

REASON AND UNREASON IN RELIGION

by Brand Blanshard

One of the curiosities of recent decades is the revival of Kierkegaard and his antirationalist theology. He had seemed to be safely buried more than a century ago, and he was so completely forgotten that one could look for his name in vain, even in biographical dictionaries. He was resurrected in the thirties by the devoted Walter Lowrie, and his formidable ghost has been flourishing as the living man never did. He has become required reading in theological schools from coast to coast, and his words have been quoted and echoed by an impressive succession of eminent theologians. How is one to account for this revival?

Part of the answer lies in this: Theologians have discovered that his strategy, devised for one purpose, is adaptable to another. His defense against the rationalism of Hegel may be used again in meeting the rationalism of science. The strategy was remarkably simple. Say to the scientist and philosopher: "Your kind of inquiry is sound enough if kept within the bounds of nature, but it becomes illegitimate the moment you cross into the region of the supernatural. Religious knowledge comes exclusively from revelation. The secret of peace between science and theology lies in a clear division of labor. The tragic 'warfare of science with theology,' which has raised so much dust and noise for centuries, is altogether needless. Good fences make good neighbors."

At the first look, this is an attractive view. It gives back to the theologian the dignity he has lost in the course of a long and ignominious retreat. He had to retreat before Galileo, to retreat again before Darwin, to retreat before the higher critics, to retreat before Frazer and Freud. He can now turn and face his attackers. He can say to them, "Let us have done with all this. There is really no issue between us; our 'warfare' has been a mistake from the beginning. The religion you have been attacking with your science is not an intellectual affair at all; it is not a thesis to be made out by evidence, or a proposition that can be refuted by argument. It is a commitment of the will, or better, an act of faith made possible by a descent of grace. And because it is not a

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rational matter, science is simply irrelevant to it. It can neither be supported by scientific evidence nor undermined by scientific criticism."

This Kierkegaardian view was taken over by theologians of the stature of Barth and Brunner. Brunner puts the case uncompromisingly. "Revealed knowledge is poles apart from rational knowledge. These two forms of knowledge are as far apart from each other as heaven is from earth" (*Revelation and Reason*, p. 16). "It has been forced down my throat," says Barth, "that the theologian is under the obligation to 'justify' himself in his utterances before philosophy. To that my answer is likewise, No. . . . It cannot be otherwise than that Dogmatics runs counter to every philosophy, no matter what form it may have assumed . . . our activities of thinking and speaking . . . cannot possibly coincide with the truth of God . . ." (*Credo*, pp. 185-86). Such statements are a declaration of independence not only from science but from the whole methodology of reason, whether scientific or philosophical.

Is this a successful line of defense for a beleaguered theology? Successful in a sense it certainly is, since it has all but driven from the field the liberalism that was in the ascendant fifty years ago. But if the question is whether this defense has really shown that the appeal to reason used by science is invalid in theology, the answer, I think, must be "No." I suggest a few grounds for thinking so.

1. The theologians who are loudest in their protest against the invasion by reason resort to it continually in their own practice, even within the religious preserve. Emil Brunner was an exceptionally clear-headed thinker; Kierkegaard was less so, but was not unpracticed in the dialectic of Hegel; Barth has read his Kant and frequently reminds one of Kant in his defense of the unknowable. If these theologians used rational methods only when explaining historical occurrences or inquiring into natural laws, their practice would be consistent with their principles. But they do not. For example, they use these methods freely when they come to interpret scripture. They regard scripture as a channel for revelation, but what is it exactly that scripture reveals? The most important part of it is "the plan of salvation," which gives some ray of hope to those who are otherwise condemned. How is one to find this doctrine in scripture except by using the methods of "natural reason"—by interpreting the words of St. Paul, by asking whether their meaning is consistent with what he says elsewhere and consistent with itself, by refuting other interpretations exclusive of one's own? How does one show that the claims to revelation made by other religions are fraudulent or mistaken, as both Barth and Brunner maintain? If scien-

tific and philosophic reasoning is really irrelevant to religious knowledge, one wonders what all the thousands of pages written by these most articulate of theologians are about. In theory it is idle to pursue such knowledge by the forming and testing of hypotheses, by the analysis of ideas, and by the refutation of erroneous arguments; all this should be left behind when we come to revealed truth. But it neither is nor can be left behind. Revelation contains the great and essential truths that believers are called on to accept. Unless these truths have some apprehensible meaning, unless they affirm something definite enough to exclude something else as false, it is hard to see how they can be called "truths" at all.

2. Sometimes their meaninglessness is accepted and underlined. Brunner has a striking analogy in which he compares the field of knowledge to a wheel; revealed truth is at the center and all the spokes run out from it, but the hub of the wheel is hollow. At the core of this hub is the most certain knowledge we possess, but to the merely scientific or rational mind it is meaningless.

