Religion Without Beliefs

Hugo Meynell

Northrop Frye's views, both on the Bible and on other works of literature, are strongly influenced by the writings of William Blake.[1] When the University of Toronto Press published a collection of Frye's writings on religion,[2] it was thus very fitting that William Blake's picture of God answering Job out of the whirlwind should be used as a frontispiece to the book. In the spirit of Blake, Frye treats the Bible as a sovereign means for the expansion of human consciousness and imagination, and I believe that this is one very useful way of looking at it. But the question between Frye and most traditional Christians is, whether it also contains, however implicitly, a message about what is so, what philosophers might call propositional content. Frye seems to hold that such propositional content as there is in traditional Christianity may be abandoned, indeed is much better abandoned.

It appears to me that Frye is a thinker of genius rather than mere talent. Quite apart from the brilliance of his work on other parts or aspects of literature, few other writers, if any, have thrown as much light as he on the way in which the Bible 'works' on the human mind, as an imaginative structure of narrative and imagery.[3] But however much Christians may stand to learn from Frye's understanding of the Bible, his views are by no means compatible with any form of orthodox Christianity. What are the outstanding differences, and what are the reasons for them?

I

As a young university lecturer, Frye was teaching a course on the poetry of John Milton, but found that he was hampered at every turn by the fact that his students had so little knowledge of the Bible, when such knowledge is so constantly presupposed by Milton, as well as other English classical authors. When Frye mentioned this problem to his head of department, the latter remarked that the students did not know the difference between a Philistine and a Pharisee; and proposed that Frye conduct a course on the English Bible,[4] He was still teaching the course several decades later, when he had published two great books on the subject.

For the rest of this section I shall summarize Frye's views on the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2003.tb06313.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Bible, without comment. The Bible as such, before the systematic theologian or the historical critic have got their hands on it, is a structure of narrative and symbol, and can be studied from a literary point of view like other such structures.[5] It does no doubt contain a certain amount of history, in the sense of a more or less accurate chronicle of what happened; but such material is in the Bible not because it is history, but for quite a different purpose.[6] Frye admits that he does not know as much as perhaps he should about biblical criticism as generally practised; but he complains that study of the Bible from the truly literary point of view, as a narrative and symbolic structure, has hardly begun.[7] The standard biblical critic divides, or rather pulverises, the text into smaller and smaller units, and the process is necessarily endless. To follow this route, moreover, is inevitably to get further and further away from understanding the Bible as a unit)', which is the only way to see how it could have been the immense force in Western culture that it has. And no doubt it is true, and even interesting, that the creation narrative that comes at the beginning of the Book of Genesis dates, at least in its written form, from several centuries later than the rather different creation narrative that follows it. But what is interesting from the point of view of a strictly literary criticism, is why the narrative which comes first in the book does come first in it and in the Bible as a whole.[8]

People in all cultures tell stories to one another. Many of these stories are not felt to be of central importance, and maintain an independent existence as folk-tales or legends. Parts of the Bible, like the tales of Samson or Jonah's adventure with the fish, are redolent of such material. Other stories are felt by those who tell and hear them to be of greater intrinsic significance, and such that all members of the community ought to know them; moreover, these stories (myths) tend to coalesce into a single structure (mythology).[9] The Bible as a whole is an example of such a mythological structure. A society lives primarily within its system of myths, which mediate between it and raw nature. Once the effort to know about nature as such has come to maturity in the sciences, it goes its own way; to renew myth for society is the special task of poets.[10] From a literary point of view, the Bible has a single overall shape of fall, exile and return; the idealized human existence which was lost at the beginning being regained at the end. The same structure is found in miniature at various points in the Bible, as in the Book of Judges, where the scenario of the Israelites falling into sin, being given by God into the hands of their enemies., repenting, and being delivered by a divinely-appointed leader, is played out again and again. This structure is that of the more complex kind of comedy, exemplified by the late 'romances' of Shakespeare, which combine the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2003.tb06313.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

form of tragedy' with that of the simpler sort of comedy, with fall into alienation succeeded by restoration.[11]

Medieval Christian theologians distinguished four senses of Scripture, the literal, the allegorical, the tropological, and the anagogical. The allegorical refers to Christ, the tropological to our moral lives, and the anagogical to our fate after death in heaven or hell. Frye considers that, for all the usefulness of this scheme — which he brilliantly applies to literary criticism in general in *The Anatomy of Criticism* — it does not quite adequately convey the manner in which, in the Bible, there is an ever-expanding series of perspectives, each depending on those before without abandoning them. Also, it presupposed the uniquely privileged status of one unduly restricted set of interpretations, that of medieval Catholic Christianity.

