

# EXPERIENCE AND ENCOUNTER

By J. M. LEBLOND

CONTEMPORARY writing on faith makes abundant use of such notions as 'commitment' and 'adventure'. There is much to be said for this. Yet it is hard to see how 'pure' commitment, which has no reason, no object, outside itself, can be a *fully* human attitude; and adventure, if it is to justify itself, calls for something more than the qualities of sincerity and determination. The adventure, the commitment, of christian faith, with the risks it carries, is not entered upon blindly; it is grounded upon truth. Its power lies ultimately in experience – free but not at all arbitrary: experience which is recognized in encounter.

The aim of the following pages will be to help the contemporary christian not so much to enter upon experience as to recognize or to uncover it, for it is already 'there', in a hidden fashion. Besides, it is not a 'once-for-all' thing; it demands constant rediscovery.

## *The experience of God*

To write about this is never easy; and the task becomes particularly delicate when one is conscious that one may be read by theologians. A large number of theologians belong to one of two camps. The first and more superficial group consists of those whose theory of the faith is too tidy and too convenient. Their tendency is to lump the certitude of faith together with historical certitude, which stems from the critical and scientific appraisal of evidence. But faith is not a science, not even the science of history (which is not to say that historical science has no contribution to make to faith). Faith makes its appearance as an experience of God; it is not obtained by proxy, the proxy of the researcher. Belief in God has God for its cause; it exists 'because you are truth itself', not because of the human logic which organizes our ideas. Equally the 'science' of theology, which has its place within the faith, is in no way the simple equivalent of faith. This would be to substitute a handful of coppers for gold coin. The second and larger group of theologians, while on their guard against the dangers of the analogy with

read more at [www.theway.org.uk](http://www.theway.org.uk)

historical certitude, is characterized by a marked suspicion towards such notions as the *sensus Christi*,<sup>1</sup> which, they think, are redolent of confusion and sentimentality.

It is still more delicate to talk about the experience of God to philosophers, in particular to the philosopher of today. If he possesses any acquaintance with psychology, he will be aware of the complex processes of the mind's chemistry which go to produce what we call experience. He will be at least dimly aware of the part played in experience by needs, drives, and the deterministic elements, both external and internal. Again, those who are not professional philosophers have only to reflect on their everyday experience to know how difficult it is to say exactly what one has seen.

Finally, to appeal to the experience of faith might, for many people, have a rather discouraging effect. While such an approach would unquestionably ring true for the genuine mystic, most of us are only too well aware that such holiness is not ours. Nor have we any wish to become pseudo-mystics, relying upon doubtful visions, measuring our faith in terms of sensible fervour, or the sort of emotion that can be aroused by so trivial a stimulus as the sound of church bells.

All this said, no genuine discussion of faith can leave out of account the element of experience. The reason why becomes obvious when we think of the original communication of faith, two thousand years ago, and of its expansion and growth. The apostles were certainly not professors of systematic theology. What they proclaimed was their encounter with Christ and the message they had received from him. Even then they made no attempt at scientific historical writing. What they did was to recount their experience, which was not, strictly speaking, 'historical'. 'That life was made visible, we saw it and we are giving our testimony.'<sup>2</sup> And this was a witness for which they gave their life's blood.<sup>3</sup>

Through the word of these original witnesses, the first christians received a communication of the experience of Christ, and themselves entered into relationship with him. They could certainly have made their own the riposte of the inhabitants of Sichar to the samaritan woman: 'it is not because of your words that we believe; but we have heard him ourselves'.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf 1 Cor 2, 16.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Jn 1, 2.

<sup>3</sup> So much so that their action has left its mark on our language. From its first meaning of 'witness', the word *martyr* has come to designate those who give their lives.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 5, 42.

Not only in the beginning, but today and in all times, this is the way the believer arrives at a 'personal religion', at a faith which is genuine commitment, whether this personal religion is the assimilation of a tradition received from childhood or whether it has entailed the renunciation of other convictions.

The process of personalization, by which a traditional inheritance becomes a personal experience, is analogous to Teresa of Avila's description of the process of the 'supernatural locutions' of genuine mystical experience. It is not a question of hearing words which have never been spoken, but of the personal appropriation, in terms of inward experience, of words heard and read so many times over. 'It is I; fear not': one day such a word touches *me* and involves *me*, because it is *spoken to me*.

But although the element of experience is decisive, it contains several perpetually recurring ambiguities, which need to be identified. It will be helpful, even at the risk of over-philosophizing, to attempt to clarify the very notion of experience. What does the word 'experience' mean?

### *The experience of others*

Human experience falls into two main categories. First – and this is the category which the word 'experience' spontaneously calls to mind – there is the experience of things; of 'objects' and of 'objective' facts. That sugar melts in water and that a lump of lead held in the hand is heavy, are facts of experience. It is an elementary, crude sort of experience; and often we have to resort to the pre-arranged conditions of the laboratory, to the mediation of instruments, microscopes, telescopes, balances, electrical or chemical analysis, in order to give precision to the data of this experience.

