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Jeremy Taylor 1667–1967

AN ESSAY ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF

FAITH AND REASON

by *H. R. McAdoo**

We who are members of this College and who belong to this University have ample reason to remember with gratitude one whose chief fame belongs to a wider sphere and whose importance has been increasingly recognised, Bishop Jeremy Taylor, who was appointed Vice-Chancellor in 1660 by the Duke of Ormonde, the then Chancellor of the University.

Admitted to this office in 1661, Taylor, in his own words, found 'all things in perfect disorder'. 'There is indeed a heap of men and boys', he wrote, 'but no body of a college, no one member, either fellow or scholar, having any legal title to his place but thrust in by tyranny or chance.'¹ He set to work, ably seconded by the new provost, Thomas Seele, the first of our own graduates to attain the dignity, and they worked so effectively that Taylor's most recent biographer, C. J. Stranks (1952)² wrote of them both: 'They firmly and finally set Trinity College on its feet.'³

We are in debt to our great Restoration Vice-Chancellor. Yet what he did for the College, vital as it was, shed less lustre on Trinity than what he did elsewhere, for he is one of the outstanding figures of the seventeenth century, an age which was so liberally endowed with greatness in so many spheres.

He was one of whom each century, including his own and ours, has been aware. As theologian, devotional writer, and prose stylist, his influence has been as deep as it has been wide. He possessed that indefinable original quality which in itself ensured that he was never without a following. Paul Elmen has brought out this point in a study which shows the number of editions through which Taylor's work passed during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁴ The twentieth century has been equally aware of him. In the past

* Based on the Trinity Monday Memorial Discourse, 1967.

The notes begin on p. 29.

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twenty years, perhaps a dozen books have been published which have been entirely about him or else very much concerned with him and his work.⁵ He is one of the leading figures in another book, just published, *The rise of moralism* by C. A. Allison, and I know of two books on Taylor which are at present in the making.

His importance as a devotional writer whose books had a very large circulation, his pioneer work as a moral theologian, his general theological writings, and his preaching, make him one of the great figures in the history of Anglicanism and of religion in the seventeenth century. The liveliness of his mind, the vividness of his style, the rich imagery and the essentially poetical quality of his prose, the wisdom with which he assessed human experience, the variety of subjects on which he wrote, reveal a candid, devout and courageous man who loved and served his Church at great cost to himself.

Life was not easy for Jeremy Taylor who was twice imprisoned for his faith and dispossessed; and who lived with uncertainty as his one sure companion during the Commonwealth. He suffered for his Church's sake at the hands of its enemies, and he suffered at the hands of its friends for what they considered to be his unorthodox views.

My object however, is not to evaluate his theological output nor to assess the nature of his impact on the way in which ordinary people practised their religion as Anglicans. Nor is it to study him biographically. I would rather address myself to a different question in respect of Jeremy Taylor. Has Jeremy Taylor a message for today?

It is the Christian belief that 'Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever', the true contemporary of every age, and that His mystical body by its preaching and by its life has as much to say to those who will listen and belong now, as it had to those who listened and belonged three centuries ago. But what of the mode of its expression, what about the form of his theology? Given our contemporary difficulties in communication, is there any likelihood of Jeremy Taylor being intelligible to or significant for the twentieth century? Does he say true things in a way which helps other centuries to grasp some aspect, some facet, of the truth of things? Is he able in fact to communicate across the intervening years? Can he tell people things about themselves, about the interaction of purpose and of circumstances in human affairs, about God and man, that have cogency for this century as well as for his own? Has he insights of a kind which people recognise to be valid so that they say 'That's true. That's

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real', and has he an approach to the whole picture of the human situation which makes for a theology which would be viable today? or is his general view of things meaningless to people in the modern situation?

It is a large question, and as is the case with such questions, anyone who is rash enough to attempt to look at it in the short space of a lecture is liable to answer what may be the wrong parts of it for some people. For others, it may well be that the attempt itself is to be regarded as a waste of time. They would hold that the best thing which can happen to theology is that it should be obliged to make a clean sweep, to start from scratch, which means getting inside the mind of the twentieth century and thinking out from there, acquiring and using an altogether new idiom. Whether this project is actually translatable into terms of a practical plan of action, or whether it sounds more stimulating than it is, one cannot help having more than a little sympathy with it, arising as it does from the sense of urgency and from the desire to make effective contact. A radical approach may well be what is needed in theology.

