

JONATHAN W. CHAPPELL

Beyond ‘The Warfare of Science with Theology’: George Tyrrell’s Plea for Epistemic Humility

The Catholic Modernist theologian and scholar, George Tyrrell (1861–1909), may be characterised as a Thomist who sought to relate theology constructively to the issues of the day. While his engagement with historical criticism has been well studied, his response to the challenge of science, and particularly of evolution, has been neglected. This article seeks to address this neglect. Having outlined his intellectual context, it explores his cautiously affirmative approach to the idea of evolution, and shows that he was just as opposed to scientific reductionism as he was to the ethical reductionism of liberal Protestantism and to the absolutising of Thomism by his neo-scholastic contemporaries. The rationale for his position is shown to be his neo-Kantian conviction that science and theology are both fallible human endeavours which operate within clear epistemological constraints. A humble recognition of these limits, he believed, could help us move beyond the conflict between science and theology that was apparent in his day.

Keywords: Tyrrell, von Hügel, Modernism, Thomism, neo-scholasticism, evolution, positivism, Harnack, neo-Kantianism, epistemology

Introduction

On 30 September 1904, the Jesuit theologian, George Tyrrell, wrote to Baron Friedrich von Hügel, the Austro-English philosopher and theologian, with whom, for several years, he shared his most intimate thoughts, about the devastating impact that reading Andrew Dickson White’s *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* had on him:

White’s volumes convince me that theology will pursue its course of destruction until at last its own presuppositions and *raison d’être* are brought into controversy ... Hence for the present we should leave ‘apologetic’ alone and confine ourselves purely to that collection and arrangement and presentment of facts that will eventually *force* upon theologians the necessity of readjustments ... if theologians will not let us help ... we must do so indirectly by bombarding theology with facts till it howls for help.¹

1 Petre, M.D. *Autobiography and Life of George Tyrrell in Two Volumes*, Vol. II, *Life of George Tyrrell from 1884–1909*, London: Edward Arnold (1912), Letter from George Tyrrell to Baron Friedrich von Hügel, 30 September 1904, pp. 196–197.

Such sentiments reveal Tyrrell's determination to persuade the Roman Catholic Church to confront the challenge of modernity. He was profoundly struck by the 'accumulative force' of White's case,² which, he believed, clearly showed that the evidence for 'warfare' between science and theology was beyond dispute. It was undeniable that the Church had, in the past, made serious errors when attempting to deal with scientific matters, most notoriously with regard to the Copernican hypothesis.³

Moreover, Tyrrell was concerned by the Church's deep reluctance to embrace the historical-critical method of biblical scholarship.⁴ A particularly stark example of this occurred in October 1902, when the Pontifical Biblical Commission was entrusted with the task of passing judgement on biblical questions which were the subject of debate among Catholic scholars. One of its edicts was to affirm the exclusively Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, although it contained an account of Moses's own death. The Church attempted to resolve the conundrum by claiming that, given that Moses was a prophet, his powers of precognition enabled him to predict his own demise.⁵

For Tyrrell, the Church had been an obstacle to scientific progress, due chiefly to its anachronistic approach to science and its methodology, which he termed 'medievalism'. In his view, if the Church were allowed to continue to impose its views, 'our scientific conceptions today would be those of the Bible'. Such a literalist hermeneutic would result in the conviction that creation stretched back a mere 6,000 years; that fossils were created just as we find them; that meteors and eclipses were miraculous portents; that the stars were hung out like lamps each night; that 'all the races

2 This point is also expounded by Tyrrell in *Through Scylla and Charybdis: Or the Old Theology and the New*, London: Longmans, Green and Co. (1907), p. 201.

3 Tyrrell was staunch in his defence of Galileo and heliocentrism (his letters, for instance, contain innumerable references to the anti-geocentric aphorism, '*Eppur si muove!*'). He conceded, however, that the Church's condemnation of the Copernican model of the solar system was understandable (and hardly surprising) given the Church's 'fear of the spiritual disaster that would result from a sudden revolution of theological thought for which the general mind was as yet wholly [*sic*] unprepared' (Tyrrell, G. *Lex Credendi: A Sequel to Lex Orandi*, London: Longman & Co. (1906), pp. 60–61). Moreover, for Tyrrell, given the Church's commitment to a static conception of truth and scriptural interpretation during this period, it lacked the theological resources to respond adequately when faced with the Galileo challenge.

4 By the mid-twentieth century, the Catholic Church, following the publication of Pope Pius XII's encyclical letter *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (30 September 1943), had become more sympathetic to historical and form-critical methods of biblical scholarship – methods that had already been utilised by Protestant scholars for generations. On the use of the historical-critical methods in Catholic exegesis see the valuable reflections and resources in Robinson, R.B. *Roman Catholic Exegesis since Divino Afflante Spiritu: Hermeneutical Implications*, Atlanta: Scholars Press (1988).

5 *De mosaica authentia Pentateuchi*, On the authenticity of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch (27 June 1906), Pontifical Biblical Commission; see also 'Face to faith', *The Guardian*, 28 February 2009: 'The ideas that led to George Tyrrell's excommunication still confront Christianity, says Oliver Rafferty'.

[were] derived from the three sons of Noah'; and that the plethora of human languages was a 'preternatural phenomenon'.⁶

Tyrrell did not hold these views in isolation. A loose network of theologians and scholars in Germany, France and Italy, which came to be known as the Modernist movement, also shared them.⁷ Tyrrell himself established amicable relationships with many of the most prominent 'Modernists', including Alfred Loisy, Baron Friedrich von Hügel, Ernesto Buonaiuti and Maude Dominica Petre.

The Modernists shook the Roman Catholic Church to its very foundations. They had various concerns – biblical criticism, philosophy, apologetics, science, history – but what united them was a passionate desire to relate traditional Christianity to the issues and questions germane to the modern age. Above all, they were deeply concerned that the growing authoritarianism and antipathy towards the secular world which characterised Catholicism in the opening years of the twentieth century should be energetically resisted.⁸

All the thinkers associated with the Modernist movement were determined that a Galileo-like debacle should never happen again and, accordingly, pressed for reform in the Church. Tyrrell, along with other Modernists, thus wrestled with the question of how to make Christianity meaningful in a scientific age, of how to re-express the tenets of Christian belief in a manner that rendered them intelligible to the 'modern' world.⁹

6 Tyrrell, G. *Medievalism: A Reply to Cardinal Mercier*, London: Longmans, Green and Co. (1908), pp. 124–125.

7 The extent to which the 'Modernist' movement constituted a distinct and homogenous group has been much discussed by historians of the period. Some, such as Ellen Leonard, argue that no 'modernist movement' existed as such (Leonard, E. *George Tyrrell and the Catholic Tradition*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd (1982), p. 26). According to Oliver P. Rafferty, 'Much is made by commentators of the fact that, in a sense, it was Pius X's encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* which created modernism since no coherent body existed as such' (Rafferty, O.P. 'Tyrrell's History and Theology: A Preliminary Survey', in Rafferty, O.P. (ed.) *George Tyrrell and Catholic Modernism*, Dublin: Four Courts Press (2010) p. 24). Moreover, Alex Vidler has pointed out that *Pascendi*, 'was an extremely skilful articulation of the logical implications and outcome of ideas that were being canvassed and disseminated in the Church at the time [...] though not necessarily crystallized in a single person's consciousness' (Vidler, A.R. *A Variety of Catholic Modernists*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1970), p. 16). Nicholas Sagovsky, in his outstandingly balanced and perceptive biography of Tyrrell, entitled '*On God's Side*': *A Life of George Tyrrell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) also concurs with this view: 'Modernism', he writes, 'was, in effect, created by Pius X through the encyclical *Pascendi*. Until September 1907, when the encyclical was published, there was little coherence and a variety of aims in the liberal Catholic movement, but once *Pascendi* appeared, it was widely accepted that the modernist movement represented nothing less than a conspiracy to undermine the Church' (p. 223).

8 See Jodock, D. (ed.) *Catholicism Contending with Modernity: Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2000).

9 See O'Connell, M.R. *Critics on Trial: An Introduction to the Catholic Modernist Crisis*, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press (1994).

George Tyrrell, who has been described as ‘the most important twentieth-century Catholic theologian in England’,¹⁰ is perhaps best known today as one of the most outspoken and notorious of the Roman Catholic Modernists – and also as one of the most tragic. He was born in 1861 in Dublin and, although raised an Anglican, was received into the Catholic Church in 1879 and entered the Jesuit noviciate a year later. Like Gerard Manley Hopkins, he underwent the full rigour of nineteenth-century Jesuit formation. Following priestly ordination, he taught philosophy at St Mary’s Hall, Stonyhurst, from 1894 to 1896. However, his growing intellectual independence, and refusal to adhere to the prescribed curriculum, was considered dangerously subversive, and he was transferred to the fashionable heart of London Jesuitry in Farm Street, where he became a much sought-after spiritual director and confessor. Having made the acquaintance of Baron Friedrich von Hügel, he began to study continental ‘Modernist’ scholars, such as Lucien Laberthonnière and Maurice Blondel, and, after several controversial publications, he was ‘removed’ to the Jesuit house at Richmond in Yorkshire. His refusal to curtail his provocative literary activities, however, eventually led to his dismissal from the Society. Finally, after writing two robust letters to *The Times* condemning the anti-Modernist encyclical, *Pascendi*, he was excommunicated in 1907. He received extreme unction on his deathbed in 1909, but, because of his refusal to abjure his ‘heretical’ views, was denied Catholic burial.¹¹

The Catholic Church’s reactionary stance against the rise of modernity, which historians have traced back to the Counter-Reformation and the Church’s defensive response to the French Revolution, deepened in the nineteenth century.¹² In the ‘Syllabus of Errors’ of 1864, Pope Pius IX had solemnly declared it an error to believe that ‘the Roman pontiff can and should reconcile and adapt himself to progress, liberalism, and the modern civilisation’.¹³ Free scientific and philosophical enquiries were condemned in forceful and uncompromising terms, and ‘Modernism’ was seen as the

10 Scott, G. ‘Foreword’ to J. Broadley & P. Phillips (eds.) *The Ministry of the Printed Word: Scholar-Priests of the Twentieth Century*, Bath: Downside Abbey Press (2016), p. 8.

11 See Chapman, M.D. *The Coming Crisis: The Impact of Eschatology on Theology in Edwardian England*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press (2001). See especially Chap. 7, ‘George Tyrrell: Modernism, Eschatology and the Religious Crisis’, pp.151–167. See also Mursell, G. *English Spirituality: From 1700 to the Present Day*, London: SPCK (2001), pp. 246–250. Tyrrell’s inequitable treatment at the hands of the ecclesiastical authorities caused widespread consternation, not just among his contemporaries, but among subsequent literary figures; the Italian poet and Nobel Laureate, Eugenio Montale (1896–1981), is a notable exemplar of the latter; in his poem, ‘The Smell of Heresy’, Montale expressed his ‘astonishment’ at the unjust way in which Tyrrell was ‘suspended *a divinis*’. See Montale, E. *New Poems*, trans. G. Singh, London: Chatto & Windus (1976), pp. 79–80.

12 See Hales, E.E.Y. *The Catholic Church in the Modern World: A Survey from the French Revolution to the Present*, New York: Doubleday (1960).

13 Denzinger, H. *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 30th edn., trans. R.J. Deferrari, St Louis and London: Herder (1957), 1780.

greatest challenge to the Church's authority since the Reformation. This defensiveness culminated in Pope Pius X's publication of two papal bulls: the Syllabus *Lamentabili sane exitu* and the Encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis*. In both *Lamentabili* and *Pascendi*, Pius X not only condemned the historical-critical approach to the Bible, but also any attempt on the part of the Church to engage with natural science, which it saw as 'atheistic';¹⁴ he cautioned that the natural sciences should only be studied in a way which ensured that they would not 'interfere' with the study of religion.

