

Faith And Experience:

XII Christian Experience

Simon Tugwell O. P.

In the past few articles we have been tracing some of the ways in which philosophers and theologians have used the idea of the ineffability and incomprehensibility of God. They warn us insistently not to suppose that we know more about God than we actually do. Whether our understanding of God derives from philosophy or from revelation or from our own experience, they remind us that he is still largely unknown to us, mysterious and transcendent.

Those who are drawn by the idea of that "infinite ignorance" which was proclaimed by Evagrius¹ may find all this quite delightful. But may not some people rather feel that they are left with almost no God at all? We may recall the tragic conclusion of Casian's account of the anthropomorphite controversy in Egypt. When at last old Paphnutius is convinced of the truth of the anti-anthropomorphite theology, he throws himself on the ground, howling, "Poor, poor me!" he cries out. "They have taken away my God and now I have no God to hold on to. I do not know whom I am to worship now or whom I am to pray to" (Conl. 10,3).

As Bowker says, "No matter how 'God' is constituted, if there is no feedback at all into the actual situations and experiences of life, plausibility is under maximum strain; if no effect of God can ever be discerned or specified, then in effect God is nowhere" (*The Sense of God* p. 84). Now maybe there is good reason for saying that that is precisely where God is. But does our negative theology not tend to make God so remote from our actual situations and experiences, does it not make it so difficult to accept anything at all as an "effect of God", that it eventually ceases to be plausible to talk of God at all?

But, as Bowker points out, "plausibility" cannot be treated as a static consideration. So much depends on who God must be made plausible to, and what their particular crisis of plausibility consists of. And it is worth noticing that at least one element in the development of negative theology is precisely a concern to make God plausible.

Inevitably a great deal of religion is made up of various kinds of concession to human weakness. If such concessions were not made, no contact could be made between God and man. But the very concessions that make God cogent to one generation or one

people become an embarrassment to another generation or people.

We can see this process within Judaism. In an earlier article I referred to the evident attempt to insert into the tradition of God speaking to Moses face to face a negative corrective. And in fact we can see in many Jewish texts a concern to play down the anthropomorphisms which are so abundant in the Old Testament. So strongly was it felt that the very human appearance of God in some passages is intolerable that it was declared by Rabbi Judah, in the second century AD, that "If one translates a verse literally, he is a liar" (*Kiddushin* 49a). This rather strange principle can be seen at work in many passages in Philo and the Targums.²

Another problem was posed for Judaism by animal sacrifice. There is a widespread Christian tradition that the Old Testament sacrificial law was given to the Jews because God realised that the people were addicted to sacrificing and so wanted at least to make sure that they only offered sacrifice to him.³ The same is said by Maimonides⁴ And it is a very plausible view. The Jewish religion, even with sacrifice, was so unlike other people's religions that it seems to have been hard for the Jews to believe that it was enough. It would have made an impossible demand on them to expect them to do without such a universal practice as sacrifice. But evidently by the time of Christ there were Jews who wished to be rid of the whole thing.⁵ Philo tried to salvage the whole Temple ritual, but to do so he had to resort to highly sophisticated symbolic interpretation.⁶ Christ seems to have been for some Jews a welcome opportunity to declare sacrifice abolished and a reformed Judaism now in force. (Cf. Gospel of the Ebionites, frag. 6)

On the other hand, the general abandonment of Jewish ritual law proved too drastic for some other Christians. St Paul seems to allow at least a partial retention of it as a concession to their weakness (Rom 14, 1ff), and in due course Christianity develops its own religion of law. It seems reasonably clear that the hardening of monasticism into a complex set of precise observances was at least greatly encouraged by the need to provide a safe place of Christian practice for beginners. St Benedict is expressly providing a "school of the Lord's service" for beginners (Rule of St Benedict, Prologue 45; 73, 1 & 8). But in time this provision for beginners comes to be felt as an obstacle to growth. St Dominic is said to have challenged some Cistercians who were scandalised by the carefree way in which he sent his young men out all over the place to preach, "Why are you spying on my disciples, you disciples of the Pharisees? I know very well that I shall send my young men out and they will come back; but you can lock your young men up and they will still escape" (Salagnac, *de Quatuor* MOPH XX p 10). And escape they did, evidently; there is good evidence of fairly

general unrest in monastic life in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁷

Another concession to the needs of the time, at least in Origen's view, was the whole element of miracle and prophecy in the Old Testament dispensation. Everybody else had miracles and oracles in abundance; if the Jews had been the only people to lack them, the temptation would have been too strong to resist, to run off to pagan shrines to supplement the meagre fare provided by the Lord. (*C. Cels.* III 2f.)

