

## Faith And Experience

### XI Revelation And Human Experience

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"No one has ever seen God; but the only-begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, has interpreted him to us" (Jn 1:18). The early christian theologians who develop the view that man cannot know God truly unless God reveals himself to him are conscious that they are not only following the teaching of scripture, but also echoing and confirming a belief which has deep roots in Greek tradition. Clement of Alexandria can quote several texts from the Greek poets expressing the difficulty or impossibility of any man on earth penetrating very far into the mind of God. An Orphic hymn is cited, which says that God is "utterable only by the immortals"; Pindar is shown echoing the sentiments of Isaiah 40:13: "Why hope for wisdom? One man is not much better than another. It is hard for a mortal mind to search out the counsels of the gods". Hesiod too says, "There is no seer among men on earth who could know the mind of Zeus". Solon similarly says, "The mind of the immortals is quite unclear to men".<sup>1</sup> Even more radically, Xenophanes is quoted by Sextus Empiricus as saying: "As far as anything clear goes, no man has seen anything nor will any man see anything concerning the gods and all the other things I am talking about; even if he should hit the mark with outstanding accuracy and say something quite perfect, he would not know it himself. Everything is subject to opinion". In Sextus' view, Xenophanes is one of the philosophers who have rejected outright the idea that there is some "criterion of truth" available to us; he interprets him as meaning: "at least in matters which are not apparent, no man knows what is true and knowable; even if he does happen to hit on it, he still does not know that he has hit on it, he is left simply with a suspicion and an opinion".<sup>2</sup> Xenophanes ridicules people for generating gods in their own image, and, in anticipation of Rupert Brooke's delightful poem about fishes' concept of heaven, says that if cows could draw, they would make their gods look like cows.<sup>3</sup> For himself, he only claims to be saying what seems probable.<sup>4</sup>

The belief that human concepts and understanding are vastly inferior to those of God is evidently enough of a commonplace for Celsus, in his attack on the christians, to mention it as evidence that the christians are simply taking over and distorting doctrines

of Greek philosophy. He quotes Heraclitus as saying, "Human nature does not have understanding, but the divine nature does".<sup>5</sup> Origen does not dispute the doctrine, but turns Celsus' attack back against him, claiming that the Greeks in fact derived it from the Old Testament.<sup>6</sup>

Against this background, we surely have to take seriously the kind of remark that Plato puts into the mouth of Timaeus, in the course of his exposition of his cosmology: "That our account is true, we could only assert with confidence if it were to be confirmed by a god; but we may venture to say that it is plausible".<sup>7</sup> There is some justification in Theophilus' invocation of Plato to support his argument that philosophical discussion is rather a waste of time, even if he is not quoting with precision or accuracy: "It is necessary instead to become a disciple of God's lawgiving, as Plato himself admitted that accurate learning is impossible unless God teaches us through his law".<sup>8</sup>

Some people can evidently live quite happily with such knowledge as is possible to the human mind, but, the more complex life becomes, the more likely it is that people will come to feel it to be an agonizing problem that we can attain to so little certainty. Thus Hermes Trismegistus cries out for a divine solution to the epistemological problem: "With so many people saying so many different things about God and the universe, I cannot discover the truth; so you must please enlighten me about this, Lord. I leave it to you alone, with complete confidence, to reveal the truth to me about this".<sup>9</sup>

The Christians were not, therefore, going totally against contemporary attitudes in bidding people abandon their fruitless speculation and find solid food for their minds in the revealed words of scripture. Basil compares philosophical doctrines with painted harlots, whose beauty is far inferior to that of respectable women. "They apply a forced persuasiveness to their arguments; but here (i.e. in scripture) the naked truth offers itself without any veil of gimmickry".<sup>10</sup>

Revelation gives a new certainty to thought. As Athenagoras claims, the poets and philosophers had nothing better to go on than guesswork, each one prompted indeed by some affinity with the breath of God in his own soul to try to find the truth, but never able to arrive at any sure conclusions because they were their own masters. The Christians, by contrast, base themselves on the prophets who spoke about God and the things of God under divine inspiration. On this basis it is possible for the Christians, unlike anybody else, to support their contentions with "evidence and arguments for their truth".<sup>11</sup> It is remarkable that Athenagoras seems to be maintaining that revelation makes it possible to argue and to offer evidence; he cannot be taken to be recommend-