Over against this, and at least equally important in our lives, there is the experience of others; the experience of what is present to us not only as 'object' but as 'subject'; that is to say, as a being which possesses an 'interior', which is present to us as capable of receiving impressions, as a source of decision. We apprehend this being as free, capable to some extent of original and unpredictable reactions. In particular, we recognize that such a being is capable of genuine giving; and giving is a function of freedom.

We can, and must, if we are concerned with truth in its entirety, consider other people as 'objects', perceived from without, open to analysis in terms of drives, repressions, and other determining factors. But perception of this sort does not constitute experience of

'another', properly so called. This experience may be characterized by two important words: 'encounter' and 'presence'. Both these words must be taken seriously.

Certainly, we can be in relationship with another and even recognize him as 'subject', simply by seeing him or speaking to him, without the element of 'encounter'. It must be recognized that in human relationships speech has even a function of defence and isolation, and may serve as protection against genuine encounter. In polite conversation about nothing, one's intention is to avoid self-revelation; but one does not discover the other person either. Genuine encounter means lowering defences on both sides, and the consequent discovery of an identity and a freedom which are different from my own. Polite conversations are quickly forgotten: they are not worth remembering. A genuine encounter is not something to be forgotten.

The other term which needs to be clarified is *presence*. Presence in the full sense (and it is always in its full sense that a word is significant) is not established by the mere fact of two people being close to one another, 'eyeball to eyeball'. Nor is that curiosity which is eager to break into the other's secrets enough to achieve this privileged type of presence. On the other hand, attention given to a difficult child with the real desire of furthering its development; the presence of a nurse to an invalid; the presence (which is the fullest of all) between people in love: in all these cases, presence is the gift of self even before it is self-revelation or discovery. We realize that presence is possible only where the commitment is reciprocal. 'To the one who loves me I shall reveal myself':<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard was not mistaken when he applied this text of scripture to all genuine presence.

Genuine experience of another person could be called 'inter-subjective'. Unlike purely objective experience, it cannot be exposed to laboratory experimentation and stay alive. Yet it is real and human in the strong sense in which those words apply to the experience of love (except, of course, the 'love' which is basically a state of the hormones). It requires no proofs; it is established by 'signs' which convey far more than they contain. Certainly it admits of verification, the effort to convince and reassure. Analysis and rational enquiry, as ways of looking at people, are not quite the same thing as love and the penetration that belongs to presence.

---

<sup>5</sup> Jn 14, 21.

*Encounter with God and the presence of God*

It is on the lines of this inter-subjective experience that we must try to think about the experience of God. Where there is indifference or lack of commitment, such experience is impossible. It is more likely to be lurking in the troubled invocation of the poet: 'If heaven is empty, we give offence to none, And if a God exists, may he have pity on us',<sup>6</sup> or that profound prayer of anguish and darkness, contradictory only in appearance: 'may You exist'.

It would seem that calling on God, an element as fundamental as God's calling to man, occurs quite spontaneously in certain moments of complete joy. An unbelieving novelist wrote in a moment of unexpected success, 'would that I had a God to thank'. This need to give thanks does not amount to a decisive 'proof', but it can provide the occasion for a genuine encounter. The first christians, finding themselves delivered from the closed and restricted world of pagan thought, had every reason to give pride of place to the 'prayer of thanksgiving'.

Yet the encounter with God is not always, or even in most cases, accompanied by tender feelings of gratitude. Often indeed we feel the need to protest, if not for ourselves, then at least for others. This might look at first sight like the prayer of the disaffected – of those who find that the world is not good. Yet the protest is made to a person; and for all its near-blasphemous appearances, it has a profoundly religious quality. It provides the setting for man's confrontation, not indeed with a punitive God, but at least with a God who is other than easy-going, merely benevolent, undemanding. Such of course was the prayer of Job; and though his right-minded friends found it unseemly, yet from the depths of the cloud and the storm God showed that Job was right. Even revolt or the temptation to revolt, since they make sense only when directed against another, may provide the occasion for encounter.

Again, we are personally involved by the truth when it confronts us in the form of something to be done, a decision to be made, particularly one which goes against the grain. At such moments truth creates conflict; no longer distant and abstract, it threatens to overwhelm us. This sense of being threatened by the truth is not far removed from presence; even if, as in Jacob's struggle with his unknown adversary, the other waits until the end to reveal his name.

<sup>6</sup> *Si les cieux sont déserts, nous n'offensons personne, Et s'il existe un Dieu, qu'il nous prenne en pitié.* Musset.

Or take the experience of dissatisfaction with self, the obscure awareness that self-justification is ultimately as futile and dangerous as self-accusation. This can be the occasion of an encounter with the One who has power to forgive. Finally, there is the fundamental dissatisfaction in the heart of man, endlessly desirous to be other than what he is, constantly disillusioned with the here and now. This is often felt as the absence and lack of Someone, of that feeling that God is somehow present even in his absence: 'You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in You'.