Origen himself is still quite positive about miracles. He several times refers to the contemporary evidence of miracles to support his claim that Jesus Christ is a force to be reckoned with. (E.g. *c. Cels.* I 46, II 8, VII 35, VIII 58). But later on people become embarrassed by miracles. St Augustine regards miracle-working as, in general, being due to vanity, as does St Aelred after him. (Augustine, in *Ep. Joh.* 2,13f; Aelred, *Spec. Car.* II 73).

The problem of the plausibility of religion shifts inevitably, as the solution to one problem becomes in turn a further problem. The concession that was made in order to make religion accessible at the outset needs to be purified, in order to keep that religion plausible, by some kind of negative corrective device. God must not be reduced to his concessions, and religion cannot for ever live off his concessions.

The Greeks, like the Hebrews, found themselves saddled with tales about their gods that they began to find distressing. But, not being tied by any great sense of revelation, their first reaction to the problem was not so much to negate their tales on principle as to rewrite them on their own authority. Thus Hesiod, faced with the story of Prometheus bringing fire to man by deceiving Zeus, simply declares that it is impossible to deceive Zeus, and emends the story accordingly.⁸ This is just what we should expect of a man who says that the best man of all is the one who works things out for himself, though a man who learns from someone else is also good. (*Op.* 291). Later philosophers were not always so confident of the abilities of the human mind. Zeno reversed Hesiod's two lines, to give first prize to the man who is prepared to learn. (*SVF* I 235).

Pindar likewise refuses to follow several traditional myths on the grounds that they are disrespectful of the gods, which is, he says, a "hateful wisdom". War and strife, for instance, must not be associated with the immortals. (E.g. *Ol.* 9,35ff; 1,52). Xenophanes also complains that the poets ascribe to the gods all that is considered most shameful among men. (B 11,12 DK). Plato's similar strictures on the theology of the poets are well known. (*Rep.* 377Dff) Euripides puts the point in a nutshell: "If the gods do

anything base they are not gods". (Frag. 292 Nauck.)

This is evidently not negative theology, far from it. Nevertheless its purpose is not unlike that of the kind of negativity we find developing in Judaism. It is a protest against a cheapening of the gods, and the protest is a high intellectual adventure. When Pindar proudly announces: "My tale of you will be the opposite of what men have said before", (*Ol.* 1,36.) we can surely sense a great creative mind breaking out into freedom. No more than Hesiod is he simply disdainful of the myths. He is not a pedantic rationalist like Hecataeus, who simply found the Greek myths silly. (Frag. 1.) It is because he reverences them that he cannot allow them to be wrong. Plausibility must be saved, whatever the cost.

Yet after all, perhaps the cost was found to be too high. These gods whom Hesiod and Pindar and their like conceived were, in the end, too plausible. Purged from all earthly dross, the very perfection of their divinity made them redundant. The final outcome of these impeccably proper gods was the totally irrelevant pantheon of the Epicureans, whose connexion with our mundane existence was simply that we sometimes dream of them. And, as later thinkers, both christian and pagan, pointed out repeatedly, if that is all that you can do with your gods, you might as well be an atheist.⁹ Their gods were too plausible to have any genuine traffic with this rather implausible world of ours.

And so the protest against the protest had to be made. It was made in agony by Sophocles' Philoctetes, who knew what divinity meant and found that the gods were not, in that sense, divine: "Commending divine attributes as good, I find the gods themselves are bad". (*Philoctetes* 452). It was made enthusiastically by Heraclitus, who thought Xenophanes a learned fool, (B 40 DK [16 Marcovich]) and had no time for his majestic, peaceful God. Where Xenophanes decried any mingling of war with godhead (B 1, 21ff; B 23-26 DK), Heraclitus maintained that God is war, the universal strife which is nevertheless the hidden harmony which is preferable to one more obvious. (B 53; 54; 64; 80; 110 DK [29; 6; 79; 28; 71 M]) The distinction between right and wrong is ours, not his, (B 102 DK [91 M]) and if we think that what we call evil could profitably be dropped from the world, we are merely blinding ourselves to the most obvious facts of life. (E.g. B 111 DK [44 M]). Theology needs more than the Olympian deities, maybe, but all the same the peculiar and sometimes rather revolting procedures they seem to expect from their devotees, if properly understood, are of a piece with the nature of the world.¹⁰

Maybe we can call Heraclitus a kind of negative theologian, with his belief that sense belongs to God, not man. (B 78 DK [90 M]). But the important thing is his protest against the taming of

God. Maybe the old gods were a bit too savage; but the proposed alternative was too refined. A Dresden deity may adorn a drawing room; but can he really do the serious business we require of a God?

