

PONDERING PARADOXES

Definition of "Paradox"

A great deal has been said in recent Theology about the paradoxes of the Christian faith and ironically enough, the discussion about paradoxes has not been without its own paradoxical aspects. One of the most important of these incongruities resides in the use of the word "paradox" itself as descriptive of Christianity and its credal statements. While we must agree with Paul that "great is the mystery of our religion" (RSV), it does not necessarily follow: "And great are its paradoxes and contradictions". The problem is basically one of definition and conotation. Are the denotations and clear connotations of the word "paradox" proper expressions of what the Bible often calls the "mysteries" of our faith? A quick check of the general, theological, and philosophical dictionaries reveals that there is unanimity on this one point, viz, that "paradox" always denotes a contradiction in logic in either the primary or the secondary sense of the word. Philosophically, we are referred to the Eleatic school of Zeno and his paradoxes of motion and being, or to Emmanuel Kant and his antinomies of the Noumenal World.¹ In both cases we have illustrations of that which is self-contradictory and rationally impossible. Is this what is meant by the "paradoxes" of the Christian faith or have we been using the word loosely and unadvisedly?

The Scriptures use the word paradox only once (Luke 5:26) to describe the Pharisee's reaction to the healing of the paralytic by Jesus. The basic meaning of the Greek word is "incredible"² but even here it may carry the conotation of the "impossible" to them. They cried, "Who can forgive sins but God only?" Both the healing and forgiving of the paralytic's sins seemed impossible to them. What is more important is that the New Testament does not use the word "paradox" at all as a description of our Faith. We are not asked to believe the impossible or even the unbelievable (incredible) but merely the mysterious. What is a mystery? It is not a logical contradiction; it is a supra-logical revelation. The philosophical connotations of paradox should not be confused with the Christian's use of mystery though this is often, unadvisedly, the case. The existential theologian may feel at home in the presence of paradox but not the Believer whose logic is based in the Logos or eternal reason. The law of rationality and contradiction ~~must~~ stand or fall in the self consistency of God. The dictum must be true: He who breaks logic will in the end be broken by logic.

Description of "Mystery"

How does a mystery escape the dilemma of contradiction? Does it mitigate the tension to call it by another name? A mystery is only a seeming contradiction or paradox. Biblically, the word is used ~~in the New Testament~~ to denote, "a truth once concealed but now revealed"³. But in addition it usually carries the connotation of a "Divine revelation without human comprehension". It is a message from God that is meaningful and yet mysterious. It is apprehended but never fully comprehended. It is neither contrary to reason nor can it be made to conform with reason. It is not against reason, but it is beyond reason.

Because of the complex nature of a "mystery" it is not only confused with "a paradox" but with "a problem" as well. However, the two are quite different and ought to be approached in different ways. A "problem" can be solved; not so with a "mystery". To explain a problem one needs to discover the proper facts somewhat like finding the right piece for a puzzle or the correct key for a door. But a mystery, by its very nature, provides all the fact and it is the possession of all the relevant facts that constitutes the mystery. The more truly the facts of the mystery are known, the more mysterious is the mystery. For example, the more data one collects from the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament, the more one is convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was truly man and yet really God. So it is that the more truly we know the facts about Him the more puzzled we are to explain Him in other than a mystery.

This same point may be made historically as well as exegetically. The exhaustive attempt of the early fathers to explain Christ led some of them on one hand to deny His deity (Arianism) in order to maintain his humanity and on the other hand to deny his humanity in order to affirm his deity (Docetism). The result was that they were compelled to distill the mystery of His Deity and His humanity into the Nicene Creed which acknowledged that He was "Very God of very God" and yet "was made flesh and became man".⁴ So when the facts of a mystery ^{ARE} is fully apprehended, they cannot be completely comprehended. Just exactly the opposite is true of a "problem". We conclude, then, that whereas a problem needs extensive study for solution a mystery needs intensive study. Research is necessary for a problem but reflection is imperative for a mystery. The solution of a problem will come by the acquisition of more facts about it while the illumination of a mystery comes only by meditation on the facts that are already in it. It is precisely at this point viz., within the mystery, that the sovereignty and

finality of God's revelation is contrasted with the futility and inability of man to attain unto it.