We cannot dismiss the claim to such knowledge by saying that we have never ourselves experienced it and do not understand what is claimed. There are many vivid and important experiences that remain sealed to most of us. We may never have followed the mathematical flights of von Neumann, or caught what Schönberg was trying to say with his strange new scale, or experimented with LSD. Still, these things are not wholly cut off from us, for we know the *kind* of experience that mathematics and music give and can improve our grasp of it; and though the visions of the LSD addict seem remote, we at least know their conditions and could produce these in ourselves. But the experiences alleged by Barth and Brunner are not like this. They are not only meaningless to reason but unachievable by any effort or technique. They have no conditions in the brain or mind of the person who has them; they are discontinuous with our psychology, with our logic, and even with our ethical ideals. They are granted to some persons and withheld from others on grounds that are admitted to be impenetrable. Even by the person who has them they are incapable of analysis or expression, and by the person who does not have them they cannot be engendered, examined, or imagined.

There may be such experiences. Mere skepticism and denial are no disproof. But that vacuum at the center of the hub does raise misgivings. It is dangerously near to nothing at all. When the theologian, in the interest of making his position invulnerable, divests it so completely of every trace of conceptual content, is what is left the most impor-

tant of all truths or a fugitive will-o'-the-wisp, on the point of vanishing into thin air?

3. But it does not vanish wholly, even if in theory it ought to. One can hardly believe that when neo-orthodox theologians speak of God as just or good or all-knowing, the meaning of these terms has no relation to what they mean in ordinary speech. And if such terms do retain more or less of their common meanings, then we may rightly ask whether the meanings are used consistently. I do not find that they are so used. God is just, but he is admitted to have deprived the great majority of men of the means of salvation he has freely granted to others. This makes him both just and unjust, if the terms are used with any approach to their common meanings. He is declared to be good but also to have condemned some men to severe punishment for sins committed by others before they were born. He is thus both good and not good. He is omniscient, yet in his earthly incarnation grew in knowledge much as others do. His knowledge was thus both limited and unlimited.

These theologians seem to oscillate between untenable positions. Sometimes they insist that "God is wholly other," and then, since he is unknowable, the suitable course—seldom adopted—is to maintain silence about him. Sometimes they include in this knowledge the central dogmas of the creed, and then, since these dogmas clearly have meaning, that meaning is open to the tests of consistency required of scientific meanings. When so tested, the results are not reassuring.

4. Barth and Brunner take a high line about such criticism. Religious knowledge does not have to pass ordinary tests. It need not submit even to the laws of logic. To require that it should is to measure it by human standards, and that is to commit the sin of pride. "This autonomy of man, this attempt of the Ego to understand itself out of itself," says Brunner, "is the lie concerning man which we call sin." "Autonomy is equivalent to sin" (*The Word and the World*, p. 71). Human standards of truth and goodness are impertinent in both senses of the word when carried over into religion.

This reply has consequences upon which the theologians have perhaps not reflected enough. The major laws that govern scientific thinking are not laws that apply in one field and not in another. Of some laws that can be said undoubtedly; the law of gravitation, for example, does not hold among ideas. But the laws of logic are no respecters of property rights in knowledge. They hold everywhere or nowhere. It will not do to say that the law of contradiction is valid in physics and psychology but not in economics, in Ireland and India but not in Iraq.

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Logicians would, I think, agree that if, in any area whatever, what is inconsistent may still be true, then the law of contradiction must be invalid and cannot be relied on anywhere.

This seems to me to be the consequence in which the Kierkegaardian theologians are involving us. They are saying that, since God is wholly other than we are, and discontinuous with the standards of our logic and ethics, we must allow that paradoxes which are nothing short of contradictions may still be true of him, and prescriptions that run counter to our clearest insights, as in the case of Abraham and Isaac, may nevertheless be his will. But if the clearest and surest insights of our reason may thus be mistaken, what ground have we for trusting it anywhere? Does not its invalidity in the most important of all areas of knowledge reflect uncertainty upon its application everywhere else? Thus what began as a defense of religious certainty ends in skepticism regarding every kind of natural knowledge.

The conclusion from this brief review is plain enough. The attempt to defend religious knowledge by a return to irrationalism will not serve. The universe is not to be conceived as a gigantic layer cake in which the lower stratum is governed by scientific law and an intelligible logic, and the upper stratum is somehow released from these restrictions into the freedom of incoherence. The theologians who have tried to fix these boundaries have not been able to respect them, and in the attempt to do so they have not only reduced religious knowledge to something dangerously like zero but managed to cast a skeptical shadow over our secular knowledge as well.