

THE CHANGING PATTERN OF THOUGHT IN THE EARLIER FOURTEENTH CENTURY

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THE pattern of thought during the first half of the fourteenth century is as yet far from clear. A formidable array of thinkers and systems remains to be analyzed; until this is done there can be no certainty for our present conclusions. At the same time certain features are beginning to emerge; and it becomes increasingly possible to trace their contours. The present attempt to do so, inevitably provisional, is an amplification, and in parts a modification, of an earlier sketch.¹

I

The more the thought of the earlier fourteenth century is considered, the more apparent its discontinuity with the thirteenth century becomes. The years from the last decade of the thirteenth century until certainly the time of the Black Death in 1349 saw a generation of thinkers whose guiding preoccupation was with redefining previous concepts. Where their predecessors of the thirteenth century had sought, in greater or lesser degree, to incorporate knowledge into a framework of revelation, men as different in outlook as William of Ockham (d. 1349), Thomas Bradwardine (d. 1349), Robert Holcot (d. 1349), Thomas Buckingham (d. 1351), Adam of Woodham (d. 1357), Gregory of Rimini (d. 1358), to mention only a few, emphasized their incompatibility; where the Augustinians as well as the Christian Aristotelians of the thirteenth century had striven for some common ground from which to view the divine and the created, fourteenth century thinkers affirmed the absoluteness of their separation. Their emphasis was upon the limits rather than the scope of reason; and they displayed none of the confidence

¹ "The fourteenth century and the decline of scholasticism", *Past and Present*, ix (April 1956), 30-41.

towards its powers which their forerunners of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had enjoyed. More specifically they were no longer willing to conceive the created world in terms of the truths of revelation ; or, rather, to try to adduce the latter from natural experience. Revealed truth was taken out of reason's ken. Thus the existence of God, His nature and His actions, the creation of the world *ex nihilo* and in time, the relation between the Divine Persons, the requisites of salvation, the relation of divine and free will, which had provided the framework for all previous, Christian thinking, came to be regarded as beyond the scope of natural reason ; they were the province of faith, and should remain thus.

It was here that the great breach with previous tradition took place ; for it constituted the rejection of the union of faith with reason which was the basis of scholasticism. It meant the reversion to an outlook far closer to that of St. Augustine than of the so-called Augustinians of the thirteenth century.¹ However much Ockham differed from St. Augustine, both accepted the independence of theology from natural knowledge ; they both shared the fundamental assumption that God was unknowable and His ways inscrutable ; and neither recognized the sequence from natural knowledge to knowledge of God. The affinity here between the fourth and the fourteenth century is the measure of the distance between the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries. It can hardly be exaggerated ; for it meant not merely the divergence between what men believed and what they knew ; but the sundering of the entire integument which had bound natural knowledge to faith. Almost at a stroke it cut loose the vast corpus of metaphysics and science, which had come to the West via the Arabs. The efforts at its assimilation into the tenets of Christian faith, which had been the guiding task of the majority of thirteenth-century thinkers, were abandoned ; and instead

¹ The Augustinians were those thinkers in the thirteenth century who sought to give a traditional interpretation to the findings of Aristotle and the Arabian and Jewish thinkers like Avicenna and Avicbrol. They did so by filtering off those elements which could be harmonized with the teachings of St. Augustine, although in the process they became considerably modified. For a discussion of this subject see the writer's *Medieval Thought : from St. Augustine to Ockham* (1958), pp. 190-4.

Christendom was presented with two different interpretations of truth—the natural and the revealed—without any means of reconciling them. The laws of the created order had no bearing upon the divine ; each had to be taken in itself, however disconcerting the consequences.

This separation between faith and reason provided the setting for the intellectual developments of the first half of the fourteenth century. It confronted its thinkers with a new and, since the time of St. Augustine, unprecedented situation : that of the infinite and unbridgeable chasm between God and his creatures. Where God, as supreme being, was both necessary and free, the latter were merely contingent, devoid of any *raison d'être* other than God's willing: the result, therefore, of an entirely gratuitous act on God's part. On the one hand was God, eternal and uncaused ; and on the other, His creatures who could as well never have been. It was this obsessive awareness of the contingent, not to say fortuitous, nature of creation that above all transformed the intellectual climate of the fourteenth century and accounts for its most revolutionary features. These came about at both the levels of the divine and the created ; and in examining them separately it is necessary to emphasize their essential interdependence.

