

## THE SPIRIT IN NONCONFORMIST SPIRITUALITY

H. FRANCIS DAVIS

IT is the object of these papers neither to find differences nor to apologise for them, but to pause for a while to consider how far they really exist. We wish to learn to appreciate something of another's point of view without sacrificing anything we treasure as true ourselves. Is truth different for different men? Or is it vital to some men and a matter of little concern to others? Or are our differences questions purely of emotion or feeling or of the company we like to keep? If we answer negatively to these questions, then differences between sincere people must be mainly questions of misunderstanding. We cannot hope here to heal a schism, but something will be gained if we can help to remove one stumbling-block. This is worth while, even if the stumbling-block be small or mainly a legacy of the past.

I am confining myself to a doctrine which was at one time considered vital, especially among Methodists. And, though it may be less considered today, it has its intrinsic interest as well as being a doctrine that might be revived in any back-to-the-Reformation movement. I refer to the Lutheran doctrine of assurance of grace, referred to usually by Wesley in Pauline terms as the *Inward Witness of the Spirit*. I do not know whether the Wesleyans used to regard this as a peculiar Protestant doctrine, but it is certain that Luther himself looked upon it as such. It was to him part of his justification of his big step in rejecting the external authority of the Catholic Church and was further dictated by his desire to gain an interior feeling of peace with God more vividly felt than any assurance such as Catholics normally seek and find in their sacraments. They all felt confirmed in their appeal to assurance by such Pauline passages as the one, 'The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.' They made it part and parcel of their doctrine of justification by faith or confidence that Christ had washed away their individual personal sins.

As regards the motive of emancipation from external ecclesiastical authority, we should say that this was perhaps the occasion or cause of their expectation of an inner witness of the Spirit, but there is no necessary connection. Naturally a Catholic could not

in conscience allow that authority and the Spirit are mutually exclusive alternatives. Internal guidance by the Spirit is as much in harmony with external authority of the Church as soul is in harmony with the body. The Church without the Spirit would be a lifeless corpse; the individual member of the Church without any individual guidance would be a dead member. There is no more opposition between these correlatives than between the visible authority of Christ in his lifetime and the internal guidance of the spirit in his followers. For the Catholic the general authority of the Church is none other than Christ's authority, and Christ's Spirit in a sense informs both the whole body and each of its members.

The Protestant who has not yet learnt to accept this position sympathetically will be tempted to object, 'Why have interior guidance if exterior will suffice'? or, possibly, 'If there are two voices, sooner or later they will clash.' These objections are meaningless to the understanding Catholic; the first, because it appears to be God's universal system of ruling to guide men partly by the voice within each man's breast and partly by the teaching and government of others. Though all authority is from God, there are external channels of his inspiration as well as internal, and the two work in harmony in so far as they are channels of that inspiration. This gives the solution to the second problem. Two voices do not contradict, as long as they proceed from the same source.

But, to return to the interior voice of the Spirit, is the Catholic doctrine of the 'indwelling Spirit' really in opposition to the evangelical doctrine of the 'inward witness'? It is often assumed by both sides that the Catholic has been committed by the decisions of Trent to reject this doctrine of 'assurance'. In consequence, Catholics are apt to think it heresy, while Protestants regard its rejection as another example of Catholic materialism or authoritarianism, impatient of any purely spiritual influence of God in the heart. Both these opinions are unjust.

The Fathers at Trent did set out to condemn this 'Protestant' doctrine *en bloc*, as it were, as being essentially one with the general Protestant rejection of the visible Church and its authority. But, on closer examination in the debates before the final definition, it was found that the doctrine was not necessarily contrary to Catholic teaching. There were even found to be a number of Augustinians and others taking part in the Council who held quite

definitely the doctrine that some sort of personal assurance was a common privilege of good Christians. In the end the Council carefully avoided appearing to condemn the doctrine except in a clearly unbalanced and extreme form. Such a form was that of many Calvinists that, unless one were able to declare with certainty that one was saved, one lacked trust in Christ and consequently could not be regarded as one of the redeemed. Others declared that, if once one did receive this interior unhesitating certainty, there was no longer any chance of one's being lost. In other words, you were confirmed in your justification. On this view, we are told that Cromwell consoled himself on his death-bed on the grounds that he knew that at one time at least he had felt this certainty. For the upholders of such a view to suggest that anything else was necessary on the part of man would be to introduce a doctrine of salvation by works. It was only these extreme views, held by very few in this country today, that were condemned by Trent. Trent refused to condemn the man who trembled for his own salvation as though he were guilty of infidelity, provided, of course, his trembling was due, not to mistrust of Christ, but to mistrust of one's own faithfulness to him. Trent wished further to condemn the Calvinistic notion of a predestination so independent of free will that nothing I can do can cause me to lose heaven, once I have been justified.

