

light aspects of the infinite truth that previously had been veiled. Nor would it follow that their conclusions should always display a neat coherence. Incoherence, a certain logical impropriety, is essential in religious language. This is not to say that there are not some incoherencies which should be disallowed, but that is a different matter. 'What we have to learn', to quote Dr Ramsey for the last time, 'is that there is no single inward track to mystery, and no single outward road from the infinite.'¹ Only in this legitimate diversity can the treasure of Christian truth be discovered.

Secondly, while it is to be hoped that a theologian's faith is true, it is possible for it to be seriously defective. Clearly, the defect will not hinder a disclosure, but it will cause a false discernment. To use a literary example: as Othello's faith in, love for, Desdemona is distorted by jealousy, the evidence Iago brings him evokes a disclosure that creates a false discernment, and so he kills her. The possibility of error indicates the need for an authority in the Church whose right faith is assured. Whether such an authority is given and, if it is, how it should operate, are further questions which need not be treated here. But it may be as well to remark that the exercise of that authority in relation to theology is properly found in a seminary or theological college, and not in a university. That is where the distinction between the two lies, rather than in the consultation or neglect of faith in the academic discipline. This article merely insists that the virtue of detachment, so highly prized among other scholars, plays no part in bringing a theologian—university or otherwise—to perfection. The knowledge faith provides is vital to him, if he is to perform his task at all adequately.

Experiment in the Church

by Peter Hodgson

1. *Scientific Experiments*

Ever since the Second Vatican Council it is being increasingly realized that experiment and adaptation are continuing conditions of the life of the Church. But what precisely is an experiment in this context? Karl Rahner² has recently tried to answer this question and he concludes that since history as such is not really open to experimentation in the scientific sense, experiment must have a different meaning in the two contexts, and so the Church can learn nothing useful from a study of scientific experiments. In support of this view Rahner points out that an experiment in the Church is an event in the Church itself and so changes the Church, while no

¹Ramsey, *Models and Mystery*, p. 65.

²*The Month*, February 1971.

scientific experiment changes the physical world. Thus the meaning of experiment is quite different in the two cases.

In this he compares the subject of one activity with the object of another so the result is naturally misleading and unfruitful. The logical comparison shows a close similarity that deserves further study: just as a scientific experiment does not change nature, neither does an experiment in the Church change human nature; but just as a successful experiment in science is a stage in the growth of the understanding of the natural world by the scientific community, so a successful experiment in the Church is likewise an irrevocable stage in its onward spiritual pilgrimage.

In view of this close similarity it is not surprising that Rahner's account of the place of experiment in the life of the Church is much closer to scientific experience than he recognizes and thus a further exploration of the analogy may prove useful.

In the sciences an experiment presupposes several beliefs about the world and our knowledge of it. We must believe that the world has orderly characteristics that can only be discovered by examining it. To plan the experiment we need to have at least some rudimentary ideas about what to expect and we hope that useful conclusions can be obtained in a reasonable time.

An experiment is initiated by whoever is curious about some aspect of the world and has an idea about how to learn more. Usually such ideas come from young men who are immersed in the subject and have lived with it for years so that they are thoroughly familiar with all that has been learned from previous experiments.

In the early days of the development of a science there are no clear concepts and experiments are made more or less at random to see what will happen. These may be called creative experiments. We put things together and observe results or we alter the parameters such as the temperature and observe the effect on the rest of the system. In this way we gradually develop an intuitive understanding of the behaviour of the phenomenon. Our concepts become more precise and acquire operational definitions. The field of sensible experiment narrows and they are now carefully designed with a definite object in view such as to decide between two or more theories of the same phenomenon, and precise measurements may be necessary to do this. Usually there are clear criteria of success and failure, and the experiment can be definitely terminated after a certain time. This may be called the selective phase of experimentation.

It is often the case that an apparently selective experiment, designed for a definite, limited purpose, turns out to be truly creative. It is conceived within a particular set of concepts but the result is so unexpected that the conceptual scheme that gave it birth is permanently shattered. Thus an apparently routine attempt to measure the velocity of the earth through the ether led ultimately to the

theory of relativity. After such an event the subject can never be the same again. Even if the scientists are personally opposed to new concepts and find them hard to accept they have no option but to do so.

