

The Relevance of Philosophy to Preaching

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Philosophy is not a single thing any more than is poetry. If we were to consider the relevance of poetry to preaching, we would be forced to admit that a lot of poetry isn't relevant and that there are many different kinds of poets. The same is true of philosophy. Much of it is not relevant to preaching, and what philosophy is for a mathematically-minded, a scientific-minded, a metaphysically-minded, and atheistically-minded, or a religiously-minded philosopher is as different as what poetry is for different poets. This variety is not accidental. It reflects the complexity of the world. Perhaps this variety itself is one way in which both poetry and philosophy are relevant to preaching. They remind us of how tempting it is to over-simplify things in preaching. After all, the time at our disposal in preaching is short, and the congregation is diverse in age, intelligence, and education, so one is tempted to keep things simple. On the other hand, we are to preach the truth, and Jesus' own teachings show us that profundity and richness are possible without oversimplification. Poetry and philosophy can help us recognize that perhaps we have made God too small.

For all their variety, poetry and philosophy each have a fundamental characteristic. Poets always rely on imagination and philosophers on reason. Our apprehension of God—and hence our preaching—suffers today from the weakness of both our imagination and our reason. We put imagination and fact into opposition: our God is not a fable nor is the story of God's actions in the Bible a fairytale. Yes indeed. But we incorrectly dismiss imagination as if it were only a faculty for the manufacture of fantasies, and as a result our biblical exegesis is limited to a barren search for historical bedrock. We do the same with reason. We realize that Christianity is a faith, but we turn to reason in the guise of history to establish the veracity of the Bible stories. When historical reasoning cannot quite do this, we then call upon faith in such a way as to set faith and history in opposition. We are forced to rely on faith alone to do what history cannot do. In this fashion we end up using neither our imagination nor our reason properly in our apprehension of God and his ways with us.

This is particularly harmful today because of the widespread secular understanding of nature, history, and human life. With our cramped imagination and a narrow view of reason we are caught between a rock and a hard place. Here is our dilemma: either to demythologize the Bible, as Bultmann recommended, and so ignore God's rule of nature and activity in history, or to divide ourselves and for a time suspend what we as contemporary people believe we know about our world and attend to the Bible stories with another part of ourselves. Bultmann's route offers the essential ingredient of integrity, as modern knowledge is fully admitted into our person. Unfortunately such integrity has a very high, not to say unacceptable, price. What we need is an integrity

which includes an understanding of God as active in every event of nature and as actively guiding all historical events and actively involved in our individual lives. This cannot be done without our theology coming to terms with our present-day understanding of the operations of the natural world. For it is an earlier view of science which closed off the world to a biblical God. In the seventeenth century a mechanistic-deterministic science led to Deism, in which God as creator is said to have made the universe but from that point on nature operates by its own intrinsic principles and powers without God's doing anything. Thus in our physical sciences all explanations of nature's operations make no reference to God. It was inevitable that the completeness of scientific explanations would make the biblical references to God's actions in the history of Israel look like holdovers from a more primitive time. Given a mechanistic-deterministic view of the operations of nature, it was inevitable that a view of history would emerge (as it did in the nineteenth century) in which the very notion of God as an agent in explaining historical events would be viewed as breaking the *continuity* of historical explanations. Just as no scientist refers to deity in interpreting the shift in the lines of a spectrograph of a heavenly body, so too no historian explains the French Revolution as the result of God's punishment of the French people for their sins—as would many a biblical writer in accounting for the tribulations of Israel. When the same procedures and attitudes which are employed in explaining the French Revolution are employed in writing the history of Israel, then indeed to refer to God does seem to be a way of speaking which has no anchorage. If one continues to have faith, it is not because it is a reasonable way or even an intelligible way to talk about the events of nature or history. If we do not ignore with one part of ourselves what we know today about the study of nature and history, we cannot say what we *mean* when we speak of God active in nature and history.

