



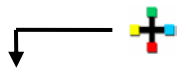
## Theism and Atheism in Theology

(91tat)

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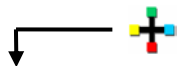
One element in the much neglected doctrine of divine providence is that the books which unexpectedly fall on my desk are so marvellously timed. The distinguished Muslim scholar Shabir Akhtar has written a robust defence of natural theology in *The Light in the Enlightenment: Christianity and the Secular Heritage* (London: Grey Seal, 1990: 213) and was kind enough to send me a copy. *The Roots of Modern Atheism* by Michael Buckley S.J. (Yale University Press, 1987: 450) came by kindness of a friend. That the divine providence has also its irony is illustrated in the fact that the Jesuit Buckley finds the roots of atheism precisely in the plot where the Muslim Akhtar seeks foundations for theism. Shabir Akhtar's work is lucid, well-informed and closely argued a work in the true spirit of the Enlightenment. He seeks to defend a theism which is common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam but his main business is with Christianity. His definition of this religion (p. 48) omits incarnation, trinity, fall and atonement and this has fateful consequences for the argument. He is deeply concerned to re-establish the possibility of religious belief in a secular age, and he recognizes that Islam has yet to meet the challenge of the Enlightenment. As he wryly remarks, 'It may require a major heretical movement to create the Muslim response to modernity' (p. 177). He attacks the criticisms of natural theology which come from the 'fideists' (Kierkegaard and Barth the chief villains) and the positivists. He takes vigorous swipes against the 'reductionists' (eg. Tillich and Bultman) and the 'revisionists' (much of contemporary main-line Protestant theology).

In spite of some recognition of the cognitive function of faith he works with a sharp dichotomy between reason, which alone can provide certain knowledge, and faith which affirms things given by revelation but not certified by reason. He regrets Augustine's marriage of faith and reason in the slogan 'I believe in order to understand', and applauds by contrast the method of Aquinas – namely to establish those things (such as the existence of God) which can be certified by reason, and then go on to those further things which faith accepts as revelation. He recognizes the need for 'a teleological interpretation of man and nature', but acknowledges the difficulty of 'finding some uncontentiously true premises' for such a belief (p. 158). As he wistfully remarks:

‘The difficulty is, of course, to locate some Archimedean point which is neutral between faith and unbelief’ (p 159). Quite so! As a believer, Akhtar longs to see the revival of belief in God in a secular world. As a scholar of great honesty and clarity, he has to conclude that the case for theism falls short of proof.

Michael Buckley, who is Professor of systematic theology at the University of Notre Dame, finds the root of the problem at the point where Akhtar looks for a solution. How was it possible, he asks in effect, that Aquinas, in the third part of his great work, speaks of Jesus Christ as the one who ‘demonstrated in himself the way of truth for us’, while in the first part of the work he has already undertaken to demonstrate the truths of God, creation and the human soul without reference to Jesus? And how was it that the Christian theologians, who at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries undertook to prove the existence of God in face of scepticism, did so purely as an exercise in philosophy and without reference to Jesus Christ? It is Buckley’s thesis that the roots of modern atheism lie here. What happened was a profound self-alienation of religion. Religious faith was denied cognitive validity; it had to be validated on other grounds. There was a self-contradiction between the religious substance of belief and the philosophical form in which it was defended. Buckley uses a Hegelian frame to show how this inner contradiction had to work out as atheism. The God whose existence was proved by Descartes (from human subjectivity) and by Newton (from cosmic design) was a matter of inference from other realities, not of personal knowledge. The arguments used to prove the existence of God could in the 19th century be neatly turned in the opposite direction. It made much more sense to argue that the supreme being demonstrated by Descartes was in fact matter in motion, and that the many disorderly elements in the cosmos could be better explained in that way than by the hypothesis of an omnipotent and omniscient Designer.

Thus modern atheism is not the result of supposed attack on religion by the new science. The pioneers of science were theists eager to prove the existence of God. It was rather that, in an age sickened by the rival fanaticisms of Christians claiming revelation, the theologians sought the help of philosophy and this help was gladly given. But it was inevitable that the troops called in to defend the city would eventually take it over. The



citizens had rejected their only true defence. ‘The Christian God cannot have a more fundamental witness than Jesus Christ, even antecedent to the commitments of faith. Christian theology cannot abstract from Christology in order to shift the challenge for this foundational warrant onto philosophy... If one abrogates this (Christological) evidence one abrogates this God’ (p.361). These two books, read together, stir far-ranging thoughts, both about Muslim-Christian relations and about ‘The Gospel and Our Culture’. I am moved by Shabir Akhtar’s deep concern for the recovery of belief in God in the context of ‘modernity’. I respond to his protest against what he rightly calls the frivolity of much contemporary debate about God. But I am convinced by reading Buckley’s magisterial survey (which it is absurd to treat in a few sentences) that theology runs into the sand when it seeks some grounds supposedly more reliable than God’s revelation of himself in Jesus Christ.

Is it one of the main reasons for the rejection of God by our culture that we have come to expect a kind of knowledge which only God can have? The proof of God can only be at the end. We know in part; we look for the day when we shall know as we have been known. Our knowledge is a response to a calling. It is a venture of trust. All human beings are called to know and to confess truth, and we can only do so with the faith that there is truth to be known. Christians are those who have accepted the call to follow Jesus on the way that he took and that he is, in the faith that it will lead to truth in its fullness. If we seek some other re-assurance, we have missed the point and missed the way. Assurance is not to be found by arguments from other grounds (in nature or human nature) but as we press forward in the way and find that more and

more of our experience of nature and human nature finds coherence because it has its coherence in Christ. Jesus said: 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth' (John 8.31). Truth is a future assurance which beckons, not a possession of our own.

Christians on the defensive are apt to look around for alliances. Buckley's book is a powerful warning against such. They are fatal in the end, because they confuse the real issue, which is between faith and no faith in Jesus as the one in who God's purpose of good for the whole cosmos is revealed and put into effect.

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