THE RADICAL QUALITY IN TAYLOR'S THEOLOGY

There is however, as the Bishop of Woolwich has pointed out, a difference between being a radical and being a revolutionary. Jeremy Taylor was regarded as a dangerous radical in his own day by many, including the then Archbishop of Canterbury, because he withstood the pressure of a widely-accepted doctrine which he believed, and was prepared to show, was no part of 'the deposit of faith'. Dr Robinson writes: 'The revolutionary can be an "outsider" to the structure which he would see collapse: indeed he must set himself outside it. But the radical goes to the roots of his own tradition. He must love it . . . the true radical is and must be a man of roots.'⁶ Whatever else Taylor was, he was a man of roots, wholly integrated in Anglicanism. To commemorate the tercentenary of Taylor's death may be merely of historical interest, a filial duty; it could also be part of a genuine effort to make a reappraisal of what Taylor tried to say.

It is true that this century is not disposed to think first, or perhaps at all, in terms of revelation.⁷ Does this then put Taylor's theology out of court? In fact, while accepting what used to be called revealed religion, namely, the full doctrine of the Creeds, Taylor sees no inconsistency in granting at the same time freedom to reason, for by it all truth is recognised and apprehended. His attitude to reason is

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in fact vital to his whole theological approach. While the seventeenth century was capable of combining acceptance and questioning, faith and reason, in a way that may seem strange to moderns but is not necessarily as naive as it looks, Taylor himself was not of a temperament which is content with a simplified and ready-made blue-print of experience. He was a cultivated man, of imagination, human sympathy and intelligence, who found in Anglicanism that liberal orthodoxy which satisfied him and gave a centre to his life in times of danger and personal difficulty. He himself saw religion as much in terms of reason and devotion and practice as in terms of revealed truth. The fact is that he saw all these and more as making up the whole, each complementing the other, for his was not a slot-machine theology.

It may be, as was said a few years ago in *Soundings*, that this 'is a time for making soundings, not charts or maps'.⁸ In this respect, there is a difference between Taylor's day and our own, in that the seventeenth century regarded a large area of religious belief and of human experience as being securely charted. While we would be mistaken if we thought that the seventeenth century saw no question marks opposite any sections of this, it is true that there were, or were thought to be, more basic certainties then than now. This is the point at which someone will say—Yes, here is the reason why Taylor cannot talk meaningfully to us. His was a background of belief, and ours is largely one of unbelief. At any rate, ours is a world where the tests are empiric ones. Here, the answer must be made, and to some it will be a hard saying, that there never was a time when religion did not require the further step of faith, an act not only of the mind but a movement of the whole personality involving the will and the feelings as well as the intellect. Yet the great theologians of all schools have asserted that this act could not be against reason, nor could this movement be away from it. What is of faith cannot be against a truth of the natural reason, but it may be beyond it, a continuing on from it. 'That is not revealed', says Whichcote, 'which is not made intelligible', and conversely, 'we must have a reason for that which we believe above our reason.'⁹

TAYLOR'S ATTITUDE TO AN IMPASSE BETWEEN REASON AND REVELATION

Taylor said a good deal on this subject himself, and some of it has a modern ring, not least his refusal to believe that there is a

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ready-made answer to the problem arising from the relationship of faith and reason. As much as anyone immersed in the twentieth-century situation, he feels compelled to face the fact that this apparently final *impasse* can be reached 'when reason and revelation seem to disagree'. Then let us admit it without intellectual pride, says Taylor: 'if we cannot quit our reason or satisfy it, let us carry ourselves with modesty'.¹⁰ This acknowledgment that all the answers are not known is candid. The Bishop of Woolwich, discussing what is in effect precisely this *impasse*, maintains that 'there is an agnosticism which releases', while holding that the function (for the present, at any rate) of fundamental doctrines is to be held on to as 'limiting concepts' for they are safeguards of an existential relationship of man 'to God in Christ'.¹¹ Is this to say more than Taylor does? The answer is probably 'No' essentially, but 'Yes' in terms of the overtones and implications acquired by the situation of theology now as compared with its situation in the seventeenth century. The truth is that Taylor can afford agnosticism about this or that, because his acceptance of fundamental doctrines, his conviction of their relevance to life, his sacramental piety and practical devotion, form a living centre for his thought.