Only in the domain of the human heart do we have a place where we know God—in the experience of grace. But when God is restricted to affecting individual lives, and indeed the interior of individual lives, especially the emotions, then God is utterly lost to our minds; then the intellect has no role to play in our understanding God nor in discerning his activity. The way to restore reason to its rightful place in Christianity and preaching is to overcome our forgetfulness. We have forgotten that the God whom we know as personal in Jesus Christ is also the God of nature, and that until we can reconceive him as active in nature, we cannot conceive of him as active in history. Without some way to think of God as active in nature and history, we are driven to a truncated deity or to a divided life, relying exclusively on a personal experience of grace and unable to think about God acting elsewhere. Since biblical scholars and theologians cannot forget about science and history completely, a wedge had been driven between the academy and the pulpit. Any pulpit isolated from the academy is in danger of being a pulpit isolated from its congregation, because people in a congregation are not always able to live a divided life fruitfully. Much of what is said from the pulpit may be irrelevant to their daily life in a secular world.

But it is possible for us today to think about God, to conceive of him with our reason and imagination, as active in the world which modern science de-

scribes for us. The science which dominated our outlook from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries has been superseded by present-day science, which unlike the older science does not close off the universe to God. God can now be understood to act on nature and history. The philosophical theologian who has shown this most clearly is Austin Farrer (1904-1968) of Oxford University. It is his work that I shall draw upon in my account of how God can be understood to act on nature and history.

Let me begin my account by pointing out that in the Bible there is no conception of scientific explanations. God's almighty Word is uttered and created realities appear. Once created, all creatures are utterly subject to the divine Word. Their operations can be suspended or altered as God sees fit. These biblical convictions were not put forward as a challenge to science; they were simply expressed by people who had no notion of scientific explanations. But we do. We seek to explain the workings of the world in terms of the relations between the members of the universe and in terms of the members *only*. At no point in a scientific account is it permissible to substitute for a member of the universe something that is not a member. Natural causes are to be used to account for natural events; to substitute God for a natural cause is anthropomorphism. The same pattern applies to historical explanations. An historical explanation of an event is to be given in terms of natural causes. At no point in historical explanation is it permissible to substitute for a natural cause something that is not natural.

Now I have no intention of rejecting either scientific or historical explanations. How then are we to express the biblical conviction that God acts on nature and history so as to affect their course? One kind of answer is to give some variant of Hegel's philosophy. Hegel argues that the order of nature and the pattern in history which he discerns (a dialectical one) are the result of the *inherent* properties of the members of the universe and result from their inherent properties alone. To this extent he agrees with the older science in which nature operates as it does only by the inherent properties of the members of the universe. But Hegel speaks of deity because the order of the physical universe and pattern of history which he discerns mean that the universe itself is *mind-like*. There are of course no interventions into the course of nature or history by deity. The developing order in nature and history is what he means by deity; or better yet, in recent variants of Hegel, deity is said to be the *meaning* of the universe.

There is indeed an orderly development of nature as contemporary cosmology teaches us, whether the Big Bang or some other cosmological theory is the correct account of the expanding universe. There is also the development of forms of life from earlier less complex forms, and both these processes are still going on. But it is no longer possible to draw upon an earlier deterministic science as a basis for the view that the patterns we discern are the result of the inherent properties of the members of the universe and those inherent properties *alone*. There is no need either to exclude God completely from the development of nature and history, nor on the other hand, to reduce God to the patterns the universe exhibits in nature and history. On the contrary, with our present-day view of physical objects and events in science, it is quite possible

to think or conceive of God as an active agent in the ongoing development of nature and history. The properties inherent in the members of the universe do not *fully* account for the course of nature or history. Both cosmology and biology now recognize that there is a *contingency* to the world's development. Its development does not flow *inevitably* in a particular direction, as it would if the courses it follows were fully explicable in terms of the properties of the members. Instead our accounts in science and history do indeed always refer to members of the universe and only to members of the universe, but those explanations never tell us that what happens is an inevitable outcome. They do not fully explain why the world develops as it does.

