

*Liberalism versus Postliberalism. The Great Divide in Twentieth Century Theology.* By John Allan Knight. Pp. x + 313. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. ISBN 978 0 19 996938 8. £45.

The once-heated division between liberals and postliberals may not be *the* great divide in twentieth century theology – it seems difficult to fit several important movements and debates into that schema – but it did loom large in late twentieth century Anglo-American theology. Knight does not propose to resolve away but to clarify the substantive methodological differences between them by exposing and correcting the theories of language with which they became entangled.

He does so through close engagement with the theologies of Schubert Ogden and Hans Frei in particular. Ogden and Frei are plausible representatives of these approaches to theology and their respective commitments to the validation of Christian truth claims by public criteria and to the priority and particularity of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. On Knight's account they also exemplify how appropriations of deficient philosophies of language can complicate theological debate.

The origins of their entanglements with linguistic philosophy, Knight argues, lies in the mid-century falsification debates in philosophical theology. To these he turns in chapter two after the helpful overview of the Protestant liberal theological tradition of the nineteenth century that takes up the first chapter. He traces the philosophical background assumed by most participants in that debate, the descriptivism which derived from Bertrand Russell's account of how names refer to objects in the world. Following Russell, descriptivists held that a name refers insofar as it stands for one or more definite descriptions which, alone or together, uniquely describe the object to which it refers. The description thus provides the meaning of the term and the conditions needed to determine whether it refers. It is, Knight points out, a short step from this account of language to Anthony Flew's contention that assertions which are not falsifiable – that is, they do not offer definite descriptions which pick out a unique referent which either exists or does not exist – are meaningless. Assertions of God's existence end up in this category, Flew argued, for in the end those who make them allow nothing to count against them; they fail to offer truth conditions for theistic claims.

Knight takes Schubert Ogden to be one of the more successful liberal responses to this challenge, which are examined in chapter three. Ogden accepted the descriptivist account of language but expanded the range of relevant experiences which might falsify a sentence to include non-sensory experiences, such as the experience of the self. Christian talk of God, as the transcendental ground of all experiences, is falsifiable in just this way, he claimed. In chapter 4, Knight shows how Ogden built on this approach. In Ogden's method, theological claims which conform to a historical-critical reconstruction of the original apostolic witness to Jesus Christ are interpreted as answering questions of the ultimate meaning of reality for human beings, and then evaluated in terms of their credibility as answers to those questions. A descriptive sense of 'God' provided both the key to demythologising the apostolic kerygma and the content of falsifiable theological and existential claims.

Knight takes Frei to inherit from Karl Barth not only the prioritising of ontology over epistemology and the subordination of theological method to the doctrine of God, but also a fear of Feuerbach's critique of theology as anthropocentric projection (chapter five). Frei detected this

anthropocentrism in contemporary liberal theology, where it was closely connected to descriptivism. Frei's rejection of liberal theological method therefore required the rejection of descriptivism, Knight argues in chapter six. To this end Frei (and George Lindbeck) drew on the critique of descriptivism in the later Wittgenstein and Gilbert Ryle and increasingly had recourse to their accounts of language as the only available alternative. Knight's reading of Frei rests largely on the latter's critique of the liberal conflation of meaning with reference in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, which (in chapter seven) he takes as an attack on descriptivism shaped largely by the influence of Wittgenstein and Ryle, alongside Barth and Auerbach.

This attack on descriptivism, Knight claims in chapter eight, provides the continuity between Frei's early and later writings. In those later writings, he argues, Frei's reliance on Wittgenstein became more overt and thoroughgoing as evidenced by Frei's shift in emphasis from seeing the meaning of biblical narratives as constituted by the narrative itself to seeing it as constituted by its use in Christian community. In the end, Knight claims here and in chapter nine, this reliance on Wittgenstein led to Frei from correctly denying that meaning can be reduced to truth conditions to denying any real relationship between meaning and reference, which made it difficult for him to make any sense of his insistence that reference does matter when it comes to the Gospel narratives, with the result that the insistence becomes no more than an appeal to faith.