ing a naive fideism,

In the pseudo-Clementine homilies Peter is presented as arguing similarly that it is impossible to order one's life aright without a proper understanding of the nature of things: "and it is impossible to attain to knowledge without first recognising the prophet of truth". "It belongs to a prophet to declare truth, just as it belongs to the sun to bring in the day. This is why those who longed to know truth, but did not have the good fortune to learn it from him, died still seeking, without having found it. For how can anyone reach the truth by looking for it on the basis of his own ignorance? Even if he did find it, he would not know it and would pass it by as if it were nothing. . . . Those who seek truth pontificate about it without realising that nobody can find the truth by looking for it on the basis of his own error. As I said, he cannot even recognise it when it is right by him, since he does not know it. Everybody who conducts his search on the basis of his own resources is convinced not by what is true but by what he finds pleasing. . . . But truth is not what any particular person finds attractive, but what the prophet thinks true".<sup>12</sup>

It is clearly very important not to confuse truth with what we should like to be true. But all the same, we are still left with an enormous problem. If we cannot recognise truth when we meet it, unless we already know it, how can we recognise a revelation when we meet it? And if we are faced with a variety of alleged revelations, how can we tell which is the true one, if any?

The pseudo-Clementines themselves are interestingly aware of one part of this problem. Reflecting the serious problem posed for both Judaism and Christianity by the apparent contradictions within scripture, the pseudo-Clementines adopt the drastic remedy of supposing that the bible as we have it has been interpolated with "false pericopae".<sup>13</sup> This means that it is possible to defend almost any view you like from the bible; "the scriptures say everything, so that none of those who seek in bad faith will find the truth, but only what he himself wants; the truth is reserved for those who are in good faith".<sup>14</sup> The bible thus needs an authoritative interpreter, and this is what Christ is. It is he who instructs us in the necessary art of discriminating true parts of scripture from false.<sup>15</sup> What may well be the original christian context for this strange doctrine is indicated in the Didascalia: Christ teaches us to distinguish, in the Old Testament, between parts of the Law which are of abiding importance, and those parts which were simply intended for the particular situation of the Jews.<sup>16</sup> It is part of the bishop's job to be a "discriminator between the Law and the Second Legislation, that he may distinguish and show what is the law of the faithful and what are the bonds of them that believe not".<sup>17</sup> The bishop ensures the transmission of the correct inter-

pretation of the scriptures which, without such interpretation, could easily lead people into error.

But this does not really solve our problem. We are still faced with the initial problem of choosing which revelation, if any, to subscribe to; and we now have the further problem of deciding which tradition of interpretation of our favoured revelation to accept as authentic.

The early church employed several different kinds of argument to demonstrate that Christ was truly the reliable, God-given, if not divine, Teacher. They argued, for instance, that we could accept him as the true prophet because his prophecies (including those of the Old Testament) were habitually found to be true.<sup>18</sup> But this seems to depend on a rather naive way of reading the Old Testament prophecies, and a somewhat arbitrary interpretation of history; it is difficult to see how the argument could be made convincing to a modern mind. Another argument was that Christ, unlike the philosophers, had succeeded in converting a large number of people to a more moral way of life.<sup>19</sup> This must always have been rather a risky contention, and it could easily backfire today. Another argument, designed to show that Christ, even after his death, still has power and must therefore be alive and authoritative, points to his continuing striking successes in exorcism.<sup>20</sup>

It would be tedious to enumerate all the different arguments that have been brought forward in the course of christian history to support the belief that Christ is the true source of true understanding. But there is one argument which has been fairly prominent in recent debate, and which is immediately pertinent to the subject of this series of articles, which we must attend to: the argument from experience.

Such an argument could, of course, take different forms. If we are going to operate within the problematic of the early church, the question is why we should accept Jesus Christ as our teacher, and at least this is a reasonably clear question. And it seems plausible to suppose that "experience" is going to come into our answer. How do we come to accept anybody as a dependable source of learning and insight? Presumably it is usually a fairly lengthy process that leads us to respect somebody's knowledge and judgment. We listen to what they say and find, from our own experience, that their words are fruitful and enlightening. There may or may not be some initial experience of "conversion". It is quite possible that we shall, in some cases, be overwhelmed with a sense that we have met someone worth listening to the very first time we ever hear them; but this initial impression, however important it may be subjectively, is clearly not sufficient of itself to show that the person is really worth listening to. Initial impressions of wisdom may sometimes lead only to disappointment and disillusionment.

It is the experience of living with somebody's ideas and beliefs over a period of time that fosters in us the sense that we can rely on them to lead us aright.