What concerned 'Modernists' such as Tyrrell most of all was the fact that the Church at the beginning of the twentieth century had clearly not learned the lessons from its past mistakes and was in great danger of repeating them. The Church, he said, 'seems like some little Alpine village doomed by the slow resistance progress of a grinding glacier. Can she change now, even at the eleventh hour, and plant herself elsewhere out of the way?'¹⁵

In contrast, Tyrrell believed that the Church would benefit enormously by learning from the philosophy of Kant and Bergson, the biblical criticism of German liberal Protestantism, the work of historians such as Harnack and, as we shall see, the challenge of Darwinism and evolution. He was persuaded that Catholic dogma did not constitute absolute, immutable truth. Rather, he came to believe that revelation was an 'inner' experience in which God touched the depths of each individual soul.¹⁶ For Tyrrell, a great deal of what purported to be Catholicism was in fact little more than a cluster of supposed verities, which, when subjected to critical interrogation, resulted in nothing but disdain for religion.¹⁷ Tyrrell thus

14 Some historians, such as Eamon Duffy, have sought to present Pope Pius X's reaction to the Modernist Crisis in a more positive light. Duffy argues that Pius X's actions were stringent but not arbitrary. Indeed, Duffy claims, 'it cannot reasonably be doubted that the Pope was responding to a genuine crisis within Catholic theology, as a host of thinkers wrestled, sometimes unsuccessfully, to appropriate for Catholicism new methods and discoveries in the natural sciences, in history and archaeology, and in biblical studies' (Duffy, E. *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes*, 3rd edn., New Haven and London: Yale University Press (2006), p. 327).

15 Tyrrell to von Hügel, November 1906, *von Hügel and Tyrrell Correspondence*, Br. Mus. Add. MSS. 44929.

16 For an informative synopsis of Tyrrell's views on the nature of revelation, see Chapman, R. 'The Thought of George Tyrrell', in Robson, W.W. (ed.) *Essays and Poems Presented to Lord David Cecil*, London: Constable (1970), pp. 149–159; for an analysis of how Modernist-era figures, such as Friedrich von Hügel, Maurice Blondel, Henri Bremond, Alfred Loisy and Tyrrell resisted the narrow and suffocating hyper-intellectualisation of neo-scholastic theology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and worked towards the restoration of the 'mystical element' in the Catholicism of their own time, see the collection of essays in Talar, C.J.T. (ed.) *Modernists and Mystics*, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press (2009).

17 Tyrrell claimed that much of the Church's theology, in addition to its rigid hierarchical structure, had led to the 'wholesale alienation of the educated classes' from Catholicism, and was, moreover, 'responsible for the widespread decay of faith'. See 'The Pope and Modernism', *The Times*, 1 October 1907.

called on the ecclesiastical establishment to embrace a flexible spirit – the spirit which he believed had energised the Church of Augustine, Aquinas, à Kempis and Ignatius of Loyola¹⁸ – which, in fostering both intellectual honesty and holiness, would enable it to be truly open to the modern world.

However, that openness and flexibility was not to be. The result of the Vatican's swift and decisive action led the Church into an intellectual and cultural ghetto.¹⁹ Dissent was ruthlessly expunged and free thought, open debate and meaningful engagement with modern science, philosophy and Scripture were suppressed. The Anti-Modernist Oath, which every priest was obliged to swear,²⁰ was introduced to uphold the Church's doctrinal purity. Extensive spy networks were established among senior clerics to root out opposition. These actions, by any standards draconian, succeeded in eradicating the ideas for which the Modernists had campaigned. The Church thus retreated into the rigid orthodoxy of Ultramontanism²¹ and, in so doing, embalmed the papacy in the grave clothes of the late nineteenth century.²²

It was sixty years before the tide turned. At the Second Vatican Council, from 1962 to 1965, the Church finally reconfigured its relationship to the modern world and, in the process, drew upon the scholarship of those who had learned from the Fathers, the early scholastics, from Protestant thinkers and from Catholics who had in many instances been the victims of ecclesiastical discipline and censure.²³ In the immediate aftermath of

18 See Austin, N. 'Spirituality and Virtue in Christian Formation: A Conversation between Thomistic and Ignatian Traditions', *New Blackfriars* (2016) 97, 202–217. In addition to such seminal figures, the work of the medieval mystic, Julian of Norwich, was a constant inspiration for Tyrrell. He was intrigued by the psychological and theological issues raised by her 'shewings', and impressed by her openness to difficulties that was stifled by the more formulaic, legalistic and rationalistic Church teaching of subsequent centuries. 'It cannot but startle us', he wrote, 'to find doubts that we hastily look upon as peculiarly "modern", set forth in their full strength and wrestled with and overthrown by an unlettered recluse of the fourteenth century'. See, Tyrrell, G. 'A Light from the Past', *The Month* (1900), 95, 12–23, 250–258.

19 See O'Leary, D. *Roman Catholicism and Modern Science: A History*, New York and London: Continuum (2006), pp. 113–128.

20 Except for priests at German universities who refused to take it on the basis that to adhere to the prescription would reduce their status in the eyes of their Protestant colleagues. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

21 Ultramontanism achieved victory over conciliarism at the First Vatican Council (1869–70), convoked by Pope Pius IX, with the pronouncement of papal infallibility (the ability of the Pope to define dogmas free from error *ex cathedra*) and of papal supremacy, i.e., supreme, full, immediate and universal ordinary jurisdiction of the Pope.

22 An excellent discussion of the Church hierarchy's draconian response to the 'Modernist' movement is to be found in Morgan, V. 'Father Tyrrell and the Censorship of His Writings', *The Chesterton Review* (1989) 15(1–2), 95–116; see also Wells, D.F. *The Prophetic Theology of George Tyrrell*, Chico, CA: Scholars Press (1981), pp. 7–16; May, J.L. *Father Tyrrell and the Modernist Movement*, London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd (1938), pp. 235–245.

23 According to Michael Hurley, S.J., Tyrrell's views were to a large extent vindicated by Vatican II. See Hurley, M. 'George Tyrrell and John Sullivan: Sinner and Saint?', 14 July

the Council there was a new openness to the contemporary world and greater willingness to engage with modern thought.²⁴

However, it is precisely because the questions raised by natural science cannot be resolved prematurely by facile or pious dogmatic pronouncements, and because the Church dealt with them so disastrously in the first quarter of the twentieth century, and could potentially do so again, that George Tyrrell's ideas concerning science and religion are worthy of careful consideration. The problems he wrestled with continue to confront Christianity today.

But what exactly were Tyrrell's ideas concerning science and theology? While some historians of modernism, such as John D. Root,²⁵ have acknowledged that the movement was precipitated in part by the devastating impact of scientific discoveries on the Church, most appear to share the verdict of Maude Petre that 'the Modernist crisis arose *mainly* as the outcome of historical criticism'.²⁶ This has meant that, while much work has been done on Tyrrell's engagements with historical-critical approaches to Scripture, insufficient attention has hitherto been paid to his ideas concerning natural science. Indeed, in contrast to the assumptions of many who have written about Tyrrell,²⁷ there is a great deal of evidence which shows that he was greatly concerned with, and had much to say about, the relationship between science and theology.

2009. Available on *Thinking Faith*, the online journal of the Jesuits in Britain, http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20090714_1.htm ; moreover, Fergus Kerr, in *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians: From Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mysticism*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing (2007), shows how Tyrrell's thought served to shape the mind of Vatican II itself: Ernesto Ruffini, Cardinal Archbishop of Palermo, a major figure at the Council, unwittingly complimented Tyrrell when he complained that, 'the idea of the Church as a sacrament came from Tyrrell'. Further, Joseph C. Fenton, another notable ultra-conservative figure at the Council, also objected 'that the whole of the first chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, the document on the nature of the Church, was composed in the language of Tyrrell' (see p. 7). The influential conciliar theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx, expatiated at length on the ecclesiology developed by Tyrrell. For Schillebeeckx, the nature of the Church, as the Body of Christ, is explained in wholly sacramental terms, as the extension of Christ's resurrected body through time. See Schillebeeckx, E. *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, 3rd edn, trans. P. Barrett et al., New York: Sheed and Ward (1963).

24 Nicholas Lash, in a 1977 re-evaluation of the Modernist crisis, situated it at the 'beginning of a twentieth-century Catholic renaissance', an 'in no small measure successful attempt to bring Catholicism "up to date" with the world that came to birth between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries'. See, Lash, N. 'Modernism, Aggiornamento and the Night Battle', in Hastings, A. (ed.) *Bishops and Writers: Aspects of the Evolution of Modern English Catholicism*, Wheathampstead: Anthony Clarke (1977), pp. 51–79 (p. 76).

25 Root, J.D. 'English Catholic Modernism and Science: The Case of George Tyrrell', *Heythrop Journal: A Bimonthly Review of Philosophy and Theology* (1977) 18, 271–288.

26 Petre, M.D. *My Way of Faith*, London: Dent (1937), p. 234.

27 See, for example, Vidler, A.R. *The Modernist Movement in the Roman Catholic Church: Its Origins and Outcome*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1934). Vidler states that Tyrrell's 'interest in science as such was secondary and almost indirect' (p. 142).

Tyrrell's intellectual context and neo-scholasticism

To begin, it is necessary to understand something of the philosophical/intellectual context in which Tyrrell was formed. This tells us much about why Tyrrell thought that there was a problem with the Church's approach to modernity – and shows why he felt spurred on to engage with the challenge of science.

As a young scholastic,²⁸ Tyrrell developed an enduring fascination with the philosophy and theology of St Thomas Aquinas.²⁹ He was greatly influenced by a certain intellectual trend within the Society of Jesus which held that Thomas should be read and understood in his own terms rather than through the 'neo-scholastic' interpretative commentaries of the sixteenth-century Spanish Jesuit, Francisco Suárez. Moreover, this 'Thomas as his own interpreter' school had received the explicit approbation of Pope Leo XIII in his 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris*. Many influential members of the Society, including Tyrrell's religious superiors, begrudged the Pope's intervention, however, and continued to insist that Aquinas be read through a Suárezian prism.

Tyrrell, a mercurial and disputatious character at the best of times, insisted on reading the primary texts of Thomas himself, rather than his commentators. This determination to bypass the accredited (scholastic) manuals and return to the original Thomistic sources is in many respects a precursor of the Ressourcement and Nouvelle Théologie movements within Catholic theology, spearheaded by scholars such as Yves Congar, Karl Rahner, Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar, which, in the period 1930 to 1960, went behind the Church's contemporary teaching to its (primarily patristic) resources to engage anew with the problems of the modern world.³⁰

Tyrrell recalled how his first encounter with the *Summa Theologiae* had a profound effect on him and gave him great hope that Catholic thought could be receptive to the modern world. He became convinced that Thomism, as opposed to scholasticism, was as flexible and expedient a system as could be formulated, on the proviso that one avoided the danger of ab-

28 A 'scholastic' was a student member of the Society of Jesus.

29 Schultenover, D.G. *George Tyrrell: In Search of Catholicism*, Shepherdstown, WV: Patmos Press (1981), pp. 28–32.

30 A thoroughly documented and masterly study, both historical and theological, of Ressourcement, which explores the role of leading Dominican and Jesuit theologians, is Flynn, G. & Murray, P.D. (eds.) *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2012). This book assesses the development of the biblical, liturgical and patristic renewal in France, Germany and Belgium, and offers fresh insights into the thought of the movement's leading scholars. See also Boersma, H. *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2009); Mettepenningen, J. *Nouvelle Théologie – New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II*, London: T&T Clark (2010).

solutising it as the only possible system. Any attempt to absolutise Thomism would have been egregious enough, but to absolutise scholasticism, as many leading Jesuits had done, was utterly indefensible.³¹

However, this resolute refusal to comply with authority brought Tyrrell into sharp conflict with his superiors and identified him from the beginning as a meddler whose whole approach to philosophy and theology was suspect.³² Following ordination, Tyrrell was sent to teach philosophy at the Jesuit seminary, St Mary's Hall, Stonyhurst. However, his combative brilliance and cussed non-conformism soon put him on a collision course with the more conservative philosophers on the seminary staff. As Oliver P. Rafferty has observed, 'The freshness of his approach, his clarity of exposition and the tenacity with which he held his views soon gave rise to something approaching a cult-like status among the more intelligent Jesuit seminarians.'³³ Tyrrell's impact on both colleagues and students was, however, deemed to be too divisive, and he was relieved of his teaching responsibilities in 1896.

