

FAITH: THE HUMAN DIMENSION

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*Shatov maintains that the only true way to start a revolution in Russia is to start with atheism. It may be true. One grey-haired fool of a captain sat there a long time without uttering a word. Then he suddenly stood up in the middle of the room and, you know, said aloud as if speaking to himself, 'If there is no God, then what sort of captain am I after that?'*¹

THIS ARTICLE is about the relationship between faith and human existence. What is the connection between belief in God and the experiences of life? Must one have faith 'in life' in order to have authentic faith in God, or is genuine religious faith the polar opposite of worldly optimism? When is faith fully human, and yet more than merely human? What is 'the human dimension' of faith?

The answer to these questions is, like life itself, paradoxical. In the following pages I will attempt to show that faith in God both depends upon an experience of the goodness of life, and makes it possible; that the very 'spontaneous trust' in the world and in people which psychology calls the root of religious faith, requires that faith in order to fulfil itself. A man cannot truly love God without loving and believing in life, for it is through life – fragile and mysterious as it is – that the word 'God' takes on its human meaning. At the same time, the 'Yes' of optimistic commitment to life needs the 'Yes' of christian faith, of self-surrender to a personal God. Faith in life must become more than itself in order to be itself: this is the dialectic and the paradox of faith.

Faith and Meaning

There is an intimate connection between the sense that one's life has meaning, that existence is worthwhile, and belief in God. 'If

¹ Dostoyevsky, Fyodor: *The Devils (The Possessed)*, translated by David Magarshack (London, 1953), p 232.

there is no God, then what sort of captain am I after that?'² For all its apparent confusion, this remark expresses a profound intuition. The meaningfulness of any particular role in life obviously hinges on the wider meaningfulness of life itself. The captain senses that his identity as a captain, and consequently his value and importance, is somehow bound up with the fact that God exists. His question follows a genuine existential logic: if there is no 'big M' Meaning, there can be no 'little m' meanings either.

The same intuition occurs in life as well as literature. Some years ago I was talking to a brilliant young professor, who had abandoned his religious faith during his student days only to return to the Church in adult life. I asked him what had brought him back. 'I believe in christianity because I'm basically optimistic', he said simply. The faith he threw off as a young man because he found it restrictive and oppressive, seemed to him as an adult the only plausible guarantee that life was good and made ultimate sense. The seeming illogic of his reply conceals great human and psychological wisdom. The late Harvard psychologist, Gordon Allport, described the religious attitude as characterized by a bias towards optimism and intelligibility.³ The urge to affirm life and being seems to find its natural culmination in religious faith and the affirmation of God.

This intimate connection between belief in God and the sense that life is meaningful and worthwhile, is mysterious. Abstractly speaking, whether God exists or not, and whether existence seems to me good and acceptable, would seem to be two different questions. God, it can be argued, is what he is regardless of what happens to me in my life. My feelings, my sense of success or failure, meaningfulness or absurdity, have no bearing on the objective fact; they are irrelevant. The existence and goodness of God are matters to be decided by intellect alone. In this perspective, a faith once established can never be shaken – so it appears – because nothing that happens can ever give rise to a doubt.

For all its apparent logic, this view makes faith invulnerable at the cost of making it inhuman. It reduces the existential component of faith to the status of a presupposition or external condition. Life's experiences, in other words, are not really a *dimension* of faith – not

² *Ibid.* (Hence Shatov argues that the most direct way to subvert an existing social order is to attack it at its base: by getting rid of God, one will also have swept away the absoluteness with which that society seeks to invest itself; its established rôles will at once become profoundly questionable.)

³ Allport, Gordon W.: *The Individual and His Religion* (New York, 1960), pp 20–23.

something which enters into its substance and modifies it throughout. In reality, the way life is experienced decisively affects both the existence and the nature of one's religious faith. Rahner observes that a protected childhood, with the early experience of security and affection, is of great importance in enabling a person to have 'that ultimate trust in reality, that attachment to God as our Father, which is the basis of religion'.⁴ Granted, later life experiences may sometimes compensate in part for what was lacking in a deprived childhood; granted too, insecurity may in certain cases drive a man to find in God an ultimate protective reality. But in general, as Rahner says, those who experience a lonely and battered childhood will be strongly tempted to see it as proof of their abandonment to an absurd world without God. To believe in God as the fulfilment of one's life, without some experience of human and earthly fulfilment, would seem to be a psychological impossibility.