One does not have to read a great deal of the writings of the greatest Nonconformist spiritual authors to realise that such extreme views were unusual among them. In fact it would, I think, be impossible to argue that they ever formed part of the official teaching of any great Nonconformist body of our country. I have little personal acquaintance with most of their writings, but at least have had a long-standing interest in John Wesley. He began by accepting the doctrine in its Lutheran form from the Moravians, and he was in some considerable anxiety himself until he experienced a conversion to a feeling of certainty or assurance of his own salvation. His recording of this occurrence has often been related. It was on 24th May, 1738. 'I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.'

The two Wesleys hymned their conversion in the words:

O how shall I the goodness tell, Father, which Thou to me hast showed?

That I a child of wrath and hell, I should be called a child of God,

Should know, should feel my sins forgiven, Blest with this antepast of heaven.

At the time this conversion relieved the Wesleys of a great load. They could at last feel they had true faith, so it seemed, since, without this sort of assurance, they felt they would be distrusting Christ.

Yet it is not certain that this view ever commended itself fully to John Wesley. He was frequently attacked for what people took to be his doctrine in this matter, and especially for predestinationism. The latter charge he promptly repelled by insisting that he had never taught 'assurance of salvation', but only 'assurance of faith'. People said he was giving people a false and presumptuous feeling of security. This he rebutted, saying that he did not regard it as either impossible or wrong for a man in a state of grace occasionally to feel worried about his condition. He further willingly admitted the possibility of a completely false sense of security. But he usually insisted that it was normal for Christians to feel confident about being in God's good favour, about having had their sins forgiven. They attacked him for introducing a doctrine that was not scriptural. He admitted that the word was unscriptural, and that he rarely used it for that reason. But he considered that some degree of divinely given confidence and peaceful security was definitely taught in the scriptures, and that further this was commonly, if implicitly, accepted by the early Fathers.

It will be helpful here to quote from a letter written by Wesley to Dr Rutherford on 28th March, 1768: 'I come now to your particular objections. I begin with the subject of your third charge—assurance; because what I have to say upon this head will be comprised in a few words. Some are fond of the expression: I am not; I hardly ever use it. But I will simply declare (having neither leisure nor inclination to draw the saw of controversy concerning it) what are my present sentiments with regard to the thing which is usually meant thereby.

I believe a few, but very few, Christians have an assurance from God of everlasting salvation; and that is the thing which the Apostle terms the plerophory or full assurance of faith.

I believe a consciousness of being in the favour of God (which I do not term plerophory, or full assurance, since it is frequently weakened, nay, perhaps interrupted, by returns of doubt or fear) is the common privilege of Christians fearing God and working righteousness.

Yet I do not affirm there are no exceptions to this general rule. Possibly some may be in the favour of God, and yet go mourning all the day long. But I believe this is usually owing either to disorder of body or ignorance of the gospel promises.

Therefore I have not for many years thought a consciousness of acceptance to be essential to justifying faith.

And after I have thus explained myself once for all, I think without any evasion or ambiguity, I am sure without any self-contradiction, I hope all reasonable men will be satisfied. And whoever will still dispute with me on this head must do it for disputing's sake.'

This view corresponds well to what we find in Wesley's sermons, notably in that on the *Witness of the Spirit*. In this sermon Wesley argues that our own conscience tells us how we delight and rejoice in God with a humble joy, a holy delight and an obedient love; how we recognise the working of the Holy Spirit within us, and through that working know that we are God's children. But Wesley knows enough about the human heart to warn his listeners against the false presumptuousness by which a sinner often claims to be in the grace of God. 'Discover thyself, thou poor self-deceiver!—thou who art confident of being a child of God; thou who sayest, "I have the witness in myself," and therefore defiest all thy enemies. Thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting; even in the balance of the sanctuary. The word of the Lord hath tried thy soul, and proved thee to be reprobate silver. Thou art not lowly of heart; therefore thou hast not received the Spirit of Jesus unto this day. Thou art not gentle and meek; therefore thy joy is nothing worth: it is not joy in the Lord. Thou dost not keep his commandments: therefore thou lovest him, neither art thou partaker of the Holy Ghost. It is consequently as certain and as evident, as the oracles of God can make it, his Spirit doth not bear witness with thy spirit that thou art a child of God. O cry unto him that the scales may fall off thine eyes; that thou mayest know thyself as thou art known; that thou mayest receive the sentence of death in thyself, till thou hear the

voice that raises the dead, saying, "Be of good cheer: thy sins are forgiven; thy faith hath made thee whole".'

