METHOD IN THEOLOGY:
PAST CHALLENGES AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES[*]

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The Problematical Fields

Throughout its history, theology experienced some difficulties in its relation to other disciplines. Particularly in modern and contemporary periods such approaches as foundationalism, text criticism, linguistic analysis and analytical philosophy, existentialism, postmodernity (under the titles of deconstruction or process philosophy), ect. have had a perennial impact on theology. This situation has challenges and opportunities for theology. These challenges made theology develop its own method and content with its own criteria. In the following pages main characteristics of this new theological approach will be outlined under some captions.

Ontology vs God

In modern times, philosophy has largely turned away from ontology, doctrine of being, i.e. *philosophia perennis*, but theology can not turn away, nor can it do so without cutting off the branch on which it sits. Because theology has more in it than philosophy. It has a personal aspect in theology. In order to make this doctrine of Being different from philosophy and metaphysics at least three aspects of it must be brought forth: *being, activity and (inter)dependence.*

This **Being** is completely different from other beings. So a physical ontology which reduces God to the physical realm and creates a closed universe must theologically be denied. Bilateral aspects of this Being are to be emphasised: Internal

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[*] First appeared in http//:georgetown.edu/centers/woodstock …

and external; the First and the Last, etc. This paradoxical structure finds its extention in Holy Scriptures. And that leads us to understand and interpret religious text differently from others.

Activity of this Being is more vital to us. It is more than a theory of Being. His activity together with ours creates history and forms real conception of God and shows us the living face of God. In His activity we uncover his *mercy, wrath*, etc. Besides intellect and reason, our very being in its wholeness feels and judges Him. God of Theology speaks with the language of the events, His creatures are dynamic ones, and they borrowed their characteristics from their active Creator. What makes the universe meaningful is not its substance as the classical philosophy and theology put forward but the events that take place in it, and our dynamic Theology is bound to formulate propositions or get them from Holy Books to interpret the events as meaningful ones. The names of Holy God and the events we experience in the World do co-exist, and this, naturally, has some theological consequences.

The category of **(inter)dependence** is the key concept to understand the nature of relationship between God and humans. This category excludes two approaches: One of them considers revelation like a stone fell down from top to humans, ignoring human capacity and readiness to accept it. This supernatural approach is humiliating humans and their ontic and epistemic structure that was given to them to react and respond. The other one is the idea that man with all his naturistic and rationalistic faculties is the unique criterion of judging what is right or wrong. When we consider the Holy Scriptures' language as the depiction of the *relation* between God and his creatures rather than general account of being, it seems more plausible to reconcile these both approaches. This reconcilation will be between neo-orthodoxy and theological humanism or liberalism, the representatives of above mentioned extremism.

This reconcilation will create a "state of consciousness" in man, which will lead us to search for an equilibrium between being "finitude" and having a "telos/ultimate

goal" to realize in this world. The tension created by these two opposite edges of "finitude" and "telos/ultimate goals" can only be dissolved by this consciousness.

Epistemology

Epistemologically rationalism and empricism have been problematics for theology. These both by claiming only 'reason' or 'sense data" to unveil the reality created reductionism and thus destructed the unity and harmony in Being and led to foundationalism, which considers only one single faculty of man as the real discoverer of the reality. This reductionism has in addition to Theology caused problems in social and even in exact sciences. Ignoring human capacity of *intellect=nous*, capacity of grasping a complex of related terms intuitively as constituting a whole, rationalism concentrated on reason or *ratio=logos*, the power of reasoning or ratiocination or logical discourse, and so by bringing forth only one facet of understanding reality, it destructed human integrity. This one faced rationality is transformed into a system of criteria to value and judge others including theological propositions, and accordingly every thing which had nothing with rational or logical reasoning was rejected. What is striking is that, religion considered reason as the unique faculty of man to be honoured and to be taken responsible, but in the hand of rationalism, reason is transformed into a means of undermining religion and theology.

