The Religion of Paradoxes [1]

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Paradoxes amuse us, yet can leave us unsettled. For the person who has a spirit open to wonder, a paradox speaks to how there are things we cannot know or understand. To an analytical mind, this is anathema: a paradox is only useful in proving or disproving some postulate, but otherwise just idle nonsense. Investigating paradoxes have driven us to deeper understanding of the world and philosophy for millennia, starting with ancients such as Zeno of Elea, Protagoras of Abdera, and Epimenides of Crete1.

In a recent talk [2] given by the writer and historian Tom Holland, he clearly summarised what I have been thinking about for a long time now: “[Christianity] is a vast matrix of paradox.” I am, of course, not the first one to think about the paradoxes in Christianity. G. K. Chesterton, in his excellent book *Orthodoxy*, has an entire chapter entitled “The Paradoxes of Christianity”. And the more I look around, the more I find.

What is a Paradox?

WordNet [3] gives a simple definition of a paradox: “a statement that contradicts itself”. A fuller definition is given by The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (vol 2, 1933):

- A statement or tenet contrary to received opinion or belief; sometimes with favourable, sometimes with unfavourable connotation,
- A statement seemingly self-contradictory or absurd, though possibly well-founded or essentially true
- Often applied to a proposition that is actually self-contradictory, and so essentially absurd or false
- A phenomenon that exhibits some conflict with preconceived notions of what is reasonable or possible; a person of perplexingly inconsistent life or behaviour

The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy gives an interesting take on paradoxes:

> A paradox arises when a set of apparent incontrovertible premises gives unacceptable or contradictory conclusions. To solve a paradox will involve either showing that there is a hidden flaw in the premises, or that the reasoning is erroneous, or that the apparently unacceptable conclusions can, in fact, be tolerated. Paradoxes are therefore important in philosophy, for until one is solved it shows that there is something about our reasonings and our concepts that we do not understand.

Paradoxes vs Ironies

Some of the things I mention below are more ironies than paradoxes. Irony, according to WordNet, is an "incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs". "Irony is a literary concept and paradox is a logical one"[2]. Thus, the notion of Jesus being a "servant King" is ironic, but not paradoxical in the strictest sense. Without wanting to stray too far from my main point in this article in responding to this observation, two things can be said to justify a loose acceptance of certain ironies as paradoxes.

The first is some of these ironies are not necessarily "mere" ironies. Taking the example of Jesus being a "servant King", the notion of "servant leadership" has become so commonplace in the secular world (in large part thanks to the model we received from Jesus), that we may not appreciate how radical the concept was when people were first confronted with it. It broke definitions and expectations, and, as such, to the original hearers it may well have seemed to be a paradox. The reasoning of the original hearers may well have gone something like: why would a king, who rules in power and reverence, not merely *stand in service* of his subjects, but become *like a servant* in stature? If we listen to these ironies without the familiarity we likely have of them, we may learn that they, in their time and for their audience, revealed "something about our reasonings and our concepts that we do not understand".

The second is that I am comfortable blending the ideas of paradoxes and ironies. I believe that God uses both to shake up human expectations and to demonstrate how His Kingdom is different from the world. Isaac and Jacob were both second born; in the culture of the day, the greatest part of the inheritance should have gone to the firstborn. Yet, God foreordained it such that the greatest inheritance from Abraham (which was God's promised blessing and favour on them and their descendants) would not go to the firstborn, but to whom God chose. They were not necessarily even the strongest or most honourable. These are all qualities at which people look when trying to decide what is "best" and "worthy", but God looks for other qualities. Their lives were thus ironies pointing towards the Kingdom of God. What God ordained for them baulked the cultural expectations to the point of it being paradoxical, and thereby gave the world a new way of thinking apart from rigid cultural expectations of rule and power.

Paradoxes in Christianity

A paradox of Christianity which is in the forefront of the minds of many people (especially many Jews and Muslims), is the Trinity[3]: "the LORD is One" (Deuteronomy 6:4), yet God is Three Persons. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; but the Father is not the Son, the Son not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit not the Father. Christians themselves have spent an enormous amount of effort to try and understand this. It is simply illogical, many people would say, and so it is to be dismissed. But doing so misses the point that the Trinity is only a tip of an iceberg of paradoxes within Christianity.

