

To
The Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge
and
The Theologische Fakultät der Universität Heidelberg

FAITH IN
THE LIVING GOD
A Dialogue

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and
MICHAEL WELKER

FORTRESS PRESS
MINNEAPOLIS

UNIVERSITÄTS-
BIBLIOTHEK
HEIDELBERG

2007 A 7138

FAITH IN THE LIVING GOD

First Fortress Press edition 2001

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ISBN 0-8006-3434-9

Printed in Great Britain

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INTRODUCTION

JOHN POLKINGHORNE and MICHAEL WELKER

The idea for this book arose from the experience of spending a semester together in Heidelberg in the summer of 1999. We taught a joint course concerned with central topics in Christian doctrine, and enjoyed intelligent discussions with a lively group of students. In our conversations, we found that we had enough in common in the way of belief and theological concern to find a ground on which to meet, and enough by way of difference in background and approach to make the mutual encounter challenging and illuminating for us. We want now to share with others, at one remove so to speak, this exploratory exercise, in the hope that the binocular vision that we may provide from our twin perspectives will yield helpful insight in relation to the important issues we are seeking to discuss. If there is fruitfulness here, it arises precisely from the combination of difference and commonality that we have in our interactions together.

Differences

Age and family

[J.P.] As we write, I am in my seventieth year, retired, and with a family that includes nine grandchildren. Born before the Second World War, I was a schoolboy during it and my brother, an RAF pilot, was killed in action. The biggest division among those alive today relates to people who have had direct experience of combat, with all the courage, compassion, savagery and sadness that war brings, and people who have not. Both authors are in that second cohort which has had no direct experience of war, but even at second hand and in the innocence of youth, living through those intense years of global conflict has no doubt

made its mark on the characters of those who, like me, are old enough for that to have been part of their life.

[M.W.] I am in the beginning of my fifties. My wife and I have twelve-year-old twin daughters. My three younger brothers and I spent our childhood in West Berlin in a very protective family, but with ruins around the house and many people in our environment physically and psychically injured by the war and the Third Reich. When I was eight I crossed the border between West and East Berlin three or four times a week to sing in the State and Cathedral choir in East Berlin. At the age of eleven I entered the French gymnasium and experienced the joy of a cosmopolitan spirit. Another formative phase was the late sixties when I was a student in Heidelberg and Tübingen, with the spirit of revolt and criticism and the hunger to renew post-war culture.

Church and culture

[J.P.] I am an Anglican from birth, having grown up in a Christian home. In middle life, I trained for the ministry of the Church of England and was ordained priest in 1982. Anglicans like to think that they base their theological thinking on the 'tripod' of Scripture, tradition and reason. They have always sought to have an appreciative but not uncritical relationship with general human culture, and in England they have enjoyed a special relationship with national life, resulting from the Church's establishment. The kind of interactive exchange between the scientific world view and the theological world view that has been my principal intellectual concern over the last twenty years is a kind of activity very congenial to the Anglican mind. The way in which that activity might be conducted has also been influenced by my Englishness, for my country has a pragmatic tradition and in its general intellectual life has tended to assign a relatively modest role to philosophy, in striking contrast to the German scene. In consequence, English theological thinking has been inclined to eschew laying great emphasis on methodological issues, or the construction of grand syntheses. Its focus has tended to be on discrete and particular topics.

[M.W.] I grew up in the churches of Berlin and Palatinate which combine Lutheran and Reformed heritage. Although my family lived only a low-profile bourgeois Protestant religiosity, as early as the age of

four I wanted to become a pastor. This intention never changed till I entered the university, although I, like most of my friends, went through very church-critical phases in my life. I grew up more with French and American literature than with strong connections to the German traditions. In my student days, however, the philosophy of German Idealism of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, and dialectical theology, a German-speaking theological movement in the 1920s and 1930s, gained my strong interest. My thinking went through 'the subjectivist turn', a concentration on human subjectivity and its epistemological potentials and the self-secularization of religion connected with it.

Education and profession

[J.P.] I was educated at Cambridge University, where originally I studied mathematics and where most of my academic career has been spent. After a Ph.D. in theoretical physics, I worked as a theoretical elementary particle physicist from 1955 to 1979, becoming Professor of Mathematical Physics at Cambridge in 1968 and a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1974. This long career in fundamental physics has undoubtedly formed my intellectual stance and influenced my subsequent engagement with theology. The latter approach I have often characterized as being that of a 'bottom-up thinker', meaning by that phrase one who seeks to move from experience to understanding, from the specific to the general, and who is wary of enunciating broad principles whose rooting in particularity is not obvious. Although I recognize that I am not a professional theologian in the same sense that I was a professional physicist, I have always been especially interested in New Testament studies, seeing in this discipline access to the foundational record from which Christian theology ultimately derives.

