

Faith and Reality

Two Major Works of Biblical Theology

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It is generally admitted that the Catholic Church is distinguished by an insistence on the reality of the objects of her faith. For those who are in one way or another alienated from the Church this realism often appears unenlightened and superstitious, a kind of primitive surrender to the principalities and powers of a magical world which lies behind and yet permeates the world of everyday, and heightens its common-sense obviousness by charging it with a *mana* derived from supposed agencies like, but more powerful than, the agencies and objects of the tangible world. Within the Church this sense of the reality of the object of faith has become incorporated in devotions of many kinds, and also in a metaphysical theology. It would be interesting to examine in some detail the various forms taken by this incorporation of a living and sensitive faith, stretching out to touch and handle its objects; but here we shall simply note some of the dangers which must be guarded against in these human incorporations of living faith, the danger common to all of course being that faith ceases to live in them and that the reality which it once sought to grasp through them ceases to be a reality precisely of faith and becomes a reality like that of the everyday world and only differing from it by a difference of sign, as it were - a 'super-natural' reality, something rather dismayingly like the crude picture proposed and rejected by opponents of the Church.

Thus one may not unreasonably wonder what part faith still continues to play in, for example, a well-established and highly sanctioned devotion like the Stations of the Cross, apart from merely providing a setting which allows those who take part in the devotion to 'change sign', to step almost without noticing it from a profane to a ritual world. Who is this sorrowful figure with whom the participants are expected to identify themselves in sympathy? Undoubtedly the urgent impulse of faith to possess the reality of its object was once certainly there and may often be there still; but it is not clear, to the present writer at least, that the historical particularization which has provided the human form in which faith might present to itself the reality of its

object, has not now become dissociated from the Jesus Christ of faith and revelation and acquired merely the twilight reality of myth. What is meant to faith by the three falls, for example? Similar considerations could be offered in regard to the devotion of the Christmas crib—realism again but, one feels, dissociated realism.

It is perhaps only too easy to assent to reflections like these; what is more surprising, and more difficult perhaps to appreciate, is that a remarkably similar position frequently obtains in the practice of dogmatic theology. The essential impulse of the Church's official theology, in its really great and saintly exponents such as St Thomas, is to grasp, as freshly and as powerfully as the human mind can, the reality of the object of faith; and the canonized means of doing so is the deployment, in the act of faith, of an understanding already exercised in the metaphysics of being, with a sense of reality sharpened and made sensitive by that exercise, in such a way that the reality of the object of faith is simultaneously grasped together with the reality of the object of ordinary metaphysical knowledge. The reality of the object of faith is then apprehended as even more real than the object of metaphysical knowledge: there is, that is to say, a *theological* analogy of being which includes and re-orientates the merely metaphysical analogy of being, supplying it with a fresh content and point of comparison, or *primum analogatum*. It should of course be noted here that the metaphysical analogy of being does not depend on purely 'philosophical' experience, but assimilates the whole manifold richness of human experience in its most heightened manifestations.

Supposing, then, that the living impulse of faith towards the grasp of its object grows weak; suppose, too, that the human experience to be organized metaphysically is impoverished and the synthesizing metaphysical power insufficient to its task: the consequence, with which we are all too familiar, follows. A set of concepts the primary use of which has been the field of metaphysical knowledge takes the place of the real object of faith, and what might be called 'supernatural metaphysics', a metaphysics of 'super-natural' realities exhaustively expressed by the metaphysical concepts, takes the place of a genuine theology which is always *open* to the reality made accessible to faith, always painfully conscious of its own inadequacy to the mysterious object revealed to faith. When such a displacement has occurred, faith once again, just as in devitalized devotions, has merely the role of guaranteeing a secondary reality, other than yet essentially like the reality known metaphysically, and stripped of all its intrinsic richness