There is perhaps nothing of the doctrine in this sermon or in the sermon on the witness of one's own spirit that could not be preached to a Catholic audience.

The Council of Trent does, it is true, say that we cannot be certain with the certainty of faith that we have grace; but the faith of Trent is different from the faith of the Reformers. Trent uses faith in its Catholic sense as an intellectual free assent to the truths revealed by God through his Church. God has never revealed publicly that this or that individual is at this or that moment in a state of grace. That God could reveal it privately, the Council does not deny. Neither Wesley nor any others assert that my salvation has been explicitly revealed. They usually use faith in a sufficiently wide sense to make it apply at times to what we regard as hope or love. They do not say that we must believe by divine faith (in the Catholic sense) that we are saved, but that we must put such implicit trust and confidence in the power of Christ's merits to save us (however great our sins) that we can say we are certain that he has forgiven us and received us to himself. Such a certainty is an inner feeling or conviction in our hearts. Moreover, he does not say we are saved by the feeling of certainty that we have faith, but by the faith itself. So that if—exceptionally—we possess the faith without the certainty, we are none the less God's friends.

You may say, if this is all Wesley meant why was he so concerned to establish personal assurance or feeling of conversion? At first he was probably persuaded that it was a necessary condition of grace. But he later came to defend the doctrine principally for ethical reasons. His sermons on the *Witness of the Spirit* and on the *Witness of our own Spirit* are examples of this. He begins the first with a warning against subjectivism. 'How many vain men, not understanding what they spake, neither whereof they affirmed, have wrested this scripture to the great loss, if not the destruction, of their souls! How many have mistaken the voice of their own imagination for this witness of the Spirit of God, and thence idly presumed they were children of God, while they were doing the works of the devil.' His hearers must then beware of false security. They must none the less value the true security which God has given them and thank him for it.

To show how far Catholic spiritual writers are from rejecting such inward security it might be useful to refer to some of our greatest Catholic saints and their convictions of the importance to them of what Wesley would call the Inward Witness. Take, for instance, the great St Teresa of Avila. We read in the thirty-fourth chapter of her life how one night she was greatly troubled during her prayers, wondering whether she had incurred God's enmity. 'I could not be sure if I were in grace or no—not that I wanted to be sure, but I wanted to die, so as to find myself no longer in a life in which I was not sure if I were dead or alive. For there could be no worse death for me than to think I had offended God, and my distress about this caused me great depression: then I felt quite happy again. I soon learned that I might safely take comfort and be certain that I was in grace, since my love for God was so strong and His Majesty was working these favours in my soul, and, of his compassion, giving it feelings which he would never give to a soul that was in mortal sin.' This is merely one among many passages. Elsewhere St Teresa tells us she cannot understand how we can be as courageous as we need to be in the spiritual life unless we realise we are in grace. Frequently she consoles the sisters that they need not fear the feeling of security that God often gives them. She warns them, as Wesley did, that they must learn to distinguish between the false sense of security that comes from the evil one and the true one that comes from God. The marks distinguishing true from false are similar in St Teresa to those given by Wesley. For both the true interior voice is proved by the exterior marks of godliness in our lives. He that thinks to hear an interior voice, while his life is proud and ungodly, is deceiving himself. On the other hand St Teresa knows that many good people are not given the security which is so helpful when God is pleased to bestow it. 'For, though it cannot be devoid of grace, since despite all this torment it does not offend God, and would not do so for anything upon earth, yet this grace is buried so deeply that the soul seems not to feel the smallest spark of any love for God, nor has it ever done so. If it has done anything good, or His Majesty has granted it any favour, the whole thing seems to it like a dream or a fancy: all it knows for certain is that it has sinned.'

St Francis of Sales is another of our great Catholic saints who teaches that a feeling of peace and security should be a normal condition in those who are really growing in their union with

God. He warns souls of the danger of refusing to accept the consolations God thus sends us and in falling back into a state of despondency.

To appeal to a name even greater in theology, St Thomas of Aquinas himself allows a high degree of moral certainty of the good soul's state before God. He calls it conjectural certainty. In explaining Romans, viii, 16, he says that this voice of the Spirit 'bears witness, not by an external voice audible to men, as the Father witnessed to his Son (Mt. 3), but by the effect of filial love which he causes in us'. Notice that for St Thomas it is not just a question of the voice of our private conscience telling us we have committed no sin, but the voice of the Spirit causing in us a love of the Father and arousing a response to his inspirations. It is the voice involved in the state of friendship that begins when the Holy Spirit takes up his abode in our hearts. This indwelling is a privilege belonging to all Christians; and it means, as St Thomas explains it, that we are able to hold intercourse—to have a common life—with that Spirit. A common life is impossible without what one might call a normal moral certainty that one is in the good favour of one's friend. This is in harmony with the words of the Apostle John: 'When a man keeps his commandments, it means that he is dwelling in God, and God in him. This is our proof that he is really dwelling in us, through the gifts of his Spirit.' (1 Jn. 3, 24). This in turn reminds us of Our Lord's words: 'But you are to recognise him; he will be continually at your side, nay, he will be in you.' (Jn. 14, 17).