II

So far as God was concerned, the new element was the emphasis upon His freedom. Now this was not a mere invocation of His omnipotence but something more akin to a metamorphosis of His nature. It rested upon the time-honoured distinction between God's two kinds of power. His absolute power (" *potentia absoluta* ") and His ordained power (" *potentia ordinata* ").¹ By God's ordained power it was accepted that there was an eternal order which He had decreed for this world and which governed its workings. It had been made known to man through God's word as found in the Scriptures, the teachings of the *Sancti* and the canons of the Church, and it was enshrined in the sacramental life of the Church. By contrast, God's

¹ For a fuller discussion of these concepts see the writer's *Bradwardine and the Pelagians* (Cambridge, 1957), ch. viii.

absolute power referred to His omnipotence pure and simple; it represented His own untrammelled nature and owed no obligation to sustain any fixed order. Ultimately, then, God in His absolute power was always able to override His ordinances, for the latter were only a specific application of His infinite power.

Now it would seem that the use of God's " *potentia absoluta* " was the most potent force in fourteenth-century thought, and the one most responsible for transforming the traditional conceptions. While not in itself new—Peter Damian had invoked God's omnipotence in the eleventh century—its widespread application was. It reached its height during the decade of the 1340s at Paris, where the university authorities attempted to ban the doctrines to which it gave rise. In 1340 the Rector of the University, John Buridan, condemned Ockhamism in general terms for engendering in the arts faculty an attitude of doubt towards the accepted authorities and towards the correspondence between terms and things, and leading to conclusions that " Socrates and Plato, God and creatures, were nothing " ¹. The climax was reached in 1346 and 1347. In the former year the Pope in a letter to the masters and scholars of the University, ² attacked the recent tendency in both philosophy and theology to turn away from the accepted authorities to " *alias novas et extraneas doctrinas sophisticas, que in quibusdam aliis doceri dicuntur studiis, et opiniones apparentes non existentes et inutiles, et quibus fructus non capitur* ". The worst feature was disregard of the Bible and the *sancti*, the very foundations of faith, in favour of " *philosophicis questionibus et aliis disputationibus et suspectis opinionibus* ". This letter, dated 20 May 1346, followed immediately on the condemnation of sixty articles taken

¹ Denifle-Chatelain, *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis* (Paris, 1891), ii. 1042, pp. 505-7. " videlicet quod nulli magistri, baccalarii vel scolares in artium facultate legentes Parisius audeant aliquam propositionem famosam illius actoris cujus librum legunt, dicere simpliciter esse falsam, vel esse falsam de virtute sermonis . . . Item quod nullus dicat scientiam nullam esse de rebus que non sunt signa. . . . Item quod nullus asserat absque distinctione vel expositione quod Socrates et Plato vel Deus et creatura nihil sunt, quoniam illa verba prima facie male sonant. "

² *Ibid.* 1125, pp. 587-90, *Litterae Clementis VI ad magistros et scholares Paris.*, quos de studio et doctrina nonnullorum recentiorum philosophorum et theologorum objurgat.

from the writing of Nicholas d'Autrecourt, on 19 May.¹ When these are considered together with the condemnation of the fifty articles of John de Mirecourt in the following year,² they give us some picture of the "pestiferous" and "pernicious" doctrines referred to in the Pope's letter. Those of Nicholas are mainly concerned with the absence of natural certainty: knowledge of the existence or non-existence of one thing does not enable us to deduce the existence or non-existence of another (1-8); there is no certainty of natural substances or of causality (9-19); or of the greater nobility of one thing over another; or that God is "ens nobilissimum" (22); or that the expressions "God" and "creature" signify anything real (32, 54, 55). Finally, God could command a rational creature to hate Him (58), and, if the former's will is dependent upon God, he could not sin or err (59). With John de Mirecourt, on the other hand, the majority of his opinions are concerned with moral theology, and above all with God as the cause of sin (10-14, 16, 17, 18, 33, 34); of the soul's hate of Him (31-32); and of all acts of the created will (35-38). John also repeats the current notions that Christ could mislead, be misled and hate God (1-6); also that God predestines on account of future good works and the proper use of free will (47-50), and that something higher than God could be envisaged (46).