since the concepts used in the theological system are not felt to leave any remainder for further exploration - any obscurity is thought to be a 'difficulty' not a mystery. I do not think there is a single area of dogmatic theology in which this shift and substitution has not at some time occurred; the 'hypostatic union' for the Lord Jesus, 'transubstantiation' for the eucharist, grace as a quality for life in the Spirit are three examples of it. The temptation today, indeed, is to abandon all this vast treasure of conceptualized insight, even when as is frequently the case, it is sanctioned by the authoritative definitions of the Church and thus a divinely guaranteed vehicle of revelation: it is a temptation vigorously to be resisted. The true point of application of all our spiritual resources must rather be the rediscovery in faith of the realities to which we have access in faith alone, and the energetic exercise of our speculative understanding, thus reanimated, to grasp conceptually, as far as we can and with the help of the traditional theology of the Church, those realities of revelation in a comprehensive unity which embraces the historically changing realities of our human and cosmic existence. It need hardly be said, moreover, that even if the 'average' theology current in the Church is frequently not sustained in the individual believer or theologian by a very vital faith, it is *always* sustained by the indefectible faith of the Church as a whole guaranteed by the presence of the Spirit in her, and consequently remains (almost, as it were, in spite of itself) the bearer of part at least of the realities of revelation.

How, then, are we to set about rediscovering in faith the realities of revelation—the Revelation-reality? (I must be allowed simply to *assume* here what must always and everywhere be the 'transcendental' answer to this question, namely, prayer). One answer to this question, the force of which is being increasingly realized by Catholics, is the study and practice of biblical theology: that is, the rediscovery in faith of the Revelation-reality in and through what is supremely the Revelation-word. Two possible interpretations of this general statement may be examined in the two books, each of them outstanding in its way, to the review of which the foregoing remarks are intended as a somewhat prolonged introduction.

In the first of these books, by the well-known Protestant scholar Oscar Cullmann¹, the Revelation-word is submitted to a close analysis, using all the resources of modern scholarship, in which the numerous *titles* by which Jesus is known and his reality expressed in the New

¹*The Christology of the New Testament.* (S.C.M. Press; 42s.)

Testament are explored in orderly succession. This is not the place to comment in detail on Professor Cullmann's interpretations, though I should like specially to commend the chapter on 'The Son of Man'. (I must also note that some of his views, especially in *obiter dicta*, are unacceptable to Catholics, and his usefulness for a reader new to studies of this kind is in consequence less than it might have been.) What is more to the point here is to comment on his method and the nature of the conclusions accessible by the use of such a method.

Fortunately, Professor Cullmann is quite explicit in his introductory chapter about the purpose and methods of his book. Describing the later Christological controversies in the Church, he remarks of them that they are concerned with Christ's *person* and *nature*: the New Testament answer to the question: 'Who is Christ?', on the other hand, is an answer in terms of *function* (p. 4). In a footnote here he disclaims Bultmann's sense of 'function', and declares that for him Christ's 'function' is a real (the German has *ontisches*) Christological event. Thus an examination of the titles by which Christ is spoken of in the New Testament (including of course the title 'Christ') will help us to grasp the sense of his person and redeeming work. Now we may grant that the 'problematic' of the New Testament writings is not quite the same as that of the later centuries, and it is important that we should recognize this; but the essential continuity between the two periods is a concern in faith for the ('ontic') reality of the Christ Event. We may even grant that the later controversies were conducted on too narrow a basis in the Revelation-word, and it is a great merit of Professor Cullmann's book that it helps us to realize how much more of the revelation of Christ we may attempt to grasp theologically and conceptually; but what Professor Cullmann does not appear fully to appreciate is that the later Christological controversies did succeed magnificently in laying down *ontological* definitions of the reality of Christ in such a way that this reality became accessible conceptually to minds for which the reality of the created world too was an object of religious concern. What Professor Cullmann's fine analysis of the Christological titles shows us is that the reality of the Christ Event contains a wealth of intelligible riches diversely brought to manifestation in each of the titles; but one cannot help feeling that there is a tendency for this intelligibility merely to be entertained in the mind, as sustained by human intelligence in a web of scholarship, rather than to be *applied* to the Revelation-reality which is the abiding and unified source of the intelligibility. It is not, of course, that Professor Cullmann is unaware

of the need to return to the living source of intelligibility, but it is possible to envisage a method of practising biblical theology in which there is never any departure from the source at all, where the living Christ is continually present as the object of contemplation.