The perspectives are as follows. The scene is set by creation and fall; the world is good in itself, hut human beings have alienated themselves from it and from each other. In exodus or revolution, there is a situation of slavery and oppression into which God enters as liberator in a very partisan way. Humanity is henceforth divided into God's own people and those who are opposed to them, in a manner which has always been a scandal to liberal-minded persons. This phase has been a powerful element in Christianity and Islam, and survived with but little change in Marxism. Through the promulgation of the Ten Commandments soon after the exodus, God's people are set apart by a special way of life, the focus of the third phase of revelation or law. Wisdom, the fourth phase, is a matter of internalizing law in the life of the individual.

Prophecy represents that uprush of forces from the unconscious of which every mature society acknowledges that it must take some account, for all that it is exceedingly difficult to accommodate within institutional constraints, and certainly must not be regarded as infallible. In both the early Church and rabbinic Judaism, one feels a certain relief in the conviction that the time of prophecy has passed. Gospel is an intensification of prophecy Jesus has been thought of in pious or legalistic terms as the only sinless individual, or even the perfect keeper of the law; but perhaps a better slant on him is that he is the one individual in history whom no human society could possibly put up with. The seventh or final phase, apocalypse, is the restoration of the fully humanized world lost at the fall, identified with the body of the Messiah, wherein people refrain from oppressing themselves and one another. So one may say that the Bible as a whole is about the achievement of true human liberty, and the dissolution of all those structures of anxiety and self-deception which by frustrating it have

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2003.tb06313.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

disfigured human history.[12]

For all the importance of envisaging the Bible as literature, Frye does not consider that one takes its measure if one treats it *merely* as literature. In explaining the difference Frye adopts the term *kerygma* (the Greek word for proclamation') from modern Protestant theology, but uses it very much in his own way. The Bible is *kerygma,* for him, in that it demands to be taken as the moral framework for our lives. It summons us to the tree action within a humanized world which is symbolized by the Resurrection: to break out of the oppressive and anxiety-ridden social and psychological structures which dominate history, constraining us to transact the usual human business of making wars and feeding parasites, and which are represented in the Bible by such symbols as Egypt and Babylon.[13] Other symbols of the ideal human state, once lost but. to be regained, are the garden of Eden, Jerusalem, and the Promised Land; pastoral imagery in general has the same function, The term *kerygma* was originally coined in a futile attempt to separate the supposed essence of the Christian message from what were supposed to be its mythological accretions.[14] But in act as Frye says, if one purges (say) the Gospels of every mythological element, one is left with absolutely nothing. And even if a historical residue could be laid bare, it would he beside the point.[15]

One might ask what has become of the concern for truth, and indeed the insistence on Christianity as the unique truth, which has been so characteristic of traditional religious belief in the West. Frye says that one should not be obsessed with the notion of truth as correspondence with fact, which is a relatively trivial matter, as well as a latecomer into history. To see what he is getting at on this issue, one must take some account of his view of the successive stages through which language develops.[16] The 'words with power' which constitute the Bible are not concerned either with truth as correspondence or with logical consistency, The demand for logical consistency was brought into Western thought by writers like Plato and Aristotle, who inaugurated the second phase of language. The distortions and absurdities which result when you apply this kind of thinking to the biblical material are exemplified in the work of Thomas Aquinas, who is forced by his systematic preoccupations into denying that God hates anything, in defiance of the many passages in the Bible where God is said to do precisely that.[17]

Truth as correspondence with Facts is characteristic of the third phase of language, whose first great spokesman is Francis Bacon. An overvaluation of this kind of 'truth' gives rise to numerous misunderstandings, such as the common conception of literature as a