How useful is this today? Some would hold that it is of no use, that the depths of unbelief must first be plumbed if the theologian is to stand alongside of modern man and share the reality of his situation. 'For I believe there is an important sense in which a person who is fully a man of our times *must*—or, at any rate, *may*—be an atheist before he can be a Christian.'¹² It is not just a slick rejoinder to say that the doctor need not seek to catch pneumonia as a necessary preliminary to curing it. Doubtless, if he has had it, his understanding of the complaint may be increased, and almost certainly, his understanding of the patient is likely to be deepened. Is it really clear how the Bishop's suggestion will help? Many have come from unbelief to faith, and it would be shortsighted in the extreme to ignore Dr Robinson's conviction that 'faith . . . for increasing numbers of our contemporaries will only be possible through, and out on the other side of, the atheist critique'.¹³ This may well be a true diagnosis, but it is also true that the *impasse* still remains unaltered for those who cannot believe, no matter how many others have accepted atheism and then emerged through and from it into the orbit of belief. Here is the core of the situation—that, despite all the talk about 'the death of God' and the abolition of 'religion', the modern radical theologian stands in the same relation

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to those outside the Church as did the seventeenth-century theologian, for he is speaking to them from a centre of faith. Anyone who reads the moving second chapter of *The new reformation* sees this clearly and is likely to agree that this is indeed the 'way in' as far as the modern situation is concerned.

All that is suggested in this lecture is that, no matter how dramatic the terminology used today and in spite of the very valuable insights of the radical theologians, such as those referred to, the *impasse* remains because modern theology *believes*—otherwise, it would not be theology. 'Reason and revelation seem to disagree', as Jeremy Taylor said. Is the only hope of a practical solution to be found in the endeavour to show that the antithesis between faith and reason is not the clear-cut affair that it is often suggested to be? Is a rehabilitated natural theology the way in, as is suggested in the first chapter of *Soundings*?

At any rate, this is the sort of approach to the problem which Taylor made, and if the analysis of the position corresponds to the facts, then basically Taylor can talk in a meaningful way to another century. It is not the point of this lecture to claim that Jeremy Taylor anticipated the findings of radical theology, but to maintain that what he said about basic problems may be equally cogent, and that his theological method may be found to be far from irrelevant to the contemporary situation.

Taylor took the *impasse* seriously, for he is the last man to pretend that reason can be safely ignored. He recognises the problem, and tries to come at it by degrees, clearing up what he regards as misstatements as he goes. For some people, Taylor says, the solution is to jettison what they cannot explain. When 'some articles which are said to be of faith, cannot be made to appear consonant to their reason, they stick to this, and let that go'.¹⁴ Others go to the opposite extreme, and while agreeing that reason is the proper guide in human affairs, deny that it can be of use in religion: 'Here we are to believe, not to dispute.' In his view both sides show misstatement and misunderstanding, while each has a point which corresponds in part to an aspect of the real situation, and one ought to try to discover 'what part of truth each aims at, and join them both in practice'.¹⁵ In his own day there were some who would not grant that the compromise was a legitimate one. For them, Scripture was the authoritative rule and what could not square with it was untrue, and understanding was the fruit of obedience. Paradoxically, Taylor pointed out, this was the ultimate position both of those who relied

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on individual guidance and of those who relied on the magisterium of the teaching Church. Yet another type of approach 'offers to prove what he says, but desires not his arguments to be examined by reason, upon pretence that he urges Scripture . . . thus . . . the systems of divinity rely upon a certain number of propositions from generation to generation, and the scholar shall be no wiser than his master for ever; because he is taught to examine the doctrines of his master by his master's arguments, and by no other.'¹⁶ What this amounts to, in Taylor's view, is that these three approaches offer no solution, since they allow people 'to be Christian' only on the condition that they 'lay aside reason'.¹⁷