Distinction Between Paradox and Mystery

~~And~~ It is in this transcendent, supra-rational nature of a mystery that resides the clue to distinguish a mystery from a paradox. A paradox is a self-contradiction and gives us no light. A problem is only a seeming contradiction and needs further light to explain it. A mystery, contrawise, is a supra-rational non-contradiction that gives light to explain other things as problems and apparent paradoxes. A paradox by nature is a self-contradiction and, hence, a non-entity. A problem is only a seeming contradiction of finite entities. But a mystery is the revelation of an Infinite entity--God. This is why man in his finitude cannot comprehend the mystery--because of its infinity. In point of fact, it is here that arises the problem of epistemological agnosticism, viz, if God is infinite, and we are finite and there is an infinite gulf between us, then how can we know anything about Him or from Him at all? The only salvation from this utter skepticism is in the principle of analogy which is the core of our theological mystery. Analogy is the mediating view between two radical opposites. On the one hand is the assertion of agnostic equivocity that we can know nothing about God and truth. On the other hand is the claim of dogmatic univocity that we can know everything about God and truth. Between these stands the affirmation of realistic analogy that we can know something about God and truth.

While we cannot assert that our knowledge is ~~not~~ the same as God's which is anthropomorphic, neither may we affirm that it is entirely different which is agnostic. It is similar which is a mystery and analogy. God is infinitely higher but he is not totally other. Even though there is infinite difference in perfection between God's knowledge and ours there is nevertheless not a total lack of similarity. It is this similarity, an analogy, that makes the mystery meaningful and saves it from being a paradox or contradiction. We may see the wisdom of God through it while yet pondering the wonder of God in it.

So all true mysteries are infinite truths in finite or analogous terms. We are given two opposing (not opposite) truths and told that they are both true even though it is not possible to know how this is so. We have the revelation but not the reconciliation of two parallel truths. But

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- 1) The mystery of Triunification in the Godhead. God is one indivisible entity, yet three clearly distinguishable personalities. He is one Being, yet three persons. This is a great mystery but it is not paradox. God is not viewed as three beings in One. His "oneness" is different from His "threeness" and, therefore, is not a contradiction to human reason.
- 2) The mystery of Revelation. The Bible is at once the Word of God and the words of men. It is infinite truth in finite terms. God is the author yet men are its writers. But even here, authorship is not ascribed to God and men in the same sense. Men are the immediate agents while God is the ultimate source of the Bible.
- 3) The mystery of Creation. The world was created out of nothing (ex nihilo). It could not have been created out of God (ex Deo) or it would be God which is Pantheism. Nor could it have been created out of something preexisting with God (ex hula) which would be a dualism or materialism. It must have been created out of nothing which is a great mystery. This may be beyond explanation but it is not a contradiction since with God all things are possible. ^{OF REPRESENTATION} Our inability to conceptualize a thing doesn't negate God's ability to actualize it.
- 4) The mystery of the Incarnation. Christ is both God and Man. He is infinite yet finite; unlimited yet limited. He is eternal yet bound by time. But, again, this is not a contradiction because of the different connotations implied. Christ is God in one sense and man in quite another sense which avoids the plight of paradox.
- 5) Finally, the mystery of Salvation. God choose men yet they choose Him. Man's redemption is through divine election, but it is also by human selection. It is through God's sovereignty and yet by man's free-will. But even in this case the Biblical record is not a contradiction unless one or both sides is misstated or overstated in fatalistic or humanistic terms. God's choice is not to be confused with man's choice even though they are mysteriously fused in the process of redemption.

