



The Other Side Of 1984: A Response To The Responses

1985

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I am indebted to the six colleagues who have been so kind as to read my small essay and raise pertinent questions. The brevity of this response is dictated by the requirement: of the Journal and does not reflect my sense of the importance of the issues raised. I shall continue to think about them, even though the Editor's deadline requires me to make a brief response now. I shall take the six in alphabetical order.

The paper by my friend Hasan Askari was completed only after I had finished writing this response. The editor has been able to turn what would have been a brief post-script into an 'in-script', but if it does less than justice to Dr. Askari's wise and penetrating comment, then I must ask his forgiveness. I sense a deep affinity between us and moat of what he says I am in cordial agreement. I think that the Muslim community in Britain will have an important role in questioning the assumption of our society on the basis of a living faith in God. I fully accept the justice of Dr. Askari's reminder that the Enlightenment rejected many elements in the classical tradition, and that the parallel between Augustine's situation and ours is only a partial one. I confine these brief comments to three points where I continue to differ from him.

(a) I acknowledge the fruitfulness of the historical-critical method, but can not take the wholly positive view of it which Dr. Askari proposes. The kind of certainty which it seeks is in my view other than that which is known in faith. I would refer to the recent study of Andrew Louth: *Discerning the Mystery*. "The deliberate holding of unproven beliefs" – as Polanyi shows is the pre-condition of modern science as of all forms of knowing, and is in no way necessarily tied to "fanaticism, bigotry and fascism". The important word is "deliberate"; what Polanyi is asking is that we should honestly acknowledge what we actually do.

(b) I do not want to under-estimate the importance of inter-faith dialogue. But I stream the importance of dialogue with 'modern' culture because so much inter-faith dialogue same to be conducted strictly within the parameters of 'modernity', taking its axioms for granted and

therefore running the risk of evading real encounter between the different truth-claims of religions by relativizing them all under the canopy of 'the modern scientific world-view'.

(c) I acknowledge the limitation of the framework

in which my essay is set. It was written for a limited purpose. I am grateful that Dr. Askari and others are lifting it into a wider framework.

Obviously Dan Beeby and I see eye to eye on many matters and he has rightly summarized the main thrust of the essay. His suggestion that it might provide the occasion for an examination of the assumption which underlie our various courses of study in the Selly Oak Colleges is an intriguing one. I may leave it to others to follow up.

Marine Felderhof has excellently summarized my intentions, but raises four critical questions. In the first place he questions the possibility that a religious faith might constitute an epistemological 'fiduciary framework'. But I do not accept the view (so much dominant since Schleiermacher) which equates faith with feeling and divides experience between affective and cognitive. Religious faith as I understand it has an essential cognitive element and I therefore do not accept this criticism. Secondly he tries to equate Polanyi's 'fiduciary framework' with Wolterstorff's 'ultimate certitudes', but this is totally to misunderstand Polanyi. His 'fiduciary framework' is not an ultimate certitude, but a necessary starting point for exploration. Ultimate certitude is an eschatological concept! Hence the necessary character of real dialogue which involves precisely the kind of ambiguity for which Marius faults me. The idea that there can be some kind of knowledge which finally overcomes the divisions between human beings this side of the End is a utopian illusion which I do not share. On his third point I am not sure whether we are in disagreement. I also accept (and it is basic to my argument) that the Christian fiduciary framework' has to be constantly tested and retested in the light of new experience. I believe that it is through this process that we can be led by the Spirit of God into the fulness of the truth (John 16:13). But, once again, this 'fulness' is an eschatological category; till the end we are on trial for our faith. And, indeed, imagination is fundamental, and the down-grading of imagination in our scientific culture is (I agree with Marine) one of the causes of loss of meaning. But I understand imagination to be a cognitive faculty and not an internal game. Fourthly, I am surprised that Marius thought my essay might function as a soporific; I rather thought of it as a stimulant. I did not talk about 'the faith of our fathers', but about the 'risky undertaking' of re-interpreting the faith for our time. (page 53)

