The Problem of Authority in Theological Education

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All Christians have put themselves under obedience to God. They acknowledge God's authority—his right to the obedience of every sentient being. They also acknowledge God's power, since disobedience to God can only exist so long as God permits it.

God's authority is promulgated to the human race in specific descriptions of certain rewards and punishments that are attached to specified kinds of behaviour. These laws are said to be made known by authoritative messengers, the prophets. God is held to be three persons in the one Godhead. The second person of the Trinity, the eternal Son of God, is said to have been incarnate, to have been crucified under Pontius Pilate, to have been raised from the dead and to have ascended to heaven. It is promised that he will come to earth again at the general resurrection of all the dead, and that those who merit eternal exclusion from the presence of God will be excluded and those who are judged worthy to enjoy God's presence will live in bliss for ever. God the Holy Spirit has been sent, and will continue to be sent, to those who submit to the Father and the Son. Among other gifts, this Spirit has given and will give wisdom to discern what is true, good and beautiful.

Any teachers of theology who are Christians are obliged to obey this God and to seek the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit in teaching the Christian faith. Should such teachers cease to profess the Christian faith they would naturally resign from any teaching position in the church.

Many Christian theologians are now employed by universities and colleges. Although many of these universities and colleges were Christian foundations, most now lay no confessional requirement on their teachers.

All Christian teachers of theology would agree that what they teach can be described from outside, as it were. This article has been written in that style, up to this point, and I have made no explicit reference to my own beliefs. In fact, my use of I in the previous sentence may have come as a shock to readers accustomed to reading academic articles.

A convention has grown up in universities that teachers of Christian theology should never reveal their own allegiance. Should a student ask whether the Christian faith is true or not, the student would, according to

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this convention, be told that the description of the Christian faith was accurate and that if the student wanted to believe it, that is what should be believed. This, of course, deceives no one. The teacher's actual allegiance can be discovered by the curious student with a few discreet enquiries. The justification for the ploy is that it provides an atmosphere in which the contentious issues of a religion—any religion—can be discussed and examined. Any such enquiry "makes strenuous moral demands: honesty and fairness to opponents in argument, an ability to tolerate prolonged uncertainty over serious issues; the strength of character to change one's mind on basic beliefs, and to follow the argument rather than one's emotional leanings; independence of mind rather than readiness to follow philosophical fashion," to cite R.W. Hepburn's opening paragraph of the entry on "philosophical practice, the ethics of" in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, edited by Ted Honderich (1995). The strenuous moral demands bear particularly heavily on teachers and students of Christian theology because of the possibility that they might feel compelled to change their mind on beliefs than which there can be no greater.

The problem arises when a ploy to give students and teachers a space in which to examine the faith dispassionately is, by sleight of hand, turned into a ban on drawing certain conclusions from the open-minded exploration of the evidence.

Of course there are certain rules of discourse and certain fixed presuppositions entailed in working in a university. There are some presuppositions that are clear and defensible. We must not fake the evidence, for example.

But can we justify ruling some conclusions to be out-of-bounds for testing? If someone proposed that the earth is flat, that conclusion would have to be refuted, even if the refutation (which would include an examination of the alleged new evidence) took only five minutes. We recognize how difficult it is to propose and test theories about the average intelligence of different races, but we recognize that universities have a duty to examine the conclusions some have drawn, and to test them.

So far, so good. However, the actual situation in universities is far different. The need for clear fixed presuppositions is traded on. In practice many scholars in universities are bent on trying to elevate some of their conclusions to the level of being presuppositions. A great deal of effort is devoted to sifting through hypotheses in order to identify what is labelled "the consensus". Hypotheses belonging to "the consensus" are alleged to help the advance of the subject because research students who have been taught "the consensus" can see more easily the areas that need further research.

In addition, some way above and behind the conclusions that lie in

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the region of "the consensus", there are presuppositions that are greeted as axiomatic.

The means for sustaining this hierarchy of truths are twofold: the academic conference and the peer review of articles and monographs for publication. Both are perfectly defensible institutions, but they delightfully cater for human fear: for the fear of those who are anxious to know which way the wind is blowing, and for the fear of those who are afraid that the whole flotilla will not turn in an orderly way to match the shift in the wind's direction.

In theory, scholars see themselves as autonomous impartial seekers after truth, following the evidence whither soever it leads them. The practice is a little different. At the international conference on the subject the latest scholar to become king-maker can be seen surrounded by younger teachers who have yet to make their mark. The younger ones are busy informally discovering what are the promising lines of work and whom to watch.