Confronted with a mystery, man tends to go in two wrong directions. On the one hand there is the tendency to understate or deny one side of the truth in order to explain the other because it cannot be conceived how both can be true. This error refuses to see that God has the power to actualize a thing even when man doesn't have the ability to visualize how it can be done. It says that anything beyond

finite reason must therefore be against any reason which assertion itself is unreasonable. On the other hand there is the danger of overstating one or both sides of the mystery so as to make an actual contradiction or paradox of ~~it~~ mere mystery. This extreme demands that the Christian accept by faith that the basic truths of ~~his faith~~ ^{XIANITY} that he believes with his heart are contradictory to his mind. This is indeed the most paradoxical aspect of the paradoxical view, viz., that the proponents of this view feel that it is not paradoxical to assert that our faith is paradoxical. But logic may not be played with so loosely and lightly. If the Christian, as he does, points out that other views are rejected because they are contradictory or unreasonable, then he must apply the same to his own system. It is unreasonable to do otherwise. In the light of this unreasonable extreme, it would seem logical to conclude that the paradoxical school has broken logic and in the end will be broken by logic.

The Christian must not succumb to the temptation to reduce a mystery to a problem by understatement nor to magnify a mystery into a paradox. Both have been done and neither is the truth. Nevertheless, it must be realized that a mystery goes far beyond the best efforts of human reason to comprehend it.

while the two truths are contrary they are not contradictory.

Among such mysterious we offer the following suggestive but perhaps not exhaustive list.

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1. First of all there is the mystery of the Triunification of the Godhead. God is one indivisible entity yet He is three clearly distinguishable personalities. He is but one "Person" and yet He is three persons.
2. Secondly, there is the mystery of Revelation. The Bible is at once the Word of God and the words of men. It is infinite truth in finite terms. God is really its author and yet men were really its writers.
3. Thirdly, there is the mystery of Creation. The world was not created ex Deo (out of God) which is pantheistic. Nor was it created ex hula (out of pre-existing stuff) which is materialistic. It was created ex nihilo (out of nothing) which is a great mystery.
4. Fourthly, there is the mystery of the Incarnation. Christ is both God and man. He is infinite yet finite; unlimited yet limited. He is eternal yet was bound by time.
5. Finally, there is the mystery of Salvation. God chose us and yet we chose Him. Our redemption came by Divine election and yet there was the human selection. It was through God's sovereignty and yet by man's free will. Indeed we must agree with Paul, "Great is the mystery of our Religion".

Design of "Mystery"

We might ask ourselves why the essential truths of Christianity are revealed in irresolvable mysteries. Why must there be two opposing sides to its truth.

1. First of all, because without both sides of the truth we would have only half truths. Only in a mystery do we get the whole truth even though we cannot make a whole or unity out of the truth.
2. Secondly, God speaks to us in mysteries to stimulate our meditation. God permits problems to prompt us to extensive study, and He permits seeming paradoxes or mysteries to inspire intensive study. And the latter is, in the end, more rewarding and illuminating than the former.
3. Thirdly, God has revealed His truth in mysteries in order to impress us with His sovereignty; to show us "How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out". To reveal to us that the meaning of

the mysterious comes via meditation on His majesty and ineffability.

4. Finally, and most basically of all, mysteries are God's chosen vehicle of revelation because God has no other way to convey the fullness of an infinite truth to a finite creature. A limited mind can have only a limited understanding of unlimited truth. A finite mind can never have an infinite understanding of the infinite. Nevertheless, man does have a real knowledge, and we must be careful never to reduce this limited knowledge to no knowledge at all. We must never reduce a ~~*mystery*~~ to a ~~*paradox*~~ because a mystery truly communicates to us, but a paradox only confound us. A paradox is against reason and a mystery is for reason by being above reason. It gives reasonable man the reason that he cannot always know the ultimate reason, save, that it is there in God. In a mystery we see why we cannot know why; because "the secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever.... (Deut. 29:29)

There are no paradoxes in our faith to perplex us, to confusion, but there are some mysteries to prompt us to contemplation and that provide us with the most ponderous revelation of Divine truth ^{EVER GIVEN} ~~possible~~ to finite man.

1. RUNES, Dictionary of Philosophy, PP 224, 343
2. BAUER, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, P 621.
3. BETTENSOW, DOCUMENTS OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH, P. 37.