The Old Testament prophets too had sometimes to protest against the tendency to make God too "nice". "Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord. Why on earth do you long for it? It is darkness, not light" (Amos 5, 18). "Behold, I am sending my messenger to clear a path before me. And suddenly there will come to his temple the Lord whom you seek, and the messenger of the covenant in whom you find such delight, look, he is coming, says the Lord, and who is there who will be able to cope with the day of his coming?" (Mal 3, 1f).

If the God of wrath needs to be tempered by mercy, the God of pure mercy needs to be tempered too if he is to be credible. Those who wish to "cuddle up to God"¹¹ need to be aware of what kind of company they are keeping. We are indeed invited to sit at God's table, but we must not forget that it is a "supper of wonder ... when fishermen sat down at table with the sea". (Cyrillona II 128, 133f). God may yet prove too much for us. C. S. Lewis makes the point vividly at the beginning of his novel, *Peregrandra*:

My fear was now of another kind. I felt sure that the creature (the *eldil*) was what we call 'good', but I wasn't sure whether I liked 'goodness' so much as I had supposed. This is a very terrible experience. As long as what you are afraid of is something evil, you may still hope that the good may come to your rescue. But suppose you struggle through to the good and find that it also is dreadful? How if food turns out to be the very thing you can't eat, and home the very place you can't live, and your very comforter the person who makes you uncomfortable?

Voyage to Venus p. 14, Pan edition

The point is also made excellently by Aelred Squire:

We must avoid like the plague that selective egotism which begins by censoring the world, goes on to miss out half the Bible, and finally, and predictably, takes flight and scandal when in the end it has to meet an uncensored God.

Asking the Fathers p. 9

* * *

The scene is now set for the most important of all the protests against the protest, that of the christian church. As we have seen, the orthodox christians were as ready as anybody to protest against the reduction of God to a mere object of knowledge or experience like any other such object. But at the same time they took up the cudgels with gusto against the philosophical reduc-

tion of God to a state of helpless metaphysical purity. And they had to do so to defend the very heart of their belief. They had to insist that, against all the odds, God does have a divine Son, and that that divine Son became man.

The first point did not, perhaps, bother the Greeks too much, but it was a major stumbling block to those who had inherited the Jewish instinct for monotheism. After all, a vital part of their religion was the protest against polytheism. Against the eminently sensible recognition of all kinds of specialised deities, possibly supervised by a High God, (Cf Origen *c. Cels.* VIII 2; 55), they had had the intellectual audacity to insist that "the gods of the heathens are naught" (Ps 95, 5 Grail).

The Christians too were, of course, monotheists and got into trouble for it. But at the same time they found themselves driven to see that monotheism, granted their belief in Christ, was a far more daring and difficult thing than had been supposed. Ignatius refers to himself as a man "made for uniting" (*Phld* 8,1), and the unity of the church is one of his major passions (*Eph.* 3-4; *Magn.* 1 et passim); yet his conviction that Jesus Christ is God and that he is distinct from the Father obliges him to plunge into the paradox of a Oneness that proceeds from the Oneness without abandoning Oneness. And having made that intellectual leap, he suddenly discovers in it precisely the key to the Oneness of the church. (*Magn.* 7, 2).

Some Christians, at first, were more timid and preferred to think of Christ as a mere power emanating from God, with no distinct consistency of his own. But Origen, more clearly than most, understood that that was not enough. A mere power could perhaps mediate God to us; but he could not mediate our ascent to God. Taking it for granted that there is an unbridgeable ontological gap between the Creator and his creatures, Origen saw only one way in which man could be united with his God: through a divine power that not only proceeds from God, but also faces God, in whom we too can come face to face with God. (Cf. *c. Cels.* III 34). A genuine distinction must somehow be acknowledged even within the Oneness of God, then, and Origen recognises the dreadfulness of this to the devout mind. But again it is an intellectual adventure that must be undertaken. In his argument with Heraclides, he ruthlessly forces the point that Christ Jesus is God and that he is distinct from God, concluding: "We are not prevented by any superstitious fear from saying that in one sense there are two Gods, and in one sense one God". (*Dial, Heracl.* 1-2).

The Arians, as we have seen, found this intolerable. They could envisage no way in which God could properly be said to beget a Son. And the only real answer to this objection is surely the one

made by Ephrem, to which I referred in my last article: we do not, as creatures, know enough about what God is to make any ruling in the matter.

Here very clearly the principle of negative theology is being invoked, not to protect the distance between Creator and creation, but to ensure the possibility of God, as it were, coming out of himself, showing himself.