In the physical sciences the system of interest must be effectively isolated from the rest of the world. If everything depended significantly on everything else the world would be so complicated that we could not hope to make sense of it. In practice it is not always easy to ensure this isolation and it is a matter of insight, and often trial and error, to achieve it. In the biological sciences it is even more difficult to ensure isolation, and impossible if whole populations are being studied. Even in the physical sciences we may be interested in the whole universe, but this is not yet an object of experiment.

There is another reason for requiring that isolated sample for experimentation: We may need to test it to destruction and yet be sure that the results are still valid.

If an experiment is successful it gives new definite knowledge about some natural phenomenon. The results are published in a scientific journal and it is then open to anyone with the necessary resources and skill to repeat the experiment and to confirm the results. Any important scientific advance is confirmed by many independent experiments in this way. Finally an experiment usually opens up more questions than it settles so it is part of a continuous ongoing search for more detailed and comprehensive knowledge.

2. *Ecclesiastical Experiments*

When we come to apply the concept of a scientific experiment to the life of the Church we immediately notice several important differences. We are not dealing with an unchanging phenomenon like the boiling of water. We are dealing with a unique living organism and what we want to do is not just to understand it more deeply as it is now, but to see how best it may be changed to fulfil more perfectly its unchanging purpose.

If we are interested in, say, the properties of carbon we can take a sample and experiment on it in any way we please. We can break it, burn it, disintegrate it, so that at the end of the experiment no carbon is left. What we learn is, however, true for all the rest of the carbon in the world, providing we have used a true sample.

The Church is different. Any experiment must respect the integrity of the individual members. We cannot test even a single member to destruction, let alone the whole Church. If we study a whole Church the range of possible experiments is severely limited both practically and morally. If we study a small sample it will be representative in some respects but not in others and this will affect the extent to which it is realistic to apply any conclusions to the whole Church. What is found helpful by the devout of Taiwan might be useless for the peasants of Peru.

Any experiment in the Church changes the Church for good or ill, so it is vitally important to do the right thing. If a scientific experiment goes wrong we can just throw it all away and start again; nothing is lost except time and materials. This is not so with a unique organism like the Church and there is a correspondingly great responsibility to ensure that the probable consequences of an experiment are carefully studied.

A further complication is that the experimenters are themselves usually members of the Church, so that they are involved in a way that the scientist is not. They are not detached observers outside the Church coolly taking its pulse; they are living within it and affected themselves by all that is done to it.

Experiments in the Church are not easy to evaluate. The ultimate purpose, the growth of men in Christ, is not wholly observable, although some measurable criteria can be derived in terms, for example, of charitable works, church attendance and so on. Scientific experiments usually come to a definite end in a relatively short time, but this is not so with the Church. The spirit of God moves in hidden ways. How long should we wait before deciding that an experiment is a failure?

With this in mind it is perhaps instructive to consider several aspects of experimentation in the life of the Church.

An important preliminary question is whether experimentation is a permanent condition of the life of the Church or whether we can hope that after a short period of experimentation we can find the ideal solutions and henceforward live in an unchanging way once again.

The model of scientific experimentation suggests the former alternative. Every experiment, even though it may settle one or two questions, usually opens up many more. From our higher vantage point we can see further than before and new possibilities continually open up before us.

There is another reason for expecting experiment to be an enduring feature of the life of the Church: the world itself is continually changing and even the rate of change continually increases. This ensures that the Church must also continually change if it is to continue to bring it to Christ.

Next one might enquire what particular aspects of the Church's life are proper subjects of experimentation. Here we can only reply everything that is not absolutely unchanging, such as the essential truths of faith. Thus not only the externals of the Church, the architecture, the mode of dress, the ceremonial forms, the organizational structure, but also the very conceptual basis of our theologies is a proper subject of experimentation.