Recent sociological studies confirm that the children of broken marriages, and those who grew up in unhappy or excessively rigid home environments, are more likely to abandon their faith as adults than others, who were raised in an acceptant atmosphere of parental affection.⁵ Once again, faith in God and the experience of a coherent and satisfying life are closely linked. Security and the love of parents are a major part of what may be called the sacrament of existence. They *make present* the reality and love of God. Without being simply identical with that reality, they mediate it – giving it concreteness, depth, and validity in the order of experience. As the primary 'meanings' of existence, human love and trustworthiness render God actual and his presence 'tangible' in daily life.

It seems, then, that the meanings of 'God' and of 'existence' are found together; that God is the ultimate Meaning of meaning. If so, it is easy to see why certain life-shattering experiences can be the occasion of a real crisis of faith. The death of a dearly loved person, some major frustration or great suffering may put into anguished question a faith whose reality has hitherto been taken for granted. The goodness, even the existence, of a personal God begins to seem questionable (and perhaps barely credible) when the human reality which helped make that goodness real has disappeared. Again, in

⁴ Rahner, Karl: 'A Theology of Childhood', *Theology Digest* vol 13, no 2 (spring 1965), p 21. Translated from 'Gedanken zu einer Theologie der Kindheit', *Geist und Leben*, vol 36 (1963), pp 104–114.

⁵ Cf Kotre, John N.: 'The Church as Inkblot', *America* vol 124, no 8 (Feb. 27, 1971), pp 196–200.

the abstract, there may seem to be no clear, logical reason why this should be so. Existentially, however, the goodness of God 'in himself' and the goodness of God 'to me' are not separable concepts. The first epistle of John asks how a man can love the God he does not see, if he does not love his brother whom he sees.⁶ In an analogous way, one may ask: If my life is not something I can love, how can I love the God who gave it to me? Would his existence and alleged 'goodness' have any meaning for me, if it were not first of all declared to me by my own experience of life, by *my* existence? This is only another way of saying that I must be able to find meaning in my life – to believe that it is worthwhile, has a point – in order to believe fully and humanly in God.

Faith: Coming and Overcoming

Faith, then, originates in an awareness that life is good; it presupposes a basic trust in existence, a tendency to rely on life and life-processes. All very well: but what happens when life is *not* perceived as good: when, in place of a coherent and meaningful existence, man finds himself confronting the absurd? At such moments, faith-because-of must become faith-in-spite-of, if it is to survive at all. The man who believed in God *because* he experienced life as meaningful, is then obliged to believe *in order that* it may be made meaningful: so that its pain and empty absurdity may be filled by the still greater love and meaningfulness of God.

How can faith give meaning to life? Not, obviously, in the sense of 'giving all the answers'. In the crisis-situations just referred to – those moments of bereavement and personal disaster which enter every human life – reasoned explanations are no help at all. To make life meaningful is not to explain everything – which (supposing it were possible) would satisfy only the mind – but to render existence acceptable; to make it something which, however agonizing, a human being *can* accept. To find meaning, in this sense, is to surrender to mystery. It is to yield oneself trustingly to the God mysteriously present in the limitations and emptiness of human life. Such self-surrender is the very essence of faith. It is possible only on the assumption that what a man surrenders to is not an absurd negation, but a being whose name is love: 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit'.⁷

What is faith? According to scripture, faith implies an obedient

⁶ 1 Jn 4, 20.

⁷ Lk 23, 46.

listening to the word of God. But the 'word' which first of all must be heard and accepted is one's own life. The 'Yes' of faith is not just a mental assent, but an acceptance which involves the whole person – mind, will, and feelings. This is why to have faith it is not enough to nod in agreement to a proposition. Though expressed in human words, the message of God is no mere abstract statement. God's word is concrete, real, living. Ultimately, it is God himself, coming to me in the lonely mystery of my own existence.

If God's primary word spoken to every man is his own life, then faith involves saying 'Yes' to God *through* the existence he has given one, the person he has called one to be. It implies a loving acceptance of the others who are part of that existence. How difficult this is, how rarely and incompletely we achieve it, is a matter of daily experience. It may be asked whether, apart from the faith-given assurance of God's love, human existence is really and finally acceptable. Adult life, with its many agonies and disillusionments, poses a radical question about the ultimate worthwhileness of existence. To be able perseveringly and realistically to assent to life seems to require more than naive optimism. For to accept life is always, in large measure, to accept the unacceptable. The 'Yes!' of joyous assent to life only makes sense if life is somehow more than life: if God himself is really present in the 'dark spaces' of human existence.