Obviously to some extent this is a subjective process, and it could never be entirely defended against the charge made in the pseudo-Clementines that we are simply adopting a view that we find attractive. But we may sometimes come to respect someone as a teacher even though we find some of his views disturbing and unpalatable. This will presumably be because we find that laying ourselves open to this kind of challenge proves to be profitable in some way, so that it reinforces rather than weakens our sense that we are dealing with a worthwhile teacher. All kinds of things will, of course, go to the making of this process whereby we come to trust somebody. The use of a word like "experience" must not mislead us into thinking that we can isolate one particular experience which turns us into disciples. It is a whole complex experience of living with certain ideas and attitudes that convinces us.

But the more modern problematic is not quite like this. The modern suggestion, put forward by Otto, for instance, and taken up by H. D. Lewis among others, is that there is some special kind of experience which convinces us that we are in the presence of God. The question now is not so much why we should trust the teaching of a man who lived at a certain time, and whose teaching is passed on and developed by other men in various times and places, but whether there is some immediate encounter with God which grounds our belief in him. In Otto, at least, this question arises partly because of a dissatisfaction with more rationalistic approaches to God. God cannot be tackled by the mind like other objects of rational enquiry. The starting point of any rational talk about God is the direct encounter with him in all his Otherness and incomprehensibility.

I have already, in previous articles, raised some difficulties about this proposal. What I want to take up now is simply its possible usefulness as an answer to the question: How do we know that we have received (are receiving) a genuine, dependable revelation? Can we not say simply that we just *do* know: it is characteristic of divine revelation that it is totally convincing?

Apart from the general epistemological questions posed by such a claim, it seems to me that there is also a theological difficulty. Once again, St Ephrem can help us. In his Hymns on Faith he refers to the elders who, in Exodus 24:9-11, are said to "see God". He comments:

When the seventy elders saw and thought they saw the totality of greatness, Moses broke all their illusions. He begged that he might see, in order to teach them and make them understand

that the elders who imagined they saw did not see. And although Moses saw, he understood that he had not seen him. Being a discerning man, he was not unaware that his Lord clothed himself in borrowed images.<sup>21</sup>

It is quite clearly some kind of religious experience that is in question here; some kind of immediate, or seemingly immediate, encounter with God in all his immensity is what the seventy elders are claiming. But Moses, in his superior wisdom, his discernment (he is *parusha*, able to make distinctions and divisions), realises that their claim is illusory. All that they actually saw was “borrowed images”. Any appearance of God, is in fact, formally, an experience of *creatures*, in whose appearance God has clothed himself. Ephrem is evidently working within the tradition we noticed in the previous article, that Moses’ claim to be the best of the prophets rests primarily on his awareness that he has *not* seen God. To think that you have seen God is a dangerous illusion.

Now if this is true, as I believe it to be, the fundamental awareness of God cannot be derived from any putative immediate encounter with him, precisely because it is called into play to *interpret* apparent encounters with him. If the encounter is taken at its face value, the result will be nothing but idolatry.

Ephrem, in his own way, is as disapproving as Otto is of any merely rationalistic approach to God. But, though he sometimes seems to be close to the language of direct experience, his view is in fact far removed from Otto’s. In another of his hymns he says:

When you are thirsty, the best thing to do is to drink the water.

Let us not start trying to measure the well instead.

It is much the best thing for a child to know his father by seeing him, rather than by doing research on him.

So it is best that we should learn truth by living a life of faith without investigation.<sup>22</sup>

Although the analogy of the child knowing his father by seeing him might seem to point in Otto’s direction, the next verse quite clearly directs us to a very different kind of view, much closer to that of St John, for whom “he who does not love, does not know God” (I Jn 4:8), love meaning essentially keeping the commandments of Christ (I Jn 5:3, Jn 14:21), which is more or less to be identified with believing in him (Jn 6:29).

There is something fairly similar in Origen, who insists that it is only with the help of God that human nature can seek and find God “purely”; this is almost certainly meant to be taken in connexion with the discussion, a few paragraphs earlier, of purity of heart, which is the precondition for any vision of God, because there too Origen insists that human nature is not of itself sufficient to attain to purity of heart, it is only God who can create a pure heart.<sup>23</sup>



It is not, then, in some dramatic encounter that God is known, but in a whole way of life, based on the creative and redeeming grace of God, bringing those who believe in him to a purity of heart which enables man to have whatever kind of vision of God is possible.