Without attempting an exhaustive analysis here, it is apparent that each set of propositions expresses what can only be described as an attitude of scepticism; while most of Nicholas's are over the impossibility of inferring that which is not given in experience, John emphasizes at once the omnicausality of God and His unpredictability: free will is virtually absolved from moral responsibility. The reasons for this attitude are not far to seek. For the first time priority in the consideration of God went to His omnipotence, with His "potentia absoluta" as its vehicle. In the first place, it rendered God unknowable to His creatures, if not in His nature, then certainly in His ways. Since by His absolute power He could do ever differently from how He had

¹ Denifle-Chatelain, *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis* (Paris, 1891), ii. 1124, pp. 567-87.

² *Ibid.* 1147, pp. 610-13.

ordained, save of course contradict Himself, no constant mode of activity could be ascribed to Him. More, He could openly flout what He had decreed by His "potentia ordinata". Accordingly he could override all the accepted laws of conduct, without in any way impairing His own nature. As Adam of Woodham (d. 1357) said: "Righteousness consists in what He wills and that is wholly rational which He decrees."¹ If taken to extremes its effects were far-reaching. Thus it was held that God could mislead, that Christ could be misled, that revelation could falsify, that God could love the mortal sinner more than the man in grace, that God could want a man to hate Him, that grace and mortal sin could coexist, that free will was more important than grace and so on.² In this aspect, it need hardly be said, God in his "potentia absoluta" was a very different God from that of tradition, and His actions became bereft of any ascertainable principle other than the exercise of His omnipotence. It is true that not every thinker interpreted God's absolute power in so extreme a way. Gregory of Rimini, for example, held strictly to His traditional attributes of goodness, mercy and wisdom as quite independent of any arbitrary fiat of His will; yet he, too, recognized the indeterminacy of His actions.³ In this case its purpose was far more the reply of a Christian thinker to the necessitarianism of the Greco-Arab systems; and the overwhelming majority of those in the fourteenth century—Bradwardine excepted—followed Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus in directing God's absolute power against the assumption of the inviolability of the present dispensation. They exalted God's omnipotence in reply to those who exalted the sovereignty of creation. It was a blow struck not against dogma but its finality; and as such applied to the whole of creation.⁴

¹ "Respondeo quod rectitudo est quod vult et rationale est omnino quod fiat sibi" (*Commentary on the Sentences*, bk. i, d. 17, q. 1, MS. B.N., Paris, FL. 15892). In an even more revealing passage he goes so far as to state as the justification for God's "potentia absoluta" that it enables God to do differently than He has decreed by His ordained power (*ibid.* q. 3).

² *Op. cit.*

³ *Commentary on the Sentences*, bk. i, d. 42-4, q. 1, a. 2.

⁴ I have here found it necessary to modify my previous view (*op. cit.* and *Bradwardine and the Pelagians*, *loc. cit.*) that the use of God's "potentia absoluta" was primarily an instrument of scepticism constituting a deliberate assault

Everything depended upon the way in which God himself was regarded. If He was to be viewed solely in terms of His power, the morality of His actions did not arise ; and it was here that the division between the radicals, like Ockham and his followers, and the traditionalists, like Gregory of Rimini and Thomas Bradwardine, arose. For the former, God's omnipotence was its own justification ; if He should lie or mislead or ignore His own ordinances, His ability to do so (which by His absolute power was unqualifiedly possible) was sufficient reason. No moral consideration was involved for everything was subordinate to the act of willing. God's " *potentia absoluta* " lay outside revealed truth ; the latter was one, contingent, aspect of His nature, but in no way an exclusive or a necessary one. As such it had no wider relevance to God's ultimate nature than any other dispensation He may have conceived. In order therefore to transcend its inherent limitations the only available light in which to view Him was by His absolute will, for this alone was germane to God as God ; it enabled us to recognize the contingent nature of all that was outside Him without attempting to attribute to Him qualities which, by virtue of their contingency, were from us not from Him. To reach an understanding of God meant, in effect, cutting through every assumption, other than that He was, as God, necessary, and, as creator, sovereignly free. This was not to deny that God was good or wise or merciful ; it meant that we were in no position to define those attributes in any but contingent terms. As with everything known, or revealed to us, they were from the aspect in which we viewed them. There was no reason for concluding that what we saw was the same in God or that it could not be superseded : God was good certainly, but His goodness was not of our devising ; He was wise but with a wisdom we could not fathom. He was a law unto Himself.

upon the rational foundations of faith. It led to such an attitude at the hands of the Ockhamists in making the articles of faith inaccessible to rational demonstration ; but with Gregory of Rimini, in particular, it served the opposite purpose of safeguarding God's actions from speculation, while at the same time safeguarding revealed truth. It is possible that with further investigation this attitude will prove to be more widespread than we are at present aware.

