CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Faith, Certainty and the Unknown God

BYANTINE CHRISTIANITY TENDED TO REMOVE GOD AS FAR AS POSSIBLE
from the believer. An important Syrian writer of the early sixth century, known
as Pseudo-Dionysius, as his works were once believed to be the genuine thoughts
of the Dionysius converted by Paul, expressed his belief that 'the saved and hidden
truth about the celestial intelligences should be concealed through the inexpress-
ible and the sacred and be inaccessible to the common masses ... We have no knowl-
edge at all of God's incomprehensible and ineffable transcendence and invisibility.'
Here is the complete contrast to Eunomius' belief that the nature of God could be
grasped through reason. In Pseudo-Dionysius' theology human beings can make no
contribution to the understanding of God. This, however, leaves any theological
statements, other than apophatic ones, those which define God only by saying what
he is not, without foundation. If God is unknowable, how can one proclaim, with
any meaning, that he is one in substance with his Son or even that Jesus was his
incarnated Son?

Pseudo-Dionysius' theology is the end result of many of the processes that we have
followed in this book. It has been one of its main arguments that theological cer-
tainty is impossible to achieve. Once the emerging church had decided to integrate
the Hebrew scriptures with the gospel memories of Jesus Christ and the distinctive,
if complex, letters of Paul and proclaim them as equally the Word of God, one was
left with the challenge of finding any kind of coherent message from them. This
did not matter in the early days of Christianity because Christians were free to
form their own communities and there was no means by which an orthodoxy
could be declared, let alone enforced. The New Testament did not, as such, exist.
So different communities had their own sacred texts, their own methods of wor-
ship and made their own relationships with Judaism or pagan rituals. It is possible
that some form of united church was evolving in the third century but the turning

point was the adoption of Christianity by Constantine in 312. Constantine probably had no appreciation of the diversity of Christian belief but his patronage of the church forced him, and Theodosius I after him, to define the nature of a Christianity acceptable to the state. Church and state moved towards a symbiotic relationship and as the state became more authoritarian so it expected the church to be the same.

The consequence was the silencing of debate not only within the church but across the whole spectrum of intellectual activity. The imposition of the Nicene Trinity, with Jesus Christ elevated into the Godhead, was followed by legislation banning the alternatives, and including the harassment of heretics and the burning of their books. Pagan worship was largely suppressed in the following two centuries and Jews were pushed to the margins of society even if their religion did manage to survive.

This legislative programme was not always easy to enforce but there were important shifts in intellectual life that reinforced the challenge to learning and free debate. The traditions of reason and free enquiry which had characterised Greek thought from the sixth century BC onwards may only have reached a tiny elite but it only needs the effective use of reason by a few for major progress to be made. Only one Pythagoras, or a follower of him, was needed to produce a mathematical proof which then acted as a template for many others and so defined an academic discipline still vibrant today. Euclid (c.300 BC) consolidated it in a series of interlocking mathematical proofs which have never been disproved.

The Greeks gave priority to the exploration of the natural world and the explanation of the forces that underpinned it. They placed human beings at the centre of all things so that their thoughts on politics, history or ethics concentrated on relationships that were not subject to supernatural forces. 'Man is the measure of all things', as the philosopher Protagoras put it in the fifth century BC. The progress they made is apparent even today: every modern academic discipline, including mathematics and the sciences, is rooted in the approaches defined for it by the Greeks.

All this was already under threat with the decline of the empire. Intellectual life needs cities, schools, including those for young adults taught by philosophers, and a hunger for knowledge. Above all it needs optimism and a confidence in the possibility of progress. An empire succumbing to attack can hardly provide these but

there were specific ways in which imperial Christianity created an ethos in which free discussion was next to impossible. The subjugation of philosophical thought went hand in hand with a denigration of the natural world.

The roots of this denigration may lie in Paul's rejection of 'the wisdom of the wise' but Paul was echoed by almost every church father. Lactantius questions the point of worldly knowledge. What will the enquirer gain, for instance, from knowing where the Nile rises or the other subjects which the scientists rave about? It is not in the interests of the church, opines Basil of Caesarea, for believers to turn from the simplicity of their faith to the study of 'the essence of things'. John Chrysostom pleads with God to clear his mind of secular learning and reasoning itself, so that he is open to 'the reception of divine words'. Augustine too denies the need for any form of *curiositas* and subjects secular learning to sacred ends. While biblical texts continued to be cited and there was much talk of reliance on the scriptures, it was the abdication of any form of reasoned thought that predominated. This was an age where even the elite succumbed to credulity and the reassertion of reason in the later Middle Ages was to be a tortuous and contested process.