The Nature

One of the problems theology faces today is considering science and theology as strongly contrasting enterprises. This contrast finds its roots in recent history, especially in G. Galileo and Newton in Science and Descartes in philosophy, whose approaches were considered as turning points in both realms and beginning of the modern period.

When Newton used God to fill the gaps in nature which he could not explain, he founded a new relation between God and nature. By God of gaps, he reduced God to a natural cause among others, and when these gaps are filled with natural explanations, there was no place left for God to fill in this natural order. Thus the natural God who had

nothing with the person and community but only with the nature, the great machine, had in the course of time faded away.

As for the theologians of this time, they concentrated on nature to infer evidences of God from it. In this process theology was reduced to intellectual demonstration of God. God's prominent attribute was Creator not redeemer or forgiver or something else which is directly related to faithful's personal life. And as a result of this naturalistic tendency, the doctrine of providence was related to nature, not to the individual and history. Little was attributed to these phenomena a meaning which finds its place deep down in the soul of the believer besides rational/logical and empirical demonstration of God. So a new understanding of nature and its relation to its Creator must be developed.

In this new sense, experience of this phenomenal world is more than an experimental observation in its detached form, because experience in theological context requires to participate in it, to be part of it, not to detach from it. Accordingly such existential new concepts as death, suffering, conflict, failure and cognitive ones like intuition or total consciousness will be used in theological context so that our reason, intellect and faith will become operative in their approach to nature. In short, in this new context, theology in addition to its commonality with science in their 'hypothetico-deductive' reasoning will consider experience of nature of phenomenal world as a ground for asserting God's *reality*, giving individual a *meaning* and maintainin an ongoing *relation* between them. This new understanding of nature will be conceptualised under the term religious experience.

Contextualizing Religious Experience within Theological Frame

So, one important factor to be imbedded into theology now is religious experience. Althought it seems risky and even illogical to put theology and religious experience together, this effort can activate some cognitive and conative elements within man, which were ignored by theology up to date. This effort, in addition analogical reasoning and discursive observation of experienced realm, will take awe, reverence,

joy, that is mystrerious side of being into consideration as beatifully explained by A. Einstein:

"The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom the emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed. This insight into the mystery of life, coupled though it be with fear, has also given rise to religion. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom ad the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms – this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness…"[1]

As this experience is based on human's conative, cognitive and epistemic bases, religious experience does not exclude knowledge, but it can not be fully reduced to knowledge. Experience has interpretation in its very basis, so religious experience is *a kind of* interpretation of internal or external reality through which a faithful discloses his inner feelings. However, this external reality does not necessarily create feelings of awe, reverence or orientation within us, i.e. they do not have 'attention-directing' function in themselves. In order that they can create such effect, 'second experience' or 'interpretation' of this first experience is necessary. First experience of external world functions mostly as a veil or curtain between man and God. In order to make it religious or theological experience one must go beyond it, rethinking or gaining a second experience as we call it. This is stated in a Qur'anic verse:

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[1]   Albert Einstein, "What I Believe," *The Forum* 84 (October, 1930), 194, from Frederic Ferré, "Einstein on Religion and Science", *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, vol: I, No. 1, 1980, 21.

"It is not given to any human being that God should speak to him unless (it be) by Inspiration, or from *behind a veil*, or (that) He sends a Messenger to reveal what He wills. Verily, He is Most High, Most Wise."[2]

Cultural or given religious presuppositions condition this interpretive process. Before our observation of this phenomenal realm, we have in our mind our respective paradigms to see this reality 'as' or to interperet it 'as'. In order to underline this point, different models of experience have been put forward such as 'seing as' (L. Wittgenstein and later J. Wisdom), 'experiencing as' (J. Hick), and 'interpreting as' (I. Barbour).[3]

