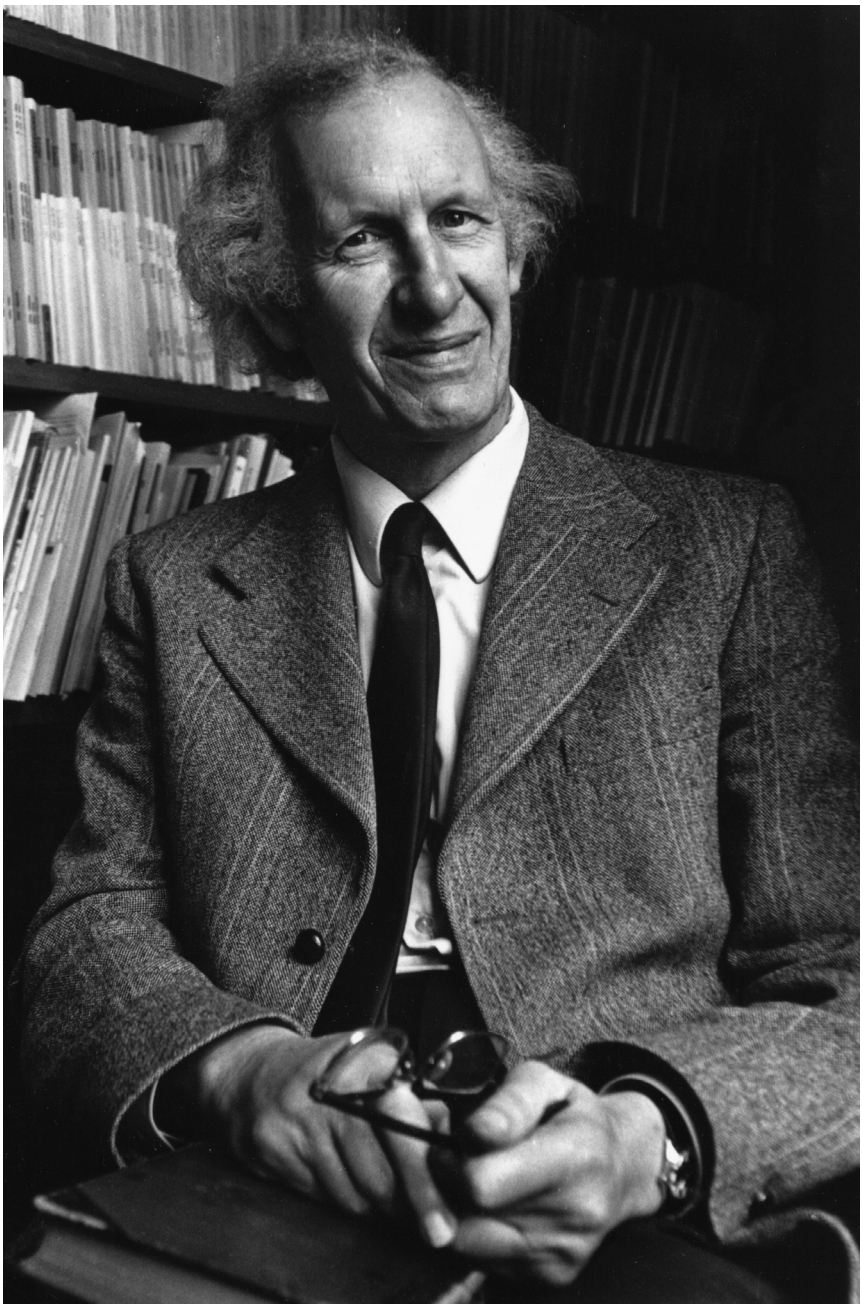

MAURICE WILES *Jessie Ann Matthew*

Maurice Frank Wiles
1923–2005

MAURICE WILES, who died on 3 June 2005, was an Anglican theologian, who was able within that tradition to develop the field of 'doctrinal criticism', and won an international reputation as a result. He began his career concentrating on the period of the early Fathers of the Church, and it was this grounding which sowed the seeds of his later work on modern doctrine. His acute mind, trained in Moral Sciences, discerned the flaws in doctrinal argumentation at the time when orthodoxy was developing, as well as the difficulties in maintaining in the modern world doctrines based on arguments conducted in a very different cultural milieu. He joined the ranks of those twentieth-century scholars who pioneered the rehabilitation of heretics, certain that they raised serious issues for Christian theology rather than being the perverse and immoral servants of the devil their opponents so often depicted: a student essay title he set as early as 1962 was 'The Original Teaching and Intention of Arius', and Arianism would remain a particular interest. Yet he retained a profound respect for tradition and, like the Fathers, constantly measured his doctrinal critique against the experience of believers in life and worship, regarding theology as second-order discourse—reflection on the significance of what was primary for Christianity, such as the experience of salvation. He exemplified 'faith seeking understanding'. He was a man of deep personal integrity, gentleness and humility, who encouraged his students to find their own intellectual pathway and never put anyone down. He was profoundly committed to the outcome of historical criticism, and dedicated to working out the consequences for Christian theology, but always with a manner that was tentative and suggestive,

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never claiming too much. He could always see something of value in positions with which he did not agree.