As early as 1931 (so Bultmann ought to have known better), Hermann Weyl, the eminent mathematician and physicist of Göttingen and later a member of the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton, opened the Terry Lectures of Yale with these remarks:

Mathematics and physics make the world appear more and more an open one, as a world not closed but pointing beyond itself. Or, as Franz Werfel expresses it in pregnant wording one of his poems, "Diese Welt ist nicht die Welt allein." [This world is not merely the world.] Science finds itself compelled, at once by the epistemological, the physical, and the constructive-mathematical aspect of its own methods and results, to recognize this situation. It remains to be added that science can do no more than show this open horizon.¹

It is ironic that it is *after* this and similar statements were made about the nature of science that Bultmann claimed that the "causal nexus" revealed by modern science had closed off the world of nature and history to divine activity. Not only was he referring to an outdated view of science, but also he thought, as many today still think, that divine activity means divine intervention. It is indeed the case that scientific and historical accounts of events are accounts in which the relations between members of the universe are considered, and only the relations between its members. Deity is not to appear in such accounts. To insert God into such accounts would be anthropomorphic intervention. But we can nonetheless rightly conceive of God as acting on nature and history, because the universe is not closed; that is, scientific and historical accounts of events are not *exhaustive*. The *course* of the universe's development is not necessary or inevitable, but it is contingent. The intrinsic properties of the members of the universe do not of themselves account for the direction of its development. What happens in the expansion of the cosmos and in the biological development of species is not determined by the properties of things. There is a contingency or a residual unaccountability in the way things have gone and are going.

Is there more which would account for the course of development? Science cannot say, because science studies only the relations between the members of the universe. Science can "point beyond" the universe, but it can do no more.

The openness of the universe means that it is not closed off to God. We can think or conceive of the world as a world which follows its course of development because of (1) the inherent properties of its members and (2) the ac-

tions of deity on them. So what happens is the joint product of God's activity and the activities of its members. Such a view is utterly compatible with a view of scientific and historical explanations being complete in themselves. Deity never appears in the accounts of the relations between the members of the universe. But these accounts are not exhaustive, that is, they do not fully explain the course of nature or history, because the direction of neither one is inevitable or determined. Did our scientific or our historical explanations tell us what must occur, then these accounts would be exhaustive and the universe would be closed. But they do not, and this is not because we lack scientific or historical data. Instead it is because there is genuine contingency in nature and history.

It is thus possible to understand God as active on nature and history. We are not driven by science either to the inactive god or deism, or to reducing God to various Hegelian philosophies and theologies in which the course of nature and historical development is deified. Nor is there any need for us to divide our minds by forgetting what we know of science and history when we talk about God as active in creating a universe and caring for it by his providential activity now. It is unfortunate that it was and is still not more widely known in theological circles that we live in an open universe. We would then have been spared the spectacle of Bultmann and others today who restrict divine action to the narrow confines of our inner life, and who call for a wholesale reinterpretation of the Bible within a straitjacket imposed by a mistaken deterministic view of science.

That the universe is open to divine activity still leaves us with a large task: the development of principles of biblical interpretation or biblical hermeneutics. For the Bible was written in a time before our science developed, and it was not written as history. I cannot here discuss the recent work on hermeneutics, even though it is a branch of philosophy and a branch that is relevant to preaching. Instead I shall complete the line of investigation I have begun by describing more fully how we are to understand or think of divine activity.

Put most simply, we are to think of God as acting at every moment of time *with* each creature, enabling it to be itself, and willing that it act as itself, and also willing its development in certain directions. We have what Austin Farrer calls "double agency," two kinds of activity: the creatures' own acts and the Creator's acts. We can observe the creatures' activities only. Their acting as they do is *what* they are; without so acting, they are not what they are. But it takes God's actions for them to act as they do—to be themselves. Even though we cannot observe the activity of deity with each creature, enabling each creature to be itself, the divine activity is manifest in the *results* of creaturely activity. The *direction* of the development of the universe, charted in cosmology and biological evolutionary theory, is not explicable in terms of the creatures' activities themselves. Those results are contingent. Because they are, we may speak of a double agency, creaturely and divine. We may think of God as acting *with* creatures, from the smallest centers of energy to every form and level of life, to the grand majestic development of the cosmos charted by cosmology and biology. God's activity is an ingredient in every creaturely act, an activity that manifests itself only in the resulting course of the universe's development.