And this becomes even more emphatic in the church's response to the pagan attack on the Incarnation. In the grand line of Hesiod and Pindar and Euripides, the Greek thinkers were concerned to safeguard the propriety of God, and they considered it unseemly to suppose that God could actually become man, and even more unseemly that he should suffer and die. But, just as Pindar found intellectual freedom in daring to correct the myths, so the Christians found intellectual freedom in daring to correct the correction. Gregory of Nyssa confronts existing standards of divine propriety with a completely different one: "There is one thing that is seemly for God, and that is to do good to him who needs it. If we acknowledge that the healing power came to dwell precisely where the disease was, what is there in such a belief that is contrary to the supposition of God's propriety?" To insist on any other kind of propriety at the expense of this most fundamental rightness is simply pusillanimity – and Gregory will not allow it to compromise by suggesting that perhaps Christ took a heavenly body that only looked like an earthly body, because heaven – as he rightly points out – is no nearer to God than earth is. (*Or. Cat.* 27).

Undoubtedly the most outrageous and the most excited campaigner to rescue God from his governesses so that he can rescue us from our sins is Tertullian. Tertullian has often had a bad press; he is easily regarded as narrow, fanatical, anti-intellectual and puritanical. But this is largely unfair. He was unusually well educated,^{1 2} and could wield an impressive battery of philosophical learning in his intellectual combats. If he attacks the philosophers it is not because he is an irrationalist, but because he finds the philosophers too tame in going about their business. If he seems fanatical, it is because he is passionate, and if he seems puritanical it is, at least in part, because he is a romantic.

Both in his theology and in his morals, Tertullian calls people to pursue the adventure further than conventional decencies would normally envisage. If he disapproves of widows getting remarried, it is because he approves of marriage. In fact, he is almost unique among early christian writers in celebrating the delights of marriage.^{1 3} And he finds it intolerable to divorce a man from his wife simply because he happens to have died. The widow cannot marry

again because she is already married; her husband is still hers and she is his, and in eternity they will be reunited in a bond even deeper than that of earthly love. (*De Monogamia* 10). The adventure goes on, in spite of the polite convention that it can be regarded as having stopped.

Similarly the intellectual adventure must go on. In our "wisdom" we think that we know what God is and, more importantly, what he is not. He is not one of us. A great gulf is set between us and him. But Tertullian, with a wicked ingenuity, turns the very argument from transcendence against the disbelief in the Incarnation. "Nothing is like God. His nature is far from the condition of everything created. Now things which are remote from God and from which he is remote, if they undergo change, lose what they were before. But how shall God be different from everything else if the opposite does not apply in his case, that God can turn into anything at all and still remain what he was before?" (*De Carne Christi* 3). The very transcendence of God forbids us to disallow that he might transcend his transcendence. If you say that it is stupid to believe in God being born of a woman, very well, let it be stupid! "Let's go on judging God by our own opinions". (Ibid.4)

"Spare the one hope of the whole world. Why are you destroying the indignity of faith when it is so much needed? Whatever is unworthy of God is for my good; I am saved if I am not embarrassed at my Lord. 'Whoever is embarrassed at me,' he says, 'I shall be embarrassed at him'. I find no other matter for embarrassment (than the birth, suffering and death of Christ), which would show me to be excellently shameless and blessedly foolish. The Son of God was crucified: I am not ashamed, precisely because it is shameful. The Son of God died: it is at once believable, because it is ridiculous. And after he was buried, he rose again: it is quite certain, because it is impossible". (Ibid. 5). There is far more to this than a display of rhetorical fireworks. The coy respectability of the world could never save the world; if all we have is what we consider to be possible, then we are without hope. By the timid standards of human caution, it is ridiculous to suppose that God might identify himself with our flesh and die and rise again. But that nonsense has happened. And that gives us a whole new foundation of certainty, on the basis of which the intellectual and moral life can begin again. If God is to be credible, he will have to be incredible; a merely credible God will get us nowhere. A religion based on the polite gods of our purged philosophy can at best be decorative, and as such, eventually, it must prove unviable as a religion. A religion that breaks through into the wild uncharted areas where we have not dared to go, now *that* might truly confront us with a God in whom we can believe. The sheer audacity of it is divine, how-

ever much it shocks our concepts of divinity.

