

PROLOGUE

Less Rational, But More Like a Ball ____

Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world?

1 CORINTHIANS 1:20

AT FIRST GLANCE, *A Theology of Nonsense* sounds illogical. Why would one seek to align Christian beliefs with Lewis Carroll's preposterous wonderlands, if not with the intent to falsify faith? Yet, this book seeks both to support Christian theology and to promote a correspondent incredulity, believing that the skeptic's perennial refrain—"you can't seriously believe [this nonsense]"¹—speaks a profound, but largely unembraced, religious truth. The apologist who overlooks the absurdity of faith in order to advance a strictly rational apologetic misrepresents Christianity. He is like Jane Austen's Caroline Bingley who declares: "I should like balls infinitely better if conversation instead of dancing were made the order of the day." To which her brother consents it would be "Much more rational [but] rather less like a ball."²

The comedy here arises from our understanding that dancing is essential to the nature of balls, and whilst Caroline Bingley may indeed desire

1. A phrase used by the character Charles Ryder inquiring into his friend's Catholic faith in *Brideshead Revisited*. Charles begins this discussion by saying: "I suppose they try and make you believe an awful lot of nonsense." Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, 84.

2. The same parallel is discussed by C. S. Lewis in his essay: "Priestesses in the Church," from *God in the Dock*, 255.

an evening of rational conversation, she cannot simply alter the definition of “ball” to accommodate her disposition. In a similar way, it is poor theology that distorts the nature of religious truth to make it congruent with the desires of a particular audience. The intention of this work is not to impose an alternative framework on Christian theology or to manipulate the statements of Christ to make them seem absurd or nonsensical. Rather, it is an attempt to articulate orthodox faith honestly, and, if it is found that it has more in common with the jovial frenzy of a dance than with rational discourse, then let us not shy away from saying so.

The major problem confronting any apologetic account of Christianity is that certain crucial tenets of the faith seem to carry us the other side of reason. It is of course true that Christianity has always had a sense that its claims will appear foolish from a certain perspective, yet despite this, a dominant strand of its traditional self-exposition has sought to demonstrate its conformity to Western standards of reason. As a result, the importance of “a-rational” modalities of faith has been significantly downplayed. In response to this widespread under-emphasis, this book calls for a corrective balance of reason with unreason, logic with paradox, skepticism with credulity, as well as the recovery of a number of other biblical themes sidelined by the rationalistic tendencies of modernity. In sum, the hypothesis explores the idea that in certain crucial ways Christian teaching runs counter to the customary secular practices of reason. The primary method by which this is articulated is through an ongoing dialogue with nonsense literature, focusing on the work of Lewis Carroll. In this way, I hope to demonstrate that some of the structural devices used in literary nonsense share a deep resemblance with and cast new light on traditional modes of religious thought.

Part One discusses the character and the role of the imagination in Christian belief. Three aspects of this are seen as central: the paradoxical, the anarchic, and the childlike. The first chapter considers a range of apparently incompatible claims within Christian doctrine and suggests, in view of this, that paradox is an essential feature of the Christian imagination. The areas examined include the epistemological paradox of transcendent and immanent knowledge; paradoxical accounts of time and space within Christology; the logical problem of the incarnation; the traditional numerical conundrum of the Trinity; and the relationship between freewill and grace. These puzzles are customarily seen as a result of linguistic limitation (where the claim is accepted) or as a way of deflecting attention away from empty premises (where the claim is rejected). In contrast, I offer a description of these tensions as “theoretic”³ paradoxes, which convey an accurate

3. W. D. Hart distinguishes between linguistic or “semantic” and “theoretic”

description of essential “illogicalities,” acknowledging their importance as tenets of Christian faith, whilst recognizing that this represents a departure from the commonly upheld law of non-contradiction. The aim of this section is to show how thinking in paradoxical terms is a vital component of the Christian imagination since it allows the believer to hold these contraries in a meaningful tension.

The second chapter concentrates on the interval of suspense between Christ’s defeat and his reign to come. In particular, the focus is on the implications of the teaching that the kingdom of God is situated both in the “now and the not yet,” and the correlative belief that Christ is absolutely sovereign even though his sovereignty has in some sense not yet come into its fullness of divine rule. The term I use to describe the experience of living in this epoch of “eschatological suspension,” between Christ’s victory and the final establishment of his kingdom, is “anarchy.” The aim of the section is to show how during this “in-between time” the Christian must develop an anarchic imagination in order to live faithfully in this era of dual temporalities.

The third part of the project seeks to recover the “childlike” as a category of the religious imagination. I discuss the significance of the Gospel declaration that only those who change and become like children can enter the kingdom of heaven and ask whether the term “childlike” is a necessary description or merely an analogy of peripheral significance to Christian faith. In essence, I consider this injunction to “change” to involve an imaginative re-orientation towards a childlike mode of relating to God as Father. There are several qualities that this transformation seems to demand: a simplistic approach to the world and the self, the ability to trust, the capacity to wonder, and an impulse for make-believe and play. On the basis of this I conclude that the childlike is not simply a phase of being before God, but the ongoing ideal of that relationship. The aim of this section is to show how the adoption of a childlike posture fosters a mode of imaginative play that opens up the possibility for a genuine encounter with God. In general, I suggest that this attitude, though born in the imagination, may nevertheless involve real development and transformation. The childlike, together with the anarchic and the paradoxical, I believe, go some way to describing the necessary role the imagination plays in Christian faith and its divergence from the dominant Enlightenment model of rationality.

In Part Two, after considering how each of these aspects of the religious imagination comes into conflict with a secular construal of reality, I

paradoxes, suggesting that in the first instance there is an *appearance* of the paradoxical, conceding that the contradiction is ultimately solvable. In the case of “theoretic” paradox the core of the conflict is a logically irreconcilable tension. For an initial outline see Hart, *The Evolution of Logic*, 67.

develop a counter-theology of nonsense, and explore the theoretical, practical, and evangelical implications of associating nonsense literature with Christian faith. Of particular concern is the response of the non-believer to the apparent unreason of religious claims. I suggest that “nonsense” has the potential to be a peculiarly useful descriptor in the communication of the Christian message, since, in accepting the atheist’s application of unreason the believer necessarily challenges the presumption that because faith is unreasonable it is therefore untrue. Prompted by the work of G. K. Chesterton, I conceive of the fall as “the condition of being born upside down” and in this light consider an imaginative reordering of our notions of the possible as a vital aspect of faith. This provides the underlying warrant for offering “nonsense” as an illuminating and hitherto unexplored way of conceptualizing Christian theology.

SAMPLE