The prime paradox in Christianity is not the Trinity; it is the Kingdom of God. In the Kingdom of God, "the first shall be last, and the last shall be first" (Matthew 20:16). It belongs to "the poor of spirit", who are blessed because of that state (Matthew 5:3, Luke 6:20). The power of the Kingdom of God lies not in armies, learnéd administrators, or its wealthy citizens, but in the poor, the sick, the widows, and the orphans. Absolutely everything that we intuit about life, success and power is turned on its head by the gospel of the Kingdom of God. Instead of "survival of the fittest", primacy

is given to the weakest. This message has been nonsensical for generations of people and, as a result, it has been dismissed. Yet this mustard seed, which started with a few dozen people hand-selected by Jesus Himself in a minor part of the Roman Empire, has grown into an enormous tree of which the branches stretch throughout the world.

Regarding the coming of the Kingdom of God, Kenneth Bailey put it as

> The New Testament presents three paradoxes on the subject of the coming of the kingdom of God. The kingdom *has come* in Jesus Christ and it is still *in the future*. The kingdom is *near* and yet *far off*. Followers of Jesus will *never know the timing* of the coming of the kingdom of God—and *here are its signs*!
>
> Kenneth Bailey, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes p. 398

But it is not only non-Christians who cross swords over paradoxes in Christianity. A notorious paradox is the question of whether God (essentially) determines all things (determinism), or whether people humans have (libertarian) free will. If God (being all knowing and all powerful) determines all things, then it (to oversimplify) takes away human agency in their sin and guilt. And if humans have free will to sin or trust God as they please, what are the implications on God's sovereignty? The paradox lies in that Scripture, seemingly, affirms *both* God's sovereignty and human free will. If this was not the case, this would not be an open debate after nearly two thousand years[4]. Yet this topic is hotly debated to this day.

As I have already said, the more I look around, the more paradoxes jump out at me. Another paradox is God's holiness [4]: it is the source of life and sustains everything (including what is not holy), yet it is also dangerous and consuming for all that is *not* holy (which is all of us, because our sin makes us unholy).

Yet another one [5]: if we "empty ourselves" for the sake of God and others (that is, to give and sacrifice to others without thought of our own needs), there comes abundant life. The gospel tells us to not be anxious about the very things we are most anxious about, because instead of relying on our efforts to provide, God will provide for His children (Matthew 6:33, Luke 11:2).

Off the top of my head, there is what is called the Problem of Divine Hiddenness (which asks why God does not reveal Himself in the world so that sceptics can believe), and the fact that Christians call Jesus Immanuel: "God among us". Many people see the absence of God, while others see God everywhere and in all things!

Not all paradoxes within Christianity are equal. Some are essential for orthodoxy (e.g. the Trinity), while others (I would argue) are not (e.g. the relationship of God's sovereignty and human free will). Some paradoxes may be completely perplexing to some people and a barrier to accepting the faith, while other people may have an intuition about a paradox which gives them peace about it. And yet others are simply nonsense. The Omnipotence Paradox tries to invalidate classical theism by asking the question "can God create a rock so heavy that He cannot lift it?" When C. S. Lewis addressed this question in his book *The Problem of Pain*, he wrote

> [M]eaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because you prefix to them two other words "God can". It remains true that all *things* are possible with God: the intrinsic impossibilities are not things but nonentities. It is no more possible for God than for the weakest of His creatures to carry out both of two mutually exclusive alternatives; not because His power meets an obstacle, but because nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God.
>
> C. S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain

He also wrote elsewhere

> Can a mortal ask questions which God finds unanswerable? Quite easily, I should think. All nonsense questions are unanswerable. How many hours are there in a mile? Is yellow square or round?
>
> C. S. Lewis, A Grief Observed

The Purposes of the Paradoxes

If one reads Scripture while keeping these paradoxes in mind, one can find all sorts of interesting implications. For example, the stories of the widow's oil (2 Kings 4:1–7), Elijah and widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:7–16), and Elisha feeding the hundred (2 Kings 4:42–44) foreshadow (among other things) Jesus's feeding of the 5000 (Matthew 14:13–21, Mark 6:30–44, Luke 9:10–17, John 6:1–15) and the 4000 (Matthew 15:29–39), which speaks to the paradox of the (self-emptying) which never runs out. We, therefore, must take Jesus at His word when He said

> Give to him who asks you, and don't turn away him who desires to borrow from you. … [D]on't be anxious, saying, 'What will we eat?', 'What will we drink?' or, 'With what will we be clothed?' … But seek first God's Kingdom and his righteousness; and all these things will be given to you as well.