Here it is necessary to remark that experiments in the Church as in science are of an organic rather than a mechanical nature. One just cannot decide one day that we will devise and try out a new

conceptual basis of quantum mechanics or of the theory of transubstantiation. This only comes slowly, gradually, with much labour. It is, in the words of Newman, a growth not a structure. But although such developments cannot be commanded to order, it is essential that we remain open to the possibility of such developments occurring and foster them in every way we can.

It is important to realize that, as in science, the distinction between the permanent and the changeable elements in the Church cannot be made with complete precision at any one time. Such a distinction would have to be made using the current conceptual system, and it is precisely this that is subject to change. Indeed it is only in and through the historical development, the product of continual experimentation, that the essential elements in the Church gradually become clearer.

The responsibility for initiating experiments is widely diffused through the Church. Traditionally it is often assumed that all new developments should be expressly approved if not initiated by authority, but the experience of scientific experiment suggests that it is the man on the spot immersed in the thick of the problem who is mostly likely to come up with a novel suggestion. The initiative must come from him and as far as possible he must be free to try out his ideas on his own responsibility. Obvious qualifications and limitations of this freedom suggest themselves in science as well as in the Church, but in both it is certain that new growth will be stifled at birth if it is oppressed by more than the very minimum of formal investigation and approval. It is not practicable for all new ideas to be vetted by authority beforehand. It must be left to the responsible conscience of the individual before God to make his decision and to put his ideas into practice. Experience will show which grains will grow and which will not and it is then an important function of authority to watch over fruitful developments, to encourage, to co-ordinate and in general to act as a clearing house for new ideas and a centre for their evaluation.

The proper field for experiment depends on the status of the individual. It is his own direct sphere of influence or responsibility. The father and mother in the family, the priest in his parish, the leader of any human group, the bishop in his diocese all have a well-marked area in which they can, and indeed must, undertake prudent experimentation. This is indeed the familiar principle of subsidiarity; that no one in authority undertakes any activity that could be delegated responsibly to someone else and conversely that we tackle our own problems ourselves and do not expect them to be solved for us by those in authority.

Just as in science, an ecclesial experiment is conceived in the matrix of contemporary ideas, but may well end by forcing their reformulation. It is not simply a matter of finding which among several clearly envisaged alternatives is the best; the result may

change the very categories in which the whole aspect of the Church's life is conceived. Whether we like it or not there is no going back. This may be disturbing and unnerving but it is an essential feature of the Church today.

The scientist is eager to push on into the unknown and readily modifies or discards his familiar concepts in his pursuit of a deeper and more comprehensive truth. He knows that the constant appeal to experiment, the careful cross-checking and continual discussion of many minds ensures the essentially progressive nature of his work. Likewise the Church in its 'pilgrimage into the eternal unknowability of God' (Rahner) is not afraid of experimentation and change, knowing that our continual growth is inspired and safeguarded by the promise of Christ.

That one must speak lightly . . .¹ A Study of Stevie Smith by Michael Tatham

It is likely enough that if some Catholic controversialist of the early seventeenth century had been discussing the merits of various contemporary poets, he would have extolled Crashaw and Southwell, deplored Donne, and vacillated in his opinion of Alabaster according to whether the gentleman was imprisoned in England for the Faith or had returned to the Anglican Church and a wife after differences with the Inquisition. Blame or approval would have been a matter of 'party' loyalty; not of poetry. The position was honourable enough in time of adversity but one we should attempt to outgrow. Such a simplistic attitude to religious belief is almost certainly an important factor in accounting for the intellectual and emotional poverty of religious art. One has heard the remark that dismisses Sutherland because he has lapsed,² as if integrity as an artist depended on Easter Communion. It is tempting to inquire how many of the great figures of the Renaissance were certifiably in a state of grace.

Thus it comes about that in March 1971 we lost one of the very few religious poets of our time and it is doubtful whether anyone noticed. She herself would not have been surprised:

I cannot imagine anything nicer
Than to be struck by lightning and killed suddenly
crossing a field
As if somebody cared.³

¹The title: 'That one must speak lightly . . .' comes from *A Soldier Dear to Us*.

²A priest's conversation overheard at Northampton, July 1962.

³All poems and quotations are from *Selected Poems*, Longmans; or *Scorpion*, Longmans; unless otherwise indicated.