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God's Existence and Nature

I do not propose to raise another polemic against the radical theology which holds that God is dead. That exercise shall be left to others. Suffice it simply to say that I start with the presupposition that God *is*. Now if this position can be maintained, which I hold can be done, it is of vital interest that we come to at least some conclusion concerning the essential nature of the God that is. For if God does live, the fact of his being will permeate and affect virtually every facet of experience. Thus the theme of the essence of God's nature is the consideration of this paper.

Following the lead of Professor C. A. Campbell, it appears vital to posit as fundamental the concept that the basic nature of God's being is 'supra-rational', i.e., in his essence God cannot be exhausted on rational grounds alone. Several lines of experience seem to point in this primary direction.

I. The Argument from Religious Experience

Probably all would agree that religious experience is a state of mind, meaning by the term 'mind' the essence of the self or personhood. But what kind of a state of mind is the religious experience? First, it must obviously be an attitude of worship. One would hardly have a genuine religious experience apart from its being a worship experience. Secondly, an element of belief seems likewise indispensable. There must be some sort of 'content' attributed to the object of worship, and it would seem clear that the minimum of that content includes at least a being who is deemed worthy of worship. Thus we can conclude that religion is primarily belief in a worshipful being. Now it follows that if the object of worship is worthy of worship, certain attributes must be true of that being. Perhaps these basic characteristics can be delineated as follows:

- (a) The Worshipful Being must be a supernatural Being.

All genuine religious experience has a certain element of mystery surrounding the worshipful object. As Campbell puts it, the worshipful's 'mode of being and functioning is not "intelligible" to us in the way in which we suppose that familiar processes in things and persons are "intelligible"'.¹ In Professor H. D. Lewis' words, 'the element of mystery in religion is thus essentially irreducible'.² Therefore all true religion has its 'mystery' aspect.

(b) The Worshipful Being must be of Transcendent Value.

This surely follows because religious worship implies adoration, and adoration is something of an emotion that only can be evoked by that which is felt to possess transcendent value. Of course, this fact automatically excludes from the ranks of true religion some of the 'cults' and a number of primitive religions in that they seek only to curry the favour of the gods, and so long as this rather mean motive is the basis of worship, these gods can hardly be seen as possessing transcendent worth. Actually, such worship is much closer to magic than to genuine religion.

Finally,

(c) The Worshipful Being must possess Transcendent Power.

This principle is maintained on the basis that true worship is permeated with a sense of awe, and the objective correlate of awe is power, i.e., power that is mysterious and overwhelming. Now it would seem clear that the power of the worshipful must be recognized as not *merely* mysterious, for to inspire genuine awe, the power of the worshipful must be power of transcendent value. This further implies that the worshipful, endued with transcendent or 'numinous' power and value, must be free from any imperfection; God must be perfect. Now if God be perfect, he must then be *infinite* and *one*. For finitude clearly implies limitation and therefore some deficiency in power; and a plurality of perfect beings is self-contradictory.

It can now be concluded that the worshipful Being must be

¹ C. A. Campbell, *On Selfhood and Godhood*, (London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd.), p. 240.

² H. D. Lewis, 'Religion and Enthusiasm', *Prospect for Theology*, Edited by F. G. Healey (James Nisbet and Co. Ltd.), p. 39.

endued with 'Mystery', 'Power', 'Value' – in all essentials Otto's *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. . . .³ And it seems there are no other *essential* qualities that need be ascribed to the generic object of religious belief and experience. God is one, perfect Being, endued with overwhelming 'holiness', i.e., the acme of mystery, power and value.

Now Rudolph Otto⁴ contends that when we ascribe the term 'holiness' to the worshipful Being, we must be very careful not to understand the concept on human rational grounds. There is something more in the apprehension of the Divine than can be expressed rationally. This 'something more' Otto calls the 'numinous', and this non-rational, religious, 'numinous' experience is adequately described in the previously quoted phrase, viz, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

Otto then goes on into some detail and tells us first that the 'mysterium' aspect of the religious experience indicates that one is in contact with something 'wholly other', i.e., something 'whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb'.⁵ Now the content of this 'mysterium' aspect of the experience is furnished by the *tremendum et fascinans* concept. He states that the 'tremendum' has three elements, viz: (1) the numen is grasped as awe-inspiring and (2) as overwhelming in might and majesty and (3) as super-abounding in living energy and urgency. The *fascinans*, is described as a blissful rapture by the mysterious enchantment and allure of the numen. It is now quite clear that this is a non-rational strand in Otto's basic idea of the Holy, and because a better term does not seem to be found, it is contended that religious experience compels us to postulate a God whose essential nature is 'supra-rational'.⁶

Obviously, religious experience is foundational to postu-

³ Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

⁴ In his volume *Das Heilige*.