But this seems to bring us back again to our initial problem. If it is essentially in or by means of a life of obedience to and faith in God that we can be said to know him, it is all important to ensure that we cultivate the right sort of ethics. And from where do we derive the certainty that our ethics are correct? We are back at the problem posed in the pseudo-Clementines. If, as Origen says, virtue is a life in accordance with a true understanding of *physiologia*, the nature of things,<sup>24</sup> correct ethics must presuppose correct doctrine, and where are we to look for that? If Christ is proposed to us as our teacher of *physiologia* and ethics, why should we accept him rather than, say, the Buddha?

An important contribution to our discussion is made by the First Vatican Council. Apart from its famous declaration that "God, the foundation and purpose of all things, can be known with certainty from created things by the natural light of human reason", the council also teaches that "our obedience of faith is in harmony with reason". The council was, in fact, fighting on two fronts. It was concerned to resist the reduction of faith to reason and the notion that our consent to revelation could be constrained by rational argument; but it was also determined to oppose the suggestion that faith rests simply on some kind of inner light, quite independent of rational thought. It therefore presents it as an essential part of catholic belief that faith can be made credible by such things as miracles. In fact, in one way it is simply reaffirming the ancient arguments from prophecy and the miraculous powers of Christ and his church. But the major objective of the council seems to have been, not so much to endorse the views of the ancient apologists, as to protest against illuminism. The reasonableness of faith depends on publicly available evidence, not on private revelations. The actual text of the council's anathema is extremely important for our present enquiry: "If anyone says that revelation cannot be made credible by external signs, and that therefore men must be moved to faith solely by their own individual experience or by private inspiration, anathema sit".<sup>25</sup> The council could not consistently with itself be maintaining that faith can actually be proved by miracles or any other such signs and wonders. Nor does it lay upon them the whole burden of producing faith. They are regarded simply as supporting the inner working of the Holy Spirit. Faith is essentially a gift from God; what the miracles and so on (and the council does not confine *facta divina* to miracles and prophecies) are expected to do is situate the inner working of the Holy Spirit in a context of public

phenomena which make it reasonable to suppose that there is a supernatural agency at work.<sup>26</sup> The *signa* startle us into asking questions about life, to which the christian revelation can be seen to be a plausible answer. They do not solve all theoretical epistemological questions.

It would seem to be in accordance with this conciliar teaching to oppose, then, the suggestion that what makes christian belief rational is some private encounter with the Wholly Other (and it remains private even if, when we compare notes, we find that several of us have had such an encounter). We must also say that there is no evidence or argument which *constrains* our minds to assent to christian doctrine. Faith is a gift of God, produced in us by the Holy Spirit, not by some kind of inner experience, but as a light which enables us to see things in a certain way, and to recognise that some of the more peculiar things which we encounter in the world are most easily accounted for on the hypothesis that God is at work in them. The hypothesis that God exists to be at work in them is, in the view of the council, already, in principle, confirmed on other rational grounds, though the council is well aware that in actual fact it may often only be christian belief that makes some people subjectively certain of the existence of God – though they will, presumably, as believers, see progressively that it is rational to believe in God.

It would be a mistake to try to determine whether the inner working of the Holy Spirit, which produces faith, or the external signs which make it reasonable to believe, should be regarded as prior. They are two sides of the same coin, two aspects of a single operation. The reasonableness is neither prior nor subsequent to the belief. Belief is born, mysteriously, as reasonable belief. The specific factors which make it reasonable are quite public, “adapted to the intelligence of everybody”, as the council says,<sup>27</sup> so that it is quite possible for the believer to engage in debate with the unbeliever about the reasonableness of his belief; he is not reduced to saying “I believe and that is all there is to be said about it”. In that sense, the reasonableness can be to some extent detached from the belief. But for the believer himself they are not two separate things. He is a believer precisely as a rational, intelligent human being.

Now it seems to me that this characteristic of faith as something which is simply given, but which nevertheless emerges, from its first beginning, as something reasonable, indicates where faith is related to the problematic of philosophy. One of the most basic questions in philosophy is: What is the ground of rational understanding, rational investigation? How does a rational argument get started?

As we have seen, some of the early christian apologists are con-



fidant that christians are in a better position to be rational than anybody else, and this is clarified in some of the early theologians as a claim that the christian faith provides precisely a dependable foundation for argument.