Tyrrell soon learned that this enthusiasm for neo-scholasticism was not confined to the Jesuits: it was shared by much of the Church's intelligentsia, which regarded it as the authentic Catholic philosophy, and all other systems were deemed un-Catholic if not heretical. He was forced to conclude that scholasticism and the Roman creed were virtually synonymous: to affirm one was to affirm the other.

Tyrrell came to believe that this insistence on neo-scholasticism, in contrast to the teaching of 'Thomas as he is', was one of the key reasons why the Church had closed itself off from modernity: its system was too fixed, closed and defensive; its categories were too mechanistic; and its sheer rigidity, combined with the assumption on the part of its proponents that it was the 'final word', had a stultifying effect.³⁴ And it was precisely this neo-scholastic mindset which produced both an attitude of resistance to scientific change and a rigid way of conceiving Christian faith. For Tyrrell, 'The problem was that the Church's teaching seemed, at times, to imply that faith was an assent to theological propositions predicated on medieval

31 For a detailed exploration of Tyrrell's struggles with his Jesuit superiors concerning the 'correct' interpretation of Thomism and neo-scholasticism, see Schultenover *op. cit.*, (29), pp. 28–47.

32 Schultenover *op. cit.*, (29), p. 25. Friedrich von Hügel considered Tyrrell a theologian and philosopher with the 'heart of an Irishman and the mind of a German'; see Von Hügel, F. 'Father Tyrrell: Some Memorials of the Last Twelve Years of His Life', *Hibbert Journal* (January 1910) 8, 16.

33 Rafferty, O.P. 'George Tyrrell and Catholic Modernism', 6 July 2009. Available on *Thinking Faith*, the online journal of the Jesuits in Britain, http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20090706_1.htm.

34 See Schultenover *op. cit.*, (29), p. 29.

scholastic reasoning.³⁵

Indeed, as Nicholas Sagovsky has written, the majority of theologians during Tyrrell's time were persuaded that 'Aquinas, interpreted by Suarez, had given to the Church a systematic statement of unchanging Catholic truth'.³⁶ Tyrrell, by contrast, believed in Aquinas 'studied critically as a system; but not delivered dogmatically as *the* final system'.³⁷ An over-rigid adherence to such a system, Tyrrell believed, had led the Church into an intellectual ghetto and had fostered a fortress mentality hostile to anything new or creative. Above all, he deeply resented the fact that, as a Jesuit, his 'first step in converting a man to Christ must be to convert him to Aristotle'.³⁸

For Tyrrell, studying Thomas thus gave him a huge sense of liberation. He became an ardent advocate of Aquinas, not because he thought that Aquinas had produced the definitive theological and philosophical articulation of Catholic belief, but because he adduced a systematic presentation of Christianity, unmatched in its coherence, precision and sheer splendour. Aquinas's greatest gift was as a systematiser, and he should be read as Dante is read, not for specific information, but for his spirit. And it was precisely this 'spirit' of authentic Thomism, this belief in the harmony of faith and reason, which led Tyrrell to the conviction that the Church possessed the resources to engage fruitfully with natural science, and consequently, that it had nothing to fear from the advances of modern thought.

Tyrrell and evolution

This openness to contemporary thought afforded by Thomism gave Tyrrell the intellectual freedom and confidence he needed to engage with many of the scientific issues of his day – and evolution was undoubtedly the most prominent issue he addressed. Although the reception of Darwinism by Christian theology has played a prominent part in the religious and

35 Rafferty, O.P. 'The Enigma of George Tyrrell, S.J. (1861–1909): Catholic Apologist and Excommunicate', in Broadley, J. & Phillips, P. (eds.) *The Ministry of the Printed Word: Scholar-Priests of the Twentieth Century*, Bath: Downside Abbey Press (2016), p. 43. Tyrrell, contra neo-scholastic intellectualism, held that Catholicism is an internal religion; indeed, the basis of religion in humanity is essentially non-rational (i.e., it lies beyond the empirical and linguistic realms). See Tyrrell, G. 'Lex Orandi' in Tyrrell *Essays on Faith and Immortality*, London: Edward Arnold (1914), p. 119ff. In this connection, the thought of the later Ludwig Wittgenstein serves to shed light on Tyrrell's critique of neo-scholasticism. For a close analysis in this respect, see Kerr, F. *Theology After Wittgenstein*, 2nd edn., London: SPCK (1997). Wittgenstein's critique of the theology is, in essence, a critique of neo-scholasticism.

36 Sagovsky, N. *Between Two Worlds: George Tyrrell's Relationship to the Thought of Matthew Arnold*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1983), p. 6.

37 Petre *op. cit.*, (1), p. 46.

38 Tyrrell, G. 'Adaptability as a Proof of Religion' in Tyrrell, *The Faith of the Millions: A Selection of Past Essays*, London: Longmans, Green, and Co. (1901), pp. 277–347 (p. 279).

intellectual historical scholarship of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many scholars of this period have assumed that neither modernism in general, nor Tyrrell in particular, engaged with evolution to any significant degree.³⁹ There is, however, important evidence which shows that Tyrrell gave much thought to the implications of Darwinism and evolution for theology.

The topic of evolution was a live issue for Tyrrell because, when he was writing in 1900, most orthodox English Catholics had still not fully acknowledged the veracity of Darwinism. Indeed, they were still deeply resistant to Darwinian ideas about evolution. In fact, the status of Darwin's theory within ecclesiastical circles was comparable in many respects to that of Copernicanism 200 years after Galileo: although generally accepted in the wider culture, the Church continued to approach it with extreme caution and careful qualification.⁴⁰

It is striking that during the period 1890 to 1910, the relationship between theology and science in general, and particularly that between theology and evolution, was widely discussed among the Catholic intelligentsia in England. Members of the English Province of the Society of Jesus were particularly active and contributed much to the debate. One of the most prominent figures in this regard was John Gerard, Provincial of the English Province of Jesuits from 1897 to 1900, and editor of *The Month*. It is somewhat ironic that Gerard, who was himself an evolutionist, and who clearly possessed considerable knowledge of biology and evolutionary theory, nonetheless felt threatened by Darwinism. This was perhaps because he was aware of how the non-purposive character of Darwinian natural selection could be employed by the Church's adversaries to undermine some of the central tenets of Catholic dogma. He was thus firmly persuaded that to discredit Darwinism would be to the advantage of Catholicism and was therefore determined to utilise his biological knowledge to undermine Darwin's theory. To that end, in 1900, he tried to persuade Tyrrell, who was already gaining a reputation as a sharp and competent Catholic writer,⁴¹ to produce some anti-Darwinist pamphlets for the Catholic Truth Society

Tyrrell gently, but firmly, declined Gerard's request, believing that it was intellectually unacceptable to engage in polemical apologetics of this

39 While John D. Root's paper (*op. cit.*, (25)) is an exception to this rule in that it offers a useful survey of some of Tyrrell's engagements with natural science, insufficient attention is paid therein to Tyrrell's work on evolution.

40 See, Artigas, M., Glick, T.F. & Martínez, R.A. *Negotiating Darwin: The Vatican Confronts Evolution, 1877–1902*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press (2006), pp. 281–283. For a comprehensive discussion of these issues, see also the collection of essays in Caruana, L. (ed.) *Darwin and Catholicism: The Past and Present Dynamics of a Cultural Encounter*, London: T. & T. Clark (2009).

41 See Sagovsky *op. cit.*, (7), pp. 50–64.

sort. The modern world must be embraced, not opposed, he insisted. In his reply to Gerard, dated 17 November 1900, Tyrrell spelt out the grounds for his refusal: 'Supposing I could throw cold water on evolution, would that help any man towards faith?' Whatever might be achieved, he continued, 'by asserting what every educated man denies, and denying what he asserts, can only be partial and temporal; the tide will come in, and around and over, notwithstanding'.⁴²

While scholars such as John D. Root have argued that Tyrrell 'does not appear himself to have been a believer in the evolution of man',⁴³ there is important evidence which clearly shows that Tyrrell was open to Darwinian evolution and held that, if interpreted teleologically, rather than materialistically or naturalistically, it should be enthusiastically embraced. Thus, while Tyrrell shared Gerard's concerns about the non-purposive implications of Darwinism for Christianity, he felt, in stark contrast to Gerard, that the Church had nothing to fear from Darwinian natural selection per se. On the contrary Tyrrell felt that, if read through the lens of divine providence, evolution was actually supportive of theism. The problem with Gerard's approach, according to Tyrrell, was that he had failed to make a clear distinction between evolutionary theory, which both he and Tyrrell agreed was sound, and certain agnostic and naturalistic readings of evolution which were clearly not compatible with Christian theistic belief. These sentiments come across clearly in Tyrrell's letter to Edward Thomas dated 22 July 1904:

There is a materialistic sense in which the doctrine of evolution is fatal to religion, i.e., if it explains the higher as but a complicated case of the lower and gives the highest reality to atoms and physical forces. But if it explains the beginnings by the ends and makes the higher more real than the lower – in a word, if it views the whole process of the world as a gradual self-discloser of a divine idea, I cannot for the life of me see why religious men are so timid about accepting it cordially and candidly. I suppose they shrink from the amount of reinterpretation of dogma that it will involve; but for my part I am convinced that the real gains will be overwhelming and the losses altogether imaginary.⁴⁴

Thus Gerard's defensive and sceptical approach to modern science in general, and his wholesale and unqualified rejection of Darwinian evolution in particular, was, for Tyrrell, symptomatic of precisely the kind of ecclesiastical antipathy to modern science which he identified in his letter to von Hügel. The Church had, in the past, singularly failed to take

42 Tyrrell to Gerard, 17 November 1900, quoted in Barmann, L.F. *Baron Friedrich von Hügel and the Modernist Crisis in England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1972), p. 163.

43 Root *op. cit.*, (25), 275.

44 George Tyrrell's letter to Edward Thomas, 22 July 1904, in Petre, M.D. (ed.) *George Tyrrell's Letters*, London: T. Fisher Unwin (1920), pp. 20–21.

scientific developments seriously, and, in repudiating Darwinism, it was in danger of compounding the error it had made in its condemnation of Copernicanism.

To confirm that Tyrrell is here referring specifically to Darwin, one need only turn to the lengthy discussion he provides of 'Darwinian theory of Natural Selection' in his important essay 'Adaptability as a Proof of Religion'.⁴⁵ Moreover, this essay, in addition to other sources, suggests that the more Tyrrell ruminated on Darwin, the more he became convinced that the challenge to the Church lay not in Darwinism per se, but in the way in which some philosophers, such as Herbert Spencer,⁴⁶ were using the data of evolution to promote a naturalistic and agnostic agenda, and thus undermine theistic belief. The condemnation of naturalism was to become a persistent theme in Tyrrell's work. He was also concerned about the way in which positivist thinkers, like Spencer, seemed to assume that it was possible to gain a total understanding concerning the nature of reality via the methods of the natural sciences. To be clear, it was not Darwin's theory of evolution which Tyrrell fought against, but, rather, Spencerian positivist evolutionism.