Life

Maurice Frank Wiles was born on 17 October, 1923, the son of Harold (later Sir Harold) Wiles, who was a career civil servant—from 1946–55 he would be Deputy Secretary of the Ministry of Labour and National Service. At Tonbridge School (1936–42) Maurice acquired a love of cricket, which he continued to play throughout his active life; according to the obituary in Wisden he topped the batting averages at Tonbridge School in 1941, and came second in bowling with his leg-breaks, and even as Canon Professor he was regarded as 'one of the Oxford area's wiliest purveyors of leg-spin'. Some have attributed his sense of fair play to his sportsmanship, though it was also the one scene in which he could appear aggressive. Enjoying all kinds of ball games, he was highly competitive, and he shared a love of sport with his wife, Patricia (Paddy). A shy and private man, he was devoted to children and animals, and his family was of prime importance to him. He had three gifted children (one of them Sir Andrew Wiles, the mathematician who solved Fermat's last theorem) and six grandchildren.

From Tonbridge School, Wiles gained a classical scholarship to Christ's College, Cambridge. Pursuing classics, however, was diverted by the demands of war-time. He was recruited into the Army for one day, but actually his war service was spent at Bletchley Park, a fact kept very quiet for a long time: his classics, together with skill in chess and solving crosswords, had recommended him as a recruit to learn Japanese. In 2002 he contributed a paper entitled, 'Breaking Japanese Military Codes at Bletchley Park', to a Conference on Bletchley Park held at Christ Church, Oxford. Arriving in Cambridge after the war, he chose to study Moral Sciences rather than classics: Part I Moral Sciences was followed by Part II Theology.

A little book Maurice wrote towards the end of his life tells of his two contrasting grandfathers, both deeply committed Christian ministers, one an Anglican parish priest, the other a Strict and Particular Baptist pastor.[1] He himself would likewise choose to go into the Church, though it is clear from his account that family influence was not a factor. He had become

[1] *A Tale of Two Grandfathers* (Cambridge, 2003).

involved in evangelical societies at school, though his enquiring mind led him to become already *persona non grata* to Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (CICCU) as a student. Reading Theology and training for ministry at Ridley Hall meant his intellect came to be deeply engaged with the questions surrounding Christian faith. His emergence as a so-called 'liberal theologian', and eventually as a highly controversial figure in some circles, was the result of gradual evolution, an account of which he gives as an Epilogue to his work on his grandfathers—though in very different ways, he and they were alike responding to the challenges posed to religious belief by the scholarship of their day. Maurice gradually came to see that

> Our task is not, as I had first envisaged it, one of translating a truth already given in Scripture and the creeds into the thought forms of our own day. It is more radical than that. It is to use the resources of Scripture and creeds in the continuing process of seeking to understand, in the light of the knowledge available in our own day, the realities to which faith points.

During his student days two people particularly influenced him: Ian Ramsey, who was Chaplain of his college and his first Theology tutor; and Henry Chadwick, who encouraged his early research in the Church Fathers. Wiles always knew he would be an academic rather than a parish minister, but after Ridley he served his time as a curate at St George's, Stockport. The beginning of progress towards an academic career came two years later when he returned to Ridley as chaplain. In 1955 he went to Ibadan, Nigeria, to lecture in New Testament studies, returning to Cambridge in 1959 to fill the vacancy created by Henry Chadwick's appointment to the Regius Chair in Oxford, the Chair he would himself occupy from 1970–91, thus twice succeeding his mentor.

In Cambridge Wiles was Dean of Clare, as well as university lecturer in Early Christian Doctrine. Between Cambridge and Oxford, he held the Chair in Christian Doctrine at King's College London (1967–70). In Oxford he led patristic study, attracting a considerable number of research students from a variety of backgrounds, and co-directing the international Oxford Patristic Conference, which happens every four years. He developed some key transatlantic academic friendships, and edited the main academic journal in English, the *Journal of Theological Studies*, a task he continued throughout the nineties after his retirement from the Regius Chair. It was in Oxford that his particular contribution to Theology came to full fruition. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1981.

Early work

Maurice Wiles's published work was, to start with, focused on exegesis, particularly that of the early Fathers of the Church. His earliest articles indicate engagement with the New Testament—his first, published in *Theology* in 1954, was concerned with the parables. Very quickly this interest was taken up into an examination of patristic exegesis; so we find 'Early Exegesis of the Parables' published in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* in 1958. His first book was *The Spiritual Gospel. The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel in the Early Church* (Cambridge, 1960). The next project performed the same task for Paul, and was published as *The Divine Apostle* (Cambridge, 1967). With this record it is hardly surprising that he was asked to provide essays on the exegesis of Origen and Theodore of Mopsuestia for the first volume of the *Cambridge History of the Bible* (1970).

This stage of Wiles's thinking can be exemplified by examining *The Spiritual Gospel*. The initial chapter headings are an indication of how his examination of patristic exegesis was shaped by questions raised by the historico-critical method: the authorship and purpose of the Gospel; the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptic Gospels; Historicity and Symbolism; the signs; even his exploration of the leading ideas of the Gospel reflected a then recent book by C. H. Dodd. By taking these topics he shows by implication both the continuities and discontinuities between early and modern interpretation, as well as the divergences between ancient commentators. There is little discussion of method as such. Occasional remarks that one commentator or another seemed to grasp what the Gospel was about better than another do appear, but it is implicit rather than explicit that the standard of assessment is provided by modern reading of the text.