This is no museum-piece theology, for both Taylor's essential orthodoxy and his near-modernity are constantly breaking surface in his writings no matter how much those writings are coloured by the century of their origin. While it would be fair to say that the atmosphere of theological debate in the seventeenth century was largely impregnated by acceptance, just as that of the present day is imbued with the opposite, nevertheless Taylor and others of his contemporaries saw the question marks. For him, and one thinks also of his controversial writings on original sin, theology is not 'simply a debate between a closed circle of mandarins within the agreed terms of their system'.¹⁸ In the passages quoted Taylor is saying that neither a magisterial authority, nor unaided individualism, nor a theology of system, has any possibility of beginning to cope with this fact of human experience, the impact on each other of faith and reason. As he understands it, an authority which cannot be freely interrogated cannot be freely accepted, and a subjective view is ultimately valid only for him who holds it. In this latter connection, the swing to existentialist modes of thinking constitutes something of a temptation for modern theology to upset the balance as between objective and subjective. As one ponders the reconstituting of theological method for this age of incessant movement, the comment of John Lawrence is constructive criticism:

A very important school of modern theology insists on the here and now. It asks, 'Is this true for me?' This existential approach is valid, so far as it goes. It is biblical and even Johannine, but it does not, by itself, lead to the fulness of truth. I cannot in the end believe that a thing is true 'for me' unless it is true for all men. The more traditional theology of propositions goes to the opposite extreme. It considers things abstractly, in their essences, and is sometimes called 'essentialist'. Its truths are universal but they may not come home to me here and now. Neither

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essentialist nor existential theology is sufficient by itself for the plight of humanity. Both enable us to see the truth which would otherwise be inaccessible but both need to be seen in the light of a theology which provides the link between that which is 'true for me' and that which was from the beginning. This will be a theology of process but it has little or no connection with the 'process theology' that stems from Whitehead.¹⁹

What is 'true for me' must be true for all men. This is the kind of basic thought which centres on the *impasse*. It reflects that essential internal balance between what is given and what is appropriated by experience: 'It was there from the beginning; we have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes; we looked upon it, and felt it with our own hands; and it is of this we tell. Our theme is the word of life.' This is part of Anglican theological method, too, with its appeal to what Paget was bold enough to call the unconflicting rights of Scripture, reason and antiquity. Taylor was a convinced exponent of that method in his writings, and it may well be that it is more capable of coping with what Lawrence called the plight of humanity, than a theology which destroys this equilibrium and yet remains in essentially the same position, namely of belief, *vis-à-vis* those who are on the fringe or outside. Is Taylor right after all in seeing the attempt to reconcile faith and reason as the true kernel of the nut?

TAYLOR'S VIEW OF THE CONSONANCE OF FAITH AND REASON

Whether his handling of it is the right way or the wrong way for this century, it seems inescapable that theology's task is to attempt to show a consonance between faith and reason, and then to demonstrate the relevance of what is shown in the life and practice of the Church. The Bishop of Woolwich agrees that the primary task of theology and of the Church in this generation is to make it possible for men to see the reality of the Incarnation—'to see before they can believe'.²⁰ The value of this part of his book, and of what the new theology generally is saying in this connection, is great. He is convinced that if any text proves central to the new Reformation it will be *John* 14.9, 'He who has seen me has seen the Father.' More than this (may it not be added?), it is central to the whole situation. William Temple said the same thing to R. A. Knox in 1913 in a letter: 'The whole of my theology is an attempt to understand and to verify the words: "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father"'.²¹

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This is indeed the centre, and the approach to it by way of 'the gracious neighbour' may well be a singularly important contribution for our times. But in the end, the 'how' of the Incarnation is vital, for on the understanding of it depends the result—a New Testament Christology such as that of *Colossians* 1.17 (which incidentally Dr Robinson asserts),²² or a diminished Christology, or none at all. Temple saw very well where the nub was, as is evidenced by his assertion that the whole of his theology consisted in 'an attempt to *understand* and to *verify* the words'. It is in fact at this centre that faith and reason must come into dialogue. This is inescapable if theology is to be the Interpreter's House, and Jeremy Taylor saw it. How he saw the problem, and the fact that he saw it, entitle him to a hearing at any time. No matter what inadequacies his way of seeing it may reveal from the point of view of the present situation, he was aware of the underlying difficulties which are today's difficulties in another setting.

Inadequacies are not confined to seventeenth-century theologians, as their modern counterparts of every school would most certainly be the first to admit. Many would feel it to be a fair criticism of modern radical theology that its approach is somehow fragmentary—it seems to find difficulty in looking at the wholeness of theological method and therefore in mounting an effective critique. Without wishing to discount the rôle of prophecy in any theology speaking to the condition of its times, it must be able at the same time to do something more. Many would also agree to a curious sense of frustration in that modern radical theology seems constantly to take away with one hand what it offers with the other. It makes telling analyses and advances 'exciting' concepts, but the 'how' and the suggestions for implementation are not to be found.