The Scotists would say that their school claims an even higher degree of certainty than the conjectural certainty postulated by St Thomas. But St Thomas allows the full force and implication of the Gospel words, 'By their fruits ye shall know them.' He merely denies either supernatural infallible certainty on the one hand or metaphysical certainty on the other. And he would, of course, say that the certainty becomes greater as the fruits are more seen.

Thomists have illustrated this doctrine of their Master by giving lists of signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Such lists would include *good works*, following Mt. vii just quoted; *love of one another*, following John 13, 35, 'In this shall all men know that you are my disciples...'; the *inward witness of a good conscience*, following 2 Cor. 1, 12; *love of enemies*, following Mt. 5, 'Love



your enemies. . . . that you may be sons of your Father in heaven'; *carrying the cross of Christ*, following 2 Cor. 4, 10; *hearing the word of God willingly*, following Jo. 8, 47 and 10, 27; *mercifulness*, following Mt. 25, 34 and 5, 7; *putting into practice the Sermon on the Mount*, etc.

Such lists could be compared with Wesley's list. 'It is not adversary of God and man that enables thee to love thy neighbour, or put on meekness, gentleness, patience, temperance, and the whole armour of God. He is not divided against himself, or a destroyer of sin, his own work. No; it is none but the Son of God who cometh "to destroy the works of the devil". And surely therefore as holiness is of God, and as sin is the work of the devil, so surely the witness thou hast in thyself is not of Satan, but of God.'

In the face of frequent misunderstanding, Wesley is always correcting those who accuse him of the Calvinistic assurance of salvation, which is tantamount to predestinationism. He calls his assurance an assurance of faith, i.e. that we believe. Some Catholic theologians think that the virtues of faith and hope imply some degree of consciousness that we have these virtues. Yet, like Wesley, they all admit that the false security of those who are blind through their very sinfulness and presumption is possible, and, like counterfeit of all kinds, can lead astray both its possessor and others.

A study of Howard Watkin Jones's book, *The Holy Spirit from Arminius to Wesley*, will show us that few English Protestant theologians have gone further than Wesley in the direction of those extreme views condemned by the Catholic. Usually they understand it as a doctrine for the spiritual life, for the consolation of believers, such as we have found in many of our own spiritual classics.

The question will have occurred to some, how can a Catholic consistently admit the true witness of the Spirit in the heart of one who, according to Catholic teaching, is outside the true Church? Wesley himself certainly thought that Catholics would be bound to deny the truth of the witness that he Wesley felt himself to experience in his own soul.

We can only answer that we have never denied the validity of baptism outside the visible Catholic Church, nor even the possibility of baptism of desire. Naturally we must logically insist that

all baptised non-Catholics and others to whom God has granted his grace should be with us in the shelter of the Catholic Church. This we believe to be Christ's express wish; and in that body they will find the appointed means of salvation. We could not surrender this truth without surrendering the very centre of our faith, the visible unity and indivisibility of Christ's Body. It is Christ's wish, we firmly believe, that they should be one with us. The fact that they are not is due to no fault of theirs until they realise their duty to join us. We even admit that their misunderstanding of our Church is not always due to no fault of ours. We cannot then say that followers of Christ outside what we believe to be the one true fold are in the Church in the sense in which they should be. Yet they belong to our Church, i.e. the one Church, by baptism or by grace, and their possession of the Spirit and ultimate salvation will be because of their being members of Christ's Body.

We are then fully ready and only too pleased to allow that it seems to us that men like Wesley were godly men, possessing Christ's grace and Spirit, though they did not live to realise that they should have united themselves visibly to the old historic Church founded from the beginning.

Naturally some readers will not feel able to agree with this. If they did, they could not sincerely remain separated. Until we can agree on this most vital matter, let us at least learn to understand each other. Many outside, whom we need in the Church, appear to us more worthy and sincere than we ourselves. This paper will not have been wasted, I venture to hope, if it does a little to make people on either side more sympathetic with the genuine spirituality and love of God found among the sincere spiritual writers of the other.