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Faith and Contemporary Human Experience

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Faith and Contemporary Human Experience

THIS volume of *Concilium* takes up what is perhaps the most fundamental problem facing the Church today, namely that of relating the Christian Faith to contemporary human experience. Confirmation of the importance of this problem can be drawn not only from the list of best-sellers, e.g. Robinson's *Honest to God*, Cox's *Secular City*, and Dewart's *The Future of Belief*, but more substantially from the discussions and decrees of Vatican II, especially its Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) and its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) as well as from those of the World Council of Churches, Montreal, 1963. Moreover, there is a growing awareness today that within this basically theological problem, a special role is being played by the changes in contemporary anthropology and epistemology, i.e., man's new self understanding and the contemporary approaches to a theory of knowledge that at one and the same time have helped to form, and graphically reflect, this new human self-consciousness. Thus the title of this volume, *Man as Man and Believer*.

There are many sides to this basic Faith-contemporary experience relationship. The editors of this volume, Fathers Schillebeeckx and Willems, have centered their approach on the idea of Revelation. Dealing with its objective side, L. Bakker takes up the question of whether revelation is a "speaking by God that falls vertically on man, as it were from the outside, and without any contribution from man himself, or may revelation be taken as expressing and enlightening man's understanding of himself?" (p. 21.) The historical and unique aspects of Revelation are compared by A. Vögtle to its equally essential universality and relevance for all time, while the role of the Church's magisterium in explaining Revelation is taken up by G. Baum.

Relative to man's response to Revelation, its subjective side as it were, J. Alfaro contributes an outstanding article on

* MAN AS MAN AND BELIEVER. *Concilium*. Theology in the age of of renewal. Volume 21. New York: Paulist Press, 1967. x, 178 pp.

the dual aspect of Faith as entrusting oneself to God, and as acceptance of the Christian message. The question of the content of man's response, and of its truth, is broached by von Balthasar, and its communitarian aspect in the Church is developed by M.-D. Chenu. The volume also includes two excellent surveys on contemporary theories of the development of dogma, H. Hammans reporting the Catholic positions and G. Lindbeck summarizing the Protestant views. Obviously only a few of the major themes in this collective work can be signaled out for comment.

P. van Leeuwen's lead article provides an interesting account of the various schemes that gradually evolved into Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution, *Dei Verbum*. The final text approved by the Council showed an extraordinary advance over the first drafts; Leo Bakker, in the following article, claims that "the first text was even diametrically opposed to the definitive one" (p. 27), citing as an example the final draft's insistence that God reveals not through words alone, but through words *and deeds*.¹ This stress on God revealing rather than on the content of the message, understood in propositional form, had the effect of focusing attention on the transmission of revelation. In this context, tradition conceived as growth became the key notion in approaching both the transmission of revelation and the development of dogma. Here is an area in which theologians have profited from advances in contemporary anthropology. Hammans credits Blondel with the real breakthrough from an older, narrower conception of tradition to seeing in it not merely the transmission of "a series of venerable sentences or actions from the past but rather the living reality itself" (p. 124). While resting on the texts, tradition also is essentially the experience "which is happening all the time and which allows it to dominate the texts," and in this way effects the passage from "what is lived implicitly." In a recent work, J. P. Mackey uses Karl Jaspers' analysis of the levels of community to develop a wider notion of tradition, not limited to a "group of esoteric truths pertain-

¹ All the recent commentaries on *Dei Verbum* stress this point. See, for example, K. McNamara, "Divine Revelation," *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 34 (Jan., 1967), 3-19.

ing to the Christian faith but not found in any way in the bible," nor to the official teaching of the hierarchy, an interpretation proposed by Franzelin. [Cf. J. P. Mackey, *Life and Grace*, Gill, 1966, pp. 105-44.] Baum in turn stresses the point that "the tradition of faith is not simply doctrinal tradition; it includes the entire life of the community," and it is to this living tradition of the Gospel in the Church that the indefectibility and infallibility of the Church primarily apply (p. 72).