Frei was right to find descriptivism problematic, however. In chapter nine, Knight rehearses several serious critiques of that theory in the truth-conditional form it takes in Donald Davidson. Most pertinently, it proves impossible to derive the meaning of a sentence with any warranted confidence from the identification of its truth conditions. At the same time, however, Frei, with Wittgenstein, overstates the case in ascribing all constitution of meaning to communal convention. The use of referring singular expressions also plays a part in the meaning of many sentences and only by on this account this can we interpret the meaning of certain sentences, and distinguish the illocutionary force of fiction from factual claim, as Frei needs to but has no means to do.

What is needed, Knight maintains, to correct both accounts of language, is to recognise: (with John Searle) that types of sentence may bear many meanings, but this semantic polysemy is put to use to produce a more determinate speaker meaning in actual sentences; (with William Alston) that the speaker meaning of a sentence, together with contextual factors, determines the truth conditions of a particular assertion, yet single referring expressions play a role too; and that the reference of such expressions may be determined descriptively or directly (as Saul Kripke argued). Such an account allows for greater diversity in theological method than liberals like Ogden would accommodate by allowing for direct reference to God as experienced in individual or communal experience alongside descriptive reference to transcendental experiences. This move in turn makes room for preserving the particularity of the meaning and reference Frei is concerned with. It also enables us to frame divergent liberal and postliberal readings of the resurrection narratives, for example, as different speaker uses of the semantic range of the text, opposed on properly theological, not linguistic-philosophical, grounds. Finally, it removes any need to mystify the character of reference in theological language, as Knight holds Frei does.

I have reservations about Knight's reading of Frei on several counts. Knight is good on Frei's methodological debts to Barth and indicates correctly ways in which Frei followed and sought to correct Barth's method in his own work. Frei's argument in *Eclipse*, however, is at once more

focused than an attack on a whole theory of language and identifies a conflation of meaning and reference in respect of a particular genre that is broader than Russellian descriptivism in character. Despite acknowledgements to the contrary, the need to frame Frei as a counter-part to Ogden seems to lead Knight to attribute to the former a more general theory of meaning than he ever espouses and hence to exaggerate the influence of Wittgenstein upon Frei. For example, while it is plausible to think Wittgenstein informed Frei's scepticism about general theories, Frei had prior, theological reasons for resisting their application to the gospels, which he articulated consistently throughout his career. Wittgenstein likewise provided warrant for close attention to Christian practices and how meaning and understanding function there, but did not supply Frei with their content. Indeed, Frei's account of literal reading is also more complex and nuanced than Knight allows, being a communal consensus about a minimum rule that Jesus Christ is the ascriptive subject of the gospel narratives: a consensus which binds readers to the gospels' narrative structures and which allows for considerable disagreement and diversity, including the pursuit of the historical Jesus, even in his more liberal guises. Closer attention to the way Frei reads the synoptic gospels would also problematize Knight's account, for in practice Frei takes their narrative structure cumulatively to provide truth conditions to determine on what grounds Christian talk of Christ's presence refers. This reading would likewise illumine Frei's tortuous explications of how Scripture refers to Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, where the meaning of Christ's complex divine-human identity as the clue to the manner of his presence is also the clue to how such reference is possible. The attendant mysteriousness is hence properly theological, not Wittgensteinian, for God is radically unlike all other referents.

These caveats notwithstanding, Knight's is a bold and attractive proposal, supported by detailed exposition of demanding authors with impressive clarity and whose constructive elements seem appropriate and illuminating. Frei, for example, can be read as reaching for but failing to frame clearly some of the moves and categories Knight advances. Perhaps the biggest issue Knight's positive suggestions raise relates to the role ascribed to reference in determining meaning. Knight seems to link this role (p. 287) to the rational adjudication of the validity of theological claims, presumably against public criteria. But by whose rationality would they be adjudicated, and what degree of overlap or (ad hoc?) correlation between Christian and other discourses would be necessary to articulate acceptably public criteria to be articulated? Answers to such questions lie outwith the scope of the book but give further reason to look forward to future developments of Knight's constructive agenda.

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