

to come to terms with a writer by a close and reasoned examination of his thought'. My excuse must be that even a skeleton outline of some of the things Rahner has to say has occupied a considerable space. If a reasoned examination is demanded then the reader must obtain the book himself. He will find it one of the most stimulating and enlivening studies in post-war theological writing. He will find above all a consistent emphasis on theology as proclamation of the saving mysteries of Christ's life, and a realisation that such a proclamation must be made in as precise and charitable a manner as is possible to man. He will find, that is, that he has been shewn that no venture of the mind of man is so worthwhile as the proper study of God in his word.

Experience and Expression in Christian Education

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It is necessary nowadays for Christians to re-think all manner of things that were formerly taken for granted. 'Our world is a world in a continuous state of becoming, a state in which everything is questioned', writes Cardinal Suenens in a book bulging with new insights and ideas.¹ 'We no longer live in an age where daily lives were solidly framed in tradition, and institutions were there to safeguard values that were never called in question'.

In attempting to understand what has happened and what the happenings mean for us, one historical fact takes on importance for all concerned with Christian education. In the disintegration of traditional ideas the way people *lived* Christian ideas and the forms in which these ideas were *expressed* fell apart.

It can happen that a good tradition of living, one basically sound and Christian, may incidentally be expressed in formulae that are much narrower and more rigid than the whole human thing that produced

¹*The Nun in the World*—to be reviewed in our next issue.

them. This has been the case where Christian education is concerned. In communities, usually compact ones, in which Christian values were taken for granted as the foundation of daily living, the teaching in which these values were expressed could be limited to simple explanations of doctrines and morals, using traditional analogical language. It did not matter if the actual teaching was not well-related to daily life, for the relation between doctrine and life was a fact of daily experience. Life itself supplied the inadequacies of expression.

But when daily living must go on in a world where Christian values are no longer taken for granted the old vehicles of teaching become inadequate and may even tend to work against the purpose for which they are used.

This is widely recognised in the Church, and great efforts are made to express Christian truth in ways that mean something to twentieth-century children growing up in a non-Christian world. There is still something lacking, however. Real knowledge does not come with words only. Words are necessary in this world, but are of value only when they crystallise knowledge gained by a mixture (varying widely in its proportions) of experience, intuition, and thought about both these. Even doctrine expressed in clear, supple and meaningful terms remains barren without this.

It seems worthwhile, therefore, to explore here the possibility that in certain ways current religious teaching, both at home and at school, tends by its nature to reverse the real order of knowledge. Instead of providing experience, or the opportunity for experience, and then guiding the children to discover in it the truth that we want them to know, we simply tell them things. We try to explain those things as clearly as possible, and often we try to provide opportunities for the children to exercise the virtues they have been taught. But it is all basically back to front. And the result is that in many cases the teaching does not in fact lead to real knowledge, but only to a superficial assent to statements unrelated to life. I don't want to exaggerate the importance of this. In practice circumstances often put matters right. Children hear at school teaching that illuminates their understanding of what they have experienced at home or among their friends. Grown-ups suddenly find that teaching they remember from childhood acquires meaning from later experience. But all this is accidental. The fact that so many Christians settle down to a sincere but superficial practice of their religion, or gradually abandon it altogether, seems to show that their faith has no roots in experience, has never been really 'known'.

At home and at school it does seem as if we are, without meaning to, forcing the growth of religious knowledge in an unhealthy way. We try all the time to explain in childish terms doctrines that only find their full meaning in adult life. There is no harm in trying to explain complex ideas in simple terms in response to a child's request—indeed it must be attempted, for the request implies a background of experience that requires this new knowledge to complete it. But we tend to think that a child must be taught the elements of everything before he leaves school. The need for the training of adult Christians is often stressed, but it is always regarded as something *more*, something added on, to improve a structure already complete. This assumption is not surprising, for it is one that governs secular education as well. We talk about 'education' and 'further education', as if 'education' were something that normally finished on leaving school, and was exceptionally continued afterwards. But education is continuous and when it ends the human being stagnates.

This is just as true, and more important, where religious education is concerned. It is natural that parents, and teachers at each stage of schooling, should want to make sure that the pupils have an adequate grasp of the main doctrines of Christianity before the children pass out of their care. This is fine, as long as one has a very clear idea of what constitutes an 'adequate grasp' for the individual child at his particular stage of mental and spiritual development. But what too often happens is that, in an attempt to make sure that the children 'know their religion' an ability to give clear verbal answers to questions is insisted on. This happens even with teachers who have discarded the use of the Catechism as a normal instrument of teaching. But surely anyone who has lived with children realises that the ability to give a clear answer is no proof of real understanding. A child who remains tongue-tied or gives wrong or inadequate answers may have failed to grasp what he was taught, but equally he may be struggling for a real understanding which his vocabulary is not yet able to express. The child who gives a good answer may really have understood, but it is possible to remember and recount a lesson in detail without 'knowing' what it teaches in the sense described above. The emphasis on the value of clear answers helps to force the pace of religious teaching and to persuade both parents and teachers that the children have received a good grounding when all they have received is a collection of un-assimilated bits of information, little of which is in any way related to experience. I don't want to exaggerate the evil. The wrongness of the system is to a great

extent compensated by the understanding the children receive when the personal enthusiasm of the teacher (at home or at school) informs the teaching so that the children to some extent share the teacher's experience of his or her religion, by sympathy and intuition. In the hands of a really inspired teacher even Catechism answers can convey knowledge in depth. But most of us are conscious of not being particularly inspired. We are anxious to do a very important job as well as possible, and sometimes it is this very anxiety that makes us require accurate answers as a measure of our achievement.