In Athanasius' *Life of Anthony*, Anthony is presented as arguing with some philosophers who come to visit him. The philosophers pour scorn on what they consider to be the irrationality of christian belief, but Anthony very neatly turns the tables. "Because you prefer to rely on demonstrative arguments, which is what you are good at, you want us too to refrain from worshipping God without argumentative proofs. But tell me, how are things, particularly knowledge about God, known? By arguments? Or by active faith? And which is more basic, active faith or proof by arguments?" They reply that active faith is more basic and concede that faith is in fact where precise knowledge is to be found. Anthony approves of their answer, with the comment that faith arises from the disposition of the soul, whereas dialectical argument arises from a skill in putting things together. Finally he says, "What we understand by faith, you try to establish by arguments; but that is an impossible undertaking, for often we cannot expound what we understand" (following the Latin text).<sup>28</sup>

As it stands, Anthony's argument is somewhat dishonest, but it draws our attention to something already pointed out by Aristotle, that rational discourse always has to *start* somewhere. In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle attacks the absurdity of wanting to have an account (*logos*) of everything. "They look for a first principle (starting point, *arché*) and expect to have it established by demonstration. . . . What is wrong with them is that they are looking for an account of things of which there is no account. The beginning of a proof is not itself a proof". Wanting to prove the beginning of a proof is as stupid as wondering whether you are asleep or awake.<sup>29</sup>

The christian claim against the philosophers is that, first, christianity is no more unreasonable, because it bases itself on faith, than any other view of life; and secondly that christianity is actually better grounded than other philosophies because the starting point of its thought is identical with the very principle of reality, namely Christ, the Logos.<sup>30</sup> If this cannot be proved to be true, no more can the first principles of any other philosophy: and christianity has the advantage at least of *having* a starting point. Origen, like the sceptics,<sup>31</sup> wishes to display to his students the arbitrariness of the various schools of Greek philosophy by taking them through the various writings produced by the different philosophers. In this way they will be able to see how easily we can be bewitched into offering a rational defence of a position we have adopted without any rational grounds at all.<sup>32</sup> People adopt posi-

tions more or less at random, and then develop them into consistent rational systems; but they have no foundation. Mere internal consistency is not enough to validate a system. Christianity is not merely coherent (albeit in a somewhat elusive way), it knows where it starts.

What it still cannot really answer, though, is quite how people do arrive at the starting point. The very awkwardness of the question perhaps shows that we cannot really expect to answer it. Faith is a gift, and that is that. The starting point is given. As Wittgenstein says, "It is so hard to find the *beginning*. Or rather: it is hard to begin at the beginning. And not try to go back further".<sup>33</sup> Wittgenstein dismisses an appeal to "intuition" as "an unnecessary shuffle".<sup>34</sup> We might say the same about an appeal to some kind of primary experience: that too would be an unnecessary shuffle. There may, of course, be a particular moment in time at which one suddenly sees that christianity provides a key to things, and that might be an "experience", but it really does not matter.

What does matter is that the key should be found to work. It is the claim of christians like Clement of Alexandria that orthodox christian belief can provide a comprehensive insight into everything. Unlike Vincent of Lerins' famous but fatuous criterion of truth, Clement's criterion does actually give us something that we can work with. He offers it formally as a criterion of orthodoxy, a way of recognising true christian belief: "the church's rule (*canon*) is the harmony of the law and the prophets with the covenant given at the Incarnation".<sup>35</sup> This rules out any interpretation of christianity which involves discarding any of the Old Testament. But a fairly similar principle is involved also in Clement's view of Greek philosophy: "the philosophy of the barbarians and of the Greeks has made of the eternal truth a kind of rending (*sparagmos*); not the rending which comes in the myth of Dionysus, but a rending of the theology of the word which is real and everlasting. Whoever can put together again what was sundered and unite it completely in one *logos*, you can be quite sure that he will see the truth".<sup>36</sup>

Irenaeus similarly accuses the heretics of taking bits and pieces of text from all over the place; the true believer, by contrast, puts everything in its proper place; fitting it to "the body of truth".<sup>37</sup> St Ephrem also uses the phrase "body of truth" for the integrity of the two testaments, which heretics destroy. "The church of truth, the big church with the big lap, is large enough for the fullness of both testaments".<sup>38</sup>

If we are to demonstrate the superiority of christian belief over other philosophies, it must surely be in some way like this. Christian belief can cope with the fragmentary insights found elsewhere and draw them into its "body of truth"; it bears better wit-

ness than its rivals to the integrity of truth and understanding. The christian hypothesis is to be preferred because it can account for more things than any other hypothesis.

Of course this could never amount to a final proof of the correctness of christianity; but it does strongly support the contention that faith and reasonableness are essentially born together. At least, it supports it provided that christian belief really does prove to be capable of the kind of comprehensiveness claimed for it by people like Clement.

