Play, ritual, and the rationality of religious paradox

Tony Edwards

The thing that seems most of all to characterize [religious thought] is a natural taste for immoderate confusions as well as jarring contrasts. It freely tends to excesses in both directions. When it relates things together it confounds them; when it distinguishes between things, it opposes them. It knows nothing of restraint or gradations, it seeks extremes; as a result, it uses logical mechanisms in a clumsy way, but it does not overlook any of them.

Durkheim

"Is religion rational?" has been a major question in the study of religion—and little wonder. For in this question two fundamental human commitments, religiosity and rationality, come together and collide. At the heart of the issue is the prevalence of paradox in religious language. Paradoxes are prima facie contradictions, and the law of contradiction is one of the cornerstones of rationality.

Here I shall consider an argument in favor of the rationality of religious paradox. First, I shall develop an argument based on analogies between quotation, play, and ritual. After reviewing two minor problems with that argument, I shall then present a more serious objection based on disanalogies between quotation, play, and ritual. Finally, in answer to that objection, I seek an explanation for the peculiar balance of the analogies and disanalogies: religion seems unable to fulfill its function except by employing paradoxes that hover elusively between mention and use.

By "paradoxical expression" here I shall mean an apparently contradictory or self-negating sentence. Such a sentence may be direct, as in Luther's claim that a Christian is simul iustus et peccator, "at once just and a sinner," or indirect, as in Aquinas' "A human being is ordered to an end that exceeds..."
reason." In Luther's case, the problem is immediately evident. Like Augustine, Luther used this sort of expression to bait readers into struggling with his meaning. In Aquinas' case, on the other hand, the problem is not so easily recognized. We have to think through his remarks on will and reason before we can see the paradoxical character of his statement. Sometimes, too, a paradoxical expression may be implicit in a metaphorical or other figurative statement, or within the language that governs role-changes in narrative or ritual.

By "apparent contradiction" I mean an expression that joins two propositions that appear to be logically incompatible. Such expressions invoke the full range of signification in the language used, but, because the expression is problematic, and, because its problematic character is accepted as part of the meaning of the expression, its semantic and pragmatic structures open onto, and require, psychological processes: signification is suspended and exploration begins. Suspension ends only with "uptake"—the discovery of a satisfactory, but often tentative, solution. In some cases, this solution will yield the conclusion that the initial appearance of contradiction was correct; in others, that that initial appearance was misleading.

By "self-negating" expressions I have in mind expressions such as "This sentence is false." As with apparent contradictions, apparent self-negations begin by invoking the full range of significance, but here too the problematic character of the expression suspends signification, and exploration takes over. In many cases, double-take is essential to the rhetorical force of the expression: the "ahah!-experience" or "uptake" follows a "huh?-experience," an initial reading that does not get the point. In other cases, however, the move to uptake is a single, unbroken motion: as in reading literary tropes, a familiarity with rhetorical conventions or with the author's style can make it easy to understand paradoxes that would otherwise prove difficult. The

---

1 Martin Luther, Werke (Weimar Ausgabe), 40, pt. 2, 368; Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologicae, I, 1, a. 1.