How does Taylor fare under this sort of criticism, allowing for the natural dissimilarities of setting and situation?

It is surely more than coincidence that, in the course of a lengthy digression on the relation of faith and reason, Taylor should comment on that verse from *I John* already referred to, in respect of its bearing on subjective experience, 'what is true for me'. He is saying explicitly that a large part of religion is 'seeing is believing'. Granted that the Bishop of Woolwich is maintaining (and again the diagnosis seems inescapably accurate) that if the Church is really to get into effective communication with the twentieth century, then it will have to be by means of an inductive rather than a deductive theology:²³

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granted that Taylor's situation made a combination of *both* methods acceptable; yet in the end modern theology and seventeenth-century theology are endeavouring to cope with the same point since they are both confronting the same problem and the differences are situational and arise from the prevalent climate in each period rather than from the problem itself.

Taylor writes: 'There are some things in reason which are certainly true, and some things which reason does infallibly condemn . . . and St John's argument was certain, "That which we have seen with our eyes, and heard with our ears, and which our hands have handled of the Word of life, that we preach", that is, we are to believe what we see and hear and feel; and as this is true in the whole of religion, so it is true in every article of it.'²⁴ The point then as far as this essay is concerned is to stress the fact that Taylor, and seventeenth-century theology generally, attempt to deal with basic concerns which were not as far below the surface three centuries ago as may sometimes be supposed. What Taylor says on these matters may not be definitive, but it is not irrelevant to the present position.

Taylor's line appears to be that faith and reason are not opposites, but that faith includes reason and continues on from it, demanding an extra step but never requiring something which is against reason. How optimistic is this? From the standpoint of the contemporary scene, what is disappointing is that he seems to allow more authority to faith than would be considered warranted now. It may well be, however, that how he arrives is more valuable than where he arrives.

TAYLOR'S DISTINCTION BETWEEN WHAT IS AGAINST AND WHAT IS BEYOND REASON

Fundamental to his position is the distinction between what is against reason and what is beyond reason, a step further: 'For it is to be considered, whatsoever is above our understanding, is not against it: *supra and secundum may consist together in several degrees.*'²⁵ This, and its implications, lie behind all that Taylor has to say about the problem.

He argues that anything which is directly against the understanding cannot be part of revealed truth. The view he opposes would set up an intolerable dichotomy, for truth is one. In fact, this is the second basic element in his approach, that 'one truth cannot be against another', something that the Cambridge Platonists who

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influenced Taylor were never tired of emphasising: 'for all reason, and all right, and all truth, and all faith, and all commandments . . . partake of this unity and simplicity',²⁶

If right reason puts its seal to something, then it must be believed and its opposite cannot be claimed as revealed truth.²⁷ Seeing is believing in this connection, so that certain things, fundamental principles or contradictions, for example are self-evidently true or untrue as the case may be. On the other hand, not to understand the how and the why in a given instance, does not mean that the thing itself is therefore excluded from the category of reason.

In other words, according to Taylor, belief in God has the support of right reason and, because of this, faith does not need to have an advance blueprint of the detailed inner workings of every situation, nor would this necessarily be of any help, for human reason is 'below many of the works, and below all the power of God'.²⁸

This is not an evasion, and it corresponds to the experience of many in every age whose practice it has been to commit themselves to God for what they do not know because of what in their experience they do know of Him of whose existence they have been convinced by reason. Yet it does raise the question, so pressing for the twentieth century, of how seriously Taylor took atheism.

Taylor's aside that 'reason lends legs to faith' gives essentially his line of direction, but the following paragraph declares 'concerning the new atheists that pretend to wit, it is not their reason, but their want of reason, that makes them such; for if either they had more learning, or did believe themselves to have less, they could never be atheists'.²⁹ From the point of view of today when theology is trying to build a bridge to reach those who have lost or never found faith, this is not very promising. It is Austin Farrer's criticism of this kind of approach that 'it involves us in accusing all well-informed atheists either of mental imbecility or of intellectual dishonesty, or of both'.³⁰

Is this the point at which the modern critic can justifiably say of Taylor and his period, 'This is museum-piece theology so far as our situation is concerned'?