Tyrrell was thus particularly conscious of the unique challenge presented by evolutionary theory to Christian belief and was concerned to foster an apologetic that would address the intellectual doubts and concerns of educated Catholics, such as his anonymous 'Professor of Anthropology',⁴⁷ as well as those of reluctant unbelievers.

It is important to consider the question of how much Tyrrell actually knew of Darwin's work. The text of 'Adaptability as a Proof of Religion' unfortunately contains very few references to his sources; however, one source which is cited, and which appears to have been of great significance, was an article by Henry Sidgwick in *Mind*, which addressed the 'contribution from the doctrine of Evolution to ethical science'.⁴⁸ Beyond the essay itself, it is clear that Tyrrell was familiar with the work of the renowned English Catholic scientist, St George Jackson Mivart, who had

45 Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (38). The book title 'The Faith of the Millions' was forced on Tyrrell by the Jesuit censors. Tyrrell himself lampooned it as 'stupid and witless'. British Library Additional Manuscript 52367 *Petre papers*, Tyrrell to Maude Petre, 11 July 1901. See also Rafferty *op. cit.*, (7), pp. 21–22.

46 Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (38), p. 308. For an overview of Spencer's positivist and evolutionary philosophy, see Taylor, M.W. *The Philosophy of Herbert Spencer*, Continuum Studies in British Philosophy, London and New York: Continuum (2007).

47 Tyrrell wrote a 'Letter' to a hypothetical professor of anthropology, which was published as *A Much-Abused Letter*, London: Longmans, Green, and Co. (1906). This letter was printed and circulated privately and anonymously in 1904 as 'A Letter To a Friend, a Professor of Anthropology in a Continental University'. It was reprinted under Tyrrell's name with an Introduction and an Epilogue in 1906. Tyrrell claimed that the 'Professor' was 'a fiction of my brain'; see Petre *op. cit.*, (1), p. 193.

48 Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (38), p. 311, quoting from Henry Sidgwick, *Mind*, 1876, p. 9.

written extensively on evolution. And, more broadly, Tyrrell's membership of the Synthetic Society, which included several distinguished scientists, exposed him to some of the central philosophical and scientific ideas of the day. We also know that Tyrrell gave at least one paper to the Society on the topic of evolutionism and theism, on 9 June 1899, the year in which 'Adaptability as a Proof of Religion' was written.⁴⁹ Although this paper has now been lost in its original form, it is quite possible that it informed the ideas contained in the essay. It thus seems clear that, while Tyrrell's knowledge of Darwinism was largely derivative and was not based on close examination of the primary texts of Darwin himself, he was nonetheless able to gain a general sense of the key principles of Darwinian evolution from these other sources.

Tyrrell starts his analysis in 'Adaptability as a Proof of Religion' by taking evolution to be an 'empirical fact'.⁵⁰ It is 'the statement of observed processes, and belongs to positive science like the observed courses of the planets, or any other observed regularities and uniformities'. Science, he says, 'professes to have found everywhere as far as its experience has extended ... a uniform process of change from the simple to the complex'.⁵¹

However, while the 'regularities of structure and function and development', which we can readily observe in 'any single organism', are an 'admitted fact', the 'mind cannot hold together such collected facts without some binding theory, nor even observe a single fact without some preconception to give meaning to its suggested outlines: for what we really get from our senses bears but a slight ratio to what we fill with our mind'.⁵²

Tyrrell is aware that such empirical data has produced two rival theories by which such a fact is explained: theism and materialism. Both theories 'are strictly independent deductions from the same principle' (i.e. from an orderly world). However, while theism uses what Tyrrell calls the 'argument from adaptability' to advance a metaphysical explanation for the emergence of living things, materialism endeavours to explain this same order and regularity without reference to God. According to Tyrrell, those thinkers who hold to such a materialist account of the cosmos thus 'refuse to see design in it, and ... invent other hypotheses to account for it'.⁵³

For Tyrrell, 'theism and the argument from adaptability ... confirm one another'. Materialism, by contrast, is one of 'several philosophies or attempted explanations of the world, which have either denied or prescind from theism or finality'. He maintains that these two conceptions – theism

49 See Nicholas Sagovsky *op. cit.*, (7), p. 70.

50 Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (38), p. 303.

51 *ibid.*

52 *ibid.*, p. 304.

53 *ibid.*, p. 300.

and finality – ought to be considered as one. This is because, 'by finality we mean the intelligent direction of means towards a pre-conceived end; and therefore to admit a pervading finality, is to imply a theistic origin and government of the universe'.⁵⁴

According to Tyrrell, the 'philosophy of Evolution' has furnished what he describes as 'perhaps the best and most finished attempt to explain the world independently of finality'.⁵⁵ And, he argues, given that it is in the region of organic existence that finalism seeks to establish its principal basis, 'it is especially by Darwinistic Evolutionism that its force is supposed to be destroyed'.⁵⁶ Furthermore, any form of 'monistic' or materialist philosophy finds it far easier to eschew finality than does any form of dualism; and, in his judgement, since what he calls 'Popular Evolutionism' (which he associates with Herbert Spencer's positivistic version of Darwinism) is essentially monistic and materialistic in character, 'it is the best plea for non-finalist philosophy'.⁵⁷

The great flaw of such Spencerian 'non-finalist' positivism is that, while it purports to deal only with the empirical and temporal realm, it nonetheless 'takes us out of the sphere of facts into that of hypotheses and generalisations, and tries to give meaning and unity to the positive information that physical science has collected and classified'. However, this attempt to 'extend to the whole world what is known of the part';⁵⁸ and to 'erect into a cause what is only a [*sic*] orderly statement of facts' is a fallacy which makes it easier for evolutionists to dispense with or ignore finality.

Positivism, according to Tyrrell, is thus guilty of a number of elementary errors. Firstly, although it ostensibly repudiates the very possibility,

54 *ibid.*, p. 302. Tyrrell also advances an argument, subsequently developed by C.S. Lewis (*Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, revd edn, New York: Macmillan (1978)) and Alvin Plantinga (*Warrant and Proper Function*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1993); *Warranted Christian Belief*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2000)), which has come to be known as 'the evolutionary argument against naturalism'. 'Evolution', Tyrrell writes, 'is not making for truth and righteousness as for greater or even as for co-ordinate ends; but simply for life, to which sometimes truth and righteousness, but just as often illusion and selfishness, are means. There is nothing therefore in this process of Nature to make us trust that our mind really makes for truth as such, or that it has any essential tendency to greater correspondence with reality, beyond what subserves to fuller animal existence. The fact that a certain belief makes animal life possible is no proof of its truth, but only of its expediency. The extent to which many pleasures depend on illusion is proverbial; and pleasure is almost the note of vital vigour, according to this philosophy' (Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (38), pp. 319–320). The 'evolutionary argument against naturalism' was first proposed by Arthur Balfour; and it is likely that Tyrrell, who was a member of the Synthetic Society, came across this argument as a result of his contact with Balfour. For a scholarly and informative guide to the current debate, see Beilby, J. (ed.) *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism*, New York: Cornell University Press (2002).

55 Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (38), p. 302.

56 *ibid.*, p. 303.

57 *ibid.*

58 *ibid.*, p. 304.

and indeed coherence, of metaphysics, positivism nonetheless proceeds to construct its own (non-theistic and non-finalist) metaphysical system. And it is here, he believes, that the heart of the philosophical confusion lies: the positivist fails to distinguish clearly between efficient and final causes, to make a distinction between cause seen as natural change (efficient causes) and cause in the sense of an ultimate bringing into being of something from no antecedent state whatever (final cause).

Now, Tyrrell argues, given that the natural sciences are only able to deal with empirical evidence and can only therefore treat of efficient causes, this necessarily restricts the epistemic scope of scientific enquiry and means that, when searching the physical universe for certain kinds of connections, only those which relate to efficient causation will be found. Everything else will perforce be excluded from consideration. Indeed, 'Evolution, whatever form it take, gets rid of theism and finality only by slipping into their place some tendency or indefinable power which it considers adequate to account for the facts to be explained.'⁵⁹

This is particularly evident, Tyrrell avers, when positivists speak of the 'law' of evolution: 'Call Evolution a law and the popular mind will soon vaguely conceive it as a rule or uniformity resulting from some kind of unconscious will-power at the back of everything; and this Will-power stops the gap created in our thought by the exclusion of theism and finality.'⁶⁰

But this, of course, raises the question (which the positivist is unable to answer) of how such a natural 'law' itself originated. Positivists 'say loosely' that events happen

in consequence of the law ... meaning only, in conformity with the law. Thus again the law comes to be mistaken for an effectual power of some kind, whereas it is merely a sort of regularity that might result either from an intelligent will or from something equivalent. But in adroitly slipping-in the conception of a governing force or tendency, or even openly asserting it, with Schopenhauer or Hartmann, and in explaining the graduated resemblances of species by the origin of one from another, and in extending this mode of Evolution in all directions from the known to the unknown so as to make it pervade the universe, we at once cease to be faithful positivists and, becoming philosophers, must submit to philosophic criticism, since these problems cannot be settled merely by an appeal to facts.⁶¹

Such philosophic criticism will readily show, Tyrrell holds, that when this notion of 'law' is 'transferred by analogy to physical uniformities of action, an event which conforms to the observed law or regularity of se-

59 *ibid.*, p. 307.

60 *ibid.*, p. 305.

61 *ibid.*, pp. 305–306.

quence, is not really caused by the law unless we suppose that law to be representative of something equivalent to a fixed will from which it originates'.⁶²

This tendency on the part of positivism to apply science beyond its legitimate province is, Tyrrell claims, particularly tempting in the case of evolutionary theory. This is because its explanatory repertoire is so broad, encompassing elements including competition and adaptation. But it is a grave error to apply scientific categories outside the empirical realm; to assume, in other words, that in the case of 'organic Evolution, one can deny all latent potentialities and preordained ends and throw the whole burden on accidental variations and natural selection'.⁶³

For Tyrrell, by erroneously claiming to possess a total vision of reality, such a positivistic vision leads ineluctably to the apotheosis of science; it also serves, moreover, to impoverish science itself by emptying the world of all mystery and transcendence. Such an exclusive emphasis on efficient (as opposed to final) causes is also employed by the positivist, he claims, to dismiss the need for a Final Cause (and thus the need for God).

However, it is clear to Tyrrell that the rejection of the divine on the part of scientific naturalism simply commits a category mistake. Strictly speaking, the divine does not feature in the scientific account of nature, for the simple reason that the objectives and methodology of science necessarily exclude anything – any hint of feeling or value or intention or purpose – which might point towards a First Cause. It is little wonder that, for the positivist, God is a redundant entity serving no explanatory function. In his review of A.J. Balfour's *The Foundations of Belief* (1895), Tyrrell shows why such a view is little short of incoherent: 'If Naturalism be the legitimate fruit of Evolution, then Evolution has stultified itself; and, in the case of man, is played out, and checkmated'.⁶⁴

A model of creation which is more consonant with theism is one that perceives it as 'the gradual unveiling of a blank canvas, revealing simply a greater extent of the same appearance, but to the gradual unveiling of a picture whose full unity of meaning is held in suspense till the disclosure is completed. We do not now interpret the higher by the lower, but the lower by the higher; the beginning by the end'.⁶⁵

Echoing Ockham's razor, Tyrrell sees a First Cause as infinitely more plausible than an infinite regress of causes: 'surely we may be excused for still adhering to that simpler explanation which involves a mystery indeed,

62 *ibid.*, p. 305.