⁵ Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 331.

⁶ The problem of using rational terms to talk about a super-rational God is a problem that falls outside of the scope and space of this admittedly limited paper. The reader is referred to C. A. Campbell's arguments in *On Selfhood and Godhood*.

lating the concept of a supra-rational God, but there are other areas of experience as well that point in the same direction, not the least of which is:

II. The Argument from Cognition

It is contended by the Bradlian school of idealism that the basic unit of thought, i.e., judgement, is by its very nature self-contradictory. Now if this can be maintained, it is patently clear that a perfect Being could never be explained in purely rational terms. But can the idealist position be legitimately held? The argument runs as follows. The Bradlian idealist⁷ raises first the question: what is the criterion of intellectual satisfaction? In answer, surely all would agree that the criterion is found to be 'non-contradiction'. In other words, the intellect will not accept as 'the real' any content which contradicts itself. Anything self-contradictory is not *ultimately* real, and the idealist claims that the cognitive judgment – the basic unit of thought – is internally self-contradictory. Thus it follows that rational thought cannot actually express ultimate Reality. But *is* the cognitive judgment really self-contradictory? Does this not seem absurd? In defence of the position it is first argued that the essence of all thinking is the assertion of unity in diversity. Neither unity nor diversity can be eliminated in predication. Unless there is unity the terms simply fall apart. Again, unless there is genuine diversity there is no movement of thought at all. Thinking cannot be expressed in the formula 'A is A'. Therefore, as thinking must unite differences, the formula 'A is B' (for example 'the chair is red') is suggested as the only way to express rational cognition.

Is 'A is B' any improvement over 'A is A', however? To some extent so, but there are still grave difficulties. It seems obvious that, strictly speaking, 'B', so long as it is different from 'A' is 'not-A'. So the formula actually reads 'A is not-A', and it is evident that this not only asserts it annuls at the same time. This is simple self-contradiction. Consequently, the uniting of

⁷ Idealism is not to be as summarily consigned to the grave as some of the more modern 'linguistic' thinkers should like to do, see my article on 'Idealism Still Speaks' in Vol. 97, No. 2 of this journal, Winter 1968.

differences, which is the goal of all cognition, cannot be expressed as 'A is B'.

It may be objected, however, that in predication we assert simply that 'A has B', e.g., 'the chair *has* redness', not *is* redness. However, 'A has B' is surely the same as saying 'A is such-as-to-have-B'. Now we dare not say that 'such-as-to-have B' is synonymous with 'A', for we will have our old problem of the tautology again. 'Such-as-to-have-B' must be different from 'A' if we are to have any movement of thought. Therefore, let 'such-as-to-have-B' be called 'C'. The new formula now reads, 'A is C'. No one would say that this restatement is any improvement over 'A is B'. Self-contradiction still prevails and thus, formally speaking, cognition is self-contradictory.

How then can thought combine different? We surely cognize in everyday life. The answer rests in the principle that the differences must be seen as elements of a 'system' where the system is conceived as a whole of mutually implicatory parts. If the differentials are seen as diverse expressions of a system, thought is not repulsed. In this kind of a system, identity and diversity are but obverse sides of the same fact. Although 'A' and 'B' are different, their very nature is derived from the identity of which they are but expressions.

Thought thus proceeds towards its goal under the constraint of such a system. It is the union of differentials as connected expressions of a system that becomes the goal of the whole intellectual process. Therefore, the proper formula for predication is neither 'A is B' nor 'A has B'. Genuine cognition is expressed as 'Xa is Xb,' ('X' representing the system that expressing itself as 'A' must also necessarily express itself as 'B'). This is why the intellect cannot unite bare differences or rest in a metaphysical dualism. There must be a system to make judgment feasible. This alone satisfies the intellect.