Such were the assumptions, implied rather than stated, behind the theological paradoxes made by the Ockhamists in the name of God's absolute power. Its relation to an epistemology which refused to give certainty to what lay beyond practical experience is apparent. For the present, however, it is enough to stress that it was not inherent in the conception of God's "potentia absoluta"; it was but one, and widespread, interpretation. For Gregory of Rimini, for example, its purpose was to secure God's freedom from any set course of action, while recognizing the inviolable qualities of His attributes—mercy, justice, goodness and so on. God was by definition good; were He to lie or sin He would not be God.¹

This brings us to the second aspect of God's "potentia absoluta": it served to emphasize the inherent contingency of the created order. This applied equally to its physical and its moral aspects. In each case its rôle was to point to the possibility of an alternative to the existing laws; it stood as an ever-present *caveat* against taking them as invariable. Thus in the case of the physical world all the accepted evidence of natural experience could be superseded. To begin with, our knowledge could be about nothing; for if God so willed He could create an illusion, thus inducing immediate knowledge of what was non-existent. Similarly, the empirical laws of mechanics and physics could be overruled: two bodies could occupy the same space, or a form could be intensified infinitely; the world could be finite and eternal; so could creatures; there could be several infinite worlds; something could come into being only for an instance or exist at two separate instances in time, and so on.² In all these ways God's "potentia absoluta" expressed the inherent uncertainty of the natural world and the impossibility of a natural theology. Nor were these conceptions confined to a lunatic fringe: they formed part of the discussions of most serious thinkers, often men of impeccable orthodoxy like Gregory of Rimini; and they can be interpreted as much as a testimony to their faith in God's freedom of will as doubt about the world.

¹ *Sentences*, i, d. 42-4, q. 1, a. 1.

² All of these positions were upheld by Gregory of Rimini, as I have discussed in my forthcoming study, *Gregory of Rimini: tradition and innovation in fourteenth century thought*.

In the case of moral laws the issues were more involved ; for whereas the consequences of indeterminacy in the order of nature fell mainly upon Aristotle's cosmology, in undermining his hierarchy of causes, in ethics it was liable to call into question both God's nature and the foundations of scriptural authority. With God ever-liable to supersede what He had ordained, Scripture could no longer be regarded as the infallible repository of our knowledge of God's ways or their implication for man. It was His word, but not necessarily His last word : its prophecies might not come to pass and God's precepts could remain unfulfilled. Once again it was by the extremists that such conclusions were drawn. By doing so they gave rise to two main groups of questions, those connected with grace and free will ; and those over God's foreknowledge. Both called into question the very foundations of scriptural authority ; and accordingly it was here, as we have mentioned earlier in the condemnations at Paris, that the division between tradition and innovation was sharpest.

So far as grace was concerned,¹ Ockham and his disciples employed God's " *potentia absoluta* " to dispense man from the need for the supernaturally infused habit of charity in order to act meritoriously and avoid sin. Instead God, if He so willed, could accept the action of free will in its own right and reward it with merit. By this means the Ockhamists enabled free will to become the main agent in a meritorious act and relegated grace to a secondary cause which God, in acting directly, could by-pass.

Thus, while dogmatically it was true that all men since the fall were in a state of original sin, incapable of doing good or of following God's precepts by their own powers, God could dispense with the intermediary forms of grace, if He so willed. By God's direct intervention a man could reach Him unaided, could be born free from original sin, follow His precepts, and win eternal glory. In Ockham's words : " Nothing is meritorious unless it is voluntary, that is, freely elicited and freely carried out, for nothing is meritorious unless it is in us and in our power. But nothing is in our power of acting or not acting

¹ See *Bradwardine and the Pelagians*, part ii, *passim*.

unless this comes from the will as the principal mover, and not from a habit." ¹

That some did not stop there we have already noticed in the condemnation of John de Mirecourt and the conclusions of Adam of Woodham. In the process man, no less than God, became transformed. Indeed the unorthodoxy of fourteenth-century thinking is nowhere more apparent than in the swing from straightforward dogma towards the ideal and abstract in regard to both God and His creatures. Just as God could have created a different world or have decreed a different order of salvation so could man have enjoyed a different condition, endowed with powers to accomplish alone that for which a supernatural aid was at present required. It has been in response to this attitude of Ockham and his followers that Bradwardine fashioned his system. He did so equally in speculative, or at least non-dogmatic, terms by trying to establish that it was inherently impossible for man ever to attain to a modicum of autonomy or to do good of his own resources.² Bradwardine matched Ockham's emphasis upon man as he could be by insisting that he could never be other than he was, fallen and weak; each, from opposite poles, tended to discount the fall.