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2003.tb06313.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

kind of socially-permitted lying.[18] Also, to expect 'truth' of this sort from the Bible is notoriously to fall foul of science and scientific history in innumerable instances, at which the cases of Galileo and Darwin provide the most notorious examples. For the historian, the miraculous element in the Gospel narrative must inevitably tall a casualty to his method, even though he may personally believe that the miracles, or at least some of them, actually occurred. Furthermore, it may be suggested that those who insist on the importance for religious discourse of correspondence with external facts have not taken proper account of the insistence of the Bible itself on the primacy of the Word, which we find at the very beginning of the Gospel of John.[19]

On this conception of the nature and role of the Bible. '(f)aith ... becomes a course of action informed by a vision of human life',[20] as opposed to assent to more or less improbable statements about historical events, or the nature and activities of supernatural beings. At this rate, a new kind of openness becomes possible between those who set store by the Bible, and those who do so by other sacred writings. Discussion between religious groups can proceed much more fruitfully, when it is not vitiated by dogmatic obsessions.[21]

II

When Frye says roundly that the less such 'beliefs' we have the better,[22] he clearly shows the radical difference between his own position and that of traditional religious persons of all faiths and denominations. Perhaps in an unguarded moment, Frye admits that it is characteristic of those who set store by myths, that they maintain that the events there described really happened.[23] And the fact is that use of a narrative and symbolic framework, in traditional religion, is accompanied by beliefs about matters of fact. Most important among these beliefs, in the case of Christianity, is that there exists a God, or something like an intelligent will responsible for the world process is a whole; that there is some kind of afterlife to be expected by human beings. whether for weal or woe; arid that God has made the divine nature and intentions for humankind specially known through the history of Israel and its culmination in the words and deeds of Jesus Christ.

For a classical Protestant like Karl Barth, these are 'properly basic beliefs' (to use Alvin Plantinga's expression)[24] which ought to be accepted simply as a matter of faith, and are not at all to be argued for in terms of an experience or reason supposed to be in principle independent of them. For Roman Catholics, and indeed for many Protestants, at least some of these beliefs can in principle be soundly argued for; there are reasons of a kind which may be labelled

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2003.tb06313.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

metaphysical for believing that there is a God, and historical reasons for believing that the history of Israel and the words and deeds of Jesus were really such as to justify the belief hat they were and are uniquely revelatory of this God. (This does nor imply, it should be noted, that according to the Catholic view most people who are converted to Christianity are convinced by abstract reasoning; only that, when one reflects on the matter in a cool hour, this sort of reasoning can be found in fact to hold water for some basic Christian doctrines.) Such beliefs, whether supportable by independent argument as in the Catholic view, or not so as in the classical Protestant, are *compatible* with the Bible having the nature and function so wonderfully articulated by Frye: but they are not *simply a matter of* it. If one ceased to believe that there is a God as traditionally understood, or that human beings were to expect any form of life after death, or that Jesus ever existed, or was anything like the protagonist of the Gospels, the Bible might still be useful to one in the way that Frye describes; but, for better or worse, one would have rejected the Christian faith in its traditional sense.

And it could well be suggested, that this would be for better rather than worse. Is it not notoriously difficult to establish the soundness of any argument for the existence of God? And has not the Bible been found wanting over and over again when taken as the source of true facts of a scientific or historical kind? It is well known that many factual beliefs which Christians before the nineteenth century took for granted — an immediate and special creation of the world by God less than twenty thousand years ago, and many historical details apparently reported by Old Testament writers have had to be given up by more enlightened believers as a result of advances in modern natural and historical science. On he other hand, if these facts presupposed by traditional Christian faith really are the case, the consequences for human life are momentous: to deny that they obtain, and that it is 'correspondence' with them by virtue of which Christianity is true, is to make an enormous difference to that faith, and, as I think most people would say who clearly saw what was at stake, whether they themselves were Christians or not, would fatally compromise it.

Frye thinks that what is sometimes called 'the crisis of faith' is really 'a crisis in understanding the nature of the language of faith.'[25] Now it appears to me that there are at least two sorts of understanding of this 'crisis', which differ according to what one thinks has to be given up. To put the matter clearly if crudely, the faith of nearly all traditional Christians has consisted at least partly — no intelligent person would say that this was all that there was to it — in belief that certain facts are, were, or will be the case. In terms of what used to be a cliché in the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2003.tb06313.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

philosophy of religion, *belief in* consists at least partly in *belief that,* just as belief in my doctor implies belief that the medicines that he prescribes for me will not turn out to be deadly poison.