This is the distinction made by Fr Durrwell at the beginning of what is clearly a lifework, a book which magnificently sums up, more perhaps than any other single writing, that profound change which has slowly been taking place in the Catholic conscience in the last fifty years². Fr Durrwell distinguishes between two possible methods of doctrinal research in Scripture: 'One may try either to analyse what the sacred writer is thinking, or to grasp the Christian reality underlying the inspired text' (p. xxiv). As he points out: 'A study that goes beyond the actual words of the Apostles in an effort to grasp the Christian reality itself presupposes a faith in that reality' (*ibid.*); Fr Durrwell's book is the record of a living faith continually in contact with the Revelation-reality of the risen Christ through the Revelation-word of the Bible.

The two complementary truths which according to Fr Durrwell emerge from studying the resurrection of Christ in this way are: 'the fact that the death and resurrection remain for ever actual in Christ in glory, and the identification of the Church with Christ in glory, not merely in one body with him, but actually in the act of his death and glorification' (p. xxi). This compact statement indicates very clearly how Fr Durrwell sees the work of his kind of biblical theology. For it is manifest that these truths are formulated in language which is not the language of the New Testament, nor is simply analytically descriptive of that language: that they are offered as an explicit statement, in Fr Durrwell's own terms, of convictions underlying the New Testament writings and implicit in them: 'act', 'actual', 'identification' are not biblical terms. And I must say at once that the book as a whole only approximates to these two truths as a sort of mathematical limit: it is a measure of Fr Durrwell's remarkable success that the approximation is so close.

Here we have a fresh problem, then, one very unlike the problem set us by Professor Cullmann's book. Has Fr Durrwell any carefully thought-out and systematized body of language and concepts in which the explanatory, non-biblical concepts he actually uses find their proper place? In fact I do not think he has: his explanatory language would seem to be 'open-textured' in such a way that it acquires its temporary

²F. X. Durrwell: *The Resurrection*. Translated by Rosemary Sheed, with an Introduction by Charles Davis. (Sheed and Ward; 30s.)

specialized significance and force from the use to which it is put in successive contexts in the book. Consequently, while his language has all the pressure of personal experience, it not seldom lacks a precision which a more systematic theology can supply³. This is not merely being urged as a possible criticism: it is meant to indicate the special value of the book, and the need to absorb it into a wider context - a process, this absorption, which will considerably modify the context as well, and to some extent may already have done so. The resurrection is not mentioned even once in what is one of Pius XII's most important encyclicals, *Mystici Corporis* (1943), while the risen Christ has a major role in one of his last pronouncements, the encyclical *Haurietis Aquas* (1956) on the Sacred Heart. Fr Durrwell's book is a challenge to the professional theologian to re-examine his whole conceptual system: to criticize it in the light of a faith excited to fresh contact with the Revelation-reality through the Revelation-word, a fresh contact excited by a creative exegesis which continually explores the reality offered to faith, in a language charged with an implicit ontology.

Let us glance briefly at part of Fr Durrwell's treatment of the theme of 'identification'. He says (pp. 218-9): '(Our Christian life) springs from the Holy Spirit, but it is lived personally by Christ (Gal. 2. 20); the Spirit is its cause . . . Christ is its subject. The life-giving communication of the Spirit and the personal life of Christ, it becomes our own

³Fr Durrwell's attempts in footnotes to come to terms with more conventional theology are unhappy: see n. 40, p. 92; n. 51, p. 134; n. 39 on p. 217. In the first two cases the translation makes him a shade more categorical than his own words ('n'en est sans doute pas' might be 'presumably not' rather than 'certainly not'; 'parfaitement conciliable' might be 'perfectly compatible' rather than 'in perfect harmony with'). In the first case, Fr Durrwell's statement is in formal contradiction with the solemn assertion of *Mystici Corporis* (Denz 2290), and it is in any case quite unnecessary to deny the common action of the three Persons *ad extra* in the divinizing action of grace in order to attribute a proper role in that action to each of the three Persons. In the second case, Fr Durrwell's views might be compatible with *part* of Catholic theology in regard of Christ's knowledge; but no Catholic theologian would wish to assert that Christ's prophetic (or infused) knowledge was incomplete. In the third case, Fr Durrwell has no need to defend himself against that part of the condemnation in *Mediator Dei* to which he refers (it bears on an interesting aberration of major German theologians in the forties); what he does need to bear in mind is the second part of the condemnation, in the same sentence, where the encyclical goes on to reject the view that 'unam ac numero eandem, ut dicitur, gratiam coniungere Christum cum Mystici eius Corporis membris' (AAS 39 (1947), p. 593). The grace we derive from Christ is *personally* our own; and thus only specifically and not numerically the same as his.