By chapters VI–IX the focus shifts to the doctrinal concern of the Fathers in interpreting this Gospel. Here again the approach is shaped by existing scholarly models, the framework being provided by the then classic account of the history of doctrine. Thus, the way in which 'orthodox' interpreters understood the features of the Gospel that might be regarded as close to Gnosticism is explored, topics such as dualism, docetism, and determinism. Tertullian's exegesis of those Johannine texts which figured in the Monarchian controversies demonstrates his Christological exegesis of the Gospel; while the Christological exegesis of Theodore and Cyril in their Commentaries on John is prefaced by their approach to classifying texts as about the Manhood or Godhead of the Christ. In other words the

dogmatic viewpoint of the exegete under discussion provides the starting-point, which is secondarily illustrated by reference to their approach to the Gospel texts. Almost inevitably the judgement is made that 'both exegetes are attempting to interpret the Gospel from within a straitjacket of presuppositions to which the message of the Gospel will not succumb' (p. 136). Nevertheless Cyril is judged 'to do more justice to the Gospel of divine condescension' if only because he 'declares himself aware of the inadequacy of human language for describing the wholeness of divine truth'. This 'gives to his interpretation a greater theological potency than that of Theodore'. One interesting feature of the book is the fact that Wiles expresses a preference for the work of Cyril on a number of occasions, yet later will state that the Alexandrian Christology is hardly one that can be sustained in the context of modern thought.

The brief Epilogue assesses which of the ancient commentators came nearest to appreciating what the Fourth Gospel was about. Again it must be said that the criteria of judgement come from Wiles's own standpoint, viewing these commentaries from a modern perspective. He was a pioneer in taking the New Testament exegesis of the Fathers as a serious area of study; others have taken the work further, particularly in trying to understand what the Fathers were doing with the texts methodologically in their own intellectual context. However, the very shape of the book anticipates the issues that will dominate Wiles's later thinking. Accepting biblical criticism as fundamental to the modern theological enterprise, he will both engage in a parallel historico-critical analysis of patristic doctrinal development, and will then enquire about the continuing validity of the results of that process. Already in 1957 an article had appeared in the *Journal of Theological Studies* entitled 'Some reflections on the origins of the Doctrine of the Trinity', which did exactly that.

The evolution of Wiles's thinking is perhaps best observed in the collection published as *Working Papers in Doctrine* (London, 1976). This demonstrates that it was in his critical engagement with the Fathers that his increasing radicalism was born. The 1967 move from Cambridge, where his teaching was focused on early Christian doctrine, to the Chair in Christian Doctrine at King's College London meant that he now had to engage with contemporary doctrinal issues. This undoubtedly reinforced for him the questions about how, or indeed whether, traditional doctrines were to be appropriated in the modern world. In Cambridge he had produced a useful textbook on *The Christian Fathers* (London, 1966) and a study entitled *The Making of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge, 1967). Later (1974) he would follow that up with *The Remaking of*

Christian Doctrine (London, 1974) and perhaps it is hardly surprising that the Festschrift offered to him in 1993 was entitled *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (ed. Sarah Coakley and David A. Pailin, Oxford, 1993), for it was this double project that characterised his work overall). In *The Making* Wiles affirmed that

> The great doctrinal definitions of the early Church were the outcome of a closely contested process of reasoning. My aim in this study has been to give a critical review of some of the main aspects of that reasoning process; (p. 159)

and then went on to say

> True continuity with the age of the Fathers is to be sought not so much in repetition of their doctrinal conclusions, or even in building upon them, but rather in the continuation of their doctrinal aims. (p. 173)

He suggests that radical shifts, something like the Copernican revolution, are likely to be required, and having identified three strands in early doctrinal argument, namely, appeal to the record of scripture, the activity of worship and the experience of salvation, asks

> Should not true development be seen in the continuation of the attempt to do justice to those three strands of Christian life in the contemporary world?

The Remaking was an outline of that project, and it was the publication of *Remaking* which provoked the 1976 collection of his '*Working Papers*' to explain the detailed reasoning behind that 'small work'.

The collection begins with the 1957 paper on the Trinity and brings together fourteen previously published essays, including his two inaugural lectures (at King's and in Oxford). In the articles concerning the Fathers, Wiles is constantly aware of the complexity of the process whereby doctrinal affirmations came to be accepted—there can rarely be found a single line of development or a straightforward linear process of evolution. To this extent he anticipated the emerging issue as to whether 'development of doctrine' is the right heuristic model for studying the Fathers—should we not rather speak, in postmodern terms, of a characteristically Christian discourse, forged in the complex interactions of faith and worship with the intellectual questions and challenges of the period? An important insight that emerges repeatedly is that certain doctrinal propositions, which were crucial to developing Christian doctrine, in fact carried rather different meanings and motivations in different situations: thus 'eternal generation' within the context of Origen's overall theological scheme has a very different force and function from that which it acquired when used by Athanasius in a different theological system; and the

presence of a soul in Christ is affirmed for quite different reasons by Origen, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by others later in the Christological controversies. If doctrinal propositions had different meanings at different points in the patristic period, then there naturally emerges the question 'What about the continuing affirmation of such statements in the modern context?' An invited paper with a pre-imposed and, for Maurice Wiles, an uncharacteristically cumbersome title, 'The Consequences of Modern Understanding of Reality for the Relevance and Authority of the Tradition of the Early Church in our Time', provides a kind of turning point in the collection, as focus shifts to the issue, whatever might we make of the tradition in the modern world. Here it becomes explicit that appeal to conciliar dogmas cannot provide a way of escape from the uncertainties generated by acceptance of historico-critical analyses of scripture, because historical consciousness means that those statements themselves face the fires of historical criticism. Characteristically the discussion of the consequences admits to perplexity, and the conclusions are tentative.