63 *ibid.*, pp. 306–307.

64 Tyrrell, G. 'Mr. Balfour and the Foundations of Belief, I', *The Month* (April 1895) 83, p. 463.

65 Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (38), p. 329.

but nothing so positively unthinkable as a process without a beginning'.⁶⁶

Ultimately, Tyrrell sums up his view of Darwinism thus:

As long as Evolution claims to be no more than a working scientific hypothesis ... a sort of frame or subjective category into which observed facts are more conveniently fitted, it cannot justly be pressed for a solution of ultimate problems; but when it claims to be a complete philosophy and as such to extrude other philosophies [such as theism] previously in possession, it must show that it can rest the mind where they leave it restless; or that it has proved their proffered solutions spurious. This, so far, it has absolutely failed to do. At most it may determine more accurately the way in which God works out His Idea in Creation. It can stand so long as it is content to prescind from the question of ends and origins; but then it is no longer a complete philosophy. As soon as it attempts to solve those problems it becomes incoherent and unthinkable. Its true complement is theism and finality, which flow from it as naturally, if not quite so immediately as the 'argument from adaptability'. *Deus creavit* is so far the only moderately intelligible, or at least not demonstrably unintelligible, answer given to the problem of *in principio*.⁶⁷

Tyrrell is highly critical of the assumption on the part of positivists that theologians are merely attempting to add something on to what is already (or in principle will be) perfectly explicable naturalistically. He is not, however, endeavouring to step outside nature in a simplistic manner. He is merely saying that natural science points towards – but cannot itself address – the ultimate question of ontology: how is it all possible? Science thus needs to be open to mystery and the possibility of transcendence as much as religion; however, this will not be feasible while it remains encased within its self-referential system.

Tyrrell is careful not to criticise natural science per se. He is simply offering a description of what science is. And the key to its extraordinary success lies in precisely the fact that it investigates those aspects of reality in which questions of purpose, value and feeling and so forth are not of central significance. Science deals with a certain set of epistemological questions; however, ontological questions concerning ultimate meaning and purpose lie beyond its purview.

The problem with positivism is that, caught up in its own self-referential conceptual paradigm, science only asks such questions as it is competent to answer, and the fallacy of positivist or scientistic approaches is to reject as unintelligible or meaningless any question that extends beyond its conceptual and methodological remit. As a result, positivism and naturalism

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p. 343.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 345.

falsely claim to offer a complete picture of reality without the need for anything transcendent.

Criticism of Harnack

If Tyrrell was concerned about the way in which certain positivist philosophers, such as Spencer, were denying the importance of finality, and thus prescinding from the mystical and transcendental, he was equally concerned about the way in which liberal Protestants, such as Adolf von Harnack, were using historical-critical methods to gradually undermine the truths of the Christian faith contained in Scripture and the credal statements of the early Church. While the positivist committed the error of scientific reductionism, the liberal Protestant committed the sin of ethical reductionism.

Harnack, whose theology represented what many regard as the classic exposition of liberal Christianity in the early twentieth century, developed the historical-critical method of earlier theologians such as Albrecht Ritschl, who had rejected the a priori argumentation in historical analysis. Harnack argued that the message of the original gospel preached by Jesus had been obscured by the growing Hellenisation of the early Christian Church. Under the influence of the Hellenistic tradition, Christianity had become preoccupied with 'dogma', which, for Harnack, referred paradigmatically to the Christological and Trinitarian definitions of the ecumenical councils of the fourth and fifth centuries. While the authentic message of the gospel had not been lost in its entirety, the pernicious influence of Hellenistic thought had resulted in the dependence of Christian belief upon a speculative metaphysics, and the historical Jesus upon an 'imagined Christ'.⁶⁸

For Harnack, the 'original' message of Jesus, as found, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount, was essentially ethical in character. Far from being preoccupied with 'eschatology' or the 'supernatural', Harnack's reconstructed historical Jesus was primarily, if not solely, concerned with immanent existential reality. Jesus taught a higher righteousness and the commandment of love – and it is these ethical principles which, for Harnack, constitute the very essence of Christian faith.

Tyrrell's most forceful critique of Harnack is contained in his posthumously published *Christianity at the Crossroads*. In this work, he makes it plain that Harnack's ethically reductionist Christology was simply a

68 Harnack, A. von 'Revelation and Theology: the Barth–Harnack Correspondence', in Rumscheidt, M. (ed.) *Adolf von Harnack: Liberal Theology at its Height*, London: Collins Liturgical Publications (1989), p. 87.

reflection of Harnack's own liberal hermeneutical prejudices.⁶⁹ He argued that 'the Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well'.⁷⁰

Tyrrell held that Harnack's model of Christianity was more akin to a 'system of religious ethics than a religion';⁷¹ and while he conceded that the Jesus of liberal Protestantism was not quite pure myth, its fundamental problem was that, 'having eliminated what was principal in the Gospel, they have retained and segregated what was but secondary and subordinate – the moral element'.⁷²

As part of his research for *Christianity at the Crossroads*, Tyrrell had read the work of Albert Schweitzer, particularly his *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, and followed the example of the latter by rejecting theological liberalism and calling instead for a Christian transcendentalism based upon an eschatological interpretation of the Gospels with its emphasis on Christ's otherness and strangeness.⁷³ This growing emphasis on the mysterious and the transcendent as an essential element in any understanding of Christ comes across very clearly in his article, 'Mysteries: A Necessity of Life' published in the Jesuit periodical, *The Month*, in 1902.⁷⁴ Here Tyrrell underscores, for example, the centrality of a 'higher life' as a counter to any rationalistic attempt to reduce religion to a purely this-worldly phenomenon.⁷⁵ The 'mystery-hunger' of the soul, he averred, was 'not to be checked, but rather deepened and fostered as an indispensable

69 In an article which was published shortly after his death, Tyrrell condemned the Christology of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and Albrecht Ritschl (1822–89) on similar grounds. See Tyrrell, G. 'The Point at Issue', in Jacks, L.P. (ed.) *Jesus or Christ?* Hibbert Journal Supplement, London: Williams & Norgate (1909), pp. 15–16.

70 Tyrrell, G. *Christianity at the Crossroads*, London: Longmans, Green and Co. (1909), p. 44. Intriguingly, the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, remarks, in his magisterial work, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press (2007), that it is ironic that Tyrrell, who in his lifetime was pilloried for his 'Modernism', should, in his attack on liberal Protestantism, articulate views which would certainly not be gainsaid by Ultramontane Catholics (p. 292).

71 Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (70), p. 66.

72 *ibid.*, p. 88. Tyrrell, it seems, feared that liberal Protestantism, if pushed to its logical conclusion, would result in nihilistic textualism. See Hyman, G. *The Predicament of Post-modern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press (2004).

73 For a perceptive analysis of Tyrrell's approach to apocalyptic, see Ballard, R. 'George Tyrrell and the Apocalyptic Vision of Christ', *Theology* (1975) 38, 459–467. A nuanced reading of Schweitzer's 'thoroughgoing eschatology' is offered by Paul Tillich in *A History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism*, ed. Carl E. Braaten, New York: Simon and Schuster (1968), pp. 521–523.

74 Tyrrell, G. 'Mysteries: A Necessity of Life', *The Month* (November 1902) 461, 449–459. This article was subsequently republished in Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (2), pp. 155–190. References are to the original publication.

75 *ibid.*, 455.

condition of subjective development'.⁷⁶

Such an emphasis on the 'higher life', he wrote to von Hügel in April 1909, was the only way of resisting what he increasingly came to regard as the 'Sunday-school teacher Christ' of liberal Protestantism. He was quite emphatic that:

If we cannot save huge chunks of transcendentalism, Christianity must go. Civilization can do (and has done) all that the purely immanentist Christ of Matthew Arnold is credited with. The other-worldly emphasis; the doctrine of immortality was what gave Christianity its original impulse and sent martyrs to the lions. If that is accidental we only owe to Jesus in a great measure what we owe to all good men in some measure. In the sense of survival and immortality the Resurrection is our critical and central dogma.⁷⁷

It was thus only the transcendence of the historical Jesus, built on a firm eschatological and apocalyptic foundation, which, for Tyrrell, would obviate Christianity being reduced to the level of a mere ethical system.⁷⁸

While superficially, one might see some similarity between Harnack and Tyrrell, inasmuch as both were concerned with challenging the dogmatic stasis that had paralysed both the Protestant and Catholic theological traditions of their day, it is clear that, for Tyrrell, Harnack's attempt to reform Christianity by purging it of its metaphysical and transcendental dimension was profoundly wrong-headed. Such an approach only served to undermine the truths of the Christian faith.

Moreover, such a tendency among liberal Protestants to privilege what Tyrrell called the 'secondary and subordinate' ethical dimension in the teaching of Christ mirrors his principal objection to scientific positivism: its insistence that legitimate and meaningful knowledge resided in the investigation of empirical facts alone (efficient causes) – and the resultant exclusion of any consideration of final causes. Like Herbert Spencer and the positivists, liberal Protestants, then, in their purely 'ethical' reading of Christianity, had eschewed the supernatural and the transcendental – and had eliminated all mystery. Tyrrell was thus clear that neither science nor theology possessed the resources to offer an exhaustive explanatory vision of reality – without reference to any truth or meaning which might lie outside (or beyond) their own self-contained systems.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 457.

⁷⁷ Tyrrell to von Hügel, 9 April 1909, cited in Sagovsky *op. cit.*, (7), p. 255.

⁷⁸ For a lucid exploration of these issues, see Sagovsky, N. 'The Christology of George Tyrrell', *King's Theological Review* (1979) 2, 23–31.

The epistemological limits of science and theology

What has become clear in the preceding sections is Tyrrell's opposition to any attempt to reduce reality to a self-contained and self-referential system. If agnostic scientists and liberal Protestants were wrong in their assumption that the mystery of reality could be reduced to self-referential systems (positivism, on the one hand, and ethical reductionism, on the other), conservative Roman Catholic theologians were equally wrong to assume that the neo-scholastic system of philosophy and theology had the ability to grasp the ultimate truth about the nature of God or reality.

Indeed, for Tyrrell, the Church's contention that it possessed final and immutable truth – a belief which had been mightily reinforced by the declaration of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council in 1870 – was becoming increasingly untenable in the modern age.⁷⁹ One of the advantages of the Church's being open to modern scientific developments, he believed, was that empirical data was progressively falsifying some of its key dogmas, and this was showing the conservative theologians that their supposedly 'eternal' dogmas were in fact merely provisional hypotheses. The implication of this, for Tyrrell, was quite plain: 'the Church in proving herself fallible in science proves herself fallible in theology'.⁸⁰ Alec R. Vidler puts it well in this connection when he states that the strength of Tyrrell's position 'is that, since the conclusions of theology are admittedly provisional and analogous, it can fearlessly profess its willingness to come to terms with science and historical criticism'.⁸¹

However, this raised a central question in Tyrrell's mind concerning the correct relation between science and religion. For if the Church's traditional teachings were indeed subject to falsification by science and were indeed being progressively vitiated by the advance of modern knowledge, where exactly does that leave theology? And does it suggest that science is in some way superior to religion?

Tyrrell was at pains to defend the Church against what he considered such an attempt by some to undermine religion. This is evidenced by the fact that one of his earliest concerns – and one which would remain an essential leitmotif throughout his life – was apologetics. For instance, as early as 1893, he perceived 'the fluctuating character of science and criticism' and desired 'to relieve the majority of believers from the mental

⁷⁹ A splendid discussion of the way in which both Catholics and Protestants reacted defensively to the intellectual challenge of the Enlightenment – Catholics declaring papal infallibility and Protestant fundamentalists insisting on the inerrancy of God's Word written – is to be found in Wright, A. *Christianity and Critical Realism: Ambiguity, Truth and Theological Literacy*, London and New York: Routledge (2013), pp. 88–98.