In our times, we hear frequently of churchmen who publicly admit that they can no longer believe in the Virgin Birth. For Frye, to be preoccupied with the question of whether such an event really happened is merely a vulgar error. Briefly, it almost certainly didn't happen, and the question whether it did is of no real significance.[26] Such 'truth' as is to he had from the Bible is a matter of coherence within its own symbolic structure, and not of correspondence with supposed facts of a supernatural or historical kind. But on the view that belief *in* the Christian God implies belief *that* certain historical events actually occurred, it is essential to Christian faith that the life of Jesus should really have taken one course rather than another; and the question whether he was actually born of a virgin, as very many traditional Christians have held it of importance that he was, cannot he dismissed so cavalierly as a matter of no religious insignificance as it is by Frye. As he admits, the four evangelists all take for granted at least that Jesus, whatever else he may or may not have been, was an actual historical individual; and indeed would never have written a line if they had not.[27]

Frye's account of the three phases through which language develops is in many ways helpful and profound; but it involves some important assumptions which are at least questionable. Concern about correspondence with fact, as Frye sees it, is characteristic of the third phase, but not really of the first or the second, A theologian of more traditional stamp could well object that the second and third phases have something in common which is neglected on Frye's account. Certainly, a corrective was needed to the medieval scholastic, and typical second-phase, preoccupation with what Bacon called 'agitation of wit', in the direction of observation of what was available to the senses, before the typically third-phase business of modern science could get properly under way. But the fact remains that, in their search for the truth about things, scientists are concerned as much with theoretical system and logical consistency as with mere observation of facts 'out there. There is an instructive story about an aspiring student in theoretical physics, who asked her director of studies what equipment she would need for her research. The director replied that her main requirements would be quite a lot of pencils, a huge amount of paper, and a large wastepaper basket. The point of this remark, of course, was that what was expected of the student was theoretical fertility, in other words 'agitation of wit'; the business of testing the theories, the large majority of which would have to be thrown into the waste-paper basket, was a be left to the hodmen in

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2003.tb06313.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

the laboratories.

In the third phase of language as much as in the second, the thinker is in pursuit of an explanatory scheme — the theoretical table of chemical elements, the evolutionary tree of living organisms — which explains why things are as they are and happen as they do 'in their causes' as Aristotle expressed it. The account of an earthquake given by an ordinary eye-witness or a journalist is very different from that provided by a seismologist. There is much the same difference, and for much the same reasons, between the Christian faith as it appears in the New Testament and in the work of a great systematic theologian like Thomas Aquinas or John Calvin. In fact, one may well compare the work of Aquinas with that of the nineteenth-century chemists who constructed the periodic table of elements, This is not to imply that the foundations of Christian theology are necessarily as secure as those of chemistry; it could be that the assumptions underlying Christian faith are mistaken in the wax in which those underlying chemistry are not. But the point is that the basic intellectual impulse is much he same in Aquinas and the chemists in question. Both were trying to organize a set of claims, which the Christian theologian in the one hand culls from the New Testament and the Christian tradition, and the chemist on the other hand from observations and experiments which can be made directly here and now; and to expound them systematically 'in their causes', in such a way that one can see *why* those things are so which are claimed *to be so*. Even Barth, who was very critical of many aspects of medieval Christian theology, said that it was a false prophet who feared a scholasticism.[28] In similar vein, Paul Tillich said that it was the special glory of the medieval scholastics, to present Christian doctrine as a systematic, though not a deduced, whole.[29]'As theoretical chemistry rests on empirical evidence, and is confirmed ultimately only by reference to it, so Christian theology depends on the revelation supposed to have been given by God in the events recorded by the authors of the New Testament.

Both second-and third-phase thinkers are interested in the nature of things; though it is true that, in the second phase of language, they are characteristically concerned with this at a different level of generality. The typical natural scientist, as a third-phase thinker, is interested in the nature of the real world in detail, and investigates this or that kind of material, this or that sort of plant or animal. Second-phase thinkers, being metaphysicians rather than scientists, are more interested in the question of the nature the world in general, by virtue of the fact that we can come to know about it in the way that we do, If Aquinas's development of Aristotelian ways of thinking is on the right lines, then

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2003.tb06313.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

traditional Christian doctrine fits in quite smugly with the rest of what we know, there are sounder reasons than not for believing that there is a God, and that God is likely to have revealed the divine self in the manner that Christians have supposed.

