

The Reality of God and Other Essays. Schubert M. Ogden. New York” Harper and Row, 1963

“The Reality of God.”

ONE: The Problem of God Today

The “problem of God” has come to the fore in contemporary (Protestant) theology:

1. Some of the distinctive claims of Christian faith were rediscovered and reasserted by the neoorthodox theologians, but the question of the *meaning and truth of these claims for men living in a sexual age* was for the most part not even clearly posed, much less effectively answered.

The seriousness of this question has been recognized by Tillich, Bonhoeffer, and Bultmann.

They are aware of their inescapable ‘*apologetic*’ task; i.e., they insist that the terms of theological adequacy are always set not only by the faith which the theologian must seek to express appropriately, but also *by the existence of man himself*, to whom the theologian must try to express that faith understandably.

2. When contemporary Western man is judged by some of his more creative self-expressions, his outlook no longer seems merely secular, but appears to have become increasingly *secularistic*.

Modern Western cultural outlook has been deeply determined by the *scientific picture* of the world.

Many have moved beyond the affirmation of the scientific method and its complete autonomy within the field where it alone logically applies, and have asserted that the general scientific method is not only the sole means for obtaining knowledge about the world disclosed by our senses, but this kind of knowledge is the only knowledge there is..

“Logical positivism”: allows only two meaningful assertions:

- i. Tautologies of formal logic and mathematics.
- ii. Putative statements of fact that can be falsified by ordinary sense experience.

This ‘secularistic’ position questions whether theology can make any meaningful assertions at all.

Much the same shift from secularity to secularism can be seen in the sphere of morality.

‘Secularity’ is evident in *Kant*’s repudiation of the ‘theological moralists’ and insistence on “the autonomy of the will as the supreme principle of

morality" (categorical imperative); Kant, however, held that we must postulate the reality of God as the ultimate ground and guarantor of a morally responsible world.

Kant: "morality leads ineluctably to religion."

Existential philosophy has deepened our moral understanding in the

'Secularism' is apparent in the eloquent and influential works of Sartre and Camus who deny unequivocally that this world in any way points beyond itself.

We live, therefore, in "the age of atheism" (Ebeling), and have learned that, if the reality of God is still to be affirmed, this must be done in a situation in which, on an unprecedented scale, that reality is expressly denied.

Faith in God is not merely an element in Christian faith along with several others, it simply is Christian faith, the heart of the matter itself; therefore, the very thing about the expressions of faith in Scripture and tradition which makes a properly 'secular' interpretation of them possible and even necessary also makes a 'secularistic' interpretation impossible.

Accordingly, the secularist position of Van Buren et al., is virtually senseless.

'Secularism' must be analyzed as to its unity and internal consistency.

The denial of any transcendent ground seems wholly unjustified in terms of the only criteria it itself admits as possible, ergo, positivism does not have any self-evident logical force.

The plausibility of the secularist's negations is a function of the all but complete dominance of our cultural heritage by a total metaphysical-theological outlook, to which our experience and thought as secular men are indeed hardly opposed.

Secularity entails acceptance of 'logical self-consistency' as one of the necessary conditions for the truth of any assertion: supernaturalistic theism encounters difficulties in this regard in the doctrines, e.g., of creation and the end of man.

Traditional theism is unacceptable to secular man because of (a) theoretical incoherence and (b) existential repugnance.

Secularistic negation is, to a large degree, the function of a mistaken identification of Christian faith in God with supernaturalistic theism.

We must seek a conception of God's reality in which the inadequacies of this traditional theism can be overcome.

Our conception of God's reality must be exhibited as the most adequate reflective account we can give of certain *experiences* in which *we all inescapably share*.

TWO: The Reality of Faith

Underlying claim: faith in God is unavoidable.

Implication: men (e.g., secularists) can be mistaken about the real scope or direction of their own beliefs.

The theologian must cautiously interpret the difference at two essentially different levels of human life:

Unfaith (like faith) is a phenomenon occurring at two essentially different levels of human life:

1. 'In the bottom of the heart' / existential denial of God.

Idolatry: *How* are we to believe in the only God in whom anyone can believe and in whom each of us must somehow believe.

Division of ultimate trust by placing it in part in some idol alongside God.

2. 'In the top of the mind' / full self-consciousness.

One may reject a particular theistic scheme without necessarily rejecting the faith for which it claims to account, or every conceivable form of reflective theism.

It is in this light that the secularistic denial of God in our time should be viewed.

Attempts to avoid/deny reflective belief in God are finally bound to fail.

The positivists' denial of the meaningfulness of assertions about God can only be met by showing that there are religious assertions which are meaningful.

Stephen Toulmin seeks to discover the meaning of our moral/ethical discourse through examining the use to which we put it in everyday situations of moral discourse.

We are concerned with three main elements of the 'larger setting' in which he places his analysis of our ethical reasoning:

1. Contra positivism, he argues that 'the uses of argument' are many (the proof being that we do use language in many different fields).
2. He holds that we must always understand both our language and the reasoning of which it is the expression in relation to the larger reality of life to which they belong.