⁸⁰ Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (6), p. 129.

⁸¹ Vidler *op. cit.*, (27), pp. 173–174; see also Ratté, J. *Three Modernists: Alfred Loisy, George Tyrrell and William L. Sullivan*, London: The Catholic Book Club (1972), pp. 207–256.

disturbance inseparable from the erroneous impression that their faith is in continual jeopardy at the hands of scientists and critics'.⁸²

Keen as Tyrrell was to address the challenges confronting theology and science, his first priority always lay in helping Catholics to preserve their faith. In this sense, his concern was a pastoral one. For instance, he said that an intelligent Catholic's principal gripe lay 'not with the Church, but with the theologians'.⁸³ This was expressed most forcefully in his letter to a (hypothetical) professor of anthropology (1906),⁸⁴ in which Tyrrell addressed the conflicted thinking on the part of a Catholic working in a scientific field. Such a person, he realised, could easily fall into a state of 'perfectly inculpable theological confusion'⁸⁵ simply because they were 'inexpert' in criticism.⁸⁶

Tyrrell's growing friendship with von Hügel between 1897 and 1900⁸⁷ coincided with a nascent attempt on his part to reconcile science and religion, and led to his adoption of what he called 'mediatorial liberalism'. This position, usually associated with Wilfrid Ward, has been referred to by Alec R. Vidler as a 'judicious compromise between liberalism and conservatism',⁸⁸ and held out the hope that a final synthesis between faith and science might be possible.⁸⁹

The hope of such a 'judicious compromise' was not destined to last, however, for Tyrrell was becoming increasingly concerned about the way in which natural science – and positivism in particular – was operating on the wholly unwarranted assumption that it was superior to religion. He posed the following rhetorical question:

How comes it then ... that in the so-called conflict between science and religion, it is usually assumed that one is an easily defended proposition, as it were already in possession, the other apologetic, tentative, tenuous; science a body of doctrine philosophically unassailable, rest-

82 Ranchetti, M. *The Catholic Modernists: A Study of the Religious Reform Movement, 1864–1907*, trans. Isabel Quigley, London: Oxford University Press (1969), p. 48, quotes this without specific reference.

83 Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (47), p. 87.

84 Published as *A Much-Abused Letter*, see note 47.

85 Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (47), p. 7.

86 *ibid.*, (47), p. 8. As Clyde F. Crews observes in this context, Maude Petre was convinced that Tyrrell's Modernism, 'was not so much an intellectual's aberration as a pastoral response to a widely felt human need. Tyrrell had repeatedly met people in counselling who were crushed in spirit by dry and overly analytical scholastic theology'. See Crews, C.F. *English Catholic Modernism: Maude Petre's Way of Faith*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press (1984), p. 79.

87 See Petre, M.D. *Von Hügel and Tyrrell: The Story of a Friendship*, London: J.M. Dent (1937); see also Macpherson, D. 'Von Hügel on George Tyrrell.' *The Month* (1971) 232, 178–180.

88 Vidler *op. cit.*, (27), p. 149.

89 Tyrrell, G. "Liberal" Catholicism', *The Month* (May 1898) 91, 455.

ing on grounds which are the criterion of all right thought; religion not indeed an assailant, but a claimant to a share of that throne from which science has provisionally thrust it down till it can prove its claim, according to the same criterion. Whence this pretension to a non-existent superiority on the part of science? And whence so wide-spread a submission to these pretensions, even on the part of religion itself?⁹⁰

It is clear from the sentiments expressed here that he would not tolerate the rejection of religion by science.

Moreover, Tyrrell was also resolute in the face of those advocates of naturalism and materialism who confidently announced the death of traditional Christian belief. In a series of publications in the 1890s, he took to task those who claimed that, in a scientific age, it was impossible for any 'sincere' man to retain the faith.⁹¹

But he was still left with the problem of how to relate theology and science – and, more pressingly, how to preserve the kernel of religious faith once the disposable husk had either been methodologically excluded by 'science' or rejected as 'mythological' by the historical-critical method.⁹² One possible solution, of course, had been adduced by John Henry Newman and enthusiastically endorsed by Newman's theological champions, such as Ward. This was the notion that the Church's doctrine 'developed' over time: while doctrine evolved organically through the centuries, the germ or essence of the doctrine nonetheless remained forever the same. It was this idea which led Newmanites such as Ward to argue that some form of 'synthesis' between the '*depositum fidei*' and evolutionary theory was possible. The truths of religion could thus be preserved from corruption, Ward claimed, because, although they 'developed' in response to modern thought, their essence remained unchanged.

Tyrrell considered Ward's Newmanite proposals concerning the development of doctrine – and its potential for forging a reconciliation between science and theology – in an article entitled 'Semper Eadem', published in 1903. This article, which began life as a review of Ward's *Problems and Persons*, flatly rejected Ward's attempt to establish a *via media* 'between scholastic theology and science – between the old theology and the new'.⁹³ For Tyrrell, the chief error committed by Ward, following Newman, was

90 Tyrrell, G. 'Mr. Balfour and the Foundations of Belief, II', *The Month* (May 1895) 84, 16–32.

91 See Tyrrell, G. 'An Apostle of Naturalism, I & II', *The Month* (October–November 1895) 85, 215–228, 258–378.

92 Tyrrell, G. 'The Rights and Limits of Theology', in Tyrrell, *op. cit.* (2), pp. 200–241 (p. 226). For a discussion of the complex nature of the problem that confronted Tyrrell, see Stephen Prickett's *Words and The Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1986), pp. 37–68.

93 George Tyrrell, new introduction to 'Semper Eadem (I)', in Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (2), pp. 106–132 (p. 107). (This article first appeared in *The Month* (January 1904) 102, 1–17.)

his manifest failure to recognise that, while in the natural sciences there is indeed a development of thought analogous to the growth from germ to organism, 'the germ and the organism are not the same thing'.⁹⁴ Likewise, in theology, the developed doctrines are in no plain sense 'the same'; they are doctrines about the same thing, but not, *pace* Newman and Ward, the same doctrines.⁹⁵

Tyrrell argued that it was impossible to reconcile what he refers to as the 'earlier and stricter view as to the unchanging, unprogressive character of the apostolic revelation', with Newman-style 'theories of development, dialectical or otherwise',⁹⁶ which are 'altogether inconsistent' with the patristic conception of the unanimity and immutability of the *depositum fidei*.⁹⁷ Thus the attempt by the Newmanites to claim that doctrine was both 'immutable' and, at the same time, subject to 'development', was, in his view, little short of oxymoronic.⁹⁸

Clearly another, and much more radical, approach to the problem was required. The beginnings of a solution gradually started to take shape in Tyrrell's mind. The more he pondered the relationship between science and religion, the more he began to realise that the chief difficulty was at bottom epistemological, namely the claim to final knowledge on the part of both the theologian and the scientist. What each failed to grasp was that neither faith nor scientific knowledge was an immutable verity that could be apprehended with unambiguous certainty. Any light that each might afford is also accompanied by some darkness, for human reason simply does not possess the almost supersensible abilities attributed to it by either theology or science. Tyrrell expressed it thus:

Up to a certain point faith and doubt traverse the same path undistinguished, and then they separate at its bifurcation and take on, each its own distinctive characteristic. In other words, they have a common

94 *ibid.*, p. 115.

95 *ibid.*, pp. 115–116. Sagovsky elaborates in detail concerning Tyrrell's intellectual and spiritual debt to Newman. See Sagovsky, N. "Frustration, Disillusion and Enduring Filial Respect": George Tyrrell's Debt to John Henry Newman', in Weaver, M.J. (ed.) *Newman and the Modernists*, New York: University Press of America (1985), pp. 97–137.

96 Tyrrell, G. 'Introduction', in Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (2), p. 4.

97 *ibid.*, p. 9. In this context, Tyrrell urges that, by '... No longer holding to revelation and dogma as mere theology, we could rid ourselves frankly of all those fallacious "germ-and-organism" metaphors which attempt to describe spiritual in terms of physiological development' (*ibid.*, p. 12).

98 In his Introduction to Henri Bremond's *The Mystery of Newman*, trans. H.C. Corrance, London: Williams and Norgate (1907), Tyrrell argued that the Modernists had appropriated Newman's notion of 'development' and 'turned [it] against much of that system in whose defence he [Newman] had framed it'. Furthermore, 'Newman's incontestable abhorrence of doctrinal liberalism does not at once prove that he may not be the progenitor of it' (p. xv). See also Daly, G. 'Newman, Divine Revelation, and the Catholic Modernists', in Merrigan, T & Ker, I.T. (eds.) *Newman and the Word*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs vol. 27, Louvain: Peeters Press (2000), pp. 55–56.

element in that deep sense of the insufficiency of the human mind to grasp and hold firmly the ultimate and vital truths of eternity.⁹⁹

The intrinsic limitations and ‘infirmities’ of human reason mean that there is always an element of uncertainty in human knowledge.¹⁰⁰ And this uncertainty, Tyrrell maintained, applies just as much to science as it does to theology. This means that:

in truth we must not shrink from the paradox that contemporary science and history is always wrong; not wholly wrong, nor void of all grounds for priding itself on advance; but mingling so much extravagance and excess with its reason, so much dross with its gold, as to make it invariably safe to hold back and wait.¹⁰¹

The real difficulty lay, then, Tyrrell wrote in a letter to Ward, in ‘the cock-sureness of both scientist and theologian being at the root of it all’,¹⁰² the confident assumption that either possessed the capacity to fully grasp the mystery of reality. The false lemma that final and exclusive truth lay in either science or theology had led, he argued, to both scientists and ecclesiastics being paralysed for centuries ‘by the illusion of an imaginary contradiction between truth and truth, between revelation and science’.¹⁰³

Tyrrell became convinced that the way forward lay in epistemic humility: the realisation on the part of both the scientist and the theologian that their disciplines constituted provisional, partial and imperfect attempts to apprehend fundamental reality.

Whatever some of its more conservative practitioners might hold, for Tyrrell, theology, like science, should be an essentially inductive – as opposed to a logically deductive, syllogistic – approach to learning what is true.¹⁰⁴ It should endeavour to understand reality as it unfolds experientially rather than deducing the logical consequences of a set of (putatively) pre-established doctrinal axioms or propositions. Theological ‘knowledge’ of God is not, therefore, apprehended a priori, but, rather, is acquired a posteriori via our sense-experience; and, given that our experience of any reality, whether it be metaphysical or empirical, is necessarily incomplete,

99 Tyrrell, G. *Oil and Wine*, London: Longmans, Green, and Co. (1907), p. 56. ‘And drawing nigh he bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine’ (The Good Samaritan, Luke 10:34).

100 *ibid.*, p. 57.

101 Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (89).

102 Tyrrell to Ward, June 1899, quoted in Petre *op. cit.*, (1), p. 105.

103 Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (6), p. 126.

104 In an article published in *The Times* on 1 October 1907, Tyrrell attacked what he perceived as Pope Pius X’s insistence in the encyclical *Pascendi* that, ‘Religion is derived by deductive reasoning from natural and miraculous phenomena’; an early affirmation and defence of the ‘growth of historical and inductive methods’, which Tyrrell describes as ‘advantageous to piety and religion’, is to be found in his Preface to Henri Joly’s *The Psychology of the Saints*, London: Duckworth and Co. (1898), p. viii.

provisional, historically contingent and limited, it must perforce be open to correction and perpetual modification. It is this very fact – this radical contingency – that renders both the sacred and the secular sciences fallible and mutable.