Yet it is not enough to focus uniquely on revelation as God's self-communication, and on tradition as a dynamic, active vital process, without also considering the light of the grace of faith. Otherwise there is grave danger that God's self-communication will "fall under the sway of the subjective pre-condition of the human mind," reducing it to an element in man's own self-understanding (p. 113). Hammans quotes Rahner to the effect that the "Spirit and word together create the permanently active possibility of an experience which is, in principle, the same as that of the apostles." The word of revelation, then, received in the light of grace, contains the reality itself that it expresses. Semmelroth compares the word of revelation to the God-Man: just as a human body and a human soul hides in him the divine Logos, so in revelation we have a "word-body", a "word-meaning" and, hidden in that, a third divine principle which can only be perceived through the guiding activity of the Spirit" (p. 129).

Just how this light of faith works in revelation, and what precisely distinguishes a believer's grasp of God's self-communication from an unbeliever's, has been a major area of discussion for the past decade. Some would question whether a truly adequate answer can be found by pursuing the personalism of a Mounier, J. Mouroux (*I Believe*, Chapman, 1959), Cirne-Lima (*Personal Faith*, Herder & Herder, 1965).² Others suggest Heidegger's third level of "primordial" or essential

² The personalistic approach to faith must be put into the larger context of man's relationship to the *community* and to the *world*. For the former, see the recent article of B. Kelly, "Faith and the Community" *ITQ*, 34 (April, 1967), 143-58; for the latter, see the work of J. B. Metz [short bibliography, *Philosophy Today*, 10 (Winter, 1966), 299] and Teilhard de Chardin and his many commentators.

thinking is suggestive of the approach revelation demands.³ In this area it seems essential to avoid two extremes: a too narrow theological approach that ignores completely any serious consideration of Christian existential experience, while focusing its attention solely on the source of revelation, and on the absolute uniqueness and transcendent superiority of the divine word, and the completely existentialist approach, so concentrating on the experience of faith as to deny in practice any real possibility of dogmatic formulation.⁴ Somehow there must be a middle ground that recognizes the necessity of working with the existential, human manifestation of God's word in action—for example, the growing literature on the psychology of grace (Fransen, "Towards a Psychology of Grace," *Cross Currents*, 8 [1958], 211-32; W. Meissner, *Foundations For A Psychology of Grace*, Paulist Press, 1966)—while at the same time respecting the transcendent dimensions of revelation precisely as divine. This seems to be the direction pursued by Rahner and Schillebeeckx in their essays contributed to *The Word in History*, ed. T. P. Burke, (Sheed & Ward, 1966). Schillebeeckx's essay, "Faith Functioning in Human Self-Understanding" could well serve as a model of the present attempts to bring Christian Faith and contemporary human experience together in vital encounter.

In analyzing man's response to revelation, Alfaro draws a parallel first between revelation as God's gift of Himself and Faith as man's entrusting himself to God, and secondly between the human expression of this gift of God, and faith as acceptance of the Christian message. Thus man's freedom to accept revelation parallels God's free offering of Himself. In such a context, faith is viewed not so much as an act or series of acts, but rather as a basic attitude of mind which im-

³ See J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Scribners, 1966), pp. 81-86.

⁴ Bakker points this out as the basic error of the Modernists (p. 34). The corrective is had in the recognition of the triple dimension of Scripture: the *historical* element, (that Christ really lived in this way at that time), the *geschichtliche* element (the significance of this life for us here and now), and the *eschatological* element (the divine dimension) (p. 36).

poses a definite direction on the whole of man's life. This conception of faith bears striking resemblance to Fransen's explanation of man's *fundamental* liberty of an existential and totalizing option in which man expresses himself wholly with all that he wishes to be in this world and before God.⁵ This fundamental option is not any particular choice, but an orientation freely imposed in, by and through man's daily free acts, in an essentially historical, developmental manner. Perhaps with a more adequate notion of the self-becoming process precisely as developing fundamental liberty, and a more evident and essential place for intersubjectivity within this process, the opportunity is offered for a profound insight into the religious experience of faith.⁶