Later christology of course has to refine its concepts and insist on certain correctives to protect belief in the Incarnation from degenerating into idolatry, to ensure that the Incarnation is truly seen as an Incarnation of God. But the fundamental thrust of Tertullian's argument represents a definitive advance made by the Christians, at least for those who share their faith: the God who is all mystery is a God who has impinged on us in an immediate and perceptible way. Hereafter negative theology must be employed not only to save the distance between the creature and its Creator, but also to save the improper liaison established by Christ between the Creator and his human creatures.

And this shows us how and why it is both legitimate and important to talk of God in personal terms. Simply to say that God is "personal" is probably either vacuous or inept. And Trinitarian doctrine cannot be invoked here, as the word "person" in traditional Trinitarian language means almost nothing of what we mean by "person" in modern English. It is in Christ that it becomes plain that we can approach God as a person, because Christ is a person. And our negative theology, reminding us that we must penetrate into the mystery of Christ and not stop short at his humanity, does not really contradict the personalism which Christ makes valid. It is suggestive that St Basil, responding to the Anomoean claim that unless we know God's essence we do not know him at all, cites the instance of our knowledge of persons. "I both know Timothy and do not know him ... I know his features and his other personal characteristics, but I do not know his essence. In fact on the same principle I both know and do not know myself. I know who I am, but in so far as I do not know my own essence, I do not know myself". (*Ep.* 235,2). It is characteristic of our knowledge of persons that it goes with a profound ignorance, and so our knowledge of God in Christ is in important ways similar to the way in which we know ourselves and one another.

And this is what it means to know God. "He who has seen me, has seen the Father" (Jn 14,9). The mediation of Christ is never to be superseded, and the mystery of the Father is never to be plumbed. With rare accuracy, the pseudo-Dionysius describes our final bliss in just these terms: "When we come to be incorruptible and immortal, when we arrive at our Christlike and most blessed lot, then we shall be always with the Lord, as it says, fully content in all-holy contemplation of his visible theophany, illuminating us with resplendent beams of light, as it did the disciples in his most divine Transfiguration, and participating in his intellectual light-giving, with our minds free from passion and from materiality, and in the union which is beyond all mind, in the unknown and bless-

ed impression of the radiance which is more light than light". *Div. Nom.* I 4 (PG 3,592BC).

This brings us, at last, to the point where we may venture on a few remarks on the possibility of and the sense of christian experience. In principle, it seems that our conclusions so far do not preclude the possibility that God will impinge on us in our own world in some way that we can apprehend. This is precisely what he has done in Christ. In Christ he approaches us personally, as a person (whatever else he may be), eliciting a personal reaction from us.

But if the locus of this personal encounter with God is, precisely, Christ, then we are still left with a serious difficulty. Christ can surely be said to be at work in his church and in his world. He promised to be with us as long as the world shall last (Mt 28,20). But nevertheless he is with us in a mysterious way. We are still waiting for his glorious appearing (Tit 2,13). In the meantime, he is hidden and we are hidden in him; "when Christ appears, who is our life, then you too will appear with him in glory" (Col 3,3f).

This means that there is a profundity to christian life which eludes our conscious awareness, so that we must say that, whatever consciousness we may have of God's grace and intimacy, our essential life in Christ is more than what we are conscious of. And it is what we are not conscious of that is essential.

This dogmatic principle underlies the kind of teaching we find, for instance, in de Caussade, that "perfection ... produces itself secretly, without our souls knowing it".¹⁴ The corollary of that is his instruction: "Live then, little root of my heart, in the unknownness and the hiddenness of God; by his secret power put out branches, leaves, flowers, external fruits which you cannot see yourself and which other people feed on and enjoy". (*L'Abandon* p. 69). In his letters of direction to Marie Therese de Viomenil he over and over again insists that most of what God does in our souls is not felt consciously by us. And there is a very good practical reason for this. "I see that God has wisely hidden from you the little bit of good he has made you do; otherwise it would all have been spoiled by a thousand vanities and complacencies". (*Lettres* I, p. 97). It is much better that our contrition, our resignation, our recollection and so on should not be known to ourselves. (*Ibid*, 90,91,161 etc.) If perfection is to be found only in Christ, then he must create our perfection; if we are too self-conscious about it, we shall only interfere in the process, and possibly end up only with a pseudo-perfection. "Be patient with yourself; learn to put up with your own weaknesses and wretchedness with the same kind of gentleness with which you must put up with those of your neighbour. Be content to humble yourself peacefully before God. Do not look for any progress except from him and from his holy