But this surely brings us back again to the importance of the incomprehensibility of God as a hermeneutic key to both revelation and life. If christianity is to be truly comprehensive, it must always be on the move. If it settles down too comfortably with any particular way of articulating and presenting itself, it will fail to respond to the new challenges to comprehensiveness that must arise from time to time. This is one reason why it is unfortunate if orthodoxy ever becomes too sure of itself. In the early church continuing study was considered to be essential for the preservation of faith.<sup>39</sup> A faith that is merely conserved is likely to be lost. Adapting the words of Christ, we may say that faith must lose itself constantly in order to find itself. However confident we may be that we have the true answer, in Christ, we must at least keep on asking ourselves, like Anna of Mister God fame, "What's the question to that answer?"<sup>40</sup> If the key to life is precisely the incomprehensible mystery of God revealed to us in Christ, we can never be in the position of knowing exactly how the key works. This is why systematic theology can be such a dangerous occupation. Although the precise interpretation of Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis* is notoriously difficult, it does seem clear that he is quite deliberately not offering a systematic account of christian wisdom, and that this is because he fears that anything systematic would lead to serious misunderstanding.<sup>41</sup> Origen too seems to fight shy of developing any systematic theology; those who complain that his thought is not systematic are probably missing the point of what he was trying to do. He no doubt aimed at a coherent vision; but this was not to be translated into a coherent intellectual system. Christian belief is not so much a systematic explanation of things, as a formal principle of explanation; it generates explanations, but the explanations it generates do not exhaust its fecundity, any more than manifestations of God exhaust his reality.

If this is true, it is difficult to see how we could make much headway with a recent proposal that religious belief could be supported rationally by a "cumulative case" as follows:

- (a) If God (as described in belief-system S) exists, then experiences open to interpretation under S will be likely to occur. . . .
- (b) Experiences interpreted under S do occur.
- (c) No better ways of explaining the occurrence of those particular experiences are known.
- (d) Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that God exists.<sup>42</sup>

As Peter Donovan, from whom I quote this, explains, all that is required for (a) is that the belief-system should provide “a description of what will *count as* the signs of the reality and activity of God”.

But the fundamental premiss of this argument seems to be wrong. At least if our discussion so far has been following the right lines, christianity does not really “describe” God at all. It therefore cannot undertake to predict what sort of experiences are likely to result from his existence. Christianity rather undertakes to show itself a key capable of interpreting whatever turns up. If it predicted that experience X will happen, it would seem to be reducing the possibility of God bringing Y to pass instead, and this would seem to involve claiming a kind of knowledge of God, who is “Lord of all possibilities”, which no creature can actually possess. It is not the particularity but the comprehensiveness of its interpretative potential that validates christian belief.

Also it must be noted that it is not only things which have no other plausible explanation that christianity undertakes to account for. If it is to shed light on everything, that must include things which are quite easily explained as well as things which are puzzling. Its concern will not be to explain things which would otherwise lack explanation, but to suggest how everything, whether or not it is susceptible of explanation, can be integrated into the “body of truth”, into a comprehensive vision.

Indeed, I suspect that one of the more damaging disservices done to the church has been the tendency to present christianity as offering an assurance that, in certain conditions, certain results may be confidently expected. One obvious area is that of promises of supernatural healings, but it is a much more general problem. When people “lose their faith” because of some personal tragedy or whatever, with the cry, “How could God do this to me?” however much we may sympathise with their distress, must we not also recognise that a very inadequate concept of God has been at work? What right have we to lay down criteria for what is or is not acceptable behaviour from God?

On the other hand, we must not be glib in saying “It is the will of God”, as if that settled everything. To say that truly does not settle anything at all. It simply confronts us with the mystery of facts. There is no answer to the question “Why?” and “God’s

will" is, strictly speaking, not meant to be such an answer.

I have already mentioned Origen's disapproval of those who simply identify God with the Logos, as if there were nothing more to God. And I suspect that part of the objection to such a view of God is that it takes God to be no more than the key to the intelligibility of the world. But a God who is no more than that simply will not work. After all, it is not at all clear that the world which such a God makes intelligible is in any simple sense *this* world at all. If we take the doctrine of the Fall seriously, or the Thomistic view of evil as, strictly speaking, having no cause<sup>43</sup> and therefore not being susceptible of insertion into a rational account, then we must concede that, in an important way, this world does not make sense. It is only by abstracting from some of the phenomena that we can suppose that it does. But the phenomena which upset such sense are surely just as important as the phenomena which support it. For a christian believer the unendurable elements in the world serve as a reminder that this world is not our final home. But no appeal to eschatology can really resolve the problem either existentially or intellectually, because we do not know enough about beatitude and eternal life to judge how or whether heaven will show that, after all, there was some sense in this nonsensical world.