Any incentive for independent thought was also crushed by the threat of punishment in the afterlife. No empirical evidence for a world beyond this one could be provided; it was conceived purely in the imagination. It involved a number of quite sophisticated, if unprovable, concepts: that a 'soul' encapsulates the essence of a human being, that the soul survives in some form after the physical death of the body and can feel pain or pleasure in the supernatural world, that God is willing to inflict eternal pain on those who offend. Jesus did talk of a judgement in which believers in him would be saved and the rest cast out. The gospel of Matthew suggests that salvation depends on one's behaviour, in helping the poor, for instance, implying that any committed Christian will be saved. (Those who reject Christ have invariably been denied salvation.) By the fourth century this no longer held. Augustine elaborated on eternal suffering in hell but now even sincere Christians could be sent there if God did not extend them his grace or they held the wrong beliefs about his nature. One can think of few more committed Christians than Origen or Ulfilas, the missionary to the Goths, but the subordinationist beliefs of both now made it likely they would go to hell. In short, the nature of the afterlife recorded in the gospels, disturbing enough even in this context, was distorted by the political needs of the imperial church.

Augustine worried over how belief in orthodox doctrine could be justified and thought deeply about the concept of faith. It is, however, a difficult concept to use, largely because it has a variety of shifting meanings. The word has connotations of trust and loyalty that give it a positive tone. The ability to have faith is thus seen as a virtue and, in Christian terms, 'the faithful' are to be applauded. However, this can often lead to 'believing' in the unknown because one is told to, so that faith becomes a medium through which conformity is enforced. 'Faith in God has no merit, if human reason provides proof for it', argued Bernard of Clairvaux, the enormously influential twelfth-century Cistercian monk.

Then there is the very different use of the word as in 'articles of faith', specific items of belief that are declared impossible to prove through reason. From the historian's point of view, there is much that is arbitrary about what becomes accepted as an article and what does not. The Nicene Trinity only became an undisputed article of faith when it was imposed by Theodosius in 381. The perpetual virginity of Mary has no scriptural backing (in fact, it seems to contradict scripture) and appears to have evolved in the fourth century, notably in the works of Jerome, as the result of the increasing veneration of the Virgin as *Theotokos,* 'the bearer of God'. It is hard to find any unambiguous scriptural support or theological rationale for the resurrection of the body as a physical rather than spiritual entity at the Last Judgement, although this did not prevent Augustine and the other church fathers from fantasising on the subject.

When one reads studies of 'faith and reason' critically, one can often spot how the word 'faith' shifts between different meanings (whether the writer intends this or not) and the arguments in defence of faith lose coherence. The positive connotations of the term all too often cloak the unresolved philosophical problems inherent in the concept. This is particularly worrying when 'faith' is used as a justification of authority. Even in the twelfth century, intelligent Christians could see the intellectual stagnation that was the result. Abelard (1079-1142), the most brilliant mind of his generation, explored the issue in his *Collationes,* a dialogue between a Christian, a philosopher and a Jew. 'Human understanding increases as the years pass and one age succeeds another ... yet in faith — the area in which threat of error is most dangerous — there is no progress ... This is the sure result of the fact that one is never allowed to investigate what should be believed about what is said among one's own people, or to escape punishment for raising doubts about what is said by everyone ... People profess themselves

to believe what they admit they cannot understand, as if faith consisted in uttering words rather than in mental understanding.' The problem could not be expressed more clearly.

This book began with what was an intense emotional experience undergone by a small group of Jews in Jerusalem after their spiritual leader had been crucified by the Roman authorities in collaboration with the Jewish priesthood. That experience is irrecoverable but very soon Jesus was being conceived in formulas that used Jewish terminology, all that they had to hand, but which also transcended these formulas so as to give him a divine status. It came to be believed that God required his son to suffer so horribly so as to lift the weight of sinfulness that was perceived to be the predominant feature of humanity. The movement became sustainable, its teachings and beliefs passing from one generation to another and transferring into the spiritually complex world of the Greeks and then still further afield, surviving and adapting to different cultural contexts.