Indeed Wiles distances himself in this essay from radical theologies which set out 'to tackle the age-old problems of theology as if they were being raised for the first time today'. He has earlier, in an essay on 'The Doctrine of Christ in the Patristic Age', insisted that 'the Fathers' debates about Christology must be seen to have been concerned with issues of central importance which mattered and which still matter'. However, that does not mean 'we can simply carry on and treat their conclusions as our axioms—differences of world-view, of philosophical and anthropological outlook, preclude any such approach'. Already in 1967 he was suggesting that 'we cannot usefully play the fashionable game of restating Chalcedon in modern terms unless we are prepared to play with equal seriousness the less fashionable game of an equally radical restatement of Nicaea'. Two years later he was asking 'Does Christology rest on a mistake?' In the essay with this title he outlines the way in which the idea of the incarnation in its inception was closely interwoven with the doctrines of creation and fall; then describes the way in which the latter two doctrines have changed, no longer being understood in terms of specific actions in history; and so raises the question whether redemption needs to be tied to a particular historical event. Increasingly the problems of Christology and of Divine Action will become the twin focuses of Maurice's theological concern. Although *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia, 1977) caused him some embarrassment, his involvement in

that project was consonant with much he had already undertaken and would undertake later.

But the collection of 'working papers' also unveils other important ingredients in his thinking. We can see here how Wiles opened his batting on Arianism—he published an article 'In Defence of Arius' in 1962 (reprinted in the *Working Papers*) in which he argued that Arius should not be charged with being illogical and unspiritual, suggesting indeed that he had soteriological motivations for the position he took. Years later he would be a central figure in the debates about Arius and Arianism at the Oxford Patristic Conference of 1983, which resulted in the book, *Arianism: Historical and Theological Assessments* (ed. R. C. Gregg, Cambridge, MA, 1985); and his last big research project focused on Arianism through the centuries, published under the title *Archetypal Heresy* (Oxford, 1996). But a significant point here is the emphasis on soteriology. In other essays, too, he finds the thrust of patristic argument grounded in their understanding of what salvation is. Furthermore he noted that 'the work of the Fathers embodies to a peculiar degree an integration of devotion and of reason'. 'Both are essential ingredients of a living theology,' he insists, adding that '[i]t is not easy to hold them together in the modern world.'

Perhaps most interesting is his inaugural lecture at King's (also included in the *Working Papers*), where for the first time he speaks of 'doctrinal criticism'. The metaphor of his title, 'Looking into the Sun', often informs his discourse. Noting how controversial was biblical criticism a hundred years before, he comments that the church 'for the most part (whether rightly or wrongly) has come to accept [critical study of the Gospels] as an activity which can be carried on without undue damage to the eyes'. He suggests that the most important factor 'enabling the church to come to terms with a thoroughgoing critical treatment of the Scriptures' has been 'the existence of a basic outline of doctrine'—in Nicaea and Chalcedon,

> the substance of the church's faith seemed to dwell secure and unscathed, whatever the scholars might discover in the course of their critical investigations of the Bible. But to bring to that framework of Christian belief the same rigorous spirit of critical assessment, that would indeed be to look very directly into the sun with all its attendant dangers and difficulties. Yet what other proper task could there be for a Professor of Christian Doctrine in an open, secular university? (pp. 150–1)

This endeavour he calls 'doctrinal criticism', attributing the phrase to his predecessor in the Chair, George Woods, who had left a paper, which was

posthumously published, with that title. This Wiles proceeds to quote: 'Doctrinal criticism is the critical study of the truth and adequacy of doctrinal statements.' The rest of the lecture attempts to provide an example of what this discipline might involve. That example is the uniqueness or finality of Christ—the 'once-for-allness' which has been 'from the beginning a prominent feature of Christian belief'.

How then is the doctrinal critic to proceed? The first task, Wiles suggests, is to examine the particular conviction he is engaging with within the historical setting in which it first arose. New Testament scholarship is an ally here, and in relation to Christ's finality it provides clear evidence for the idea arising within the eschatological framework of early Christian thinking. But that context did not remain static—particularly with the transition from a Semitic to a Greek setting. The ultimacy of Christ came to be expressed in terms of divine and human natures, and in this Chalcedonian form has been passed down to future ages. But in our age, it is suggested, the Platonism of the fourth century is as alien as the eschatology of the first. 'Historical relativism' sums up the contemporary outlook, and this makes it 'very difficult to give to any historical events, however superlative their degree of importance, the kind of radical ultimacy that Christianity appears to ascribe to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus'.

So the typical tactic of taking Chalcedon as given and trying to make it compatible with modern thought is barred to the doctrinal critic—no position can be given absolute privilege. Defence of the faith must be defence of the truth, and the doctrinal critic

> would be saying: 'People have made these kinds of affirmation in the past within the context of a world-view which it is no longer possible for me to share. Their affirmations were intimately bound up with that world-view of a by-gone age. They are therefore for me no longer live options; I am not in a position either to affirm them or to deny them; I cannot give any satisfactory sense to them *in that form.*'

The doctrinal critic who is also a Christian, Wiles suggests, will probably regard it as 'worthwhile worrying away at what lies at the heart of, underneath, or at the back of, traditional doctrinal statements'. But

> Every Christian theologian must expect the charge of being unfaithful either to the historical tradition of the Christian faith or to the realities of the modern world. But that is no argument against the propriety of the task. (p. 162)

Here we see most clearly what Wiles thought he was doing, and also the price he knew he would be paying.