life when the Spirit incorporates us into the glorified humanity of our Lord'. I wonder whether there is anyone who will not be shocked to find that Fr Durrwell interprets Gal. 2. 20 ('I live, yet no longer I, but Christ liveth in me') by saying that Christ is the *subject* of our Christian life. Such a shock is salutary: it provokes reflection not only on the biblical text itself, but also on the meaning of being a 'subject'. Fr Durrwell goes no further: he employs the ontologically loaded word, but it is a word which for him has no systematic metaphysical context. It is for the theologian to assimilate Fr Durrwell's insight, and correct it, in fact, by taking into account the irrevocable and incommunicable responsibility of our unique created personality and 'subjecthood', which is not lost in our 'identity' with Christ. Do we not also say: 'Come, Lord'?

Fr Durrwell's book is so rich, so powerful, so consistently perceptive, so tender often, that it absorbs the reader's mind with a kind of fascination: one has the feeling of discovering the heart of the Christian mystery for the first time⁴. It becomes all the more necessary to stand back from the book and remind oneself of what it does *not* say. The really major element in the Christian consciousness which does not permit of being taken up satisfactorily into Fr Durrwell's synthesis is in fact this consciousness itself, not only in ourselves but also in Christ. I do not of course wish to deny that this Christian and Christ consciousness has received in the past all too one-sided and limited an emphasis, for instance in the abbreviated 'satisfaction theory' of the redemption about which Fr Davis speaks in his useful introduction, and which was proposed for authoritative sanction at the Vatican Council. And yet, both in Christ and in Christians, the subjectivity of human mind and will are essential to integral Christianity. Secondly it may be as well to point out that other synoptic views of the whole of Christian life, even in exclusively New Testament terms, have been presented from different points of view, such as the passion (as in Schelkle's *Die Passion Jesu*) or *agape* (as in Warnach's *Agape*). None of this is meant to detract from Fr Durrwell's achievement, but it is an attempt to set it in its proper context.

⁴He has been extremely well served by his translator. I should like, however, to register my disagreement with the policy of replacing the transliterated Greek of the original by an English word (e.g. 'spirit' often for *pneuma* - and here Fr Durrwell's use of capital and small letters, 'Esprit' and 'esprit' has often not been followed). It also seems unfortunate that the Douai version has been followed even when Fr Durrwell's version is required by his exegesis. This may be due to censorship regulations: it is still unfortunate.

In this review both Professor Cullmann's and Fr Durrwell's books have been considered from the point of view of their theological form, as it were, rather than their content, which in neither case is profitably to be summarized; I trust that readers of the review could no longer be satisfied with a summary.

Our Lady in Scripture—II: Oral Tradition

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Before the gospels were written, or rather before the gospel was recorded in writings which achieved stability in the four books we now have, there was an oral tradition. Before even the passion of our Lord, his sayings were circulated by word of mouth, handed on by those who had been present, to those who had not yet heard or seen him, stirring some to enmity, drawing others towards him. The apostles themselves were sent out by our Lord in his own lifetime to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of heaven and to set out the general lines of his teaching, a new teaching distinct from that of the rabbis, calling men to repentance and a greater purity of intention, to an inward purity of the heart deeper than outward purity before the law. They would have reported the actual words he used; perhaps he even gave them schemes to remember the outlines by and made them learn his sayings by heart; even so, Peter would have shaped them slightly differently from Matthew, Matthew from John, and when they were repeated from their audience to others they would have been slightly re-shaped again. This oral tradition certainly preserved the substance of our Lord's teaching accurately, whether it arose from the preaching of our Lord himself on the soil of Palestine or from the preaching missions of the apostles after the resurrection. It was concerned with allegiance to the person of our Lord, the kingdom he was to establish for his Father, the dispositions and conduct of those who were to make up the kingdom, the nucleus of the new Israel. It was a general message to the Jews first, and after their refusal to the Gentiles. This does not mean that there was nobody as yet to reflect more deeply