Bishop Kalilombe has given a comment on my thesis from a Third World perspective for which I am most grateful. I find his comments illuminating for my own thinking. My essay was written for a particular local situation and has the limitations which that involves. I agree with Bishop Kalilombe that the whole question of the mutual relations of Church and State is an exceedingly complex and difficult one. I used to think that we had more or less solved the problem, but now I am sure we have not. I wonder whether one clue might not be a fresh study of the roles of prophet, priest and king in the Old Testament. Each of these three was concerned with the ways in which Israel could be and remain truly the people of Yahweh. The work of Christ has traditionally been interpreted as bringing into one the three offices. But what does that mean for

the work of Christ in his body, the Church? Contemporary ecumenical Christianity loves to talk about the prophetic role of the Church, but of the three this is the one least developed in the New Testament portrayal of Jesus. If I have a quarrel with Bishop Kalilombe, it is about the matter of

power. Power is always held by a minority, otherwise it is not power. The idea of a totally equal distribution of power is an illusion. When every man has a machine gun in his home, there is no government, unless someone has tanks. I think that contemporary Christian thinking is tending to shy away from the real problem of power.

I found Ann Myler's comments very helpful, and I (with my very limited competence in her field) would strongly endorse her emphasis on the centrality of belief for every society and on the importance of ritual and ceremonial in this respect. I am not sure whether our neglect of these is cause or consequence of our intellectual mind-set; probably both. I think there is a misunderstanding between us in regard to the use of the word 'demonstrate'. I used the word to mean prove that a belief is true by reference to other supposedly more certain facts'. Ann Myler takes it to mean 'show that a belief exists.' In this latter sense of course belief can be and must be demonstrated. My use of the word 'dogma' was intentionally provocative, and perhaps that was a mistake. I entirely accept Ann's statement that dogma, in the sense of doctrinal propositions, cannot by itself perform the social function of belief. Only a living community, with its proper social and ritual forms, can do this; but 'dogma' in the narrow sense has a necessary function within this community.

Of all the contributions, that of Rabbi Solomon raises the most far-reaching questions, and I cannot pretend to respond at all adequately. Let me, however, venture a few comments. I do not accept the view that the contemporary fear of a nuclear holocaust is 'no different from the lurid imaginings of the Book of Revelation', nor do I agree that it can be equated with the agony of the Psalmists. There is all the difference in the world between tribulation faced in the confidence that there is victory, joy and peace on the other side, and tribulation faced with no such confidence. I agree that Freud has been an important factor in creating the modern mood, but I do not find that this undermines my thesis. The role of Einstein is however different. His *General Theory* does not teach total relativity; it teaches that the speed of light is absolute, and space-time is relative to that a very different thing from total relativity. I agree, of course, that physics does not by itself produce happiness, but I do not agree that happiness (unless it is produced by something akin to a drug) is to be had apart from some notion of how things are. In other words, once again, I decline to accept a total dichotomy between the emotional and the cognitive elements in human awareness. I do not accept the idea that Christianity is about 'placing God's kingdom on earth'; that misunderstanding is at the root of our whole problem. Nor do I agree that science 'knows where it is going'. Scientists are among those

who are most clearly expressing their fears and doubts about where we are going.

I think that Rabbi Solomon is right when he says that 'the scientific world view merely absorbs the religious views as part of the contemporary culture' – if this refers to those religious views which have their home in India. For these, unlike those of Judaism and Christianity deny that there is a universal purpose in the cosmos. It is this latter belief which modern science cannot absorb. The point of my story about the bus accident was not that I committed the absurdity of trying to derive the laws of mechanics from those of personal ethics, but that I could not be satisfied with a totally mechanical explanation of experience. I am sure that we are at one in this.

I think it is an illusion to think that we can avoid conflict by pretending that we have no beliefs. All action involves the exercise of power, and action is irrational unless it takes account of how things are, in other words, unless it is grounded in beliefs. Jesus did not propound a system of doctrine, but he communicated a revolutionary belief about how things are. One does not get crucified for advising people to be good. 'Values' merely hang in the air unless they are rooted in some vision of 'how things are'. In fact (and here I come back to Dan Beeby) the claim that one is free from dogma usually only means that the dogma is concealed.

These brief comments necessarily sound curt, and I apologize for this. Very deep issues are raised even in this brief debate, and I do not want to suggest a clarity and confidence which I do not feel. I do not know where these questions may lead us, and sometimes the prospect frightens me. But I am sure we have to raise them. I hope the discussion may continue.

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