With Gregory of Rimini, on the other hand, God's "potentia absoluta" served merely to emphasize, firstly, God's independence of created habits in deciding whether to reward or punish a man, so that in the last analysis it rested with God's will, and not with the presence or absence of grace, to determine a man's destiny; and, secondly, the inherent contingency of all created forms, so that if God should so choose he could supersede the habit of grace and do directly that which He had done through grace. The result is that with Gregory we find a full-fledged recapitulation of St. Augustine's doctrine of grace, reinforced through God's "potentia absoluta" against any form of natural determinism.³ It is striking testimony to the changed climate

¹ Art. I of 51 Articles of William of Ockham condemned at Avignon in 1326. See A. Pelzer, "Les 51 Articles de Guillaume d'Occam censurés en Avignon en 1326" in *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique*, xviii (1922), 240-71.

² See *Bradwardine and the Pelagians*, *passim*.

³ *Sentences*, i, d. 17, q. 1. I have discussed the topic fully in my forthcoming study on Gregory.

of thought that the traditional concepts needed reinforcement by such novel means.

The change is, if anything, more apparent in the discussion over the problem of future contingents : that is, whether God's foreknowledge conflicted with the freedom of free will. As I have suggested elsewhere ¹, it involved nothing less than the certainty of revelation ; for if the future was undetermined, how could God foresee it ? and how then could revelation be any less contingent than the actions it foretold ? The dispute accordingly resolved itself into an issue between either curtailing God's foreknowledge to what alone was determined, or subjecting it to the hazards governing all undetermined knowledge. The first alternative, taken by Holcot,² safeguarded the infallibility of God's knowledge at the expense of His omniscience ; the second, followed by Buckingham ³ and Woodham,⁴ affirmed God's omniscience at the cost of its infallibility : hence the possibility that He could mislead and that Christ and the Apostles could be misled. In both cases the freedom of free will was made the first consideration at the expense of both God's attributes and revealed truth. Small wonder that Bradwardine's *De Causa Dei* was virtually a reassertion of dogmatic first principles and directed expressly to vindicating the traditional teachings on both grace and future contingents. Its very extremism was a measure of the extremism of his opponents ; and, appearing as it did in 1344,⁵ it came virtually in the middle of the counter-attack against Ockhamism. The atmosphere thus engendered was one of condemnation and heterodoxy ; the word Pelagian ⁶ once more became common currency ; and it is hard to know what the outcome would have been had not the Black Death of 1348-50 supervened, carrying off the greater part of Ockham's generation, Bradwardine included.

¹ *Bradwardine and the Pelagians*, especially chs. vi, viii, ix.

² *Sentences*, bk. ii, q. 3.

³ *Sentences*, q. 3.

⁴ *Sentences*, bk. iii, q. 2 and 3.

⁵ For a discussion in favour of this date see *Bradwardine and the Pelagians*, Appendix I.

⁶ E.g. *De Causa Dei contra Pelagium*, and the first four of the 51 Articles of Ockham, condemned at Avignon, and Gregory of Rimini's *Sentences*.

III

When we turn to natural order, we find a similar state of indeterminacy. Once again the cause lay in the contingency of all creation. Since this applied to man as much as to any other creature, human knowledge, as that of a contingent being, was correspondingly circumscribed by the contingent ; it lacked any transcendental application from which meaningful universal laws could be derived because it was as transient and conditional as the flux from which it sprang. Duns Scotus had been one of the first, if not the first, to urge such an argument against Aquinas's proofs for the existence of God ; movement, cause and effect were the categories of this physical finite world and as such could have no bearing upon God. But it was above all with Ockham and his contemporaries in the succeeding generation that the scope of reason became firmly bounded by natural experience. The theory of knowledge associated with Ockham, and misleadingly called Nominalism¹, was essentially a corrective to the luxuriance of concepts which had grown up during the preceding centuries. It was especially directed against the proliferation of categories—genus, species, universal, form, substance, relation, essence—into self-subsisting entities, so that they came to be regarded as the ultimate reality and the individual physical objects of this world merely their manifestations. Particularly among the Augustinians attention was diverted away from the validity of everyday sensory experience, and truth was regarded as the property of the extra-sensory idea, or concept, residing in the soul. Even the return, with St. Thomas Aquinas, to the categories taken from this world had not fundamentally shifted the emphasis ; for he, no less than his opponents, sought for universal truths in the essences which the mind recognized in and abstracted from the individuals given to the senses ; thus Socrates and Plato embodied man the species and it was this which ultimately