Tyrrell gained some philosophical grip on these as yet inchoate ideas by turning to the work of Immanuel Kant.¹⁰⁵ In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant made a clear distinction between what he referred to as 'noumenon' and 'phenomenon'. While 'phenomenon' refers to anything which is an object of, or can be apprehended by, the senses, 'noumenon' denotes a realm which, while it may exist, is nonetheless completely unknowable via human sense-experience. For Kant, the unknowable noumenon is associated with the unknowable 'thing-in-itself'.

This Kantian epistemology helped Tyrrell to formulate his sense of the limitations of all human knowledge and understanding.¹⁰⁶ For, like Kant, he began to see that, although it is possible for the human mind to grasp phenomena, the ability to apprehend the noumenal realm will always be obscured. Human reason simply cannot, Tyrrell insisted, operate independently of the stream of sense-data.¹⁰⁷ This premise perforce excludes all forms of traditional metaphysics.

Accordingly, Tyrrell began to realise that it is impossible for 'reason to take flight into the firmament and peruse God'.¹⁰⁸ Nor can reason penetrate the deepest mysteries of the cosmos. Human reason is incapable of fathoming the ineffable mystery of the divine. Moreover, reason processes, classifies and organises the data it receives via the five senses.¹⁰⁹ It is the faculty which mediates between the world as it is and the world as we per-

105 For a good discussion of the philosophical influence on Tyrrell's thought, see Carroll, A.J. 'The Philosophical Foundations of Catholic Modernism', in Rafferty *op. cit.*, (7), pp. 38–55; see also Rutler, G.W. *Christ and Reason: An Introduction to Ideas from Kant to Tyrrell*, Front Royal, VA: Christendom Press (1990), pp. 147–183.

106 Many Catholic theologians were disturbed by the neo-Kantian elements in Tyrrell's thought because they regarded them as a direct challenge to Catholic orthodoxy. Indeed, Pope Pius X identified these ideas and repudiated them in *Pascendi*. See also Bampton, J. *Modernism and Modern Thought*, London: Sands and Co. (1913), pp. 36–37; see Marc, A. *Raison philosophique et religion révélée*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer (1955), pp. 14–27. To some extent, a parallel can be drawn between Tyrrell's ideas and those of the philosophical and theological movement known as Transcendental Thomism, associated with Joseph Maréchal (1878–1944), Karl Rahner (1904–84) and Bernard Lonergan (1904–84), which sought to reconcile Thomism with a Cartesian subjectivist approach to knowledge in general and Kantian epistemology in particular. See Cullen, C.M. 'Transcendental Thomism: Realism Rejected', in Sweetman, B. (ed.) *The Failure of Modernism: The Cartesian Legacy and Contemporary Pluralism*, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press (1999), pp. 72–86.

107 See Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (2), p. 91; Tyrrell, G. *Hard Sayings: A Selection of Meditations and Studies*, London: Longmans, Green, and Co. (1904), p. 31; Tyrrell, G. *The Faith of the Millions: A Selection of Past Essays*, London: Longmans, Green, and Co. (1901), p. 234.

108 Wells *op. cit.*, (22), p. 28.

109 See Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (70), p. 207.

ceive it to be. While such a faculty is essential if we are to know anything at all, it also means, however, that our knowledge is necessarily one step removed from the object of perception.¹¹⁰ Tyrrell thus adopts a form of critical (or indirect) realism which holds that, although there is a (mind-independent) objective reality which exists beyond our senses, our ability to capture or 'pin down' this reality is always incomplete, provisional and partial.¹¹¹

A corollary of such a view is that theology, far from being an exact science, should be a rumination on our intuitive 'sense' of the divine; an intellectual response to our consciousness of a presence which is other than human.¹¹² But how does one differentiate between this intuitive 'sense' of the divine and the elaborate doctrinal accretions which have gained a stranglehold over the Church's very life and thought? This desire to disentangle these two led Tyrrell to elucidate an important distinction which became central to his thought.

An indication of exactly how Tyrrell would develop this distinction can be seen as early as November 1899, in 'The Relation of Theology to Devotion',¹¹³ This work, Tyrrell claimed, marked a 'turning-point in my own theological experience', and was an 'explicit statement' or 'analytical index' of ideas he would subsequently develop.¹¹⁴ Tyrrell drew a sharp distinction in this essay between dogmatic theology and revelation.¹¹⁵ The relation of theology to revelation is likened to the relation of science to

110 Tyrrell, G. *Lex Orandi: Or Prayer and Creed*, London: Longmans, Green and Co. (1903), p. 68.

111 Tyrrell's philosophical position was analogous in some respects to the 'critical realist' epistemology subsequently developed by thinkers such as Roy A. Bhaskar in *A Realist Theory of Science*, 2nd edn, London: Verso (1997); for a more explicitly theological elaboration of this, see McGrath, A.E. *A Scientific Theology: 2 – Reality*, London: Continuum (2002).

112 Like the French philosopher, Maurice Blondel (1861–1949), Tyrrell held that a human being's whole volitional activity is actually an affirmation of the existence of God. See Wells *op. cit.*, (22), p. 30. See also, in this connection, Blondel, M. *The Letter of Apologetics and History and Dogma*, trans. Alexander Dru & Illtyd Trethowan, London: Harvill Press (1964).

113 Tyrrell, G. 'Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi', in Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (2), pp. 85–105 (pp. 86–88). (This essay was first published as 'The Relation of Theology to Devotion', in *The Month* (November 1899) 94, 461–473.)

114 *ibid.*, p. 85. According to Maude Petre, this work 'contained the kernel of all that he really ever wanted to say'. Petre *op. cit.*, (1), p. 290. Vidler *op. cit.*, (27), p. 154, claimed that this essay was 'a definite and explicit anticipation of what was to come'. Tyrrell also wrote to von Hügel making the same point. See von Hügel's *Selected Letters: 1896–1924* ed. B. Holland, London: J. M. Dent, 1927, p. 166.

115 Tyrrell argues in this vein that, 'Devotion and religion existed before theology, in the way that art existed before art-criticism; reasoning, before logic; speech, before grammar. Art-criticism, as far as it formulates and justifies the best work of the best artists, may dictate to and correct inferior workmen; and theology, as far as it formulates and justifies the devotion of the best Catholics, and as far as it is true to the life of faith and charity as actually lived, so far is it a law and corrective of all. But when it begins to contradict the facts of that spiritual life, it loses its reality and its authority; and needs itself to be corrected by the *lex orandi*'. Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (113), p. 105.

nature. While theology is an abstract presentation of the data of revelation, natural science is an abstract presentation of the data of nature. Tyrrell describes both dogmatic theology and natural science as 'hypothetical' discourses.¹¹⁶

As far as the natural world is concerned, Tyrrell argues, 'what is scientifically true in the abstract, may be practically false in the concrete'. The problem becomes even more acute when attempting to describe the metaphysical realm, 'for we can think and speak of it only in analogous terms borrowed from the world of our sensuous experience, and with no more exactitude than when we would express music in terms of colour, or colour in terms of music'.¹¹⁷ All theological discourse must therefore be subjected to what Tyrrell calls 'the *lex orandi* test';¹¹⁸ it must be reminded that, 'like science, its hypotheses, theories, and explanations, must square with the facts' – the facts here being the lives lived by those who profess the Christian faith.¹¹⁹

This line of thought was adduced with greater precision by Tyrrell in *Lex Orandi: Or Prayer and Creed* (1903). Here he maintained that we must learn to differentiate between 'God as He is given in our [personal] experience' and God 'as He is represented in the constructions of our religious understanding'¹²⁰ – just as we must distinguish, *mutatis mutandis*, between 'nature which presses and acts on us as a whole' and the nature as known only through 'the enigmatical constructions and symbols of science'.¹²¹ Theology and science are alike imperfect expressions of an un-

116 *ibid.*, pp. 87–88.

117 *ibid.*, pp. 88–89.

118 *ibid.*, p. 104.

119 *ibid.*

120 Tyrrell insisted on the primacy of the interior experience of revelation, which, for him, existed *sui generis*. However, as Delia A. Candelario has noted, such 'an exaggerated emphasis on inner religious experience ... led him inevitably to a separation of the interior dimension of revelation from its verbal expressions and doctrinal formulations'. Candelario argues that post-conciliar work in the theology of revelation, such as that of Karl Rahner, offers a key to resolving Tyrrell's dilemma. For, while 'Rahner also affirms the primacy of the originating inner experience of God', he also 'stresses at the same time the intrinsic unity between this transcendental revelation and its categorical, historical dimension'. Candelario maintains, following Rahner, that the way forward lies in positive dialogue between revelation and theology. See Candelario, D.A. 'George Tyrrell and Karl Rahner: A Dialogue on Revelation', *Heythrop Journal: A Bimonthly Review of Philosophy and Theology* (2009) 50, 44–57, 44; Tyrrell, G. 'Revelation as Experience: An Unpublished Lecture of George Tyrrell', edited with notes and historical introduction by Thomas Michael Loome, *Heythrop Journal: A Bimonthly Review of Philosophy and Theology* (1971) 12, 117–149; Rahner, K. *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. W.V. Dych, New York: Crossroad (1995), pp. 138–175; O'Collins, G. *Revelation: Towards a Christian Interpretation of God's Self-Revelation in Jesus Christ*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2016), pp. 78–79. See also Maher, A.M. *The Forgotten Jesuit of Catholic Modernism: George Tyrrell's Prophetic Theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press (2018), p. 173ff.

121 Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (110), p. 70.

derlying reality: both discourses employ symbolic language to attempt to describe that which is beyond human computation.¹²² The danger arises if one discourse claims to possess privileged access to this underlying reality. As Tyrrell was to explain, with great insight, ironically, the consequence of theology claiming such privileged access will be that religious faith is undermined:

We forget that the issue is not directly between faith and knowledge, but between theology, which is one part of the field of knowledge, and the rest of the same field. Faith were imperilled if theology were an exact, necessary and adequate intellectual expression or embodiment of faith and if, as such, it came into demonstrable conflict with the indubitable data of history or science or philosophy.¹²³

A significant milestone in Tyrrell's thinking occurred with the publication of *The Church and the Future* in 1903, which Lawrence F. Barmann has characterised as 'Tyrrell's most synthetic and important book'.¹²⁴ In this work, Tyrrell repudiated any 'attempt to reconcile the data of science and history with dogmas',¹²⁵ because, he averred, 'What is commonly mis-called the conflict between Faith and Science is in truth a conflict between Theology and secular knowledge – philosophic, scientific ...'.¹²⁶ For Tyrrell, there was no insuperable conflict between natural and supernatural reality per se; there was, however, a conflict 'between the *theories* of one and the other, between natural and sacred science'.¹²⁷ While some theologians,

122 While scholars, such as Nicholas Sagovsky (*op. cit.*, (42), pp. 146–147), argue that Tyrrell did not ultimately solve the question of the cognitive significance of the symbols ('the thrust of Tyrrell's work', Sagovsky maintains, 'is to point a direction, to ask a question', p. 147), many of Tyrrell's ideas concerning the symbolic were subsequently developed by philosophers such as Susanne K. Langer, in *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, 3rd edn, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1995). Langer was herself greatly indebted to Ernst Cassirer, whose *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 4 vols, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press (1998), although a work of enormous developmental potential, has yet to be fully appreciated by theologians (though see Paul Avis's *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology*, London and New York: Routledge (2005)). Langer offers a philosophical framework in which both 'theology' and 'science' can be understood as 'symbolic forms', without loss of cognitive content. Moreover, the potential relevance of semiotics to the contemporary dialogue between science and theology has been recently explored by Andrew Robinson in *God and the World of Signs: Trinity, Evolution, and the Metaphysical Semiotics of C. S. Peirce*, Philosophical Studies in Science and Religion, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers (2010); and *Traces of the Trinity: Signs, Sacraments and Sharing God's Life*, Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., (2014).