Farrer is saying that not only must reason be there and at work from the start examining the evidence, but faith must be there also, in the shape of a readiness to accept the evidence, an initial persuasion, a subjective condition favourable to the reception of the evidence. 'The readiness to accept that 'more' will be faith, or the effect of faith.' But how does this differ from what Taylor is saying about faith being the further step from reason?

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By way of further comparison, we might add a short passage from *Vindications* in which Ronald Preston is saying that discussions between Christians and non-Christians may range widely but in the end they reduce themselves to the uncovering of certain 'basic unprovable and unfalsifiable presuppositions'. He then continues: 'How does one come to change presuppositions? For of course people do change them. Arguments may remove ignorance and misconceptions, but we have seen that in the last resort neither faith nor scepticism can rest on a logical demonstration. Yet this does not mean that the choice of presuppositions is purely arbitrary . . . it depends on a general judgment of what is plausible, what is fitting, in the light of one's total experience of life. . . . We learn what the presuppositions suppose by being initiated into the attitude of life to which they lead.'³¹

Are not these three theologians saying much the same thing in different ways? And is not reason there from the start in Farrer's initial persuasion, in Taylor's reason leading us into such proportions of faith as it can, and in Preston's presupposition which depends on a general judgment of what is plausible in the light of experience?

It is quite true that Taylor starts out from what Farrer calls the scholastic position, although it is fair to add that there is nothing high and dry about his handling of it. In fact, Farrer's persuasion maintaining itself against rival persuasions is in the following passage as well as the traditional view of faith. Having asserted that there are three ways of knowing, noesis, dianoesis and pistis, and that these are at work in every science, Taylor concludes that reason enters into the analysis of any subject by principles proper to the enquiry, ' . . . and faith and reason are not opposed at all. Faith and natural reason are several things, and arithmetical and moral reasons are as differing, but it is reason that carries me to objects of faith, and faith is my reason so disposed, so used, so instructed'.

The result of this, he continues, is 'that into the greatest mysteriousness of our religion, and the deepest articles of faith, we enter by our reason: *not that we can prove every one of them by natural reason; for to say that, were as vain, as to say that we ought to prove them by arithmetic or rules of music; but whosoever believes wisely and not my chance, enters into his faith by the hand of reason; that is, he hath causes and reasons why he believes, indeed not wisely, but for some reason or other he does it*'. What is this but initial persuasion? If we are persuaded, says Farrer, some element of faith is there. This faith, Taylor holds, is to assent to a proposition for a reason drawn 'a testimonio', and it is just as much an act of the

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reason as to assent to a proposition for a reason drawn from the nature of things. This is to speak of faith 'formally in its proper and natural capacity'.

But what of faith taken 'materially' and as an 'infused habit'? Then, says Taylor, 'there is something more in it than this'. So considered, 'faith is a vital principle, a magazine of secret truths' which we could never have found out by that natural reason which is born with us and grows with us through our experience of life. This is *Saving belief*, to use the title of Farrer's book, and about it Taylor says much that the twentieth-century book says—though in a way which would appeal more to his own time. Both think in terms (among other things, of course) of transcendence and of revelation—and the absence of these from radical theology is why it never seems to get off the ground.

'Now here', continues Taylor, 'is the close and secret of the question, whether or no faith, in this sense, and materially taken, be contrary to our worldly and natural reason,—or whether is any or all the propositions of faith to be exacted, interpreted and understood, according to this reason materially taken?' Or, to put it another way, Taylor asks, Is not the reason which we properly follow in science, philosophy or art, sometimes contrary to faith, and then, which are we to follow? His final question here is, Can anything which is contrary to right reason be an article of faith in any sense?³²

Taylor does not claim to have a neat solution. His candour and his readiness to say 'I do not know' are surely typical of that 'agnosticism which releases', to use the Bishop of Woolwich's phrase. Taylor will say things like 'Beyond this we can do no more'³³ and in fact this quality is no new arrival and was always there in Anglican theology. We meet it in John Hales who, in an atmosphere of dogmatic system, recommended theologians to deal in 'more maybes and peradventures'³⁴ and who wrote 'It shall well befit our Christian modesty to participate somewhat of the sceptic . . . till the remainder of our knowledge be supplied. . . .'³⁵ It is as well to remind ourselves that seventeenth-century theology was not as self-assured as some today seem to think despite the fact that it operated in a climate of greater belief, and that the theologians of the time found themselves obliged to grapple with the same radical questions which face their modern counterparts. It is perhaps necessary to emphasise this because many people today who are not theologians assume that theological honesty arrived with the publication of *Honest to God*. It is well that

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that publication made them recognise the place of candour and honesty so long as they realise that the theologian with no skeleton in his cupboard has always been there, hard-pressed at times, no doubt, but no twentieth-century phenomenon.

