

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND NATURAL SCIENCE¹

LAURENCE BRIGHT, O.P.

AT the end of the last century people pretty generally believed that Christianity could not much longer survive the rapid progress of science; there was a battle on, and its conclusion was inevitable within a matter of years. Today the situation looks completely different. Scientists are more cautious in their speculations and Christianity has proved more resistant than could have been expected. The idea has grown up that perhaps collaboration rather than rivalry may be of more value to each: there are signs that the lion is prepared to lie down with the lamb.

The publication, a few months ago, of E. L. Mascall's *Christian Theology and Natural Science*² is an important step in this direction. Dr Mascall is a theologian who has maintained his interest in the science he studied in earlier life. In his new book he examines in detail a number of the points at which theological and scientific studies come into contact. As a result of this examination he insists that Christians should neither ignore nor repudiate scientific discoveries. There is not the slightest need for them to fear that science will make it necessary to abandon traditional Christian teaching, or that reconciliation can only be effected by desperate expedients such as turning Christian dogma into mere metaphor. Of course some apparent conflict must still remain, but the sensible procedure is then to examine each situation with care, and see whether valid conclusions have been drawn by theologian and scientist from the evidence available to them; if either has gone too far, we may have to suspend judgment until further evidence comes to light. Each is seeking truth, and the Christian especially must be fearless in accepting truth from whatever source it comes, since he believes that ultimately it comes from God and tells him something of its author.

Yet you may well feel that this is too rosy a picture; that Dr Mascall has tricked us into supposing there is far less conflict than

¹ The text of a talk given on the Third Programme of the B.B.C. on November 2nd, 1956.

² Longmans; 25s.

in fact exists. This was put strongly in one review that I saw. Mr Philip Toynbee said: 'what he has done is to mull over the current theories of physicists and biologists, and to select every element in them which might be construed favourably to Christian dogma.' I want to try and meet this criticism, which probably represents a fairly typical reaction, but I can only do so by showing that it is due to misunderstanding of general principles. It would be useless, even if there were time, merely to repeat Dr Mascall's analysis of particular controversies, since this would do nothing to remove the impression of bias. I think too that if the book has a defect, it is that the principles on which it is based are not unequivocally stated: the wood is not altogether easy to see for the trees. Otherwise Mr Toynbee could never have said, 'Dr Mascall insists that theology and science are "autonomous disciplines" and that no scientific theories can validate or invalidate the revealed truths of Christianity.' For in certain cases it is logically impossible that scientific theory and revealed truth could conflict; in others it is merely the fact that they do not. To understand this it is necessary to differentiate, within the Christian revelation, between statements which could be reached by ordinary human reasoning, and those which could never have been known if God had not revealed them. Of those which human reason can attain, I agree with Mr Toynbee when he admits 'there are truths beyond science—metaphysical truths—which are of a kind which cannot conceivably conflict with or depend upon current physical or biological theory'. I should call the statements that God exists, that he is good, that the world of creatures depends utterly on him for its continued existence, truths of this kind. They are the concern of Christian theologians because though they could be deduced by unaided human reason, God has nevertheless revealed them: few men have the leisure or ability to be metaphysicians, yet all have the chance of salvation. But theologians are concerned with other truths as well; those that revelation alone has given, and for which conflict with science is indeed possible, by reason of the way in which God reveals. Before I go on to discuss these, I must say a few words about theological statements of the metaphysical pattern, because they occupy the larger part of Dr Mascall's book.

The type of reasoning involved in reaching such conclusions is quite different from that which a scientist makes use of. It is not

concerned with the detailed knowledge of particular situations, but rather with the general grounds for there being such situations at all. It is from consideration of the totality of the objects we perceive, not from this one or that, that human reason passes to assert there is a God on whom all things depend. One way of doing this is by examining the notion of causality used alike in scientific and in non-scientific thinking. A philosopher will find many things to puzzle him in the notion of causality; but for the purpose of asserting God's existence he need hardly worry about an apparent break-down of causality in the sub-microscopic world of atomic physics. He may even expect that the notion will be considerably modified in its application to a state of being so remote from normal experience, just as he knows that the notion is considerably modified in the assertion that the universe as a whole has a cause which men call God. Dr Mascall is not really indulging in sleight-of-hand when, after examining carefully the principle of indeterminacy in atomic physics, he declares that it is not directly relevant to the metaphysician's approach to God by way of causality.

There is one further point to be made here. The type of rational argument I have just mentioned is of more than merely academic interest. If we can reason from the world around us to the being on which it depends at every instant, then its dependence is a matter of vital concern to us. This world is seen to be vitally affected by what lies beyond its boundaries, and truths beyond science may yet have importance for our daily lives. We shall be less likely to declare with Mr Toynbee that every attempt to relate the world of science with what lies beyond must be based on confusion; for though metaphysical reasoning needs no support from science, the world it relates to God is the same one of which science treats.

The Christian however believes not merely that God can thus enter into a new relationship with his creatures, but further that he has in fact done so. God, he believes, has throughout the course of history revealed truths impossible for unaided human reasoning to discover. In Scripture, God speaks to men in the only way they can grasp, through material means and through human speech. Hence it is characteristic of Christianity, in contrast with most other religions, that it is closely bound up with historical fact which in principle is open to investigation by ordinary human

methods. It requires us to accept that our race is descended from an original pair of human beings, that the Jewish nation fled from their oppressors through the waters of the Red Sea, and that a man of that nation declared that in himself God had taken human flesh. If any of these and other historical statements were shown to be essentially wrong, I think Christianity would have to go, for it cannot survive merely as an uplifting story. This is why historians rightly investigate the documents in which they are recorded, archaeologists examine the sites at which they are said to have occurred, anthropologists consider the remains of early men, and biologists discuss the data of evolutionary theory in their connection. Yet at the same time all this work concerns only the setting of the doctrine revealed, and remains extrinsic to any proof of it. No reasoning can prove such truths as the inheritance of original sin, or the efficacy of baptism, or the divinity of Jesus Christ. God has given to certain historical events a meaning which transcends their immediate significance, and this meaning can only be accepted in faith, it cannot be proved.