It seems that a difference is to be put butween these categories which seem on the face of it to serve to the same aim. 'Seing as' or 'experiencing as' are categories that find their roots in our ontic structure and there is no way of getting rid of them. That means, to experience or to see 'a tuft of grass as a rabbit in the twilight' can easily be corrected by seing it otherwise or sometimes reasoning helps in these situations. However, 'interpret as' is more than an ontic one, it also involves our cognition, evaluation, and most importantly our will. So, if we are to speak about an encounter with God which involves one's whole personality and total life, this is so because he intentionally and consciously interpret it so and accordingly create a model to follow. The summons Qur'an made to human beings to direct their attention to created world, to mountains, to stars even to camel is a kind of '*second experience*' which involves this interpretation and categories it uses in this process are cognitive ones such as reasoning, thinking, etc., all of which make this process theological as different from former ones and render it totally ours.

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[2]   Qur'an: 42: 51.
[3]   See for detail Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Basil Blackwell 1953), 194; John Wisdom, "Gods", ed. Antony Flew, in *Logic and Language*, vol. I (Basil Blackwell, 1951); John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (2nd ed. Macmillan 1967), 142 ff.; Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974), 55.

These challenges in bridging the gap between experience and its clear communication and representation seem to have led some philosophers to agnosticism and scepticism on the one hand, and to develop a personal/existential and ethical approach toward religion and religious experience on the other. This scepticism and agnosticism can be traced back to Sextus Empiricus's book *Against the Dogmatists,* Al-Ghazâli's *al-Munqız min al-Dalâl,* Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, etc. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations,* Martin Buber's *I and Thou* and *The Knowledge of Man,* and many more. It seems to these thinkers that there is an experience which contains more than could be said, and what could not be said is as important as what could be said in experience.

To see the possibility of this communication, one example will suffice mind. After trying to develop a model of communication, Wittgenstein turned out to realize that a unique model for this task is unsatisfactory and developed such concepts as '*language games*', '*meaning as use*' and '*form of life*', which put emphasis more on existential, ethical and practical sides of this experience to enable any meaningful communication. This means that a person who can understand and use language can do so only because he or she participates (at least to some degree) in a form of life. Within human life, there are many forms, and the meaning or use of some words are to be understood by a knowledge or understanding of a form of life. Religious language, has its place in a form of life to which particular individals may or may not have access. In order to have access to this language, one has to get an understanding of a form of life.[4]

S. Toulmin compares Wittgenstein to Pascal in their existential stances:

"He is like the French seventeenth-century writer, Blaise Pascal, who was a brilliant mathematician and a wonderful controversialist for half the time, but the other half of the time retired to the abbey of Port-Royal outside Paris and meditated on the

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[4]   Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1985), 268; D.Z.Phillips, "Religious Beliefs and Language Games", *The Philosophy of Religion,* ed. B. Mitchell (Oxford Univ. Press: Hong Kong, 1986).

question whether his intellectual brilliance was a temptation that God had imposed on him as a test for his faith. As a good Jansenist, he was inclined to suspect his own motives in being an intellectual and to reject his own intellectuality. Wittgenstein had something of the same duality, torn between his own intellectual brilliance and feelings of deep personal inadequacy which he struggled with, not entirely successfully."[5]

It seems that, to enable communication and to certify our knowledge it is taken for granted that there is a preceding *reality* from which our cognitive faculties deduce some knowledge, which develops an ontological basis both for individual and his knowledge of himself and of God and around which many sui generis forms of life are developed. Of course, what lies in the background of this understanding would appear to be a metaphysic of the individual and of his life process, which combine his awareness of his own relations, which lead on to an awareness of the Divine. In this form of relations, to be is always to be with and to know always to know something and to be aware is always to be aware of something, and this feeling puts humankind within a web of relations and creates both existential and prescriptive, i.e. ethical ground for being.