But, of course, how well such a metaphysics is really sound and how compatible it is with the scientific world-view which emerges as a result of the third phase of language is moot. Many would favour the view that the scientific world view issues in a materialism which is in conflict with Christian belief; others a Kant-like account that would make faith and scientific knowledge irrelevant to one another. Yet in spite of the arguments Hume, Kant, and their numerous disciples, many still find convincing the notion that the intelligibility of he universe, which is both presupposed and confirmed by science, is best explained if the world is due to the intelligent will that is generally known as God. Raw nature, as it were, turns out to be surprisingly precooked for the operations of the human mind. As to the Biblical stress on the priority of the word alluded to by Frye, a universe of things which we are progressively able, by means of our human words, to name in our sciences, may well be deemed to be best explained as due to a kind of prior Word through which a Creator expresses her or his will.

Frye's view would isolate faith and science from one another on the ground that the realm of fact is to be handed over exclusively to science, whereas faith concerns only the mythological envelope which human beings project between themselves and the facts. But it seems to me that this is due his neglect of what is common between the second and third phases of language. It is of no use just staring at the facts or data 'out there', if one is to get to know about the entities postulated by theoretical physicists, the thoughts and feelings of other people or the things and events of the past. One has to engage also in the typical second-phase activities of theorizing, and trying to make one's theories consistent with one another and within themselves, to get to know about leptons and quarks, or the hopes and anxieties of one's family and friends. And it is just the same if you want to get at the facts about the matrimonial adventures of King Henry VIII; it is Of no use gazing at the relevant documents, or even putting them under a microscope and gazing at them some more.

As to the relation between the first and subsequent phases of language, the biblical authors may not themselves be much preoccupied with logical consistency; but the fact remains that questions about logical consistency may properly arise when one reflects, from the viewpoint of a different phase of language, on what they had to say. We are told in the Epistle to the Hebrews that God is a consuming fire,[30] in

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2003.tb06313.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Deuteronomy and the Psalms that he has a strong right arm;[31] and it is not obvious how a fire can have an arm But it soon becomes evident to the reflective mind that both expressions are analogies; God defends his faithful ones as though with a right arm, and purges away sin as fire consumes trash. At this rate, to defend Aquinas against Frye, it would not seem too implausible to suggest that the biblical passages where God is said to hate are to be understood in the same sort of way; after all if a Creator who is all-powerful reality hated anything, how on earth could it continue to exist?

Certainly questions like this are not far pursued while language remains in the first phase. But even within the perspective of the Bible itself, it is clear that some uses of language are more figurative than others. When the prophets encouraged the King of Israel to go up to Ramoth-Gilead and fight the Syrians, on the ground that he would defeat them, obviously they meant their advice and their prognostications to be taken literally.[32] But when Jeremiah exhorted his hearers to circumcise the foreskins of their hearts,[33] it would have been very bone-headed of the to object that such a procedure was anatomically impossible. And, at least when they are read in the most obvious way, biblical writers can be preoccupied with matters of fact in the ordinary sense; Paul's remarks about witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus can be cited to this effect, as well as the claim of John's Gospel to be founded on reliable eye witness testimony.[34]

Once one has admitted the metaphorical nature of many biblical descriptions and and accounts, it seems natural to ask, How much of this is for real? Is there a literal message to be retrieved, some claim about what is reality so, under the structure of symbol and metaphor of which the Bible consists?'For Frye, the answer is no — unless one counts the ethical doctrine that we ought to use it to free ourselves of the oppressive psychological and social structures whose baleful effects make up so much of human history. Much of the effort of traditional Christian theology has been devoted to establishing that there is a literal underlying message, and just what this message is. According to Frye, such central Christian doctrines as that of the Trinity, and that Christ is both God and man, can only be expressed as metaphors.[35] This at best is a matter of opinion. One might cite to the contrary Bernard Lonergan, who has argued at length that the Trinity may be understood as three distinct subjects of one divine consciousness, and Christ as one subject with two types of consciousness, human and divine.[36]