It is the existence of this historical setting which opens the way for some degree of collaboration between theologian and scientist. I must explain how this comes about. The doctrines of the Christian religion, it must be quite clear, are in no sense dependent on the discoveries of science, for they come directly from the revelation of God. No scientific or historical investigation can alter their essential content. But there is a difference between the settled doctrine of the Church and the speculative constructions of theologians. Theologians work on the content of revelation in something the same exploratory way that scientists work on their experimental data; as objectively, yet without excluding all possibility of error. For though God has spoken once and for all to mankind through his dealings with them recorded in Scripture, first with his chosen people through patriarchs, kings and prophets, finally with all mankind through Jesus Christ and the apostles, yet it would be totally wrong to regard this message as a thing stored away in the remote past, and now to be recovered only by the archaeologically minded. We must rather say that the word of God lives continually in his Church, and that every living member of the Church shares in the work of deepening our understanding of it. Nor has God left us to rely on fallible human understanding for the interpretation of his saving message: whenever doubt as

to its meaning could hinder our salvation, the Holy Spirit has spoken through the Church to give us the true expression of God's word. Yet though Christians are left in no doubt about the basic doctrine of their religion, their understanding of it is continually increased by theological speculation within the Church. Such speculation represents a growing insight into the meaning of the revealed truths which we believe, but at any given time it need not receive the unqualified assent that must be given to settled doctrine. The comparison between scientific and theological speculation seems especially fruitful here. Science does not consist in bare statements of empirical fact. Much more characteristic are the theoretical statements devised to explain the facts. The reasoning that lies behind any theory takes the form: 'If my theory is correct, then I ought to be able to observe certain facts', and if this prediction is verified, the theory has received some corroboration. But it by no means follows that the converse statement, 'Since I observe these facts, then my theory is correct', must be true. There is no such direct path from observation to theory, which is why theories are so hard to discover: a scientist may spend months turning over possible explanations in his mind before he hits on one that does account for what he has observed. It is also no doubt why some of the cruder scientific theories of the last century which seemed in direct conflict with religion have now passed into oblivion. Scientists have become much less dogmatic since they have ceased to confuse their theories with empirical fact. Now the relationship of theology to the message of God understood by the Church is not unlike the relationship of scientific theory to sense observation: each needs trained intuition to produce, after which others too can see the connection with what is already known. There is an art in being a theologian as well as there is in being a scientist. And either may fall into error when he passes beyond the confines of what he knows with certainty to be true.

There are then borderlands of theological speculation, beyond the confines of doctrinal certainty: the possibility of scientific research into the setting of revelation marks out such a region. Here Dr Mascall's stimulating treatment of particular questions in revealed theology is set. An example or two may indicate the lines along which he works. The Scriptures tell us, in picturesque language, of the earthly nature but divine origin of

man. Beyond this it is valuable to speculate upon the *manner* in which God brought it about. The theory of evolution—itsself a matter of speculation, but which by now no reasonable biologist would doubt—indicates the way in which this creation probably occurred. An animal species was developed to the state in which it could receive a human soul. Again the Scriptures say, and Christians believe, that man fell, and the whole race inherited the effects of his sin. This is something beyond the nature of science to discuss, but it seems to depend on there being a single human pair from whom all the rest descend. What has evolutionary theory to say about this? That the human race does form a single species probably indicates that evolution took place in a single community isolated from other influences. Nor does there seem to be anything intrinsically impossible about descent from a single pair: the evidence is as yet quite insufficient to say. Dr Mascall himself speculates along theological lines: does the requirement that all men inherit the effects of sin imply physical descent from a single pair? He concludes that it does not, though on this point I find myself unable to follow him.

Let me take a second example, which works in a slightly different way. Christians hold that the universe is not merely dependent utterly on God at every instant (a truth which you may remember I consider can be shown by reason alone). Beyond this they hold that it has not always existed, but had a beginning. Now in recent years it has been claimed that support for this can be found in the evidence of astronomy, which seems to indicate a finite period at which many large-scale processes may have begun. This beginning of things does at first sight look rather like the sort of empirical event which science could investigate. But reflection shows that this is not so. The beginning of particular events can in principle be observed by someone who existed before them, and saw them come to be; but even in principle there can be no such observer of the beginning of all things, since he too must have begun with the event he ought to observe. The beginning of the universe is not a question that science can investigate, and a Christian should accept the limitations of science as readily when the evidence seems to be in his favour, as he probably will when it appears to be against him.

I have largely been concerned here with a comparison of methods. I have shown how some statements in religion can in

fact be reached by reason alone, though not in the same way that scientists reason. And I have shown that theological method is exploratory in the way scientific method is. This has led me to delimit the area of useful collaboration between theologians and scientists. In themselves theological statements, whether reasoned to or revealed, lie beyond the reach of science, but those that concern revelation have an empirical setting, open to historical investigation, where sciences such as anthropology and biology can be of use. But where the setting is not open to empirical investigation, as in the question of the beginning of the universe, it is useless to call on the physical sciences for aid.