His Oxford Inaugural ('Jerusalem, Athens and Oxford', included in the *Working Papers*) raises essentially the same questions but, sensitive ever to context, Wiles sets them in a review of the origin and development of the Oxford School of Theology. 'What then are we to do with those most vexing theological problems which arise from the historical and cultural distance of both Jerusalem and Athens from Oxford?', he enquires, suggesting that the work of theology is 'a highly complex and tentative business'.

> The theologian inherits a broad tradition; without it he could not begin to do his task . . . He takes the past statements of belief with the utmost seriousness but his essential subject-matter is the contemporary world. His aim is not simply to talk about the past in the idiom of the present, but to interpret the present in the light of the past . . .
>
> Sometimes when I say the kind of thing that I have just said, I feel it is too obvious to need saying at all. It could be applied to any other branch of study you care to name—in science or philosophy or history we stand upon the shoulders of our predecessors, but we are not bound by their methods or their conclusions. At other times I feel it is too revolutionary to be acceptable. For Christian theology with its firm roots in the history of Jesus and the dogmatic definitions of the church has always had a built-in fear of novelty, a desire to claim that apparent novelty was at least implicit in previous expressions of the faith. (p. 178)

So he sets out his manifesto: the theologian 'must affirm the propriety—indeed, the necessity—of genuinely new and creative work in Christian theology'.

Mature work in Oxford

Wiles's earlier work already showed an interest in questions far wider than those of patristic scholarship alone; epistemological issues are increasingly in view, and these and related matters come more on to the centre of the stage during his long tenure of the Regius Chair. Throughout this period, however, he continued his patristic research and teaching. In addition to a number of significant articles related to the Arian controversies of the fourth century, he reviewed extensively for the *Journal of Theological Studies* and, as editor, maintained its demanding standards for work on what used to be called 'historical theology'; he presided over the graduate seminar on patristics in Oxford, which frequently concentrated on close textual study (sometimes of rather neglected works like the corpus of fragments associated with Dionysius

of Alexandria), and trained several first class scholars of the next generation. His labours as a doctoral supervisor were perhaps especially appreciated by students from across the Atlantic, and the excellence of the work of patrologists like Rebecca Lyman and Richard Vaggione, to name only two among many, bears witness to the quality of his guidance. And of course there was also his participation in the organisation of the four-yearly Oxford Patristic Conference, an event whose range of interest and attending numbers grew substantially and steadily during his time as a Director.

But it would be fair to say that, for most of his time as Regius, his own priorities, as revealed in his published work, were to do with systematics and theological method. *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (originally the 1973 Hulsean Lectures in Cambridge) appeared relatively early in his Oxford period and established something of a pattern for the work he was to produce in the twenty years or so that followed. It is, like all his written work, eminently lucid and readable; and its dimensions were to be reproduced with remarkable consistency in all he later published. Wiles believed that an argument that could claim to be both serious and digestible required economic statement, and all or most of his mature books come out at a steady 40–50,000 words—the length of a once-a-week lecture course over one academic term. The absence from his oeuvre of any door-stopping or encyclopaedic volumes might tempt a superficial observer to think him less worth attention than some more prolific writers, especially in an age where quantity has dangerously become a more acceptable criterion for academic gravity; but any such judgement would be very wrong. Wiles's later work is in fact a patient and continuous treatment of a closely integrated set of problems, which he addresses, not in one go, but in a carefully paced series of interrogations, in which the scale and level of the intellectual difficulties discussed are slowly and lucidly expanded until it becomes clear that they have to do with some very fundamental issues indeed about religious language.

Thus the *Remaking* develops the questions so clearly flagged in the *Making* that relate to how doctrinal statement can work in a climate where the historical relativity of claims about ultimate truth has been honestly recognised. Two methodological principles are proposed, economy and coherence. In our present intellectual climate, we cannot aspire to comprehensiveness or irreformability; but we can seek for a properly but minimally systematic expression of Christian belief by attempting to make sure that it is epistemologically modest (not going beyond what we are 'required' to say in the light of the evidence) and tolerably consistent.

Appeals to ambitious metaphysical schematisation and the invocation of thrilling but finally chaotic paradox will be equally discouraged: Thomism and Barthianism are given due meed of praise—Wiles is an unfailingly courteous disputant—but gently ushered off stage as inappropriately confident of telling us what things are like from God's point of view, and too prone to use the language of mystery and paradox as get-out-of jail cards. The result is a book of some austerity, sketching out the difficulties around ascribing activity to God in anything remotely like an anthropomorphic sense and reconstructing the language of incarnation and grace accordingly. Certain configurations of events in the world allow clear expression to the divine purpose for humanity and for the universe in general; this does not mean that they carry some extra charge of divine initiative, simply that they reflect a particular moment of translucency in the ongoing interaction between 'contingent circumstances' and the unchanging divine purpose. The uniqueness of Jesus lies in the unsurpassed degree of insight into this divine purpose that his life makes possible; faith in him as Saviour and Lord means 'the conviction (which only time can test) that he will continue to fulfil that role in the future'.