This is why it is so important for believers to listen to the world's protests against our belief. The protests may often show up an inadequacy in the belief.

To take just a few modern instances which seem to me to be of theological interest: first, there is J. N. Findlay's ontological disproof of the existence of God.<sup>44</sup> As H. D. Lewis saw,<sup>45</sup> Findlay's attack on theism is essentially a religious one. Findlay himself says, "I think it *hard* to be a theist without falling into idolatry". In fact it would not be difficult to find theologians saying much the same thing as Findlay; whether or not we choose to talk of God as "beyond being", no one would deny that there is a strong theological tradition of insisting that God does not exist in the same way as beings exist. If God is simply one existent among others, Findlay is quite right to say that it would be idolatrous to worship him. But evidently there is a widespread failure to grasp this point even among philosophers of religion.<sup>46</sup>

Secondly, there is the widespread suspicion that the "God" of the churches is simply there to endorse a certain kind of *status quo* and to take the wind out of potential rebels and protesters. And this is by no means confined to those who accuse the church of being on the wrong side politically. It is found, for instance, in Ionesco, who regards politicians of all camps with equal abomination. In his view, "the laws of religion are simply the laws of this world".<sup>47</sup> The God of the churches is the God who is the creator of the world, and, like the gnostics of old, Ionesco finds it impos-

ible to regard him with any favour. "If there is – and this is blasphemy – if there is a protest to be made, it is not against society, it is not against men. Men kill each other because the world is all bugged up and everything is going to the dogs. it is not their fault. They ought all to get together and protest against the Creator".<sup>48</sup> If the church wishes – as she must – to maintain that the God she believes in is the creator, she must appreciate also, if her message is to be at all credible, what a difficult, what an outrageous belief this is. Amongst orthodox believers, perhaps the one who has shown most sensitivity to this in recent times is Charles Williams, who says:

The awful responsibility of the First Cause remains with the First Cause. . . . We return to the single cry that goes up against the Creator; it is but one variation on one theme: that he did create, that he was the First Cause. . . . If he meant to sustain his creatures in the pain to which they were reduced, at least he also gave himself up to that pain. The First Cause was responsible for them; he accepted responsibility and endured equality.<sup>49</sup>

Then there is the challenge to our glib messianism in such works as *Waiting for Godot*. Our assurance that "all shall be well" must not be trivialised into optimism. Christian hope has to face up to the God who does not come, who does not solve our problems, the God who lets his friends die before coming to the rescue.

There is also the assault on the petty moralism which so easily achieves goodness at the expense of integrity. Francis Scarfe, in his introduction to the Penguin selection of the poems of Baudelaire, says: "Baudelaire presents the first case of the modern Catholic adventure towards and beyond the boundary of orthodoxy, the search for God in the nature of evil itself, and for salvation even by our sins".<sup>50</sup>

This is not just a matter of people wanting to justify their own lack of virtue. Their integrity, their creativity, is at stake. An excellent example is provided by Cavafy, generally considered one of the most important modern Greek poets, who seems always to have retained at least a residual attachment to the Greek Orthodox Church, and who, shortly before his death, "apparently received the last sacraments with contrition".<sup>51</sup> He wrestled throughout his life with his own homosexuality, which he did not, as people do nowadays, attempt to justify morally. Nevertheless he regarded it as an authentic part of his life as a poet:

When I went to that house of pleasure  
I didn't stay in the front rooms where they celebrate



with some decorum, the accepted modes of love. . . .  
 I went into the secret rooms  
 considered shameful even to name.  
 But not shameful to me – because if they were,  
 what kind of poet, what kind of artist would I be?  
 I'd rather be an ascetic. That would be more in keeping,  
 much more in keeping with my poetry,  
 than for me to find pleasure in the commonplace rooms.<sup>52</sup>

The question is not whether we should accept statements like that, as they stand, as morally adequate. The question is whether our religious morality is courageous enough to follow what is surely the authentic christian tradition that, even within our most warped desires, there is a God-given nucleus of rightness. In the case of Cavafy, surely, his extraordinary sensitivity to male beauty which, as he keeps on saying, is thoroughly Hellenic, cannot simply be disregarded as no more than a perversion.

If we are to substantiate our claim to be in possession of God's definitive revelation of himself, then surely it is of little value to claim that it derives from some primordial encounter with the Wholly Other; what is crucial is that we should be able to see and to suggest to others that it can cope with the aspects of human existence which are usually driven to the fringe of our awareness by the narrow conformisms of our society, so that it can be seen that the church has indeed got a "big lap", capable of containing the *totum humanum* and seeking its sanctification, not its amputation, in Christ.