I am not here concerned so much with the scholarly fashion shows as with the presuppositions that lie above and behind them. Fashions come and go, but these presuppositions have been gradually infused into scholarly discourse over a period of at least three hundred years.

There are at least five presuppositions that are now hardly questioned and which in fact rule out the Christian faith. They are widely assumed even in theological writings, and the writers who assume them usually do not see this incompatibility.

"Science shows that miracles are impossible."

This is based on the truism that every event has a cause. However, the subsidiary hypothesis, that no possibility exists that is not actualised, is smuggled in. It is the smuggled-in hypothesis that renders determinism plausible. However, this axiom would exclude human choice among possibilities, let alone the divine choice among possibilities which would constitute a miracle. If you exclude human choice among possibilities, you exclude the process of arguing.

"Determinism and free will are compatible."

The most recent version of this is Chomsky's view that, although consciousness has a hidden causal structure, we are never going to get access to it and have to be content with the surface knowledge of folk psychology. One must admire the skill exercised by the highly-paid philosophers who expound these views. However, if their thoughts are determined and their consciousness that they are right is determined, they cannot logically continue to argue that they are right. Their "arguments"

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and my "reply" are fated. They have sawn off the branch on which they sit. Of course compatibilists like Bernard Williams see that if determinism entails fatalism it is absurd, but he can't wriggle off the entailment except by protesting at the top of his voice that "if determinism were coherent at all, it would be a large task to establish its truth and falsehood", so that the short way must be wrong. How does he know? His own long way seems muddled to me. ("How free does the will need to be?", *Making sense of humanity: and other philosophical papers 1982-1993*, Cambridge: CUP, 1995, pp. 910 et passim.)

"The exercise of power is intrinsically evil."
D'Entrèves (de Jouvenal) sharply distinguished power exercised as authority from power exercised as force. However, if power exercised as force be rejected, we achieve the curious result of rejecting the possibility of mercy. If I seek mercy from anyone, I admit I deserve punishment and ask the exercise of power in the withholding of the punishment I deserve. Do the defenders of this "axiom" really want to do without the possibility of mercy?

"The performance of a good action for a reward renders the action evil."
Kant's maxim is based on the observation that it is evil to accept a bribe offered by someone to persuade me to perform an action that is wrong. But if I accept a reward to do a good action that I did not at the time see to be good, I will surely be grateful later that the reward was offered to me when a calmer consideration leads me to see how truly good the action was. Would it be better to do an evil action because I was offered a reward to do a good one?

"Thought progresses like a stream: we are either with modern thought or we are out of-date."
This delicious form of bullying is laughable. For example, a serious proposal made by David Chalmers on the problem of consciousness is rejected out of hand with the remark, "Is it really worth it to paddle laboriously back up-stream [to the life-force hypothesis] for the sake of causeless subjectivity?" (*The Economist*, 20-26 July 1996, p. 91.) Why should anyone think that the progress of the stream is far more obvious than the solution to the problem under consideration?

The sketch of the Christian faith which I gave at the start of this article of course raises one enormous problem. To speak of God as making promises, as giving laws, as sending his Son, as holding out eternal life to human beings after their death is to burst the bounds of

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normal language. The language of promising and giving and sending is normally used only of beings in this world of space and time. The language of asking God for things or of promising God to do this or that, language entailed from the human side by God's activity from his side, is equally problematic. We normally only make requests to other human beings who are alive at the same time as we are, and those other human beings are normally the recipients of our promises: "I promise to repay this loan with 5% interest in one year." What is it to pray to God and to make promises to him who is not an object in our universe? He does not live at any place in the universe, and we do not communicate with him by radio or any other form of communication in use in our world.

The authoritative set of presuppositions promulgated to us which I have tried to list above contains a massive assumption that nothing outside our universe can exist and that no communication is possible outside the human communications that lie wholly within our universe.

This seemingly simple ban on speaking of—let alone to—anyone outside our universe in fact contains a fatal contradiction. Those who lay down the prohibition have themselves flouted their own ban because they promulgate an edict from a platform not part of our universe. They claim to formulate an absolute truth which applies to all human speakers. There is no complete explanation within our universe for the edict they proclaim, for if there were a complete explanation, it would not be true. Again, cosmologists discuss the dimensions of our universe, how fast it is expanding, and whether it will start to contract. They speak from a platform not part of our universe. Again, whenever I choose among the possibilities open to me, I perform an action the explanation of which is my choice. Of course the determinists try to reduce that choice to an outcome of laws and propensities inherent in the universe of space and time within which they have decreed that all explanation must be sought, but that decree is an arbitrary law delivered from a platform the existence of which their theory refuses to admit.