When Taylor looked at this root problem of faith and reason, he laid down certain guide-lines. The first of these guiding lines, as Taylor see it, is that human reason is ‘not the affirmative or positive measure of things divine, or of articles and mysteries of faith’.³⁶

The burden of his argument here is that people ‘who conclude that this was not thus, because they know not how it can be thus, are highly to be reprov’d for their excess in the inquiries of reason, not where she is a competent judge, but where she is not competently instructed’.³⁷ This is certainly not a line which will appeal to our pragmatic age which asks first how a thing works. Yet, in the way he arrives at the conclusion Taylor is more convincing. The twentieth century will not like it when he says that until God gives man reasons for some things, man can only ‘be still and silent, admiring the secret, and adoring the wisdom, and expecting till the curtain be drawn’.³⁸ But, says Taylor, is it a convincing argument to say that a thing is not because we cannot see the reason for it? ‘There is a “ragione di stato”, and a “ragione di regno”, and a “ragione di cielo”, after which none but fools will inquire, and none but the humble shall ever find.’³⁹

The second guide-line offered by Taylor is that human reason is a right judge when it is truly informed, ‘but in many things she knows nothing but the face of the article’.⁴⁰ What this amounts to is that ‘we can see what, but not why; and what we do see, is the least part of that which does not appear’. He then brings in the question—and again this will not be popular today—of the obedience of the understanding: ‘in these cases our understanding is to submit, and wholly to be obedient, but not to inquire further’.

He concludes that because a thing is above our understanding it does not follow that it is therefore to be suspected or disbelieved. Nor, if a thing is against Scripture and appears to be agreeable to reason, should it be accepted without a full investigation?⁴¹

Now, it may well be said that all this talk of the obedience of the understanding is just the medieval in Taylor gaining the upper hand, and that this simply puts him out of court so far as the situation of the twentieth century is concerned. The modern critic might allege that, if the understanding must bow out when a difficulty arises, then

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Taylor is really saying that faith is believing what you know can't be true.

Surprisingly—at first sight—this is not so at all, and Taylor's comment is in fact entirely modern, for he says that a man must first be sure that it is God, not just some human opinion, to whom the understanding submits. This, of course, opens up the whole debate, and Taylor spells it out in full in a passage which I shall quote. I quote the passage in full because in it Taylor makes clear the limitations of intellectual obedience as he understands it :

I answer, that we must submit our understanding to God, is very true, but that is only when God speaks. But because we heard him not, and are only told that God did speak, our reason must examine whether it be fit to believe them that tell us so, . . . we must judge and discern the sayings of God, from the pretences of men; and how that can be done without using our reason in the inquiries of religion, is not yet discovered.⁴²

This might well be Taylor's *envoi* on the subject, but he is not content to leave with a general statement hanging in mid-air after his departure. He gives a few particulars by way of clarification. We may not submit our understanding to man 'unless he hath authority from reason or religion to command our conformity'.⁴³ Things which claim the support of reason and have acquired a fictitious authority 'make no part of our religion'.⁴⁴ He makes no bones about recommending suspended judgment in certain circumstances, and he rejects any ultimate compulsion of the understanding. 'When reason and revelation seem to disagree . . . if right or sufficient reason can persuade us that this is not a revelation, well and good, . . . and if we cannot quit our reason or satisfy it, let us carry ourselves with modesty, and confess the revelation, though with profession of our ignorance and unskillfulness to reconcile the two litigants.'⁴⁵ Whatever is plainly told us, we should obey, not measuring it by the rules of fallible philosophy or speculation. We should make a general rule never to do violence to Scripture, so 'that when all things are equal, we rather prefer the pretence of revelation, than the pretences of reason, for the reverence of that and the suspicion of this. Beyond this we can do no more'.⁴⁶

All this has arisen from Taylor's third guide-line, that 'whatsoever is contradictory to right reason, is at no hand to be admitted as a mystery of faith'. One might spend time on this profitably, especially on the distinction he makes between the mysterious in Christian dogma—mysterious in the sense of uncomprehended rather than

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incomprehensible ('not to be comprehended by our dark and less instructed reason, but yet not impossible to be believed')—and what he terms human appendages to dogma. But this seems to be the point to leave Taylor's analysis of this fundamental question.