— Matthew 5:42; Matthew 6:31; Matthew 6:33

We also see these parables used to shocking effect, to shake up people and awaken a new understanding in them. God uses paradoxes to show people that their understanding of reality, their familiarity with that understanding, and their resulting complacency is not the true reality. For example, in Isaiah 6, a seraphim picks up a coal from the altar flies over to Isaiah and touches his lips to make him clean. This must have turned Isaiah's understanding completely upside down, because in Jewish Law, *unholiness* can spread between physical things, not holiness. One works hard to become holy, and must then stay so by *avoiding* what causes one to become unclean (unholy).

Conclusion

So what do we make of the paradoxes in Christianity? Do they invalidate the faith? Or do they, as engineered by an all powerful, all knowing God, point to things more profound?

I do not believe that any of these paradoxes are a defeater for Christianity. If it did, the faith would not have endured for two thousand years[5].

That does not mean that these paradoxes do not pose a stumbling block for some people. Should these paradoxes, therefore, not be a concern? After all, the stakes are high [6] in believing something which is not essentially true. If Christianity does not make logical sense, then should we believe it?

We must remember that many people are suspicious of paradoxes, because they assume a paradox implies that something is "essentially absurd or false". But we must also remember that a paradox can mean that something is "possibly well-founded or essentially true". That is why a paradox is a paradox. As the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy pointed out, "until one is solved it shows that there is something about our reasonings and our concepts that we do not understand". It does not say that something is false, but that more understanding should be sought.

If we accept that God exists outside of space and time, and that humans cannot reach beyond space and time, then God must come into the world He created to reveal Himself to humanity. What He

reveals is His prerogative. If He chooses not to reveal everything about His infinite nature, that does not mean there is deceit or deception in Him. It may well be that He has a different emphasis in His revelation than a complete understanding of the infinite God. So if God reveals the Trinity because the Trinity is necessary to understand creation, salvation and obedience, then it will suffice. We can therefore legitimately say that we cannot resolve the paradox of the Trinity because “there is something about our reasonings and our concepts that we do not understand”, and we do not understand it because it was not revealed to us. It is like being given a second hand jigsaw puzzle with some of the pieces missing: although we can make out the overall picture, we won’t have the *complete* picture until we are given the missing pieces.

But God does not keep us in the dark because He is merely utilitarian in His revelation or because He enjoys seeing us being confused. We need to acknowledge the element of wonder we are meant to experience. In a parable, Jesus says that the Kingdom of God if like a man who sows seed in a land: the seeds sprouts, grows and delivers a crop, even though the man does not understand how it all works. This is a parable told in a first century context. Today we can describe in detail the biochemical processes through we seeds germinate and grow; we can even engineer the DNA—very building blocks and abstract representation of an organism—to be stronger or more nourishing. But in being able to do that, we take something away of the wonder. We cannot understand the meaning of Jesus’s parable unless we imagine a time when we did not have the knowledge of biology. (But in doing so we do not denounce the knowledge.) The knowledge of how plants grow is good and sometimes necessary. Yet we need to recognise that we lose something from having it: a child-like fascination with a good and ordered creation. We do not need to unlearn what we know—and we certainly must not live in ignorance—we must simply look at the world like a child does. “Most certainly I tell you, unless you turn, and become as little children, you will in no way enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.” (Matthew 18:3) I believe that our spiritual lives will be richer and more fruitful if we don’t pour ourselves out into arguments about God’s sovereignty and man’s free will, but instead allow ourselves to be filled at the wonder of both. And the same with the other paradoxes.

We live in faith and hope that God will one day reveal Himself and the mysteries of faith and creation to us more fully. Until then, we busy ourselves with the work He gave us.

- 1. Epimenides remarked that “all Cretans are always liars”, something referenced by the Apostle Paul in Titus 1:12. But the paradox is this: if Epimenides (who was himself a Cretan) was making a true statement, was he telling the truth and thereby contradicting his own statement?
- 2. Quoted from here [7].
- 3. I have previously made an attempt to address the paradox in the Trinity [8]. It does not resolve the paradox, but relates it to a paradox found in nature.
- 4. I hold to Molinism [9], which is an attempt to, logically, reconcile God’s sovereignty and human libertarian free will. I say attempt, because I do not think it is necessarily an absolutely accurate description of the interplay between God’s sovereignty and human free will. That said, I think it is logically coherent, and the best explanation of these mysteries as we understand them, and therefore something approximately true (at least more so than the alternatives).
- 5. Consider, for example, Manicheanism. In his _Confessions_, Augustine of Hippo describes how he dabbled in Manicheanism. But when he met one of the great figures of the movement, this person was unable to answer Augustine’s questions about the movement. There were things in it which could not be reconciled.
- . Photo credit: ŠJů [10].

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