working which most often operates in the depth of the soul, without our feeling anything of it at all". (Ibid, p. 87). It is a sign of advancement when we lose the sense of where we are going: "Previously the soul had its own ideas and lights and saw what the plan for its perfection was up to. Now it is all quite different. Perfection gives itself to it contrary to its own ideas and lights and feelings". (*L'Abandon* p. 42). The important thing is to realise that, whatever happens in the world or in ourselves, it is all due to the act of God, and it is his act that matters. "His uncreated hand directs everything that happens to me, so am I to go and seek help from powerless creatures? ... I should die of thirst, running from spring to spring, from river to river, when all the time there is a hand there which has produced a whole flood! I am surrounded by water! Everything turns into bread to feed me, soap to wash with, fire to purge me, ... everything is an instrument of grace.... What I was looking for in something completely different, is looking for me unceasingly and gives itself to me by means of every creature". (Ibid, pp. 106f). What forms in us a true "experiential knowledge" of God, then, is not some special kind of experience, but "everything that happens to us from one moment to the next". (Ibid. p. 102). And the variety of our internal experience is an essential part of the programme, so we should not latch on to any particular kind of feeling or sensation. By the constant alteration of what we feel within us the Holy Spirit makes us supple so that we become capable of responding to all his movements. (*Lettres* I p. 92 etc.)

It is not only the danger of vanity that makes it likely that a great deal of our "spiritual life" will be unconscious. Another very important factor in any discussion of christian experience must be the dimension of hope, of eschatology. Our complete and blissful union with God in Christ is something that will be revealed at the end of time, not something that can be apprehended by us now. We must beware of confusing the delights we may sometimes feel in our faith with the final contentment that is in store for us. And the unpredictability of our experience is a useful corrective. As Guigo II puts it: "If we were never without this consolation – which is indeed, by comparison with the future glory which shall be revealed in us, only riddling and incomplete – we might come to think that we have here an abiding city, and so be less keen to seek the one which is in the future. So to stop us treating this place of exile as our homeland, and the pledge as the entire reward, the Bridegroom comes and goes alternately, now bringing consolation, now turning our bed entirely into a sickbed. He lets us for a little while taste how good he is, but before we have fully become aware of it, he withdraws again". (*Scala Claustralium* 10).

Just how far we can already “taste of the powers of the age to come” (Hebr 6,5) it would be rash to try to define. But we must surely be aware that the essential vision is not given in this life, and cannot be given in this life. So long as we are in time we *cannot* experience the utter stability and fullness of eternal life. Not long before she died, one of her sisters said to St Therese of Lisieux, that the angels would come at her death to accompany our Lord and that she would see them resplendent in light and beauty. St Therese replied: “All these pictures do me no good. I can only find nourishment in truth. That is why I have never desired visions. On earth we cannot see heaven or angels as they really are. I prefer to wait until after my death”. (*Derniers Entretiens* p.303 [5.8.4]).

De Caussade says that the visions and other preternatural phenomena we read about in the lives of the saints are “only a sketch of the excellence of their constant condition which is hidden in the practice of their faith”. (*L’Abandon* p. 103). This is a most helpful idea. In this world we can never see or feel more than an image of the hidden fullness which we have in Christ. All religious experience is iconic, in one way or another; it may be useful, as such, but like any other icon it can degenerate into delusion or idolatry.

Whatever kind of experience we choose to consider, it is probable that we shall find that it can quite legitimately be considered as an illustration of, a projection into consciousness of, some facet of the reality of what we are, hiddenly, in Christ. But it can never simply be *identified with* that hidden reality.

Let us take, by way of example, one or two of the more spectacular phenomena associated with the “mystical life”, and one or two of the less spectacular experiences claimed in more ordinary life.

First of all, a recurrent feature in a great deal of mystical biography is ecstasy, the withdrawal of the consciousness from the body and from the usual psychological processes. Whatever we are to make of the phenomenon in itself, there are clearly several ways in which it can be related to fundamental beliefs about the supernatural reality of the christian condition. It illustrates very strikingly precisely the hiddenness of our life in Christ, suggesting too that it is by way of dying sacramentally with Christ that we are born into that hidden life in the new creation. It dramatizes the longed for deliverance from the “body of death”, for which St Paul bursts out into praise of Christ (Rom 7,24f). But at the same time, from another point of view, it is a thoroughly inadequate symbol. The abstraction from the world obscures the christian hope of the resurrection of the body. This is why the psychological phenomenon of ecstasy cannot, strictly, be regarded as an in-

tegral element in christian contemplation. (Cf. Anselm Stolz, *Theologie de la Mystique*, p. 230).

Another frequently reported phenomenon is levitation, though it is sometimes regarded as rather a lowly mystical grace. But levitation is a rather charming way of depicting the recurrent christian theme of *sursum corda*. There is a definite appositeness, for instance, about St Dominic levitating at the point of the elevation of the Host when he was saying Mass. (Cecilia, *Miracula* 2). On the other hand, precisely because it is a peculiar phenomenon, it cannot in itself express except rather dimly the glorious freedom that we may hope for in our resurrected bodies.