If this analysis has served to do nothing more than give a theological perspective it has not been entirely useless. If it has shown that seventeenth-century theology confronted the pressing problems which Anglican theology faces in the twentieth-century then it may give us a truer picture of Anglicanism in the round. If it indicates to us that, while there are obvious advances in many fields of theology today as compared with Taylor's time, our forbears saw the nub of the question as clearly as we do,—then to keep Taylor's tercentenary has point. The climate of the two ages is utterly dissimilar and therefore we must frame the answers in our own style, not in Jeremy Taylor's, but as he would have valued some of our modern insights, we can profit by his treatment too, and learning by his mistakes, make our own, not his. So, three centuries afterwards, we remember one who loved and worked for what he called 'the little but excellent University of Dublin'.⁴⁷

Notes

1. Carte MSS. fol. ss. Quoted in C. J. Stranks's *The life and writings of Jeremy Taylor* (1952).

2. Vide no. 1, *supra*.

3. *Op. cit.*, p. 229.

4. Paul Elmen, 'The fame of Jeremy Taylor', *Anglican Theological Review*, vol. xlv, no. 4, p. 389.

5. E.g., H. R. McAdoo, *The structure of Caroline moral theology* (1948); C. J. Stranks, cited above; *English casuistical divinity during the 17th century, with special reference to Jeremy Taylor*, T. Wood (1952); F. R. Bolton's *The Caroline tradition of the Church of Ireland, with special reference to Jeremy Taylor* (1952); *The piety of Jeremy Taylor* (1960), H. T. Hughes; *The spirit of Anglicanism*, H. R. McAdoo (1965).

6. *The new reformation*, p. 79.

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7. Ibid., p. 9.
8. A. R. Vidler (ed.), *Soundings: essays concerning Christian understanding* (Cambridge, 1962).
9. Whichcote's *Aphorisms*, 1168, 771.
10. *Ductor dubitantium*, Heber (ed.), *Works*, vol. xi, p. 462.
11. *The new reformation*, p. 24.
12. Op. cit., appendix 1, p. 106.
13. Ibid.
14. Op. cit., p. 434.
15. Ibid.
16. Op. cit., p. 439.
17. Ibid.
18. *The new reformation*, p. 22.
19. *Frontier* (Summer 1965), ii vol. 8, p. 84.
20. Op. cit., p. 37.
21. F. A. Iremonger, *William Temple*, p. 155.
22. Op. cit., p. 13.
23. Op. cit., p. 37: 'It has been a deductive rather than an inductive approach, presenting them from the start with the answers they must accept if they are to believe. They have not been called to work out the sum for themselves, to discover the authority *in* the experience, the revelation *in* the relationship, as the first disciples had to before, and again after, the Resurrection. Men of our time, trained in an empirical, scientific discipline, are requiring again to see before they can believe.'
24. *Ductor dubitantium*, chap. ii, rule iii, is the relevant section. The reference is to para. 47: R. Heber (ed.), *Works*, vol. xi, p. 453.
25. Op. cit., para 46.
26. Ibid., para. 49.
27. Ibid., para. 47.
28. Ibid., para. 48.
29. Ibid., para. 66.
30. Austin Farrer, *Saving belief: a discussion of essentials*, p. 16.
31. Anthony Hanson (ed.), *Vindications*, 1966, pp. 23-24.
32. Op. cit., paras 24, 25, 26.
33. Ibid., para. 63.
34. *Golden remains of the ever memorable Mr John Hales*, p. 7.
35. Ibid., p. 31.
36. Op. cit., para. 27.
37. Ibid., para. 29.
38. Ibid., para. 27.
39. Ibid., para. 27.
40. Ibid., para. 30.
41. Ibid., para. 31.
42. Ibid., para. 58.
43. Ibid., para. 59.
44. Ibid., para. 60.
45. Ibid., para. 61.
46. Ibid., para. 63.
47. Preface to London edition of his *University sermon*, 1661.