Although Wiles argues that this approach intensifies rather than diminishes the interweaving of personal faith and academic theological study, it is not surprising that a good many readers found the austerity a predominantly negative thing. This impression was strengthened somewhat by the publication of the *Working Papers in Doctrine* already discussed; but it was set in stone for many readers by Wiles's contribution to the notorious 1977 symposium, edited by John Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London, 1977), in which his two essays sketched the shape of a Christian faith no longer committed to incarnational doctrine in any recognisable form and attempted to clarify the concept of 'myth' as vehicle for religious truth. The former in large measure recapitulated the argument of *Remaking* with greater compression and directness; the latter represented a somewhat fresh departure, in beginning to reflect on the nature of religious language and its truth claims, but suffers from dependence on what feels like a residually Frazerian assumption about the evolutionary relation between mythical and scientific description, but it paves the way for the much more extended and serious discussion of religious language in his next full-length book.

The publication of this symposium close on the heels of the Report of the Church of England's Doctrine Commission in 1976, to which also Wiles had been a major contributor, sealed his reputation as a 'revisionist';

he was not invited to rejoin the Commission when it was re-formed by Archbishop Coggan. But in addition to the more superficial and purely reactive comments on these mid-seventies essays, there were some heavyweight criticisms from those whom Wiles respected; we can read some of these in the exchanges that made up the later (and in many ways more interesting) collection, *Incarnation and Myth; The Debate Continued* (ed. Michael Goulder, Grand Rapids, MI, 1979). It is noteworthy that he did not list his *Myth* contributions in his Academy bibliography. And the next book, *Faith and the Mystery of God* (London, 1982), seemed tacitly to admit that the earlier essays needed a better grounding in reflection about 'literal' and 'metaphorical' in theology. In this volume, Wiles explicitly declares his intention of offering a more constructive approach to the fundamentals of faith. He does so by making extensive and sophisticated use of the categories of parable and metaphor, with much interesting allusion to critical and philosophical discussion of metaphor (he cites Paul Ricoeur for the first time, as well as Wimsatt, Wheelwright and Stephen Prickett). The emphasis is very much on language—especially image and narrative—as an instrument of 'disclosure' (the echoes of Ian Ramsey, whose early personal impact on Wiles has been noted above, are quite strong in much of this book, though Wiles would not go along with Ramsey's defence of Chalcedonian statements); and thus the strict focus on 'economy' which had made the theology of *Remaking* so forbidding to some is much modified. The concern about historical relativity is still pronounced but is qualified to some degree by the recognition that the basic mistake (as Wiles would see it) is less the tendency to go beyond what is 'required' in doctrinal statement than yielding to the temptation to understand expressive elaboration as somehow descriptive in force. And in this respect, despite some chastening, the earlier pattern of a split between the purely and empirically literal and everything else is still firmly in place.

The general frame of reference in terms of modern theology is a lot wider here than in the seventies; and one of its most interesting manifestations is the increased use of Roman Catholic writers (Rahner and Schillebeeckx in particular). But almost every chapter of the book returns to what Wiles has increasingly acknowledged as the fundamental issue of how divine action is to be understood. His 1986 Bampton Lectures, published as *God's Action in the World* (London, 1986), represent his attempt to work out a consistent account of this, and it is helpful to read this book as in effect the completion of a trilogy which begins with *Remaking*. As in the earlier works, he defends what is in many ways a robustly

traditional set of assumptions about God's nature as immutable and impassible, and thus as theoretically free to act in any way he wills. However, the combination of theodicy-related questions and concerns about the integrity both of created natural order and created human freedom leads him to reinforce the conclusion of *Faith and the Mystery of God* that God exercises no *particular* efficient causality within the universe once he has created it, but restrains his power in the face of what he has made. He accepts that his position has a strong whiff of what earlier generations stigmatised as 'deism', but argues that both 'deism' and 'theism' as normally conceived (the latter being a belief that God is responsible for effective causality within creation) have weaknesses that need to be recognised. Ultimately, we must learn to work with a careful disjunction between the causality exercised by God in simply being the cause of the universe's existence (including the regularities of nature and the fact of human freedom) and the 'final causality' by which alone God works within creation, drawing finite agents towards his purpose by the pressure of who and what he is. The Aristotelean *kinei hos eromenon* is, in effect, how we should conceive God at work; Wiles also deploys some of the language beloved of 'process' theologians about the divine 'lure'.

Thus the argument begun in *Remaking* is carefully and elegantly brought to its conclusion. Our historical consciousness prohibits the absolutising of any doctrinal formula, but equally prohibits the unique valuation of any historical moment as *objectively* more heavily freighted with divine significance or divine agency than any other. The divine allows itself to be seen in certain configurations of the world's circumstances, and that seeing is expressed in the language of corporate and historical belief, which may be at times even extravagantly metaphorical but remains essentially an evaluative strategy. Religious belief and practice is a disciplined and sustained attempt to dispose one's imagination to sense and respond to these disclosures. So if we are to speak of grace or of providence, it must be with a clear understanding that these are ways of speaking about changes in insight rather than in the 'density' of actual divine involvement in a situation. This does not mean that all that happens is a change of mind: changes of mind change what is possible, and the world really is changed by the proclamation of Christian belief. And to develop a picture of God's action along these lines is in no way to compromise God's personal character; indeed, Wiles suggests at various points, the effect may well be to underline the truly personal and to make less easy for the believer any mechanistic conceptions of divine agency. Ultimately, the God who is spoken of in this theology is responsible for

the most intensely personal act of all in the creation of a world in which freedom is real and in his refusal to intervene in it out of respect for its integrity.