123 Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (110), p. 207.

124 Barmann *op. cit.*, (42), p. 155.

125 Tyrrell, G. *The Church of the Future*. Privately printed in 1903 and signed Hilaire Bourdon. Reprinted under Tyrrell's name with an introduction by M.D. Petre, London: Priory Press (1910), p. 170.

126 *ibid.*, p. 105.

127 Tyrrell, G. 'Semper Eadem (II)', in Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (2), pp. 133–154 (p. 134), my emphasis. (This article was first published as 'The Limits of the Theory of Development', in *The Catholic World* (September 1905) 81, 730–744, after having been rejected by *The Month*.)

such as Wilfrid Ward, had attempted a harmonisation of the two, their project was ultimately unsuccessful due to its exclusive reliance on Newman's 'daring scheme' to reconcile 'the dynamical conception of orderly growth and development with the more statical conception of an unchanging original deposit of faith'.¹²⁸ Although an acceptable resolution to this impasse continued to elude Tyrrell, he was nonetheless emphatic that a *modus vivendi* involving a 'forced synthesis' of theology and science was out of the question. Such an approach would only undermine the integrity of both disciplines.

The period 1903 to 1907 was crucial for Tyrrell, for it was then that he produced his most mature reflections on the relationship between science and faith. It must be emphasised, however, that he had no desire to ape the liberals in their efforts to secure a rapprochement between theology and science; nor was his work geared towards mounting a defence of the Catholic faith in the face of the challenge from science. To this extent, his opus resists being caricatured as merely apologetical. The importance of his contribution stems, rather, from the fact that it formed a vital part of his broader Modernist critique of Catholic philosophy and theology.¹²⁹

It was in 'The Rights and Limits of Theology' that Tyrrell's key analytical distinction between dogmatic theology and revelation, which he had first formulated in 1899, received its most developed articulation. It is significant that Tyrrell's reading of A.D. White's *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology* proved to be the catalyst for this essay; indeed, as we have seen, Tyrrell was shaken to the core by the 'accumulative force' of White's thesis: the sheer amount of evidence of the warfare was too copious to be gainsaid. To George Walter Prothero, editor of the *Quarterly Review*, he wrote:

Granted ... that theology and science are uniformly at war, and presumably by some sort of necessity, we must get at the root of this necessity. I find it not in theology as such but in the notion of a revealed theology, a notion which is hybrid and contradictory; and I show how such a *revealed* theology is necessarily hostile, not only to all science,

128 *ibid.*, p. 150.

129 Nancey Murphy has advanced an audacious, if controversial, thesis concerning the affinity between 'new historicist accounts of science' (especially that of the Hungarian philosopher of mathematics and science, Imre Lakatos (1922–74)), and 'theological research programs', developed by Roman Catholic Modernists in general and George Tyrrell in particular. Murphy argues that, for Lakatos, scientists work within a 'research program' consisting of a fixed core theory and a series of changing auxiliary hypotheses that allow for prediction and explanation of novel facts. Murphy maintains that strikingly similar patterns of reasoning can be used to justify theological assertions. She claims to demonstrate that the 'theological research programs' of George Tyrrell and other Modernist thinkers already come close to satisfying the demands of Lakatos's methodology. See Murphy, N. *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning*, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, New York: Cornell University Press (1990), pp. 96–134.

but to religion and the prophetic spirit on whose agency the development of revelation depends.¹³⁰

Tyrrell stressed that, much as he appreciated White's work, he wished to raise an objection to it analogous to that which White raised against John William Draper's *The Conflict between Science and Religion*.¹³¹ White had believed that the conflict was better understood as one between science and theology. Tyrrell, however, felt that the conflict was not between science and theology, but, rather, between science and 'dogmatic theology', which, he argued, 'reckons with revelation and dogma as data of religious experience and not as theological statement'.¹³² The terms 'theologism', the 'old theology' and 'the dogmatic fallacy' are also employed by Tyrrell to refer to the same phenomenon. In so far as theology is a legitimate science, it also conflicts with the pseudoscience of theologism.¹³³ For Tyrrell, theologism is pseudoscientific precisely 'because it treats prophetic enigmas and mysteries, which of their very nature are ambiguous and incapable of exact determination, as principles of exactly determinable intellectual value'.¹³⁴

The fundamental error of theologism, then, lies in its denial of the wholly speculative character of man's religious quest and in its gradual 'ascription of divine authority to theology and theology's ascription of scientific or philosophic exactitude to revelation'.¹³⁵ Theologism thus mistakenly views theology 'as a miraculously communicated science'.¹³⁶ Tyrrell concedes, however, that, like all widespread and persistent mistakes, it is a very natural one, 'as natural as the belief in geocentrism'.¹³⁷ Moreover, given that such an erroneous approach to doctrine held hegemonic sway over the Christian mind for centuries, it is hardly surprising that 'no scientific or historical discovery could merit consideration or toleration which seemed to come into conflict with a divinely revealed theology'.¹³⁸

Historically there have however been at least two vectors which have resisted this tendency to reify and absolutise theology. The first is what Tyrrell calls the 'theologico-apologetic' necessity of trying to demonstrate the harmony between dogmatic theology and the 'scientifically assured

130 Tyrrell to George Walter Prothero (this letter does not contain a specific date; however, it is likely that it was written in 1904 or 1905) quoted in Petre *op. cit.*, (1), p. 197.

131 See Draper, J.W. *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*, New York: D. Appleton & Company (1874).

132 Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (92), p. 203.

133 *ibid.*, p. 204.

134 *ibid.*, pp. 204–205.

135 *ibid.*, p. 209.

136 *ibid.*, p. 210.

137 *ibid.*

138 *ibid.*, p. 215.

conceptions of philosophy and history'.¹³⁹ The second is the religious and spiritual life of the Church.¹⁴⁰ The response to these vectors on the part of dogmatic theology had become disconcertingly predictable: when initially challenged by new scientific data which appeared to contradict its teachings, dogmatic theology would first denounce them as heretical and anathema; it then sought accommodation and compromise; and, finally, it was reduced to distinguishing between the substance or 'essential value' of a doctrine and its 'non-essential accidents'. While many theologians may find it convenient to forget these chapters of history, Tyrrell argues that we forget them at our peril. For 'What guarantee have we', he asks rhetorically,

... that what theologians impose on us to-day as substantial may not in like manner be explained away as accidental in some future generation? In consequence of this stealthy process of accommodation, the professedly immutable dogmatic teaching of theology has been reluctantly dragged in the wake of general mental progress, always lagging behind far enough to incur the reproach of obscurantism, yet not so far as to merit the dubious if not damning praise of absolute immutability, purchasable only at the sacrifice of all vital connection with the mind of the age.¹⁴¹

Hostility to science is at its height when it purports to be motivated by religious principles. 'The deadliest fruit of the dogmatic fallacy', Tyrrell maintains, is that the Church began to claim ultimate jurisdiction over every branch of knowledge, leading to a 'gradual identification of the cause of scientific truth with that of irreligion'.¹⁴² In consequence, free and open intellectual enquiry was perceived as threatening to faith, and religion and science were considered to be mutually antagonistic. Although a healthy scepticism concerning all truth-claims was legitimate and wholesome, it was deeply mistaken for dogmatic theology, in the face of such claims, to insist upon its supreme authority over both faith and reason. According to Tyrrell, 'The notion of *revealed theology* [would] prove as incoherent and fallacious as that of revealed astronomy, cosmogony, chemistry, medicine, or any other sort of revealed science'.¹⁴³

In the last two years of his life, following his excommunication, Tyrrell had become so convinced of the righteousness of his cause that he felt impelled to turn the Church's own terms of condemnation against it. Any intellectual system which claimed to possess final or absolute knowledge

139 *ibid.*, p. 216.

140 *ibid.*, p. 218.

141 *ibid.*

142 *ibid.*, pp. 224–225.

143 *ibid.*, pp. 227–228, my emphasis.

of reality he repudiated as ‘idolatry’.¹⁴⁴ He thus condemned as ‘idolatrous’ the conservative ecclesiastics who insisted on the total subordination of science to theology; as well as the liberals who insisted on an immediate re-expression of traditional dogmas in the light of modern knowledge; and, finally, the agnostic scientists for whom only efficient causes were meaningful – all had fallen into the trap of the ‘dogmatic fallacy’.

For Tyrrell, the distinction between revelation and theology was crucial. ‘Revelation is to theology’, he wrote, ‘what the stars are to astronomy’.¹⁴⁵ All human representations are mere ‘accidents’ and, as such, are provisional. Both theology and science are imperfect expressions of a deeper truth and reality – and confuse what is transient and contingent with what is real and essential.¹⁴⁶

Tyrrell urged his interlocutors to concede that the historical ‘warfare’ between science and religion had been a ‘source of infinite scandal’ to the Christian Church.¹⁴⁷ Though he himself offered no fully developed synthesis between faith and reason, by urging the need for epistemic humility on the part of both theologians and natural scientists, he opened up the possibility of a truce – if not a lasting peace – after the long warfare between science and theology.

Conclusion

As we have seen, George Tyrrell may be characterised as a Thomist who sought to relate theology constructively to the issues of the day. He adopted a cautiously affirmative approach to the idea of evolution, and was just as opposed to scientific reductionism as he was to the ethical reductionism of liberal Protestantism and to the absolutising of Thomism by his neo-scholastic contemporaries.

144 George Tyrrell, To L.D. (Notebooks): circa. 1908, in Petre *op. cit.*, (44), p. 32–33. ‘What saves our “theologia” from being an “eidolopoea”’, Tyrrell records in the same notebook entry, ‘is the sense of its infinite inadequacy to compass the transcendental’ (p. 32); for an excellent series of essays which explore these themes from the perspective of one of Tyrrell’s contemporaries, see Egerton, H. *Father Tyrrell’s Modernism: An Expository Criticism of ‘Through Scylla and Charybdis’ in an Open Letter to Mr. Athelstan Riley*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd (1909).

145 George Tyrrell ‘Revelation’, in Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (2), pp. 264–307 (p. 264).

146 This point is elaborated by Tyrrell when he observes that, ‘The Categories of the understanding are the reflex of the transcendent and eternal world in the flowing waters of the contingent and material’. See Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (70), pp. 203–204. Gabriel Daly asserts, in *Transcendence and Immanence: A Study in Catholic Modernism and Integralism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1980), that ‘Tyrrell had a profound respect for the apophatic in theology’. According to Daly, while Tyrrell never questioned ‘the ontological reality of God’s transcendence’, he remained acutely conscious of the inability of human language to grasp the ineffable mystery of the divine. In effect, divine experience eludes definition by definition (pp. 143–145).

147 Tyrrell, G. ‘Theologism’, in Tyrrell *op. cit.*, (2), pp. 308–354 (p. 335).

While Tyrrell's determination in his early career to return to the original Thomistic sources in many respects anticipated the Ressourcement and Nouvelle Théologie movements within Catholic theology, associated with scholars such as Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar, his increasing sympathy with Kantian scepticism led him to the conviction that science and theology are both fallible human endeavours which operate within clear epistemological constraints. A humble recognition of these limits, he believed, could help us move beyond the conflict between science and theology that was apparent in his day.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Nicholas Sagovsky for the comments that he made on a draft of this article, and Elizabeth Ingrams, Martyn Crucefix, Jeremy Duckett, Hannah Hewetson, Duncan Macpherson, Oliver P. Rafferty SJ and Geoffrey Segal for various kindnesses and insights generously given.

Jonathan W. Chappell holds a PhD in Anthropology from University College London, an MLitt in Theology from Darwin College, Cambridge and an MPhil in Philosophy from the University of Essex.