It is true that nowadays most teachers realise that learning 'parrot-fashion' is of little use. But there is another danger connected with the use of words in the teaching of religion which goes deeper than this. Because words expressing concepts beyond the child's emotional grasp are thrust upon him or her, these are devalued in advance.

I think I may be accused of making a fuss about nothing, and certainly I cannot produce a single case of a child who 'lapsed' because his teachers had worn out for him the words that expressed his faith long before he was mature enough to accept them as valid symbols of experience. We are so used to words that we never think about them any more than we think about the air we breathe. But words can become stale, just as the air in a room can. Only it is not so easy to replace an outworn vocabulary as it is to let fresh air into a room.

The Jews had the right idea when they forbade the name of God to be pronounced. If we were a little more chaste in our use of religious words and phrases their meaning might have more chance of growing in the minds of the children. I have heard children, during Lent, singing a little hymn in which they asked to be allowed 'to suffer and to die for Thee'. This sort of thing is an outrage on the religious integrity of a child. Saints, after a lifetime of striving and loving, hesitate to offer such a prayer and do so with tears of humility—and in private. The growth of the relationship between God and the soul is a delicate thing, easily spoiled, and we trample all over it with trite pieties and forced expressions of emotions that have no place in a child's understanding. One example of this is the constant use of the holy name. All the sense of awe, of contact with holiness, of the 'specialness' of the relationship implied by its use in the liturgy and in private prayer is destroyed by the chatty, cosy atmosphere in which it is bandied about, until Christ our Lord is reduced to the same level as Father Christmas. 'At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow'—but not if its significance has been rubbed away by years of base use. (I know of one adult to whom the

phrases of English piety had become so loaded with unreality that he was driven to pray in French in order to achieve the sense that he was being honest with God. Must we teach our children a second language to give them a chance of using words meaningfully? Here is a handle for the anti-vernacularists!).

Words and phrases that are meaningful at one stage of development can be enforced hypocrisy at another. To a very small child even the word 'love' means nothing. He knows the *thing*, with all his being he knows it—or knows his lack of it. But it is only later that the word and the thing come together in his mind. So even the basic idea, 'God loves you' will find a ready understanding only when the idea of love itself has already taken root. The idea of sorrow for sin is another that is easily abused. Real penitence is often of late growth. To suggest the expression of emotions and intentions beyond the child's real capacity is to suggest a lie. Often all the child can manage is a feeling that he has made a muddle of things, and wishes he hadn't. He is not aware of having 'offended' God (he probably hasn't), does not think of sin as a *thing*. He has done wrong, that he knows. He wants to be put right. God, he knows, can do that for him. For that he is grateful.

One could go on and on, one could compile a dictionary of words, good, sound words, that have been abused and devalued until their use has become an embarrassment and a stumbling-block in the road instead of part of the paving of the way to heaven.

There is no cut and dried answer to these difficulties. It is easy to see what is wrong, much more difficult to suggest practical ways of putting it right. The teacher (at home or at school) who consciously attempts to give the children the sort of experience that can lead to a real 'knowledge' of religion will need a generous measure of energy, imagination and courage. The right use of religious words is delicate and difficult.

At this stage in the development of our understanding of catechetics we are still feeling our way, experimenting. But certain lines of approach are worth investigating. At home the practice of normal Christian virtues by the parents naturally leads the children to practise them too, and then to discover how these things fit into the Christian scheme of life. This very natural development can be consciously exploited. At school and at home greater emphasis on scripture gives the beginnings of the experience of growth in understanding the nature of God, by 'watching' that understanding grow in the chosen people. At school, too, group activities, for local or wider charities (not just bazaars but personal service) can help, drama can help. At school and

in the parish paraliturgical services offer a hopeful field of experiment in the experience of religion. Here the school and/or parish can do what the home cannot do and should not attempt. Communal liturgical life grows out of but transcends the home.

Any or all of these things can give the kind of knowledge we are looking for, experience that can be crystallised into the verbal expressions of doctrine and Christian life. Once words and phrases carry this content of experience they will be doors to further experience, can lead on to the next phase in the development of a Christian personality, and their value will be real and lasting. We could perhaps learn to exploit the natural crises of growth towards maturity in order to form the religious consciousness. Here is the clue to the *continuing* development of a Christian person, far beyond and beside mere schooling. Even a general realisation that Christian education is a life-long process would be an enormous step forward.

All these possible ways of teaching religion are summed up, ideally, in the full liturgical life of the Church, which takes account of the stages of human life by its sacraments and great feasts. In the liturgy, too, devalued words can regain their meaning and their majesty.

Here, ultimately, we can find the answer to both the experience/expression difficulty and the related danger of devaluing the words that express faith. The liturgy can both express and teach. It uses words as they are meant to be used. Here, in the essential Christian action of worship, we can bring together once more the living of religion and the saying of religion. It is from the liturgy that we shall develop, if we ever do, a new relation between contemporary Christian life and Christian words. This is not something that can be done overnight. If it is done at all it will take generations. Meanwhile we can at least try to use the liturgy as a kind of touchstone of the value and reality of our teaching.

All this may sound too vague and imprecise to be helpful. It is vague because we are dealing with imponderables. It is not possible to give precise instructions for such a re-orientation of thought and method. But we have to attempt this re-orientation of Christianity if it is not to become as mummified as Judaism eventually became.