¹ I have already in *Bradwardine and the Pelagians*, ch. ix, given my reasons for the inappropriateness of the term, namely, that it suggests an artificial continuity with the disputes of the twelfth century ; and that it ignores the wider issues in which Ockham's emphasis upon the verbal nature of our concepts was only an element. These wider issues are, in my opinion, to be found among those under discussion here.

enabled us to know that they were human beings. Where St. Thomas differed was in his realization that the universal could only be reached through first encountering the individual. Such a view still equated ultimate reality with the “*cognitio rei universalis*,” as Gregory of Rimini and others of his contemporaries saw.

The innovation made by Ockham and his confrères lay not so much in their introduction of new categories as their rejection of the old. Indeed even in his division of simple knowledge into immediate intuitive perception of an object (*cognitio intuitiva*) and abstractive knowledge (*cognitio abstractiva*) and his use of terms (*suppositiones*), Ockham¹ was but following an already established classification. Where, however, he and his contemporaries broke with the past was in their relegation of all categories to the mental order; far from expressing an independent, and indeed, ultimate, reality, they were constructions of the mind. They had no correspondence to external being and could not be considered as constituting an independent order of existence. Instead the individual was alone considered to be real: a man, not man, beings not being, were the true constituents of reality; for these alone existed independently of the mind and could be perceived as such.

How widespread such views were can be seen from the Commentaries on the *Sentences* of the time, which, when they do not explicitly reject the independent existence of universals and essences, as with Durandas of St. Pourçain, Pierre Aureole, Ockham and Gregory of Rimini, become mere skeletons of the classical commentaries; they frequently comprised no more than six or a dozen questions, as opposed to something like 500 in the original *Book of Sentences*,² just because the area of meaningful discussion has been narrowed. If reason could not operate beyond the terrain of natural experience there could be little point in trying to prove the existence of God or the finite nature of the world. In consequence scholasticism became transformed.

In the first place, what may be called strict empiricism at the natural level became something akin to scepticism when

¹ *Commentary on Sentences*, Prologue, q. 4.

² As for example with those of Robert Holcot, Robert Halifax, Thomas Buckingham, Adam of Woodham.

applied to faith and metaphysics in general ; so soon as there was a refusal to take reason beyond the limits of verifiable experience there could be no valid means of discussing let alone demonstrating their truths. The latter at best became the province of faith, to be accepted as a matter of belief ; to make them the object of rational consideration was to leave them without tangible support and so at the mercy of uncertainty and speculation. Hence by natural experience there was no more reason for supposing the existence of God than His non-existence or supposing that there was one God ; or that the world was finite rather than infinite ; or that man always had need of grace.¹ In every case reason was powerless to decide. It could be, and indeed was, argued that the opposite was the case ; and so we find the discussion marked by such formulae as *non asserendo sed disputando* and the distinction between speaking *a ratione* and *a fide*. What, therefore, was for the natural world a confession of ignorance became an attitude of scepticism when applied to matters of faith, for it doubted by reason what is certain by belief. Hence, in spite of strong tendencies to the contrary, it seems undeniable that Ockhamism engendered an atmosphere of scepticism towards faith, as we have already observed.

It became common to distinguish not merely universals and essences from individuals, but also verbal expressions as well ; so that God or creature, on analysis, were shown not to refer to anything verifiable but to connote a way of describing a concept—such as, say, the supreme being.² This approach was especially associated with Gregory of Rimini who designated it the *complexe significabile* to distinguish it from a *simplex* which denoted a real thing. Thus while 'man' denoted an individual (*simplex*), 'rational being' was a statement (*complexe*) about a man which did not directly correspond to any specific being. Yet as we have already observed, Gregory was perhaps the most traditionalist of all the earlier fourteenth-century thinkers ; and in his hands this was in no way designed to undermine belief in God. For such men as he, the most usual course was simply to show

¹ Examples once again taken from Gregory of Rimini.

² This device was one of the targets for the Pope's letter mentioned in p. 357, n. 1. " that Socrates and Plato, God and creatures, were nothing ", loc. cit.

that God's existence could not be proved rather than to discuss possible arguments to show that there was no God.

