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Bradley: from History to Mystery

In the late nineteenth century, the critical implosion, in England and to a mainly Anglican audience, reached a climax but also a dead end. It did this through the movement which may be called, admittedly with some misdescription, Anglo-Hegelianism. Of this movement, F. H. Bradley (1846–1924) was the highest point. In his case, however, more than in those of previous thinkers, it is necessary to see him as part of a range: an Everest, but flanked by K.2’s, Kanchenjungas and Nangaparbarbs; alongside his predecessors E. Caird and T. H. Green, his contemporary Bernard Bosanquet, and his successor J. M. E. McTaggart. The Anglo-Hegelians were philosophers, not theologians. Generally, they did not regard themselves as Christians. Nevertheless, they had a philosophy of religion which influenced Christians, particularly Anglicans and, as McTaggart once said, the Church of England was the Church they stayed away from. On Catholics, Anglo-Hegelianism had little impact. There is an illuminating comparison of Anglo-Hegelianism and Thomism in Dom John Chapman’s *Spiritual Letters*, but then Chapman was a convert with a first in Greats from Christ Church, Oxford, in 1887. Another convert, Dom Bede Griffiths, was influenced by Anglo-Hegelianism through his mentor C. S. Lewis, particularly in his negative assessment of language. For Anglicans, Anglo-Hegelianism was a climax. It was the last school of British philosophy to make the problem of religion even sub-central. Its notion of the Absolute, particularly as redefined by Bradley as Mystery, appeared a deeper rationale for religion than those presented by Wilberforce, Tait and Creighton. It was a dead end because the Absolute was not God, even God beyond God, the Mystery was never revealed, and the philosophy provoked its reversal into the pseudo-opposite
variously called Logical Positivism, Linguistic Analysis or Oxford Philosophy, where religion ceased to be even sub-central. Given this dead end, there could only be either stagnation or breakouts followed by reconvergence. This final chapter of the first part will therefore buttress an account of Bradley with a prior consideration of the climax and a subsequent consideration of the dead end.

Climax

In nineteenth-century England, the speculative explosion of the sciences both natural and human had been paralleled in religion by a critical implosion: a deeper examination of what made theological statements true. Method was added to authority. Religious truth ceased to be oracular. It was arrived at by an intellectual process, a series of moments of which authority, whether in scripture, tradition, scholarship or magisterium, was only one. Method did not exclude authority. On the contrary, to achieve finality and reach assent, it implied it, but authority of itself did not adequately describe or prescribe method. Hence the need for philosophy of religion: a critique, or systematic account, of the method and authority of theological statements and assents. Such criticism had been begun by Newman with his analysis of the functions of scripture, tradition, scholarship and magisterium in the Development of Doctrine in 1845. His most purely philosophical work, the Grammar of Assent, appeared in 1870 only four years before Bradley's Presuppositions of Critical History, which displayed a number of similarities to Newman's Grammar. Newman's breakthrough was inflated by Manning who surcharged it by a clearer recognition of the free co-action of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Similarly, it was adapted to Anglican purposes, with various emphases by Wilberforce, Tait and Creighton. Wilberforce built on the evangelical foundations of his family, in accordance with the traditional design laid down for seventeenth-century Anglicanism by Hooker, and inspired by a new ideal of active, independent episcopacy. Tait, more modernist, moved from religious experience through the contemporary workings of the Spirit to the current needs of the Establishment as the religious embodiment of the nation. Creighton, more modernist again and equally concerned for the nation, made history the criterion: not as having a voice of its own, but as arbitrator between the claims of scripture, tradition, scholarship and authority within the Church of England and defence counsel against its denigrators without.