Of the two aspects of faith—man's personal commitment to God's inner word in grace, and his acceptance of the outer word of the divine message of salvation, Alfaro, following St. Thomas, clearly awards the primacy to the former, the personal dimension, over the latter, the doctrinal aspect. In a footnote, Alfaro links this primacy of the personal to the supremacy of the divine over the human in Christ, of the invisible over the visible in the Church, of the spirituality of man which opens him to God over his corporeality which opens him to the world (p. 61, n. 11). There is much to be said for the clarity of this parallelism; yet it may seem to jar contemporary sensibilities which are so preoccupied with stressing man's unity, preferring perhaps to conceive of *man's* openness to God precisely as *embodied* spirit, and *his* openness to the world through *spiritualized* corporeality. This may seem like a mere play of words, or a stubborn refusal to work at the laborious process of clarifying, distinguishing, evaluating. Nevertheless, the stress on man's unity as incarnate spirit, the refusal to distinguish in the precise mode of the scholastics,

⁵ Besides the article of Fransen cited in the text above, see his more recent essay "Man and Freedom," in *Man Before God* (New York: Kenedy, 1966), esp. pp. 76-88.

⁶ This point is made by L. Dupré in an excellent article, "Philosophy of Religion and Revelation: Autonomous Reflection vs. Theophany," *Int. Philos. Quart.*, 4 (Dec., 1964), 499-513.

the attempt to gain clarity and understanding from a new *noesis*, do seem legitimate.⁷

An example of such a new orientation is the contemporary view of reality not in terms of substance and accident, but rather as a dynamic relatedness in process.⁸ In this context, man's very relation to God is said to *constitute* him as a self, instead of only being the formality *by which* he is related. Likewise, God's relation to His creation could now be conceived as something real, without thereby necessarily introducing metaphysical composition in God Himself.⁹

Alfaro tackles the difficult problem of describing God's inner call through grace, and man's personal response.¹⁰ "Man knows God a-conceptually in living the experience of His call. This knowledge is not a vision of God or an immediate experience of him, but the living of a tendency toward the transcendent one in himself, and, in this tendency, an a-conceptual grasp of man's final end—the absolute as grace" (p. 60). This difficult passage is later developed in describing grace as "God's a-conceptual manifestation and gift of Himself, an ineffable communication of God in himself, not objectivized in representative content, but lived in the attraction of the transcendent. In response to this inner invitation man feels himself called to free acceptance of the absolute in his gratuitous self-giving, even though he has no reflective consciousness of this feeling" (p. 63).

⁷ Two recent articles are noteworthy in their attempt to face the present challenge squarely and view it in its proper dimensions. Cf. E. Fontinell, "Reflections on Faith and Metaphysics," *Cross Currents*, 16 (Winter, 1966), 15-40, and W. R. Comstock, "Naturalism and Theology," *Heythrop Journal*, 8 (Apr., 1967), 181-90.

⁸ For an interesting attempt to show how this new approach can be harmonized with St. Thomas' teaching on the transcendentals, see R. E. Wood, "The Self and the Other," *Philos. Today*, 10 (Spring, 1966), 48-63.

⁹ This same conclusion was reached by arguing from a basically Augustinian problematic by W. E. Stokes, "Is God Really Related to This World," *Proceedings of Am. Cath. Philos. Assoc.*, 39 (1965), 145-51.

¹⁰ See also Alfaro's penetrating study, founded solidly on St. Thomas, of the relationship between grace and the person, in the collective work *Man Before God* (cf. n. 5), pp. 174-98.

Besides the extreme difficulty of simply understanding the English translation (and assuring its accuracy!) there remains the major problem besetting all contemporary attempts at a philosophy or phenomenology of religion. On the one hand, faith is a *human* act; grace, if it is real, must have "its own repercussion on the depths of man's consciousness" (p. 59), for it is described as the very "living of a tendency" toward the absolute. Yet it is a tendency toward the *absolute*, toward the mystery of love that transcends our intelligence, towards a gratuitous gift encountered in faith in a posture of pure receiving (p. 65). The interplay here of immanent and transcendent, of absent presence and present absence, is enough to give any linguistic analyst a mental breakdown.¹¹ It remains to be seen, however, whether the reality in question does not demand such category-smashing within the very pursuit of *fides quaerens intellectum*.

JOSEPH L. ROCHE, S.J.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion and analysis of believer and unbeliever in terms of the present absence and absent presence of Revelation and Faith see H. van Luijk's *Philosophie du Fait Chrétien* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer. 1964).