

Theology as an illusion somehow close to life.

Revisiting A.N. Prior's Crisis of Faith

During his studies in the 1930s and his early career Arthur Norman Prior was deeply involved in writing about theology, and was, in his youth, an active member of The Student Christian Movement in New Zealand. In 1942, as recorded by Antony Kenny (1971), the now 28-year-old Prior had a crisis of faith as he went through a divorce from his first wife Clair and ended up dropping the pacifism of his youth. Little has been directly known, through Prior's own writings, about this crisis, except what could be gleaned and guessed from the article *Can Religion be Discussed?* (1942), and from *Faith, Unbelief and Evil* (2011), which is a similar article, although more positive towards religion and most likely written during the same period. We know the crisis was a decisive event in Prior's life, since his theological writings changed character after 1942. His focus on theology shifted from the earlier enthusiastic writings of the 1930s to the more historical and critical writings of the 1940s. In the 1940s, Prior was more interested in analyzing various systems of theology with a view to revisioning them than with a view to defending them. Other aspects of Prior's early theological writings have been published by Grimshaw (2002), who focused on the earliest works of Prior of the 1930s. Neither the period prior to the crisis nor the one after gives us much knowledge about its depth and nature. This article serves to introduce an important discovery of a diary written by Arthur N. Prior in the midst of his crisis of faith in 1942. (Prior, 2012) The diary was discovered recently in Prior's archive at the Bodleian Library in Oxford. It is seven pages long and is dated 25th March 1942. The diary is important in two areas, and it is the overall purpose of this introduction to investigate the relevance and importance of the diary with regard to pertinent and important questions within these. The first area is the question of the crisis itself. The diary provides a unique window into Prior's thinking in the midst of his crisis, and is, as such, a valuable source for understanding the nature and depth of the same. In virtue of this, questions concerning Prior's early relationship to the Christian faith, and the eventual agnosticism he ended up with deserves to be examined anew. These questions have been dealt with by Hasle (2012), Hasle and Øhrstrøm (2004) and by Grimshaw (2002). The second area is the total picture concerning Prior's lasting contribution to philosophy and logic. Here the diary points towards the greater part that theology played in Prior's later philosophical and logical work. As such, the diary deserves to be placed within the larger story of how Prior's occupation with theology in his youth influenced and shaped his philosophical and logical work. The diary is helpful in terms of clarifying whether Arthur N. Prior, despite his deep involvement with the Christian faith in the 1930s, was merely struggling with doubt or no longer considered himself a Christian in 1942. In strikingly clear terms, it is evident from the diary that in 1942, he considered Christianity as something that belonged to his past. He now described theology as an illusion. An important question concerning Prior's crisis is answered by the diary: If he rejected theology as an illusion, why did Prior continue to cultivate an interest for collecting theological systems? The reason given by Prior is that theology

somehow brings us closer to life. However, this answer only raises other questions in light of the total picture of Prior's occupation with theology in the 1940s and early 1950s. Did Prior's laps from faith in 1942 really only last short while, as Kenny says? (Kenny, 1971) The primary reason given by Kenny is the fact that after the crisis in 1942, Prior still "continued to treasure his theological library," and "after a very brief pause [...] resumed the writing of Presbyterian articles." (Kenny, 1971) Prior's reason for continuing to collect theological systems seems to undermine Kenny's reasoning. If, for professional reasons, Prior would decide to continue his investigations into theological systems, then his high regard for theology and the subsequent publishing of articles in theological journals do not necessarily give us a reason to think that Prior's crisis didn't last for so long. Exploring various answers to this question will take up most of the first part of the introduction. Most crucial for this exploration is determining what Prior means by the following phrase from the diary:

"Theology is an illusion, but it is an illusion that is somehow "close to life", and the study of theological systems illuminates real problems in some way, and that's why I'm interested in it." (Prior, 2012)

The article will discuss suggestions as to what Prior means when he calls theology "an illusion that is somehow close to life." This will be done in light of *Can Religion be Discussed?* and *Faith, Unbelief and Evil*. The introduction will argue that while it is important to bear other questions in mind, such as the fact that for many years after 1942, Prior remained an active member of the Presbyterian church, the diary weakens the arguments given by Kenny for why Prior's atheism didn't last for long. The article also assesses the arguments raised by Hasle (2012) against Grimshaw (2002) concerning why Prior ultimately abandoned the religious beliefs of his youth. Hasle has argued that if *Faith, Unbelief and Evil* was written after *Can Religion be Discussed?*, then "it may well be seen as reflecting Prior's overcoming his personal religious crisis." (Hasle, 2012) There are reasons to believe that *Faith, Unbelief and Evil* was written after *Can Religion be Discussed?*, but this article will argue that the diary entry weakens Hasle's argument, since it supplies us with another reason for why Prior continued writing about theology, even though he considered it an illusion. Contrary to Hasle, Grimshaw has placed more emphasis on the religious crisis of Prior's youth. Based on an article by Prior from 1937, wherein Prior criticizes Barthian theology, Grimshaw has argued that these are the first signs of what would later become clear to Prior, namely that the Christian faith was logically untenable:

For as Prior notes, the issue is that a proposition is either the case or it is not – and, if not, 'no amount of believing will make it so'. In the end Prior signals the initial moving of his focus from theology to philosophy because 'even Barth does not emphasize it enough. It cannot be emphasized enough'. (Grimshaw, 2002)

To Grimshaw, the crisis of faith, together with the logical problems Prior saw from early on, led him to move away from theology towards philosophy (Grimshaw, 2002). This article will argue, that while Grimshaw is right in placing more emphasis on the crisis of faith, with regard to Prior's change of focus, Prior's crisis did not happen because "theology left too many areas unanswered".

However, in his crisis of faith, Prior found a specific vision for his professional work, in which theology played a crucial part, not as truth, but as an illusion somewhat close to life. Finally, the introduction to the diary will argue for another hypothesis concerning Prior's relationship to the Christian faith, his crisis and his subsequent continued occupation with theology. This is the hypothesis that Prior's Barthian version of Calvinism was eventually challenged by his commitment to philosophical realism, also concerning philosophical claims about God, and that when he ultimately opted for agnosticism, it was motivated primarily by a desire for a non-commitment to the theological positions he continued to investigate throughout his life. Contrary to Hasle, Øhrstrøm and Kenny, this article will place greater emphasis on Prior's early crisis of faith. Contrary to Grimshaw, the article will show that it wasn't because Prior found his faith logically untenable, but rather because Prior, in the midst of his crisis of faith, found a vision for studying theology as an illusion, somehow close to life, convinced that something good might come out of it. The article will place a greater emphasis on Mary Prior's words about her husband:

I have never felt quite sure how seriously Arthur really took the Calvinism which intellectually attracted him. It was rigorous and logical, unlike the Methodism of his childhood. But it's God lacked humanity. I think sometimes he entertained Calvinism in its various forms rather than quite believing it. (Prior 2003, p. 302)

Finally the article will seek to place Prior's crisis of faith in view of the total picture of his contribution to philosophy and logic. His groundbreaking invention of temporal logic overshadows his earlier occupation with theology, but Prior's work, on the other hand, count many important contributions to various metaphysical topics with direct bearing on theological questions, such as a timeless God's knowledge of tensed facts, and his discussions of divine foreknowledge of the contingent future. The diary casts an important light on Prior's professional life, since it contains a vision Prior found in the midst of his crisis of faith, for his continuing occupation with theology. He was convinced that something good would eventually come out of his studies of theological systems.

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