Generally the phenomena of the spiritual life are less dramatic and less apparent, with the result that it is often less certain whether what is going on is truly "supernatural" or not. For instance, people sometimes feel "guided" to do certain things, which then may or may not turn out to be obviously beneficial. What are we to make of this?

Surely the first thing to say is that it is a solid item of christian belief that God does guide us. All our ways are included within his providential ordering of the Universe. And in particular he is continually forming within us, by the working of the Holy Spirit, a will which is progressively brought into harmony with his will. Any "experience" of guidance, then, is in principle a suitable icon of this basic truth. This can be seen most clearly by asking what would be meant by saying that in some particular instance we were *not* being guided. When is it simply true to say that we are not being guided? Maybe it would have to be said that we are not in any clear way being guided when we commit sin. But apart from that, it is far from obvious what sense we can give to the suggestion that we are acting independently of God's guidance. And even if we follow something that we took to be "guidance" and, in retrospect, had to conclude that we had made a mistake, we must still acknowledge that all outcomes, whatsoever they may be, are part of the whole way in which God is guiding his universe to its final goal. There can be no outcome which is outside God's will. The mistake we are likely to make is to think that there is something specially "guided" about situations that are accompanied by certain internal sensations. But the occasional feeling of being guided is better taken as a kind of picture which can make more convincing and urgent to us the belief that all that we do, however deliberate and calculated it may be, is ultimately steered by God. Whether we simply feel ourselves to be making up our own minds or whether we feel ourselves to be specially guided, what in fact happens is that we do whatever we do and then have to leave the outcome, both the short term and the ultimate outcome, in the

hands of God. The growing sensitivity to the will of God which we should hope is taking place in the depths of our soul should indeed result in a greater fidelity to God's purposes and a greater confidence that we are living in his friendship; but it should never be too naively identified with any particular kind of experience.

Another experience which people sometimes have is the sense of being comforted by the love of God. And again people can wonder whether it is simply "imagination". But what would be meant by saying that such a sense of being comforted was *false*? It is a primary dogma that God loves us. To sense that we are loved is therefore to sense something that is true. It may well be that imagination is involved in our sensation, but nevertheless the truth of the dogma must stand. The mistake is to identify the love with the sensation, so that the cessation of the feeling is taken to mean the cessation of the love, which would be heretical.

What is important is that we learn from the experiences that come our way to trust more in the doctrine that teaches us what we are in Christ. Julian of Norwich seems to have undergone a crash course in the "vicissitudes" which de Caussade considers so important, shifting from consolation to desolation and back again repeatedly, and the moral, as she concluded, was that we are to know that "God keeps us always equally securely in woe and in weal", so we ought not to pay too much attention to what we feel like. The consolation is perfectly acceptable when it is there; but it does not matter. (Long Text, ch. 15).

The important thing, then, is not that we should have any particular experience or experiences. There seems to be no adequate doctrinal reason for the attempt that has been made by such theologians as Heribert Muhlen to *prescribe* experience, or for the philosophical desire to *predict* experience. What is important, as de Caussade says, is that we should learn to "envisage", (E.g. *Lettres* I, p. 64) whatever experiences we may have in a proper doctrinal light. What christianity should produce is not experiences but significances, and this is why the phenomenological, psychological study of mystical experiences in themselves is so unproductive, and why a comparison, simply at that level, between the mysticism of different religious systems is more likely to be misleading than helpful. (Cf Stolz, *op. cit.* 192ff, 232).

We should beware of reading a primary psychological interest at least into the earlier christian spiritual writers. It looks at first sight as if, say, the medieval texts describing the experience of the "coming and going of grace" are *identifying* the presence or absence of grace with certain subjective states. But it is instructive that Guigo II, in precisely such a context, specifically distinguishes between the *actual* union of the soul with Christ, and the

awareness of his presence. (*Scala Claustralium* 9). Guigo is not for a moment suggesting that our feelings of themselves can serve as a test of the presence or absence of grace. But granted the ups and downs of human experience, he wants to provide a link between the doctrine and the experience. For him as for many medievals, the love story in the *Canticle* provides an imaginative world, almost a myth, within which human experience can be seen as significant. The *feeling* of sometimes being full of fervour and joy is grasped imaginatively as a coming of the Beloved, the feeling of listlessness being grasped correspondingly as the absence of the Beloved. It would be a mistake to make too much doctrinal inference from this. Certainly there is no question of anybody looking for experiential counterparts to doctrinal ideas. The experience is given, and it is ordinary human experience. But in the context of christian belief, it is found to be intelligible in the light of the scriptural text, and so, in turn, it provides illustration of the scriptural text.

