

On the mysteria stricte dicta

1. I have generally resisted the traditional teaching according to which certain *mysteria stricte dicta*—specifically, trinity, incarnation, and grace—are beyond the competence of human experience and reason to validate as credible. This I have done because I do not want to accept anything as credible simply on authority.

2. But if it belongs to the very nature of a religion that there should be something particular and insofar arbitrary about it; and if all experiences of the particular are in the nature of the case beyond the competence of common human experience and reason simply as such, it would seem that I need to reconsider my accustomed resistance.

3. It belongs to a religion that it should be a particular and insofar arbitrary re-presentation of a universal possibility of understanding human existence. The particularity of the re-presentation is as essential to the religion as is the universality of the possibility of understanding. But then there will be that about any religion whose truth cannot be validated simply by common human experience and reason without particular historical experience and critical reflection thereon.

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1. That the explicit primal ontic source authorizing authentic existence is one named "Jesus" could not possibly be known by common human experience and reason simply as such, but only by human experience and reason qualified by particular historical experience of the one so named.

2. Similarly, that the implicit primal ontic source authorizing authentic existence is the One named "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" also could not possibly be known by

common human experience simply as such, but only by human experience and reason qualified by the same particular historical experience of Jesus.

3. For these reasons, there is a certain point to the traditional teaching concerning the *mysteria stricte dicta* of incarnation and trinity. And it seems clear that the same point can be made with respect to grace insofar as it is, properly, "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ"; for it, too, could not possibly be known by common human experience and reason simply as such, unqualified by particular historical experience of Jesus and critical reflection thereon.

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1. I have claimed that "any properly existential assertion, including any assertion of Christian faith, both implies and, to an extent, is implied by the truth of certain properly metaphysical assertions" (*Doing Theology Today*: 254). But to what extent, exactly, is any true existential assertion of Christian faith implied by the truth of certain properly metaphysical assertions?

2. It is implied to the extent that any assertion of Christian faith implies a certain answer to the existential question about the meaning of ultimate reality for us. If, then, certain properly metaphysical assertions are true, because they correctly describe the necessary conditions of the possibility of our own existence and all existence—and in this sense describe the structure of ultimate reality in itself—a certain answer to the existential question of the meaning of ultimate reality for us must also be true. What answer? The answer that takes account of the structure of ultimate reality in itself as thus described. To the extent, then, that any assertion of Christian faith implies the same answer, to the same extent this assertion is itself implied by the truth of certain properly metaphysical assertions.

3. Thus, if any assertion of Christian faith implies that we can and should exist in radical freedom from the past and for the future, it is itself implied by the truth of certain properly metaphysical assertions that imply that we can and should exist in exactly the same way. To take a specific example: the assertion, "Jesus is the Christ," implies, arguably, that we can and should exist in radical freedom from the past and for the future. To the extent that existing in this way is also implied by certain properly metaphysical assertions that are true, to the same extent the assertion, "Jesus is the Christ," is also implied by these same properly metaphysical assertions.

4. This is not to say, however, that the assertion, "Jesus is the Christ," is itself and as such implied by the truth of certain properly metaphysical assertions. On the contrary, because or insofar as this assertion of faith includes a historical as well as an existential moment, it neither is nor could be implied by the truth of any properly metaphysical assertions. The most that could be implied by the truth of any such assertions is the concept of the true re-presentation of the answer to the existential question necessarily implied by these same assertions. But that this concept is truly applied to a particular historical figure or event, or that it can be truly applied to any historical figure or event at all, neither is nor could be implied simply by the truth of any properly metaphysical assertions. This, presumably, is a legitimate motive in the traditional teaching according to which there are certain *mysteria stricte dicta* that are inaccessible to common human experience and reason simply as such.

5. The same point can be made, *mutatis mutandis*, by considering the existential assertion, "God is strictly ultimate reality." This assertion, also, implies a certain answer to the existential question. To the extent that this answer is the same answer that is implied by the truth of certain properly metaphysical assertions, to the same extent this existential assertion is implied by these properly metaphysical assertions. But, once again, this is not to say that the assertion, "God is strictly ultimate reality," is itself and as such implied by the truth of certain properly metaphysical assertions. Insofar as talk about "God," not unlike talk about "Jesus," includes a historical as well as an existential

moment, it neither is nor could be implied by the truth of any properly metaphysical assertions.