It was when attempts were made to bring order to Christianity that problems arose. First, it was impossible to find secure foundations on which to build an enduring institutional framework for a 'church'. In the end the doctrine of apostolic succession, the passing on of an original 'deposit of faith' from generation to generation of the priesthood, proved the most effective rationale for stability. This did not, of course, mean that the 'deposit of faith' was in itself a coherent body of belief. Neither scripture, nor philosophy nor tradition provided a stable base for theology. To say, with PseudoDionysius, that 'we have no knowledge at all of God's incomprehensible and ineffable transcendence and invisibility' is a recognition of this fact.

Second, boundaries could only be drawn around orthodoxy by excluding those defined as heretics. Orthodoxy and heresy were inseparable, although where the boundary between them was drawn was always arbitrary. It was a particular and unhappy feature of Christianity that the punishments decreed for those who found themselves on the wrong side of the fence were so dire. They leave a contradiction at the heart of the Christian ethical tradition. What does it mean to talk of a loving God whose forgiveness appears so limited?

None of this invalidates the experiences of Christians who found comfort in their own communities, the pattern of rituals and the sense that they at least would be saved if they conformed to the demands of their faith. One has to try and balance

the achievements of Christian communities in providing security for their members through ritual and mutual care with the loss of the lively tradition of intellectual thought which had been preserved in the Greek world over many centuries. In the short term, for many Christians, this may have been of no concern, but in the long term societies have never prospered without the rational underpinning that allows progress. This appreciation of reason went into abeyance for some centuries as the rule of faith was enforced.

This is too bleak as a conclusion. The churches have fulfilled many needs. The belief that the divine has reached out to humanity through becoming human has provided spiritual inspiration and comfort for many. Christian communities did integrate principles of mutual support into their everyday life and this provided security for many in a wider society that was often unforgiving. *Pace* Augustine, most Christians have trusted that their commitment to Christ will offer them salvation in an immaterial world beyond this one.

Every society develops rituals in which the most profound moments of human existence, including birth and death, are commemorated and Christianity has evolved sophisticated ways of doing this by linking these inevitable events to the wider Christian story. While the institution of the church seems to have gone far beyond anything envisaged by Jesus, there have been times of breakdown, at the end of the Roman empire in the west, for instance, when the church has provided a framework of administration and cohesion which has helped community life survive. Again, while it is hard to find a coherent Christian ethics from the various scriptural traditions — the Old Testament, the gospels and the letters of Paul offer very different perspectives — a commitment to ethical standards has been an essential part of Christian life. In today's world, Christianity has often provided an effective medium for challenging the corruption and oppression of elites.

The adoption of the scriptures may have been far more of a protracted process than modern Christians are led to believe but they have remained at the core of western culture ever since the fourth century. Vast amounts of resources have been transferred into the glorification of God in the arts and architecture. One has only to reflect on Dante's *Divine Comedy,* Milton's *Paradise Lost,* the works of Dostoyevsky, as well as art or music, to recognise this. Again none of this might have been imagined from the teachings of Jesus, but it is the legacy of the Christianisation of the west.

Yet while in some ways Christianity broadened human perspectives, in others it has narrowed them. One phrase has haunted me as I have been writing this book. It comes from Themistius, the pagan orator, who pleaded with the emperor Jovian for religious tolerance. He talks of how God rejoices in the diversity of human society and how he actually responds to being worshipped in a variety of ways. Such an approach became inconceivable within Christianity. Even today one senses a fear that pervades Christian worship that God will be offended if things are not done the right way. Yet it is hard to see on what grounds one could ever build a consensus on what is this 'right way'. This is surely the most important lesson any study of theological debate teaches us. While it makes sense to accept that we are naturally religious, imaginative about the spiritual possibilities of a life beyond materialism, anxious to find deeper ethical truths which will enable us to live in harmony with each other and the over-exploited planet we live on, we appear to be without the means to define the supernatural in any coherent way. One of the most enduring legacies of the Christianisation of the west is the tension between institutionalised formulations of 'God' and the deeper, more free-ranging, spiritual impulses of the human mind.