The difficulties confronting theologians who dare to think about and talk about God are on all fours with the difficulties confronting philosophers who dare to think about and talk about what they are doing when they philosophise. The alleged impossibility of meaningful talk about God is parallel to what should be seen as the impossibility of aspiring to make true statements about our universe, which the theoretical determinists refuse to see, holding, against all reason, that free human discussion of the truth and determinism are compatible.

All the maxims I have tried to list above are based on the writings of authorities (Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, Russell &c.) who first promulgated these opinions. I think the maxims are false, but can hope to

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do no more here than indicate where they are weak. My main purpose is unmask the claim by the opponents of the authority of God that *they* rely on reason alone, while the theologians who believe in what they teach ultimately rely on authority alone. My thesis is that no one is free from authority. This is first of all a matter of observable fact. As Montaigne once remarked, "Almost all the opinions we have are taken by authority and upon credit". G. A. Cohen, a student at McGill University in Canada, had to choose between doing postgraduate research at Harvard and doing it at Oxford. He chose Oxford because it was more exciting to leave Montreal for Europe than for the States. As a result, he said, he accepted A.J. Ayer's position that the analytic/synthetic distinction held, and he rejected Quine's view that all truth depends on the way the world is (Gifford Lecture, Edinburgh, 22 April, 1996).

If no one is free from authority in fact, that is nothing to be ashamed of. I wish to argue that we are logically required to submit to authority. The powerful principle that we are forbidden to be judge in our own cause applies just as much to arguing as it does to examining or going to law. We are bound, when our own interests are at stake, to turn for judgment to a benevolent and impartial judge. The eager young scholar who tries to talk to the eminent expert in the field at the conference is in principle acting well; the distortion occurs because of the fear on the part of the supplicant and the revelling in power on the side of the king-maker. The judge is not impartial and the supplicant goes to the judge precisely for that reason. Nevertheless, our most cherished hypotheses, our finest arguments have to be submitted to benevolent impartial judgment. We cannot honestly hold any position unless we are sure that the best judges would regard it as true and fully justified. We appeal to their authority. We not only do all rely on authority; we are all obliged to rely on authority.

If we could all adopt the practice of citing our authorities, we would be more honest, and we would all be able to apply our reason to these authorities. Sometimes people throw off one set of authorities and adopt another.

The common refusal to cite authorities as authority is designed to give the impression that the view one is expounding is based on pure reason. A view based on pure reason seems to be unavoidable and not liable to be questioned. Or "modern science" is evoked as though it were a unified body of knowledge with unchallengeable authority. The Christian theologian cites Moses' authority as conveying laws with God's authority, and appears foolish and old-fashioned. But at least God allows us to question his authority, as he allowed Job. Let the opponents of God's authority cite their authorities so that we may examine their claims, and

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escape the spurious covert claim to a pure truth discovered by them and all right-thinking humans.

Of course this procedure would exclude those who persisted in saying that they would bow to no authority; that they were governed by reason alone. Too bad. They deceive themselves. After reporting Hume's description of Rousseau's tactics for drawing attention to his ideas, Burke said of Rousseau's disciples, "I believe, that were Rousseau alive, and in one of his lucid intervals, he would be shocked at the practical phrenzy of his scholars, who in their paradoxes are servile imitators; and even in their incredulity discover an implicit faith" *(Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Penguin edition, 1968, p. 284).

Our motto should be this, taken from Coke: *Ratio et auctoritas, duo clarissima mundi lumina.*

The practical consequence of my proposals for church authorities charged with the institutional arrangements for theological education are as follows.

1. Seminaries have manifold advantages. Students for the ministry are told clearly the rulings of the authorities behind whom stands God, the source of all truth. They are able to learn how to use their reason in distinguishing the true import of the authoritative texts, how to use their imagination to enter into the truth, how to use their tongues to teach the truths of the faith and to extol the Fountain of Truth. They and their teachers will be able to leave if they think the faith not to be so, or not to be true.

2. Universities that retain their Christian foundation can be held to their charter of allegiance to God. Teachers can choose not to join, or can choose to leave. That seems harsh when every teacher believes there is a divine right to go on being paid while they say whatever they like under all circumstances, but whence comes this right?

3. Universities that always were secular, or which have become so, can be seen as worthy institutions devoted to the rational pursuit of truth. Christian teachers can be encouraged to uncover the hidden authorities that are covertly promulgated, to expose the weakness of too-easily assumed axioms, and to point out the rational grounds for belief in God. They should quietly give both their reasons and their authorities. Those teachers who persist in the denial that God has authority and power should be challenged to cite their authorities openly and to acknowledge their own allegiances.

None ought to be judge in their own cause; nor can they be.

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