But here is where the problem begins to bristle with difficulties. As Campbell expresses it: '. . . Although such a unity is the inherent demand of the intellect, and thus needful for the assurance of apprehending ultimate reality, it is a unity that is not obtainable by the intellect. . . . For . . . the route which the intellect takes, and must take, in its effort to realize its ideal is one which never can by reason of its intrinsic character, lead to

the desired goal of mutually implicative system or unity in difference-which never can, therefore, yield us apprehension of the real'.⁸ The issue seems to be that the intellect is faced with the knotty problem as to how the ground itself is connected with the differences it attempts to combine. Consequently, a 'deeper ground' is necessitated, but the same problem emerges again and again, *ad infinitum*. In simple terms, we can just keep on asking indefinitely 'why?' to every proposition. The reason is that the intellect demands a self-consistency that can be found only in a system where the ground is *internal* to the differents it connects, but the only thing the intellect can achieve is a ground that always remains at least partially *external* to the entities it unites.

What then is the conclusion of this line of argumentation? The route the intellect *must* travel, a route that necessitates the assumption of relations, can never lead to its goal of a perfect, self-implied Whole. Thus it is a path that can *never* lead to *ultimate* Reality. Therefore, it must be that 'Reality owns a character which transcends thought - a character for which since a label is convenient we may term "super-rational"'.⁹

Now we can deduce that if the philosopher's ultimate Reality, is supra-rational, this gives us more than a clue that this must be God's nature. Moreover, it clearly follows that if God is infinite and perfect, he cannot be a 'thinking' God as we rationally understand the term. To say God rationalizes as we do immediately implies, according to idealism's arguments, that there is limitation, indeed defect, in God, and this obviously cannot be if God is ultimate and perfect. Hence we conclude that one is forced to posit a supra-rational character for God's essential nature.

III. The Argument from Conation

The 'will of God' is a phrase often used in religious language. Yet, surely it cannot be taken in a literal sense, for it seems self-evident that 'will', as we understand it, implies defect.

⁸ C. A. Campbell, *Scepticism and Construction* (London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd.), p. 14-15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Is it not true that any conative action suggests a state not yet existing that is considered better than the state presently existing? Thus imperfection in the conative subject is implied in every willed action.

Now this problem is particularly pressing when one speaks of God's Will, especially in creation. To say that creation is a result of divine will implies that there was a time when the world did not exist, a time, therefore, when God felt a 'lack' in his being. But this is obviously incompatible with a God of utter perfection, and to retort that God created the time order along with the world is merely to shift the problem from one point to another. This is the issue Augustine failed to see in his attempt to deal with the quandary. Thus God cannot be said to 'will' anything, that is, as far as we can grasp the term on mere rational grounds.

Yet there is real meaning and content to the phrase 'the will of God'. Religious life is quite meaningless apart from it. How can the dilemma be solved? The only answer seems to be that we project the idea of a supra-rational God wherein the will of God is understood in a symbolic way¹⁰ of God's actions in the time-space order. Thus we conclude that to understand God's activity in any satisfying way that is in line with what we claim him to be, we are forced to declare him as supra-rational.

In the light of the foregoing arguments it seems reasonably conclusive that we can now quite confidently assert the concept of a supra-rational God. I may go so far as to say we are compelled to take such a stance.

Moreover, it may even be found that such a position can perhaps shed light on some of the more detailed theological problems of Christianity. For example, the problems of the Trinity, the person of Jesus Christ as both Son of God and Son of Man, perhaps even the perplexing dualism of God's sovereignty and man's free will can find some help towards solution in the idea of a supra-rational God. Suffice it to say in conclusion that I hold that only a supra-rational God can

¹⁰There are those who declare that a symbolic theology is really no theology at all. Space precludes a defence of a symbolic theology, but the reader is again referred to C. A. Campbell's work *On Selfhood and Godhood*.

satisfy the difficult problems of a purely rational theism, and more, the only One who can satisfy the deepest longings of the human personality to know Ultimacy.