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1. According to Bultmann, the only reply that can be given to someone who asks for a criterion of the truth of the witness of faith is to show that this witness re-presents to us our two basic possibilities of self-understanding, thereby forcing us to decide for either one or the other (*GV*, 1: 284).

2. In principle, this seems to me to be correct; for beyond establishing that the self-understanding—or understanding of existence, of self, others, and the whole—implied by faithful acceptance of the witness of faith is our authentic possibility, given the structure of our existence as such, there's nothing else that theology could do to establish the credibility of this witness.

3. Theology does this by establishing one or both of two conclusions: (1) that the properly metaphysical implications of the witness of faith, and hence of faithful acceptance of this witness, are metaphysically true; and (2) that the properly moral implications of the witness, and hence of faithful acceptance of it, are morally true or right. If, in this way, the self-understanding of faith is shown to imply a true metaphysics, it itself can only be our authentic self-understanding and is insofar forth theoretically credible, although accepting it as such, because one knows its metaphysical implications to be true, ought never to be confused with actualizing this self-understanding as one's own. Similarly, if, in this way, the self-understanding of faith is shown to imply a true or right morality, it itself can only be our authentic self-understanding and is insofar forth practically credible, although accepting it as such, because one knows its moral

implications to be true or right, ought always to be clearly distinguished from actualizing this self-understanding as one's own.

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1. What is the christological significance of the fact, if it be a fact, that "there is an element of arbitrariness . . . in any arrangement of roles and offices," so that "it is nearly always arguable that a different set of arrangements would enable an activity to be more effectively conducted, or an institution to function better"? What follows for christology from reflecting that "only rarely does it seem that the existing set of arrangements is the only one conceivable," and that "this element of arbitrariness extends to nearly every form of authority" (E. D. Watt, *Authority*: 106 f.)?

2. I want to say that the christological significance or implication of this is to clarify at the level of general principle why it is that the most any argument along the lines of *Cur Deus homo?* can establish is the necessity of *some* special revelation, not the necessity of *just this, that, or the other* special revelation. Because "there is an element of arbitrariness . . . in any arrangement of roles or offices," there is and must be an element of arbitrariness in any particular religion and in the special revelation by which it is constituted. To this extent, there is and must be that about any religion that transcends common human experience and reason simply as such. The assertion that "*Jesus* is the Christ," that *Jesus* is the decisive re-presentation of the meaning of ultimate reality for us, is, in this sense, arbitrary.

3. Authority is justified if two conditions are satisfied: (1) it is important to the pursuit of some activity or to the work of some institution through which some activity is pursued; and (2) this activity or institution itself is important, at least to those pursuing it or working in it. But, then, the procedures, roles, arrangements of offices, and the authority associated with them that are important to an activity pursuit of which is itself

important, are all so many *means*, to be justified in the only way in which any means can be justified—by their aptness for attaining the end of the activity. This is to say, then, that the authority claimed by the Christian religion as a means is justified if (1) it is important to pursuit of authentic human existence as such; and (2) this pursuit itself is the ultimate concern of every human being.

4. Moreover, even if the most reasonable instance of authority is, to some extent, arbitrary, "such arbitrariness need not detract from its reasonableness." After all, "the arbitrariness of the choice of red as the colour of stop lights does not show that it is unreasonable to stop at red lights" (107). *Mutatis mutandis*, the arbitrariness that a first-century Palestinian male Jew should be chosen as the bearer of God's decisive revelation does not show that it is unreasonable to acknowledge the lordship of this particular human being. On the other hand, it clearly would be unreasonable to claim that this is the *only* way in which the decisive revelation of God, or of the meaning of ultimate reality for us, can be received—just as unreasonable, indeed, as to claim that red is the only color that could possibly be used for stop lights. If, in some other social-cultural context, yellow, say, could be agreed upon as the color for stop lights, stopping at yellow stop lights would be just as reasonable, even if also just as arbitrary, as stopping at red lights is in our context. In the same way, if in another social-cultural context, some other person or thing could decisively mediate the revelation of God, or of the meaning of ultimate reality for us, there would be nothing unreasonable in acknowledging the unique religious authority of that person or thing, although such acknowledgement, like any other of the same kind, would still involve a certain unavoidable arbitrariness.

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