The effect, then, of the sovereignty of individual knowledge was the jettisoning of any attempt at a natural theology; for, in a contingent universe, there could be no bridge between the possible and the necessary. Accordingly the truths of revelation could but rest on faith alone. Such an attitude infected the orthodox as well as the heterodox, and its prevalence, as we shall mention shortly, meant the virtual rejection of the traditional uses of theology.

In the second place, no less far-reaching were the effects of such an outlook upon the created world. Just as revelation had to withdraw from reason's purview so, as we have said, did metaphysics. As a consequence, the conception of the nature of the universe underwent a radical change; and it is here if anywhere that fourteenth-century thinking is at its most formative and exciting. It led to what may not unjustly be termed a new cosmology. For the first time we are able to see something like the emergence of a genuine scientific attitude through the growing tendency to replace the older *a priori* conception of the universe, as the reflection of God's workings, by the new predominantly empirical view which treated it largely in its own terms. While in principle both thirteenth- and fourteenth-century thinkers held to God's will as the final arbiter, the latter no longer saw its operation in terms of eternal laws; far from being God's final dispensation its characteristic was, as we have seen, its contingency and liability to change. As such, Aristotle's cosmology became their main target. In rejecting all necessity in the universe they also rejected Aristotle's all-embracing world view of first and final causes by which everything could be traced from its origin to its end. In its place, in keeping with their view of knowledge, came a world of discrete individuals. These became the measure of all things, to be taken in themselves and not as the expression of higher universal truths. Far from being the embodiment of immaterial essences, *they* constituted reality. Accordingly knowledge of them was not to be sought through an extrapolation of their qualities but in their own palpable properties as physical beings: extension, mass, movement,

relation and so on were their attributes, inseparable from them. Correspondingly, the universal, genus, essence, and disembodied form, for so long the objects of attention, were displaced : literally displaced from the status of self-subsisting entities—albeit non-material—to mere mental figments, which, when not regarded as without meaning, were certainly without relevance to the physical world.

Consequently, as a macrocosm the universe lost its definition : it could not be held to be finite or eternal for, on the one hand, by God's will it could be otherwise ; and, on the other, knowledge did not extend to experience of such notions. As a microcosm, however, knowledge of it became ever more precise ; and here we might speak of a rehabilitation of Aristotle more complete than at any previous time in the middle ages ; for with the emphasis upon individual experience, verification, observation, and measurement now became the main sinews of practical knowledge ; and where did men look for such if not to the Stagirite ? Thus Aristotle, while his notions of the nature of the universe were either disregarded or opposed, was ever to hand in the discussion of physical and mechanical problems like remission and intensification of forms, condensation, rarefaction, movement, and so on. Concurrently, forms become translated into physical terms ; no longer regarded in their own right they became the constituents of being, to be examined in relation to particular topics, such as those just mentioned. In that way their extra-sensory and metaphysical nature was displaced by that of physics. Similarly, with categories, such as number, movement, time, place, situation and so on. They were no longer to be treated in their own right, but as aspects of specific beings in particular relations or groupings : that is, as specific conditions of existence ; and the burning questions became those concerned with them.

It is hardly necessary to emphasize the radically changed outlook on the universe which resulted. It shook the entire foundations of the medieval view both as to what could be known and what was known. The novelty lay not so much in the introduction of new laws and techniques as in reinterpreting the existing concepts or putting them into abeyance. Thus, though in terms of scientific advance Ockham's conception of movement differed

little from that of his thirteenth-century predecessors,¹ his denial that it, together with other categories, was a self-subsisting essence was little short of revolutionary. The whole notion of proving the existence of God through an order of interacting causes fell to the ground; similarly, the notion of goodness. If these were to be regarded as merely mental constructions, offering no correspondence to reality, what became of such time-honoured paths to God as the idea of the "summum bonum" and the "primum movens immobile"? They no longer served to demonstrate Him.² Once again thinkers as different as Gregory of Rimini and Ockham were united in refusing to attempt to do so, expressly on the grounds that terms like "causality" and "eternity" in no way implied a first cause or a necessary being. Consequently, the fixed and ordered hierarchy of spheres and beings, the constancy in the operation of God's laws, the unchanging and unchangeable nature of existence and its relation to God, were all thrown into question.