Abbot Parry, with whom we began this series of articles, says: "Where there is no experience of any divine effects, the life is in a very low state ... like a coma". (*This Promise is for You*, p. 47). In one sense this is patently true. If there is no point at which our belief affects our experience of life, it is a somewhat superfluous belief and is unlikely to retain our interest and allegiance. But what should we count as "divine effects"? Abbot Parry seems to want us to seek some special kind of experience to bring God more intimately into our lives. But surely de Caussade is the better theologian in preferring to remind us that everything that happens is a divine effect. If we feel our lives to be lacking in religious experience, it is not because some special experience is missing, but because we have not brought our everyday experience into the context of our belief. God gives himself in all our experience. "And when God gives himself like this, then everything ordinary becomes extraordinary, and that is why nothing extraordinary appears. This way is in itself extraordinary, and so it is not necessary to decorate it with marvels which do not belong to it. It is a miracle, a revelation, a continual enjoyment, except for a few slight failings; its nature is not to have in itself anything perceptible or marvellous, but to make everything that is ordinary and perceptible marvellous. This is the way that the holy Virgin practised". (*L'Abandon*, p. 130).

(Concluded)

- 1 *Kephalaia Gnostica* III 63; *Practicus* 87.
- 2 Cf Georg Strecker, *Das Judenchristentum in den Pseudoklementinen*, pp. 171ff.
- 3 *Clem. Recogn.* I 36; Origen, *c. Cels.* III 2-3; Ephrem, *Hymns on Faith* 26, 15; Bede, *Hist. Eccl.* I 30; Anselm of Havelberg, *Dial.* I 5; Peraldus, *Summa de Virt.* III 5,6,3.

- 4 *Guide for the Perplexed* III 32 (quoted by Raymund Martin, *Pugio Fidei* III d. 3 ch. 12, xiii).
- 5 Cf Marcel Simon, *Saint Stephen and the Jerusalem Temple* (JEH 1951, pp. 127-142).
- 6 Insistence on maintaining external practice: *Migr.* 89ff. For allegorical interpretation, e.g. *Spec. Leg.; Vit. Mos.* passim.
- 7 Cf J. Leclercq, *Lu crise du monachisme* (Bulletino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo 70 (1958), pp. 19-41; H. Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter*, pp. 391f; K. V. Selge, *Die Ersten Waldenser*, I pp. 267f. Cf PL 172, 1411; Pl 181, 1720.
- 8 *Theog.* 550, 613. Cf M. L. West on *Theog.* 551f.
- 9 *Epicurea* 360ff Usener. For the critique, cf Greg. Thaum, *Or. ad Orig.* 152; Origen, c. *Cels.* II 27; Atticus, fr. 3 Des Places; Porphyry, *ad Marc.* 22.
- 10 B 5; 14; 15 DK (86; 87; 50 M). For the interpretation, cf M. L. West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*, p. 145 (I accept his first interpretation).
- 11 William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 94 n.2 (Fountain ppb.).
- 12 Cf T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian*, p. 201.
- 13 *Ad Uxorem* II 8, 6ff. Cf Jean Steinmann, *Tertullien*, p. 121.
- 14 *L'Abandon*, p. 71. All references to de Caussade are to the editions by M. Olphe-Galliard.

Rahner's Grundkurs

Foundations of Christian Faith. An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity, by Karl Rahner. Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978.
£14.00

Hugo Meynell

The appearance of this book is a considerable event. Many good judges, perhaps the majority, would say that Rahner is the best living Catholic theologian. While his earlier writings have covered a daunting range of theological topics, many of his admirers have felt the lack of an account from him of the nature and significance of Christianity as a whole. Here is what they have wanted. I shall try to sketch the argument of the book, and conclude with a few comments.

Theological studies as they now exist are splintered and fragmented, and often too dominated by scholarship for its own sake (p. 6), rather than promoting an understanding of 'Christianity as the answer to the question which man is' (p. 11). The principal aim of the book is to remedy this deficiency.

What has to be stressed about man as potential hearer of the revelation of God is his nature as person and subject; that is, as free to decide what to make of himself, yet also liable to shirk the issue, to shift responsibility from himself, and to cloud his consciousness on the matter by pursuit of pleasure or business (p. 29). It is by reference to this that one may understand something of 'the ultimate mystery which we call "God"' (p. 44). Genuine