As I have said, the question of whether Christianity is true, and not only in Frye's rather Pickwickian sense, can be argued on the basis of historiography as well as metaphysics. Historians sometimes conclude,

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2003.tb06313.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

as a result as a result of what they take to be objective investigation, that the historical Jesus made for himself substantially the same claims as the Church has made for him, and even that one may not unreasonably conclude that he was right in making them. Others have lost their faith, on the ground that historical evidence does not support this stance. Of course, there is huge ideological pressure on either side of this issue; but there seems no reason in principle why argument between the parties should not proceed on a basis of scientific historiography. Thus the sceptical party may argue that narratives of this kind, with such a profusion of miraculous elements, are simply not to be trusted; while believers may retort that, given the comparatively short time which elapsed between the life of Jesus and the writing of the gospels, the environment in which the message about Jesus was first preached, and the suitability of God, if God exists, revealing the divine nature and purposes in way that Christians have proposed, one may reasonably believe that the gospels, miracles and all, are quite historically reliable.[37]

If Frye's account is correct, it is true that there is nothing factual for the faithful in different traditions to disagree about; which will remove *one* pretext for the deplorable episodes of intolerance and persecution which have disfigured the history of religions. On the other hand, it is surely possible for people to have radically different views about matters of fact, even matters of fact bearing on religion, but still treat one another with respect and good will. A Christian might be deeply impressed by a Muslim's devotion to God, a Buddhist's steadfastness in the face of pleasure or pain, or a Marxist's passion for social justice, while still believing that they were in error in so far they rejected the divinity of Christ. In the future, one may hope that believers in different religions and in none may commend one another so far as they promote human virtue and authenticity, and discuss real differences with mutual respect and genuine desire to learn.

In *Words With Power*, Frye presents the phases of language as related to one another by a series of 'excluded initiatives'. The third or 'descriptive' phase, which for all that we are inclined to take it for granted, was in fact the last to have come into fully-fledged existence, presupposes that words are arranged in a certain way, and such arrangement, which makes logical argument possible, is the business of the second, 'analytic' or 'conceptual' phase. But while one is operating in the descriptive phase, the analytical one is out as an 'excluded initiative'. Also, he says, there is a personal equation underlying all metaphysical writing, however 'objective' it may look or claim to be; this cannot be taken into consideration when conceptual systems, which include some of the most impressive achievements of the human spirit,

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2003.tb06313.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

are being elaborated. But even ideologies and personal equations leave an excluded initiative, that of the imaginative vision which sees all ideologies as particular manifestations of human concern.[38]

I concede that a scientist or historian will not be able to get on with her job if she is perpetually fussing about questions of methodology, or the rhetorical devices implicit in the language she is using. On the other hand, one should not think of 'excluded initiatives' as making watertight compartments in the mind or in one's use of language. A scientist may stick exclusively to her proper professional business of attending to the whole of the relevant evidence and rejecting, modifying or corroborating her theory accordingly. But she may also, in the manner of the philosopher of science, attend to the problem of what she is doing when she is doing this, and why and how it is that a properly-ordered verbal structure, when tested at the bar of experience, may aspire i.o accurate description and explanation of the real world. Similarly with the rhetorical use of language. Some good scientists — one thinks of Charles Darwin, and the discoverers of the double helix — have been excellent literary stylists, and have evidently reflected to some purpose on how their theories may most effectively be communicated to their colleagues and the general public. Such rhetorical uses of language may, as it were, leak inappropriately into the act of communication. In the writings of the Roman historian Tacitus, for example, one sometimes wonders whether the author's desire for paradox or effective antithesis has led him to distort his presentation of the character of persons or the course of events. But it need not be so; a scientific theory or an historical account may at once be the best way of accounting for the available evidence, and effectively communicated.[39]

A traditional Christian might argue that something like the God of religion, as well as being part cf a mythology which might be commended as promoting an unrestricted imaginative vision, is properly to be affirmed as real on the basis of comprehensively critical conceptual argument. The personal equation or ideology at the basis of the conceptual structure involved might in principle be nothing other than a passionate desire to follow all the relevant evidence where it leads, and not to be distracted by desire, fear or the pressure of one's ideological group. She might go on to maintain that a fully scientific history, which is a special compound of the descriptive and conceptual uses of language, tends in the long run to support rather than impugn the view that a particular succession of events constitutes the special revelation of the divine nature and purposes for humankind, Is there any confirmation to be had in terms of the first or 'descriptive' phase? I think there is, in the 'religious experience' which certainly remains for

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2003.tb06313.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

most traditional Christian believers the real basis of their belief in God and in Christ. Atheists would reply that conceptual thought built on the rest of experience goes to show that the theistic, and *a fortiori* the Christian, interpretation of things is mistaken, and that such 'experience' is really repressed sexuality, longing for a parent, misdirected political aspiration, or whatever.