IV

This brings us, lastly, to the corresponding transformation of theology which such an attitude entailed. At first sight one of the seeming paradoxes of the earlier fourteenth century is the reversion of theology from being a "scientia" to its ancient non-scientific status. Most of the leading thinkers from Henry of Ghent, Godfrey of Fontaines and Duns Scotus to Ockham, Bradwardine and Gregory of Rimini, differently though they did so, joined in returning to the older view of theology as the preserve of scriptural truth, concerned with elucidating the articles of faith and fortifying its adherents. It was practical rather than speculative, to glorify God rather than to comprehend Him. On closer consideration, however, we can see how inseparable this view was from the new outlook generally; far from being an aberrant, the renewed emphasis upon the exclusive, self-contained nature of theology was its concomitant. The overriding contingency of creation, with the consequent unknowability of God and all that was outside practical experience, cut the ties between

¹ See A. Maier, especially *Die Vorläufer Gallileis*, (Rome, 1949).

² E.g. Gregory of Rimini, *Sentences*, i, d. 3, q. 9, a. 1.

theology and knowledge. As deriving from God's word, theology dealt with truths inaccessible to human experience. Even where it was held that God's existence was amenable to proof, as with Henry of Ghent, Duns Scotus and Bradwardine, theology became increasingly confined to the articles of faith, so that although God could be shown to be the first cause or "ens infinitum", His enactments yet remained the property of revelation, given only to those who believed. Ultimately, the difference between the age of St. Thomas Aquinas and that of Duns Scotus and Ockham lay less in the possibility or otherwise of deducing God's being than in attributing a definable course of actions to Him. For the majority of fourteenth-century thinkers God's existence was taken for granted, even when the proofs for it were withheld; yet there still remained no ascertainable relation between the divine and the created. Indeed, as we have observed, the entire source of indeterminacy lay with God; it was not that His existence was not to be invoked, but on the contrary its very invocation acted as a solvent of the created order. It therefore destroyed the foundations of a natural theology and a theology founded upon knowledge.

In these conditions theology could have no place as an object of independent, rational enquiry: it dealt in eternal truths where practical knowledge was bounded by contingency; it gave certainty of belief where knowledge was confronted with unknowability. Where theology enshrined God's decrees, natural knowledge could only express His power to override them. Hence not only God, but the other traditional topics of the "Commentary on the Sentences," Christ, creation, the sacraments, came no longer within reason's purview. From the days of Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus the question "Whether theology is knowledge" came to be answered in the negative. Its truths could not, as many thirteenth-century thinkers had held, be seized directly or by a process of reasoning. Instead there was a common return to the older view of theology as the preserve of the believer; but with an added emphasis upon its exclusiveness. Far from its having a proselytizing rôle, or even an apologetic one, as was the case with some of the greatest works of St. Augustine and St. Thomas, it acted as a barrier which reason, and thereby the infidel,

could not cross.¹ We could have no clearer evidence of how completely belief and knowledge had become divorced and how completely the foundations of scholasticism had been sapped.

V

The pattern, then, that emerges from this discussion is of a radical break with the immediate past, both in tone and in topics. Not only are terms like Nominalism and Realism inapposite, but so also is the division of the thinkers of the time into "moderni" and "antiqui". Thomas Bradwardine and Gregory of Rimini, no less than William of Ockham and Robert Holcot, were operating on different territory from that of their predecessors; even when the former were in greatest opposition to the innovations of the latter, they could still not think in purely traditional terms. However strongly they drew upon tradition they were dealing with an untraditional situation. Thus Bradwardine enunciated a doctrine which, in attempting to reassert the primacy of God's will, left virtually nothing to man's own resources; he regarded him as so worthless that he in effect disregarded the distinction between fallen man and man in original righteousness. The very extremity of these views removed him far from the principles he was defending. Gregory, for his part, though in all essentials true to the doctrines of St. Augustine, still bore the imprint of his age, in his logic, his epistemology, his cosmology, his frequent use of God's "potentia absoluta" and in his emphasis on the fundamental contingency of all creation. Neither thinker could have belonged to the pre-Scotist era any more than the Ockhamists could have done. In this sense all the leading thinkers of the fourteenth century were "moderni" by virtue of their circumstances. Conservatives no less than radicals combined to give a new turn to the discussion, and one which meant a break with traditional modes of thinking and with it the break-up of scholasticism.

¹ This was expressly stated by Gregory of Rimini, *Commentary on the Sentences*, Prologue q. 1; see my article "Faith and Reason in the thought of Gregory of Rimini, c. 1300-1358" in *BULLETIN OF THE JOHN RYLANDS LIBRARY*, xlii (September 1959), 88-112.