A whole range of intellectual influences may be discerned in this vision. There is, indeed, as some have stressed in a less than wholly friendly spirit, the obvious mark of an empiricist philosophy, invoked in earlier works in a somewhat wooden fashion, it is true (with the emphasis on what evidence 'licenses' or 'demands'). But there is an increasing alertness to broader currents: Wiles writes relatively little about Troeltsch, but is clearly working under his shadow to some considerable extent; and the deployment of literary critical material in *Faith and the Mystery* deserves more discussion. But those familiar with some of the British Free Church theology of the first half of the twentieth century will notice strong echoes: John Oman comes to mind again and again in Wiles's treatment of grace, and the personalist emphases of Tennant and even Wheeler Robinson can surely be traced. Among his own contemporaries or near-contemporaries, his fellow Regius at Cambridge, Geoffrey Lampe, and his colleague at Christ Church, Peter Baelz, were obviously kindred spirits.

The clarity and reasoned modesty of all that Wiles wrote, especially in the Oxford years, are undoubtedly major strengths; these books are attractive, morally serious, rigorous without being mechanical and altogether one of the best cumulative presentations of a classical English Protestant liberalism that the last century produced. They have, of course, some of the weaknesses of that tradition—perhaps most notably an insularity of reference, only partially conquered in Wiles's later works. Earlier books barely mention the major theological or philosophical figures of modern Europe, though, as we have noted, they are dealt with respectfully (if rather uncomprehendingly) when they do find a mention. And there is a curious thinness of acquaintance with the way in which the mainstream scholastic tradition handled doctrinal matters, especially incarnational doctrine: Herbert McCabe gently but inexorably pointed this out in an exchange with Wiles in 1977.[2] Of other Anglican writers in the twentieth century there is only a rather patchy trace: Ian Ramsey is present and positively evaluated in some respects, though there is no full discussion. Michael Ramsey belongs in a very different intellectual world and it is not surprising to find him absent. Austin Farrer is a more startling omission, meriting brief allusions in the later books, but never really

[2] In H. McCabe, *God Matters* (London, 1987), pp. 62–74.

figuring as the major conversational partner one might have expected where the discussion of divine action is concerned. Nor is there sustained engagement in print (but how much of this is due to sheer personal courtesy and diffidence?) with his colleague of so many years, John Macquarrie, whose style, influence and conclusions were so radically different. It would be fair to say that Wiles's characteristic mode of working was not by tussling with the specifics of another thinker's system, but by the painstaking effort to get down to basic presuppositions in the range of argument that he will be tackling. On occasion, this gives his work a rather misleadingly abstract flavour—though in this respect at least he is oddly close to Farrer. It is part of the constant resolution not to write for *cognoscenti* and to avoid anything resembling the tribal language of an academic clique. It helps also to explain why Wiles could never be said to have created a 'school' (a notion he would have disliked intensely); by starting from fundamental definitions of what an argument was about, he intended to leave as much intellectual space as possible, for reader, student or colleague.

This in turn illuminates his professional relations in Oxford and elsewhere. No one could have been less prone to personalise disagreement, to retreat into the company of the likeminded or to pursue academic politics to advance his ideas. His immense integrity and a certain self-sufficiency of temperament allowed him to work both peacefully and constructively alongside theologians of spectacularly different conviction, not least within the unusually close quarters of the Christ Church chapter. He happily collaborated in teaching and discussion with John Macquarrie and Oliver O'Donovan, and later with one of the writers of this memoir; mutual respect and affection were clearly in evidence—though his temperamental affinities with others like Peter Baelz and John McManners meant that these were particularly happy friendships within the college. Not a man with any great taste for either music or liturgy, he did his formal residences in the Cathedral with perhaps more resignation than enthusiasm. But he was unfailing in his attendance at Matins and in his celebration of the early (1662) Holy Communion service on Sundays. As a celebrant and a preacher, he communicated a profound, reticent and in many ways rather traditional piety which could sober and silence critics who thought of him as an irresponsible radical. Any half-complete portrait would have to register this aspect of his life at Oxford, and the edification—in the most serious sense—experienced by those who shared with him the life of the Cathedral. The college, when he first arrived, was still somewhat marked by an anti-clerical nip in the air (even among those

of the Governing Body who were practising Christians), and it was not initially felt by either Wiles or his wife to be a specially welcoming environment. But the atmosphere changed steadily over the years, especially under Eric Heaton's deanship, as older figures retired to the margins; and by the eighties he was held in warm regard by the college.

Retirement

In 1991, Wiles came to the end of his time in the Regius Chair and he and Paddy retired to Iffley. In practice he continued to be heavily—but never intrusively—involved in Oxford's academic life. He remained an editor of the *Journal of Theological Studies* and director of the Patristic Conference and continued to write and publish, adding first to his corpus of 'systematic' works an essay on *Christian Theology and Interreligious Dialogue* (London, 1992). It was a subject he had come to relatively late; the influence of the debates that increasingly focused on John Hick's work and that of comparable proponents of religious pluralism was obviously one of the stimuli in this, but it also represented a chance to spell out some of the implications of his earlier work, particularly the fate of any concept of unique or privileged revelation within the intellectual framework he had constructed. The book is written with all his usual care, fairness and clarity, but has not generally been thought to take the argument on this subject much further. Once again, a degree of not uncritical engagement with liberal Roman Catholic thinking is worth noting.