This is the reason that, at certain moments, optimistic faith 'in life' has to transcend itself. The faith which 'comes from' life must become the faith which 'overcomes the world', if life itself is to be made humanly acceptable. The assent to God makes possible the redemption of existence.

Thus it appears that the relationship between faith and existence has, so to speak, two directions. The dialectic of faith contains both an ascending and a descending movement. The first of these begins from an experience of life's goodness, and uses this experience to motivate and inspire its assent to God. In this perspective, faith is seen primarily as a kind of overflow of a humanly satisfying life. To find God in this way is to say, in effect, 'I am; therefore I believe'. The other way begins from God and moves to existence. Faith is regarded rather as something which fills up all that is lacking in life: God is the completion of what, left to itself, is incomplete. A man believes in God *in order that* he may believe in life. This type of faith says: 'I believe, therefore I am'.

These two movements – from existence to God, and from God to

existence – are reciprocal and necessary moments in the growth of faith. Both are indispensable to a faith that is at once vital and realistic. For the truth, however paradoxical, is that faith in God is both the result and the cause of a humanly meaningful existence: the overflowing of what is experienced as full, and the filling up of what is felt to be empty. Optimistic faith in life is the body of which religious faith is the soul. Without a vital and deeply experienced sense of the value of being, faith can easily degenerate into a kind of neurosis. When the acceptance of God is used to justify a withdrawal from life, religion becomes what its sceptical critics have often accused it of being: ‘the self-consolation of life’s losers’. In reality, it only appears to accept God, since it rejects the conditions of existence. Such life-denying faith has nothing in common with the religion intended by Jesus when he said: ‘I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full’.⁸

At the same time, faith in life needs faith in God in order to sustain itself. For to accept existence is always to accept – whether consciously or unconsciously – the God who alone has the power to make existence really acceptable. Such ‘anonymous’ surrender to God in the courageous acceptance of existence finds its full realization and ultimate support in explicit, God-directed faith. For it is the ‘Yes’ spoken to God which makes possible (and humanly meaningful) the assent to life in the face of death.

The Personal Face of Reality

Modern man, it has been said, lives in a world of ‘radical immanence’: a closed world of interlocking forces. The ‘numinous’ world of primitive man, inhabited by mysterious, quasi-personal powers, has given way to a universe of ‘secular hurryings through space’, empty of intention and without personal bearing. In such a world man finds himself to be a stranger. A person begotten by non-personal forces, he feels isolated and cut off from that which produced him, the by-product of an evolutionary process without ultimate sense or direction. Human community can help to reduce his sense of utter isolation, but it can never overcome it entirely. He can speak to others, but not (except by way of poetic personification) to nature or to reality itself; his prayer can only be a monologue uttered to ease the pain of his essential loneliness. In such a world, man the person is inescapably absurd.

⁸ Jn 10, 10.

To believe, on the contrary, is to know that being is ultimately personal: not an opaque 'It' confronting the trapped and lonely I, but a Thou who can both listen and respond. The man of faith knows that the incomprehensible reality which surrounds him has, in Maritain's words, 'a face, a voice, and has set me before it, that I may speak to him and he to me'.⁹ In place of the impersonal universe where (as Auden put it) 'the occupation of space is the real and final fact', the believer can return continually to the stable at Bethlehem, to the miraculous moment when 'everything became a you and nothing was an It'.¹⁰ This does not mean a reversion to the magical, pre-scientific notion of natural forces as the activities of gods or demons. It means rather an awareness of the depth dimension of things, of reality's 'personal face'.

Believing is seeing. The man of faith sees a meaning, a pattern – or better yet, a personal intention – in the events of his human life, where those without faith see only chance and the impersonal accidents of nature. This faith-given sense of reality's personal character is central to the Hebrew religious tradition. In the sermon on the mount, Jesus gives this sense its most memorable expression when he urges his listeners to consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. He interprets the fact that the ravens are fed and the flowers magnificently robed, all without worry and anxious toil as a sign of the Father's personal care. 'Will he not much more care for you, men of little faith?'¹¹ The same intuition of a personal intention behind apparently 'natural' phenomena inspires his reference to the Father 'making the sun rise on the bad as well as the good, causing the rain to fall on just and unjust men alike'.¹² The sun's rising and the fall of rain are not, for Jesus, natural facts without further significance. They are a personal gift from the Father of all, and a direct expression of his love. The just are precisely those whose faith enables them to recognize the giver and be grateful, while the unjust take the gifts for granted. It is faith which turns everyday events into signs, 'words' which reveal the hidden meaning of creation.

