving Conciliar authority in the Tome of Leo, argued that while the human and divine natures of Jesus Christ were separate, the attributes of the one could be predicated

of the other because of their union in the one person of Christ. Here is paradox indeed. Natures supposedly wholly separate are found to be united. On one interpretation it would certainly be a vicious muddle, i.e., if it was supposed that a thing called a 'person' united two other things called 'natures' which were nevertheless utterly separate. Further, when the doctrine has been taken in this descriptive way, it has certainly led to what I would say is pointless controversy, viz., as between Luther and the orthodox. But if the doctrine means to assert that while words about 'human nature' and 'God' are logically diverse, yet they have to be mixed to talk about Jesus Christ, so that as used of Jesus, words like 'union' or 'Person', or Cyril's phrase 'hypostatic unity', are logical peculiarities whose behaviour awaits elucidation—it may be right or wrong but it is not necessarily sheer muddle, and we may agree that some sort of encouragement for this task of elucidation can be derived from the scientific case. In this way the development of Christological doctrine can provide us with something close to the scientific parallel. But let us notice that it only does this by appealing in the end to crucial words and phrases which still await a logical placing. The original paradox may have been avoided, but only in a way which reveals more clearly than ever the characteristically preposterous core. In this way we are pushed on to the unavoidable paradox which is peculiarly religious.

It will be useful at this point to take an example from Nuer religion, for it leads us to the same sort of conclusion. In the religious discourse of the Nuer can be found assertions such as these: 'The twin is a bird'; 'The cucumber is an ox'. Professor Evans-Pritchard elucidates these assertions as follows:

When a cucumber is used as a sacrificial victim Nuer speak of it as an ox. In doing so they are asserting something rather more than that it takes the place of an ox. They do not, of course, say that cucumbers are oxen, and in speaking of a particular cucumber as an ox in a sacrificial situation they are only indicating that it may be thought of as an ox in that particular situation; and they act accordingly by performing the sacrificial rites as closely as possible to what happens when the victim is an ox. The resemblance is conceptual, not perceptual. The 'is' rests on qualitative analogy. And the expression is asymmetrical,

a cucumber is an ox, but an ox is not a cucumber. A rather different example of this way of speaking is the Nuer assertion that twins are one person and that they are birds.⁷

Professor Evans-Pritchard continues a little later:

It seems odd, if not absurd, to a European when he is told that a twin is a bird as though it were an obvious fact, for Nuer are not saying that a twin is like a bird, but that he is a bird. There seems to be a complete contradiction in the statement. . . . But, in fact, no contradiction is involved in the statement, which, on the contrary, appears quite sensible, and even true, to one who presents the idea to himself in the Nuer language and within their system of religious thought. He does not then take their statements about twins any more literally than they make and understand themselves. They are not saying that a twin has a beak, feathers, and so forth . . . when Nuer say that a twin is a bird they are not speaking of either as it appears in the flesh . . . they are speaking of the association birds have with Spirit through their ability to enter the realm to which Spirit is likened in metaphor and where Nuer think it chiefly is, or may be. The formula does not express a dyadic relationship between twins and birds but a triadic relationship between twins, birds, and God. In respect to God, twins and birds have a similar character.

In such a case it is clear that what started as paradox concludes as a group of more transparent assertions, viz., that in respect of God or Spirit, twins, birds, cucumber, and oxen have a similar symbolic function. The paradox only arises if, in Evans-Pritchard's words, we mistake the rules governing the assertions and think of the formulae as expressing a dyadic relationship rather than a triadic relationship. But this does not mean that the example falls into the negative class of avoidable paradox which we considered above. For while it is true that the paradox has disappeared when the correct structure of the formula has been recognized, it has only disappeared on the introduction of another concept, viz., God or Spirit, whose logical behaviour remains unmapped. All we can gather is that such a concept, while it somehow refers to

⁷ *Nuer Religion*, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, p. 128.

observables such as beaks, twin births, cucumber skin, oxen, refers to more than observables as well.

The same conclusion might be drawn from a less obviously religious example: 'Hail to thee blithe spirit, bird thou never wert'.⁸ Bird, obviously the skylark is. Shelley is therefore saying that here we have something which is both a bird and not a bird. Paradox indeed. Yet he might say it was justified in so far as what has a beak, feathers, and so forth, is a symbol of what is beak, feathers and more than any number of such items, i.e., spirit. But to reiterate our earlier point, the logical behaviour of 'Spirit' is still on our hands.

Let us conclude this section with a further note on the Nuer tribe which will lead us conveniently to our next group of paradoxical assertions. Much earlier in the book Evans-Pritchard has remarked that Nuer prayers

as is the case among other peoples, are often repetitions, but rather in the form of parallelisms than of tautologies, for they are variations of meaning within the same general meaning. Different images are used to express the same general idea, each stressing a different aspect of it.

The important question which arises out of this remark is: Is the variegated and often conflicting discourse displayed by prayers only paradoxical and complex in so far as it contrives to bring together all kinds of ideas in curious concatenations,⁹ thereby producing striking and unusual effects—the grotesque can often be the exciting and memorable—or does the discourse of prayer somehow contrive so to combine words and evoke images as to tell some new kind of story altogether, a story about what can never be cashed in terms of such words and images taken at their face value, a story about something which is not merely observable, a story for which the rules (if there are any) still need to be elucidated? This brings us to what is most characteristically religious paradox: paradox claiming to be of the unavoidable kind.

⁸ *To a Skylark*, P. B. Shelley, ll. 1-2.

⁹ Compare J. Newton's hymn (English Hymnal 405):
Jesus! my Shepherd, Husband, Friend
My Prophet, Priest and King
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End. . . .