[M.W.] At the University of Heidelberg, where I later received a DrPhil., I studied particularly Old Testament, some church history and philosophy. In Tübingen I concentrated on systematic theology and New Testament. Here I received a DrTheol. and experienced a considerable change of my thinking when I decided to write my *Habilitationsschrift* (a post-doctoral degree needed in Germany in order to enter an academic career) on the Cambridge mathematician, natural scientist and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. In 1977 I

went to America to study Whitehead's work, almost unknown in Germany in those days, and the so-called process theology, which is shaped by Whitehead's thinking. Yet I did not become a Whiteheadian or a Process Theologian; I saw rather that Whitehead had developed a new type of thinking, as some other great theorists, particularly coming out of Harvard, had done with and after him: a multi-systemic theory which acknowledges that we approach the world with common sense, religious thought, theories shaped by the mathematical sciences, historical, ethical and other modes of thought. A general theory, according to Whitehead, does not only have to look for relative commonalities between these modes of thought, but it also has to explain their differences.

Audiences and primary partners in dialogue

[J.P.] I write at a variety of levels and seek to do so with intellectual care and seriousness. I am particularly anxious to write in ways that will be accessible and helpful to an open enquirer who is exploring the question of the reasonableness of Christian belief, especially if that enquirer is someone for whom scientific insight is important, or who suspects that there might be some inherent opposition between science and theology. In common with a number of other scientist-theologians, I often emphasize what I perceive as being a cousinly relationship between science and theology, in that both believe that there is a truth to be sought, whose attainment will result from the scrupulous pursuit of motivated belief.

[M.W.] Working on my first three academic books and beyond, I immersed myself in the theory languages of Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Nietzsche, Whitehead and Luhmann for at least one to two years each. This for a long time shaped my writings, which were primarily for academic audiences. Ironically the serious discourse with scientists which I entered into ten years ago made it necessary to transform philosophical theory language. I also became convinced that the crisis of Christianity in the West with its processes of self-secularization and self-banalization cannot be adequately addressed by theologians who are not willing to learn and to translate theory languages of the past.

Commonalities

In our concern for an interdisciplinary academic discourse which does not rest in itself but serves the Church and the oecumene of faith traditions as well as secular culture, we discovered many commonalities in the midst of the differences just described.

For both of us it is crucial not to confuse faith in the living God with fascination by a figure of thought or a great idea and the correlated certainties and intellectual and aesthetic satisfactions that go with them. Although we have both been trained in several theory languages, we seek the topical adequacy of these languages and are eager to translate them, first for each other and then for audiences which have not been trained in philosophy or in the sciences. Although we treasure the synthesizing and discriminating powers of these theory languages, we are sceptical about various forms of reductionism and types of metaphysics which do not test their figures of thought with inductive modes of thinking. We both emphatically reject the opinion that religion and theology are just culturally manipulated discourses that do not respect rationality and do not possess a consistency that is subject to evaluation. We are convinced that faith should always seek understanding and that religious convictions and certainties have to be ready to warrant truth claims.

We both believe that if Christian faith is to command respect and acceptance, it needs to be rich and detailed in its content and expression. For both of us, Trinitarian theology has this requisite 'thickness', and we seek to explain and defend this point of view in the course of the discussions that follow. As the readers will see, we are both very respectful of Scripture, though we recognize that it always requires interpretation, an activity in which the insights of contemporary understanding have an important, but by no means totally determinative, role to play. We wish to place ourselves in a consonant relationship with the tradition of the Church, while recognizing that each generation has to make that tradition its own, in its own way and in the light of its own particular situation and experience.

The Structure of the Project

The concrete project is for each author first to discuss his understanding of the threefold pillars of Christian doctrine: faith in God the creator, faith in Christ, faith in the Holy Spirit. Then each comments on the

other's contribution and finally each responds briefly to the comments made on his own essay. In this way, differences and commonalities are explored dialogically and in relation to many specific topics. We both feel that the resulting bipolar treatment offers something that neither of us could have provided writing solely on his own.

The first part of the exercise completed, each then writes, in Part II, a particular essay in which his own approach is subjected to further discussion and analysis. For both authors, the question of truth is paramount in theology and so they conclude with a joint account of how truth-seeking communities may further their search for understanding, pursued in the widest setting that is possible for them.

Acknowledgements

There are many persons and many institutions who made our co-operation during the last years possible. We want to thank the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, particularly its directors Dr Daniel Hardy and Dr Wallace Alston, who invited us to join and finally to chair the consultation between scientists and theologians. We thank the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung which offered a *Forschungspreis* to John Polkinghorne, and the Rektor of the University of Heidelberg for his hospitality. We are grateful to the more than twenty Heidelberg students who took the course 'Crucial Topics in Theology' in 1999, even though it took place on Friday afternoons and was in English only. We are also grateful to a large group of European doctoral students and colleagues for stimulating discourses on the relation of science and theology in the Internationales Wissenschaftsforum Heidelberg and at the Akademie Hofgeismar. We thank the Stiftung Volkswagen-Werk, the Hanns-Lilje-Stiftung and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, who supported several conferences, which led to further publications beyond this enterprise. Finally, we are grateful for the technical support that Beate Müller and Wolfram Kerner gave us when we prepared the manuscript for publication.

This book has emerged out of a dialogue over seven years and the personal and theological friendship whose fruits we now offer to truth-seeking communities in the Church, the academy and the theologically open and interested wider cultural public.

PART I

FAITH IN THE LIVING GOD