In these assesments a kind of *cognition* rather than *knowledge* is emphasised and the bases it rests are determined as 'consciousness', 'awareness' and 'web of relations'. Although these are completely true, one important cause seems to be ignored. To set this 'consciousness' and 'awareness' in motion and to develop this 'web of relations' and to make them general grounds for all, some more objective ground is to be searched for. This ground will to some extent bridge the gap between totally other being, namely God, and humans so that we can overcome the negative ontology and agnosticism? This can be done by rendering God *intelligible* or *cogitable* to humans in a way. But how?

As the religion has the very concept of revelation (*wahy:disclosure*) in its basis (be it in 1.oral or written communication as in the case of heavenly books tradition, or 2.as in God's revealing himself through His creatures, that is His self-disclosure as signs

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[5]   See http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/1997-03/toulmin.html

an symbols in general, or 3.as His showing his living face in historical events), it is experimental* and as it takes humans' ontic, epistemic and emotional integrity into account, it has an anthropological basis. With this basis, revelation, with its various forms, is open to humans' experience. As humans are equipped with this ontic, epistemic and emotional integrity to experience, to cognize and to know, there has been and will be an ongoing and fruitful interaction between them. In order to secure this interaction on a wide scale, human subjects are equipped not only with one cognitive element but many as mentioned in the Qur'an such as *qalb/*heart, *fuâd/*inner heart, *sadr/*breast, *lubb/*innermost heart in addition to their *aql/* reason *and nazar/* intellect. With these faculties, "human beings are therefore by necessity *homo hermeneuma,* interpreters of signs. And human language, *par excellence*, illustrates the grammar of these signs within which we are caught."[6]

These self-disclosures must occur in a manner which *corresponds* to human understanding. Hence we may sepeak of *modes* of Divine Self-disclosure, and it follows that the criterion for their adequacy is the degree to which they actually correspond to the process of *human* understanding. So the most adequate mode of God's Self-disclosure to man must necessarily be the *human* mode.[7]

But we are caught by a paradox here which is triggered by two kinds of Qur'anic verses, abundant in number. One kind sees absolute Being something beyond and above all human conceptions and references:

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* For an evaluation of differences between religious experience and *vahy* see Adnan Aslan, "What is wrong with the concept of Religious Experience", *Islam, Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol.: 14, no: 3, July 2003, 299-312.

[6] Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, tr. R. Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), I, 132; see also Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 54.

[7] M.S. Raschid, *Iqbal's Concept of God* (Kegan Paul International: London, 1981), 102.

"Your Lord is holier than the qualities which they ascribe to Him."[8]

The other kind attributes the title *knowledge* to revelation which includes *written text*, *signs/symbols* in external world and *events* in history, all of which are supposed to increase our experience of God:

"…Verily, if you follow their desires after that which you have received of *knowledge* from God, then indeed you will be one of the wrong-doers."[9]

As any theory which excludes some kind of cognition and knowledge can not sustain itself as a general/objective ground for all, it is a must to develop one to reconcile these two. Trying this, we do not aim at removing this paradox. As there is a 'totally other being' we are supposed to refer to through our human language, this paradox will always be there. When disqualifying the superimpositons of language theories of positivist tradition, from perspective of theological language this must be case, which in no case poses any difficulty to theology. In the last analysis, all these fields are referred not to render them the subject of any theory of knowledge, but rather to develop and support this consciousness, awareness and cognition.

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[8]   Qur'an 37: 180. Similarly, he prohibition of graven images 'or any likenes' (Ex. 20: 4) in biblical tradition serves the same cause both as a rejection of idolatry and as an acknowledgment that God cannot be adequately represented in visual or mental imagery.

[9]   Qur'an 2: 145; See also "And thus have We revealed it, a true judgment in Arabic, and if you follow their low desires after what has come to you of *knowledge*, you shall not have against God any guardian or a protector" Qur'an 13: 37 and "He taught (gave as knowledge/*ilm*) the Qur'ân" Al-Rahmân 55: 2.