- 1 Clem. Al., *Str.* V 126,1; 129,3-6. Orphica, frag. 248 Kern; Pindar, frag. 50 Bowra; Hesiod, frag. 303 MW; Solon, frag. 17 West.
- 2 Sextus Emp., *Adv. Log.* I 48-51. Xenophanes, frag. 34DK.
- 3 Frags. 14-15 DK.
- 4 Frag. 35 DK.
- 5 C. Cels. VI 12. Heraclitus, frag. 90M (78DK).
- 6 C. Cels. VI 13.
- 7 *Tim.* 72d.
- 8 *Ad Autol.* III 17.
- 9 *Corpus Hermeticum* 11,1.
- 10 *In Hex.* III 8.
- 11 Athenagoras, *Leg.* 7.
- 12 Hom. Clem. II 5-8.
- 13 *Ibid.* II 39, III 50.
- 14 *Ibid.* III 9-10.
- 15 *Ibid.* III 49,2.
- 16 *Didascalia*, trans. Connolly, p. 218.
- 17 *Ibid.* p. 34.
- 18 E.g. Justin, I *Apol.* 12; 10; 30ff. Origen, *c. Cels.* passim (see vol V of the Sc edition. p. 214).
- 19 E.g. Justin, I *Apol.* 14,2ff; Origen, *c. Cels.* I 9; Athanasius, *de Inc.* 50ff.

- 20 E.g. Athanasius, *de Inc.* 30.  
 21 *Hymns de Fide* 26, 11.  
 22 *Ibid.* 67, 15-17.  
 23 *C.Cels.* VII 42; 33.  
 24 Origen, *in Matt.* XVII 7 (GCS edition p. 603).  
 25 Session III, ch. 2-3; *Anathemas* II 1, III 2,3,5.  
 26 Session III, ch. 3.  
 27 *Ibid.*  
 28 *Vita Anton.* 77. Anon. Latin version ed. G.J.M. Bartelink (Mondadori, 1974).  
 29 1011a 3-13.  
 30 Clem. Al., *Str.* VII 2,2; 95,3ff.  
 31 Cf. Cicero, *de Nat. Deorum* I 11. Greg. Thaum., *Pan. Orig.* 151ff.  
 32 Greg. Thaum., *Pan. Orig.* 162f.  
 33 *On Certainty*, 471.  
 34 *Philosophical Investigations* I 213.  
 35 *Str.* VI 125,3.  
 36 *Str.* I 56,3.  
 37 *Adv. Haer.* I 1,20.  
 38 *Hymns c. Haer.* 2,16-17.  
 39 E.g. Barnabas 2,9; 4,1 etc. Hermas 40,4.  
 40 Fynn, *Mister God this is Anna*, p. 77 etc.  
 41 Cf. André Méhat, *Étude sur les Stromates*, pp. 125ff.  
 42 Peter Donovan, *Interpreting Religious Experience*, p.91.  
 43 *QD de Malo* q. 1, art. 3.  
 44 Flew & MacIntyre, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, pp. 47ff.  
 45 H. D. Lewis, *Philosophy of Religion* (Teach Yourself Books), p. 77.  
 46 E.g. R. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, p.1; Robin Attfield, *God and the Secular*, p.165; Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness*, pp. 175f; John J. Shepherd, *Experience, Inference and God*, pp. 114f. (I owe these references to Brian Davies O.P.).  
 47 Eugene Ionesco, *Un Homme en Question*, p.15.  
 48 *Ibid.* p. 19.  
 49 Charles Williams, *The Forgiveness of Sins*, pp. 28-32 (in the edition combined with *He Came down from Heaven*, pp. 129-131).  
 50 *Baudelaire*, p. xl.  
 51 Robert Liddell, *Cavafy*, p.206.  
 52 C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, with translation by Edmund Keeley & Philip Sherrard, pp. 374-5. I quote from this translation.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

**COMMENT** *continued from page 501*

such matters as priests wearing roman collars and the restoration of the Tridentine Mass.

To say the least, we must question the value of an institution like the Congregation of Faith whose pedigree has caused so much scandal and misery, damaged ecumenical progress, and on top of all that is inefficient. Errors, mistakes, confusions and muddle are bound to happen when academic theologians are allowed to work freely. The question is: Is there no other way for the Church to defend the truth of the Gospel?

Alban Weston O.P.