Faith, then, is the power to detect the personal at work in the impersonal. It is the ability – not a natural 'knack' but itself a gift from above – to recognize the things of life as sacramental signs, symbols declaring the Father's personal love. 'Man does not live by bread

⁹ Quoted by Daniélou, Jean: *God and the Ways of Knowing* (New York, 1957), p 48.

¹⁰ Auden, W. H.: 'For the Time Being: a Christmas Oratorio', *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York, 1945), pp 409, 466.

¹¹ Mt 6, 30.

¹² Mt 5, 45.

alone, but by every word which comes forth from the mouth of God', said Jesus.¹³ Faith is the gift which turns earthly bread – all that of itself nourishes man, yet leaves his deepest hunger still unsatisfied – into a 'word of God', a vessel of divine meaning and power. Faith like this goes far beyond instinctive trust in reality, or a vague reverence for 'life' and 'life forces'. For it recognizes a personal love revealed and embodied in human existence, which still remains distinct from that existence. Such a faith-illuminated recognition carries with it the obligation (and the power) to continue to believe in and rely on that love, even when the realities which originally invited our trust have passed away.

An example may help to clarify this. A few years ago, a friend of mine lost his young wife, whom he had loved deeply. Her death left him with three small children. Visiting him in his home some six months later, I found him still completely absorbed in memories of her. During dinner, he talked of her continually. But though he had been crushed by her death, his deep religious faith had not given way. After supper, I heard him leading his children through their night prayers before putting them to bed. After a series of prayers for various relatives and friends, he concluded with these simple words: 'We love you, God, and we know that you love us – no matter what'.

'No matter what': uttered unselfconsciously and without melodrama, these words seemed almost to echo the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane. They expressed – with a naked simplicity of faith that was at once heartrending and consoling – the same unconditional acceptance of the Father's will found in Jesus' own self-surrender. If there is a point at which faith can truly be said to go beyond the 'merely natural', surely it is here. The courage to continue to believe in life as a manifestation of God's personal love at such a moment, transcends the human. At the same time, it is fully human, for it takes its stand on an indubitable assurance arising from experience: 'we *know* that you love us'.

Such knowledge is mysterious: born of faith, it gives birth to faith. My friend's certainty that God loved him undoubtedly came to him partly through the love of his wife. Though death separated him from the experience of that love, it did not cause him to doubt the personal love and benevolence of the Father, the 'giver of every good gift'. Here the dialectic of faith appears in almost pure form: the

¹³ Mt 4, 4; Deut 8, 3.

dialectic between a faith and love which owes its origin to the world, to created goodness, and a faith which ultimately overcomes the world.

The experience which declares confidently 'we know that you love us' is an experience formed and penetrated by faith – faith in the quite ordinary sense of belief in the words and person of Jesus. For, as Romano Guardini said, 'that God loves us, we know, ultimately, only through Christ'.¹⁴ Without such faith, human existence is largely a matter of unfulfilled promises and disappointed hopes. This is why St Paul says of Christ: 'In him the promises of God become certain'. The promises of God are wider in scope than the prophecies of the Old Testament. They are the promises of life, the promises everywhere implicit in reality as we know it. Such promises life continually frustrates and disappoints; hence creation, condemned to incompleteness, 'groans in travail . . . waiting for the sons of God to be revealed'.¹⁵

Christ's coming proclaims the arrival of the last days, the dawning of final fulfilment. The prologue to St John's gospel declares that 'to all who believe in him, he gave the power to become the sons of God'.¹⁶ Anyone who has faith in the words of Jesus, lays hold of the knowledge that he is loved by God. That Being is personal, that love is the final meaning of existence, is the message Jesus brings to all who have the courage to accept it. To say 'Yes!' to this is not to take a humanly unsupported 'leap of faith'. It is to act out of a knowledge that being and life already give, but which apart from Jesus and his word appear unconfirmed, even denied, by the deathly limitations of life. Jesus summons man to a hope beyond optimism and an assurance beyond all that can be demonstrated. Its warrant is simply that it corresponds to man's deepest desire: that longing for fulfilment which, to the man of faith, signifies the very presence of God in the mystery of human existence. This hidden presence accounts for the paradoxes which have been the theme of this article: the mysterious duality-in-unity of the human and the divine dimensions of faith.

¹⁴ Guardini, Romano: *The Lord*, translated by Elinor Castendyk Briefs (Chicago, 1954), p 400.

¹⁵ Rom 8, 22; 19.

¹⁶ Jn 1, 12.