No one, of course, is compelled to describe the course followed by nature in its development into our present cosmos, with life, and indeed human life, as the result of God's hidden agency working with creatures. But because of this contingency in nature (and history), this perspective cannot be excluded by science. It is moreover not an anthropomorphic view, for the activity of God is not inserted into scientific accounts (as an action performed *between* the members of a nature would be). Instead, God's activity in enabling creatures to make the universe we have by their activities is a picture of a continuous activity which to our eyes is that of creatures, and only creatures, acting. To our eyes, creatures do everything. Hence there are no gaps into which God may be inserted. But God is active *with* creatures, enabling them to be themselves, and we can claim this because the course of development which nature has taken to produce our cosmos and the forms of life we find, is not determined by creatures. So God does not appear in any scientific account because God's causal agency is hidden from us. As Austin Farrer puts it, the "causal joint" where Creator's and creature's activity meet and together produce the direction of the universe's development is hidden. But God's agency is *manifest* in the result, which is not determined by creatures alone. Their own natures do not specify one and only one possible course of development.

Perhaps the relation of God's activity and creaturely activity can be partly captured by this analogy: a master weaver gives an apprentice advice, and does so with a pattern in mind. Should the apprentice make a mistake, the master weaver does not make the apprentice undo the error, but instantly alters the design, and gives the apprentice advice on how to proceed. The handling of the creatures of the physical universe in its cosmological development could have gone in many ways, but God led the actions of created energies in the direction which would allow life to develop. God also uses the inherent properties of living creatures. He directs them so that eventually human beings arise. There is room for quite a lot of accident in both domains, and the need for improvising like a master weaver, because God allows all creatures to "do their own thing" or to be themselves. Yet God's resourcefulness is such that the ultimate purpose of a universe sufficient for the emergence of creatures that bear the Creator's image can be realized. So instead of thinking of God's providence as a ready-made blueprint, we must think of one who improvises to achieve his goals.

With human beings the scope of departure from the divine intentions is far greater than with other creatures. The "master weaver" has to exercise considerably more ingenuity in leading history and human beings to their fulfillment, because God in achieving his purposes does not violate the free natures of human beings. The divine activity in history and in individual lives is persuasive, not coercive. Perhaps we can convey this with another image, that of a composer. This would be a composer-conductor who persuades players by taking the sounds which fit in better with the direction or drift of the music they hear in order to make even greater and more glorious music. What results is thus owing in part to players themselves, but not solely, because the composer-conductor actively responds to what they play and persuades them to perform differently and better.

To understand God as acting *with* creatures highlights our responsibility. To believe in God's providence does not mean that we simply leave things to him. Think of a boat with two oars. One is pulled by God and one by the creatures. If the creatures do not act, then the boat will start to curve around. God is active, but if we are to live well and truly, we must act in harmony with the divine activity. We must seek to discern it from the fullest exercise of our intellect in our study of nature, history, and human nature. We must exercise our intellect to the fullest in our study of the Bible and the life of the church. Only a heart that cares for God will make the effort, but without the effort to discern with our minds the activities of God, we shall not be able to act responsibly.

To have used our minds to achieve this understanding of God enables us to use our imagination without fear of falling into fantasy. I lack the space to say much about this, so let me refer you to the closing pages of Austin Farrer's *The Glass of Vision*, in which he discusses the missing ending to Mark's Gospel, as an example, and close with another short one.

Rowan Williams writes:

Conversion and repentance—those words which Christians of all persuasions have come to use so glibly—involve going down into the chaotic waters of Christ's death, so that the Spirit can move to make "new creation"; being unmade to be remade.²

Here we have our baptism into Christ's death connected to the creation story by the words "chaotic waters" (Genesis 1:2). With that connection made, we can see that the Spirit which moved over the face of the waters at creation, bringing order out of chaos, is the Spirit which makes us a new creation.

From the chaos of our lives, harmony may come, but only by turning to be remade by God's action upon us.

This is a use of the imagination and is not fantasy. What makes it a matter of imagination and not fantasy is not historical biblical criticism, but the use of our reason. Freed by reason of the constrictions of narrow and inadequate views of science and history, the imagination is liberated to range over the witness of Scripture and enables us to become eloquent. There are of course many exegetical principles to be learned to guide us in our interpretations. To believe that God is active in nature and history does not tell us how we are to interpret parables, for example, or the significance of controversies over the law of Mark's Gospel. But it does free the imagination to discern God's activity and does license our use of glorious and moving words, such as those used by Rowan Williams. If the mind has done its work, preaching can rightly sound wonderful and move the heart through the imagination.

NOTES

¹ Hermann Weyl, *The Open World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), 7.

² Rowan Williams, *Christian Spirituality* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 7.