Different uses of language arise in function of the various situations and activities of human existence in the world.

Moral reasoning emerges in order to facilitate our moral decisions, i.e., “to correlate our feelings and behaviour in such a way as to make the fulfillment of everyone’s aims and desires as far as possible compatible.”

The whole apparatus of our moral language arises so as to make possible two kinds of arguments:

- i. Reverse the various possible courses of action to the moral rules and laws evolved by the relevant community for governing human behaviour in the kind of situation in question.
- ii. The ‘right’ action is the one which maximizes the realization of men’s several desires while minimizing their frustration.

Norms of moral and scientific reasoning are wholly secular and autonomous.

3. In an important sense, science and morality point beyond themselves.

This is evidenced in the phenomenon of the ‘limiting question’ – the purpose of religious reasoning is to give answers to the questions that naturally arise at the limits on man’s activities as moral actor and scientific knower.

“Our most serious problem is that of accepting ourselves and the world, of pursuing scientific knowledge and embracing moral duty in spite of conditions that make for the profoundest uncertainty about what the future finally holds.”

Thos threatening conditions are the ‘boundary situations’ (e.g., finitude and death).

Religion provides the needed reassurance, answering the limiting questions at the level of self-conscious belief.

The function of religious assertions is to provide *reassurance*.

They can *re-assure* us only because they themselves are the *re-presentation* of a confidence somehow already present prior to their being made.

These assertions are more the 'effect' rather than 'cause' of our general confidence that existence is meaningful.

The historical religions are attempts are a self-conscious understanding of this original confidence.

In providing reassurance, religious assertions are directly relevant to scientific explanations and moral thought and action.

The original confidence is the *necessary condition* of all moral action, though any particular re-presentation of that confidence is not necessary.

"God" refers to the objective ground in reality itself of our ineradicable confidence in the final worth of our existence.

If the religious mode of reasoning is assumed, the reality of God is necessary; if the religious mode of reasoning is not assumed, the question of God's reality need not be asked for it can never be answered.

The characteristic deficiency of all nontheistic moral theories is that they leave the final depth of morality itself utterly unilluminated.

The only alternative to some form of theism, if we are to give a reflective account of our experience at all, are inventories of our beliefs that are either essentially fragmentary or else shot through with self-contradiction.

THREE: Toward a New Theism

Two preliminary inferences:

1. Modern secular man, with his characteristic affirmation of our life in the world in its proper autonomy and significance, is in a peculiarly good position to discover the reality of God.
2. Secularism (as the express and unqualified denial of God) is the enemy of secular affirmation.

But classical theism is fundamentally opposed to a truly secular decision and outlook on life.

For God to be conceived as the ground of secular man's confidence in the ultimate significance of life in the world, our systems of fundamental concepts must enable us to think of his nature as defined by two essential characteristics ('*dipolarity*')

1. God must be conceived as a reality which is genuinely related to our life in the world and to which, therefore, both we ourselves and our various actions all make a difference as to its actual being.

2. God's relatedness to our life is itself absolute and to which, therefore, neither our own being and actions nor any others can ever make a difference as to its existence.

God's 'existence', as distinct from his actual being, is to be conceived as absolute.

Supernaturalism, at best, is a maze of *inconsistencies* which we must pronounce unacceptable in proportion to the strength and clarity of our secular affirmation; it is also *existentially repugnant*, for to an absolute God nothing can make the least difference, and hence man's strivings and sufferings must be ultimately indifferent.

Camus: "God is the eternal bystander whose back is turned to the work of the world."

Two forms of conceptual inadequacy characterize the constructive efforts of Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, and Tillich:

1. Their conceptuality is insufficiently developed, so that what they mean when they speak of God is left obscure and uncertain.
2. Their conception of God is still determined by some metaphysical-theological premises by which the supernaturalism they seek to transcend is itself determined.

"Process philosophy" provides the conceptuality which enables us to conceive the reality of God in a way that respects both all that is legitimate in modern secularity and the distinctive claims of Christian faith itself.

Starting point = 'the reformed subjectivist principle' (Whitehead); i.e., we must take as the experiential basis of all our most fundamental concepts the primal phenomenon of our existence as experiencing subjects or selves.

Constitutive of selfhood is *relatedness* and *temporality*.

When this is taken as paradigmatic for reality as such, the result is a complete revolution of classical metaphysics.

Chief category = "creative becoming" (process).

God is the perfect instance of creative becoming, and so is the one reality which is eminently *social* and *temporal*.

Precisely because God is the eminently relative One, there is also a sense in which he is strictly absolute.

The traditional attributes of God are all reconceived on the analogical basis provided by our own existence as selves.

"By conceiving God as infinite personal existence or creative becoming, one can assert God's independence of the actual world (in his abstract identity) without saying he is wholly external to it, and one can affirm his inclusion of the actual world (in his concrete existence) without denying that the world as actual is completely contingent and radically dependent on him as its sole necessary ground."

This conception of God is also truer to the revelation of the God of Jesus Christ in Scripture; it also binds our religious conceptuality with our comprehensive philosophical outlook.