For Frye, both parties are in error in assuming that the mythological construct which is the Bible aspires to represent the world, rather than to be an effective envelope between the world and human beings. Over the centuries, as Frye says, Christians came to read the Bible through 'a structure of logos-formulated doctrine.'[40] From the Catholic perspective, this was just the right thing to do; God has provided the Catholic Church, through its teaching office, with a reliable means of advancing towards truth and avoiding error in this matter over the course of the centuries. Frye finds it 'obvious' that the prologue to John's gospel is deliberately trying to counter this attitude, through an identification of *mythos* with *logos*.[41] But I can see no good reason to agree with him about this.

1 Cf. 9, 20, 23, 34, 70–1, 81 etc.
2 *Northrop Frye on Religion.* Excluding *The Great Code* and *Words of Power.* Collected Works of Northrop Frye, Volume 4. Edited by Alvin A. Lee and Jean O'Grady (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000). All references not otherwise assigned will be to this volume.
3 Among recent authors, his only peers that I know of are Austen Farrer and Hans Urs von Balthasar. See Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (Glasgow: The University Press, 1948) and *A Rebirth of Images* (London: A. and C. Black, 1949); Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius. 1982–91) ,volumes VI and VII.
4 23.
5 4.
6 6; 10–22.
7 17–18. This would no longer be strictly true; but certainly such study is on the whole a recent phenomenon
8 18.
9 4, 18.
10 38.
11 3, 15, 107–8, 49–51.
12 See The Great Code. *The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982), 221–4, Chapter Five.
13 6.
14 26, 86, 163, 179–80.
15 6,18,86.
16 24–30, 77–8. 130–2, 158–9. 160–5.
17 27.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2003.tb06313.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

18 5, 39. For further discussion of the three phases of language. see *Words With Power* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1990), 5–13
19 29–30,80. 158.
20 8; cf, 23–34.
21 8,22.
22 8
23 4
24 See A. Plantinga, 'Rationality and Religious Belief', in Steven M. Cahn and David Shatz, ed., *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. 1982), 265.
25 3, 176–82
26 For Frye on the Virgin Birth, see 180–1, 222, 223.
27 32.
28 For Barth on scholasticism, see his *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T Clarke, 1958), 497f.
29 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I (University of Chicago Press. 1951). 54.
30 Hebrews xii 29.
31 Deuteronomy vi 21, vii 8; Psalm cxxxvi 12.
32 1 Kings xxii 6.
33 Jeremiah iv 4
34 1 Corinthians xv 5–7; John xxi 24. cf Luke i 1–2.
35 7.
36 Very roughly and summarily, God is the 'unrestricted act of understanding' that understands all possibilities, and wills those which actually obtain The Father is understanding generating a conception of the divine self, from which love flows the Son is the conception so generated evincing love together with the Father; the Holy Spirit is love as issuing from Father and Son. See B. J. F. Lonergan, *De Deo Trino* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1964) *Verbum Word and Idea in Aquinas* (Toronto: Toronto University Press 1997) This is of course in marked contrast with sinful human beings, who cannot form accurate conceptions of themselves or others because of lack of love, and *vice versa.*
37 I have written at greater length on this subject in 'Philosophy and Christianity, *Philosophy of Religion. A Guide to the Subject,* ed. Brian Davies OP (London: Cassell 1998), 236–8.
38 Northrop Frye *Words With Power* 8–13.
39 In this paragraph, I am responding to some points raised by Dr. Jeffery Donaldson, to whom I would like to express my gratitude for this, as well as other suggested improvements to this paper.
40 *Words with Power,* 34.
41 Loc. cit.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2003.tb06313.x Published online by Cambridge University Press