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BALANCED LANGUAGE? PART V (Reprinted from June 20, 1993)

Alister McGrath has reminded us that the decisive flaw of historical relativism is that it denies the rational freedom by which all periods of history, even our own, may be judged. And yet we cannot flee into an abstract rationalism which denies historical influence and development (The Genesis of Doctrine, Chapter Four). In the end, neither reason nor history exists alone. They are both "constant factors" related to one another in human experience. Plato thought that time is the moving image of eternity, reflecting an eternal rational structure. In Christ, the Word made flesh, we have seen time and eternity in their union and distinction. For Christians, change is not the "only constant factor", for God himself "with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" acts in history.

The prayer book tradition must be seen in this context as an inheritance of the Church's wisdom, what she has come to know through redeemed reason and Christian history. In the prayer book tradition the Church's wisdom is evident in the profound synthesis of Biblical texts, theological reason, and religious poetry, woven into a coherent pattern of prayer. Common prayer is not determined simply by one period of the Church's life, certainly not our own. Nor is it mere dogmatic theology. It is the revelation of the Bible, the summary knowledge of the Creeds, and the prayers of the saints, given a unity that is both historical and rational, religious and spiritual, empirical and mystical. The Book of Common Prayer cannot be reduced to an abstraction about relevant language in constant change, because it is not simply an historically determined book. It is the form and content of what it teaches and prays, the union of eternal truth and the redemption of time. It is a divinely inspired way to live into the Incarnation of the Word of God.

To say this is not to resist prayer book modifications, but to maintain they be undertaken in continuity with the wisdom of the Church. And this is where the real theological issue comes into view. The revisionists' ideology presumes that all language about God is derived from the experiences of changing history, and that ours will be necessarily different from those who go before and after us. Even the words of Scripture are revisable. But this presumption is historicist, arbitrary, and a sham. Not only does it mean that the prayer book must be re-written for each new generation in order to correspond to its peculiar experience, but it also presumes upon the nature of reality and experience itself.

What I mean is this: the idea of experience they espouse is confined to a conception of the human being restricted to the insight and emotions of individuals. They assume that reality is only as they experience it. The archetypal example of this experience is their claim that the name of God the Father is a mere biblical image, and that Jesus called God Father because of a "distinctive insight into Jesus' own relationship with God . . ."

This idea of experience cannot tolerate divinely revealed truth, or a divinely made reason that is capable of knowing truth and is common to all people in all ages. The tyranny of individual experience must theoretically preclude the notion of providence weaving essential truth and historical existence into a seamless cloth. It will not participate in something revealed "in the fullness of time".

The method of "Balanced Language" then is this: theology is couched in the language of metaphor and analogy because it is understood through the arbitrary notion of historical relativism and personal experience. But to recognize this is not enough. Christians must recognize what their own theological method is and has been. And this should be understood through the perspective of language about God.

Is it true, as Leonel Mitchell says, that "the language in which we speak of God is necessarily metaphorical and analogical"? Yes and No.

Yes. It is true and obvious to the casual thinker, that our language about God is not identical to the way in which God thinks himself. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways." If our language were so then we would be nothing less than the eternal Word. Our thinking is finite, which is to say, that it is by nature limited within time and space, and subject to contingency. When we turn to the Bible we discover many forms of finite language including metonymy, synecdoche, simile, parable, proverb, myth, history, and proposition. These different forms have been understood at different periods of the Church's life through the various modes of allegory, anagogy, analogy, typology, tropology and philosophical theology, and lately through positive higher literary criticism. All of these we might call metaphorical if by that we mean language about God which is not tantamount to God's self-knowledge. But if by metaphor we mean that our language about God is merely the projection of our experience into the heavens, we are gravely mistaken, and in this sense the revisionists are dead wrong.

A definition of metaphor from Caird is helpful: "A metaphor is the transference of a term from one referent with which it naturally belongs to a second referent, in order that the second may be illuminated by comparison with the first or by being seen as the first". (Language And Imagery, Chapter Three). The origin of the comparison pertains to nature. It is the original nature which is the reality to which other things are referred and compared metaphorically.

When it comes to theological language, language about God, our comparison often ends not with our images, but with God's revelation of himself, so that if indeed all language about God is understood metaphorically, the natural origin and primary referent of comparison does not and cannot remain with us. The method universally understood throughout the Church has been to measure our

metaphors about God, in whatever literary form they may appear, by God's self-revelation.

For example, St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that it is not the same to say that God is a lion as it is to say that God is the Good. It is the lion's nature to exercise great strength in the particular sphere and splendor of his creatureliness. To call God a lion is to picture him in his absolute power over all creation. But to say God is the Good, is not to attribute to him what is merely the stuff of our experience, but to know and name (not exhaustively but truly) what is proper to God's very nature (Summa Theologiae I.13.6 Respondeo). And so all created goods are referred and compared to that Good which is the very being of God and the source and origin of all created goods. For Thomas, such names of God as the Good and the Wise are those we use for naming creatures, after the manner of human knowing which begins with creatures, but they are understood finally and properly only of the divine nature, and these along with all the names of God must be measured by the Scripture.

(to be continued)

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