But the most satisfying and original products of his retirement were the two books which he wrote most obviously to satisfy his own curiosity—one on the history of Arianism in the post-patristic period and the other on his own family, specifically his two dramatically contrasting grandfathers.[3] The latter, which he undertook with great interest and enthusiasm, traces the strands of solid Anglican divinity and profound (dissenting) evangelical piety which were bound together in his inheritance, and it is a fascinating study in the Christian cultures of imperial England. The former is one of the books he was born to write: a highly original survey of how the ideas stigmatised in the heresiology of the fourth century and later as 'Arianism' continued to surface in later

[3] *Archetypal Heresy: Arianism through the Centuries* (Oxford, 1996); and see above, n. 1.

Christian debate, most especially in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England. Something like the subordinationist pluralism of Arius had been part of the complex world of European anti-Trinitarianism in the Reformation era; but it was in England that some of the most unusual and intriguing varieties of this were developed a little later. Wiles discusses the doctrinal and theological researches of figures like Clarke and Whiston, and clarifies the distinctive elements that set them apart from ordinary Unitarianism; they represent some of the first stirrings of a serious interest in Jewish Christianity, and their work on second-generation anti-Nicene theology (Eunomius in particular) was no less trailblazing, however weak by the standards of later scholarship. What Wiles brings out most plainly is the fact that Arianism, in the sense of a belief in the Divine Logos as a pre-mundane supernatural being, as opposed to classical Unitarianism (which was more in the tradition of Paul of Samosata, if a patristic antetype is to be sought), had become increasingly incredible in the seventeenth century with the demise of any robust level of belief in supernatural agencies between God and the empirical world. The same intellectual climate which bred scepticism about Trinitarian doctrine as 'revealed' bred an equal scepticism about angelic viziers in heaven. In an odd way—though Wiles does not put it quite like this—the 'Arians' of the eighteenth century reproduced what some have seen as the strengths and the weaknesses of Arius himself—an intense commitment to logical coherence and a wariness of paradox, but also a sturdy intellectual conservatism in exegesis and metaphysics. The entire book is a fitting crown to decades of interest in Trinitarian controversies; for all its admirable and customary objectivity, it cannot help but reveal here and there some of Wiles's longest standing personal concerns. The English 'Arians' of the seventeenth and eighteenth century ask so many of the questions that he regarded as necessary and neglected, about the actual history of doctrinal formulae, about authority in doctrine, about the limits of pluralism in doctrinal expression—yet were themselves held back from a fully rational reconstruction of the tradition by adherence to a pre-modern world view.

It might be added that, like some of the reconstructionists of the mid-twentieth century, they were prone to overlook the ways in which, in scholastic as well as patristic discussion, quite a few of the problems which they presented as insoluble logical *aporiai* had in fact been subjected to rigorous critical examination, and resolutions offered. This does not mean that such discussions make contemporary questioning

redundant, but it is a reminder that there is not after all an unbridged gap between the Fathers and the early modern world, a wilderness of dogmatic credulity. It is another way in which Wiles's writing represents a very traditional style, reflected in the structure of most theological syllabuses up to quite a recent date: the Council of Chalcedon marks the end of a 'classical' period, inaugurating a long era of theological uneventfulness up to the Reformation and the dawn of the Enlightenment. Some of the debates over Christology in the seventies and eighties can give a slight impression of reinventing the wheel, labouring hard over questions that had a substantial history of earlier discussion as if that history had not happened—which is perhaps why Roman Catholic theological debates in this period took a different tack. And in this light it is worth saying that Wiles's growing openness to and use of contemporary Catholic theology in his later work shows his essential honesty and readiness to enlarge his world of reference; though—curiously in some ways—he did not really warm at any level to the world of twentieth-century Continental Protestant thought: Schillebeeckx (or even Rahner) was a more congenial interlocutor than Moltmann or Jungel (though Pannenberg is briefly discussed in one or two pieces).

Whether one regards this as a regrettable insularity or a welcome scepticism about overblown and overambitious systematising is in part a matter of temperament and in part a matter of where convictions lie about the constructive limits of theology. Wiles's sense of these limits was acute; the word 'austerity' was used earlier in this memoir, and it is undoubtedly a word he would have appreciated. Alongside the almost infinite patience and the rather shy warmth which are remembered with such affection, there was a very deep understanding of the *docta ignorantia* that should characterise the theologian. In a revealing passage right at the end of *Faith and the Mystery* (p. 129), he expresses his concern that ambition to resolve what are essentially unresolvable theological questions will undermine the priority of mystery itself—mystery not as an alibi for thought but precisely as an invitation to thought, and to the renewed reverential unknowing to which serious religious thought leads.

> [W]hile mystery warns us against the speciously attractive answers that would dissolve it, it also encourages us to continue with the looking, for we can never tell when we have reached the limits of human understanding. Indeed, it is to such a continued search for understanding that faith commits us.

Other theologians may construe a little differently the warning against dissolving the mystery; but Wiles's own exemplification of theology as 'continuing with the looking' will remain as a model of intellectual and spiritual humility for which his colleagues will be deeply thankful and by which they will be content to be judged.

ROWAN WILLIAMS
Fellow of the Academy

FRANCES YOUNG
Fellow of the Academy