It should be noted that this encounter with God, personal as it is, is also rooted in the encounter with others. This is not only because others bear witness to the encounter with God in their own lives (and Bergson insists on the importance for religion of the witness of the mystics) but also because God is present in all absolute dedication and in all love.

To some, this way of talking might seem dangerously close to a personalist interpretation of the world, rather like the unconscious animism of the young child who hits out at the 'naughty chair' which has got in his way. Those for whom encounter is alien to their experience will inevitably incline to such a view. But the personalist approach to the world admits of other interpretations. It may be seen as a starting-point, even though a slightly naive one. It may even be a point of arrival, the culmination of a development which may well have been difficult and painful.

It must be understood of course that such encounter, even when it is forced upon us, does not dissipate the element of obscurity. The Unknown is always revealed to us as it was to Jacob, in the darkness. For God, though our approach to him is on the lines of human encounter, nevertheless transcends what we understand as a 'thou'. Indeed, even in the order of human relationships, in the love directed to a single privileged 'thou', it is impossible to bring the personal encounter as such into the clear light of objectivity. Where the encounter with God is concerned, the final word is that of those mystics of darkness and the abyss. 'The most goodly knowing of God is that which is known by unknowing'.<sup>7</sup> A science of God would reduce him to the level of a mere object of human reason. Such knowledge inevitably founders; but its very failure is testimony to the divine presence.

---

<sup>7</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius: *De divinis nominibus* ch. VII; cf the *Cloud of Unknowing*, ch 70.

*The experience of Christ*

It is not only impossible to 'objectify' the presence of God; it cannot, in the human sense, be 'subjectified' either: 'we do not know as we are known'.

Nevertheless – and this is the content as well as the motive of faith in the properly christian sense – God has spoken to us in his Word, and he whom man cannot look upon has shown himself to us in Christ. 'No one has ever seen God, but the only Son has made him known'. 'Philip, who sees me sees the Father'.

No one can doubt the importance in our western world, and indeed beyond it, of the event of Christ's coming. Modern atheism itself bears the impress of that event, which is why it can only be described as 'post-christian'. But it is one thing to recognize the importance of Christ in the evolution of humanity and another to 'encounter' him. What do we mean, then, by 'encounter with Christ'? And in what realm of experience may we hope to find it?

It is under the inspiration of the Spirit of Christ that the attention and interest of christians today has been brought to bear on the very *meaning* of the incarnation, and not only the marvel of it. Mere admiration before the spectacle of human nature divinized in the individual humanity of the child and of the man Jesus falls short of the full meaning of the word 'divinization', with its implications of a dynamic unfolding through history. To be sure, 'He came down from heaven'; but we must add to this, as does the *Credo*, that he came 'for us men'. Christians in our own day, with little or no acquaintance with the Fathers of the Church, have nevertheless discovered afresh the whole Christ, who moves forward through time towards his complete stature, and in whom the head is not separated from its members.

It is not enough to say that this concerns us; it concerns Christ himself. The plan of salvation is not something exterior or accidental to Christ. It is not something 'he has'; rather he *is* this plan. He is the Word of God, the plan of salvation working itself out in the world. The word of God is not only 'spoken', as our own words are. It finds embodiment and grows to the extent to which men receive it into themselves. This is why Christ can speak of himself in a way which is all-embracing. 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' (that is, in persecuting my brothers); 'what you do to the least of my little ones that you do to me' (not merely as a guarantee, given from without, of your love for me, but in the very exercise of your

love for me; for my brothers are me). This explains the radical connection between charity and faith.

For Christ to become all men in this way, his coming had to be real and historical. He is not a handy symbol, enabling us to talk about the entirety of men without having to worry about numbers. He is a real human individual and an event in history. Hence one of the places where we meet him is in the gospel. To take up the gospel and meditate upon it – though some people openly admit to finding this tedious – is a practice which can be described in the fullest sense as ‘true’.

What is fundamental is first of all to retain or revive the sense of a real ‘event’: the realities we are dealing with took time to happen; they occurred within the temporal sequence to which we too belong. Take, for example, the lines which any meditation on the nativity is bound to follow: the roads around Jerusalem and a girl looking for shelter; the birth of a child, a particular night which stands at a certain precise distance from this present night. The assimilation of this reality is no mere accessory to our prayer and our ‘encounter’. We are concerned not with an idea or with a legend, but with a fact; not with a story, but with history.

In the gospel itself, the doctrinal and moral message of Christ is of supreme importance: those who ‘know’ him keep his word and do, or try to do, what he commands, in a realistic love which is more than sentiment or talk. No doubt many are struck by the comment of some of the jews at the end of the sermon on the mount, ‘he speaks as one with authority’. At first sight the remark may appear superficial, naive, a way of diverting attention from the speaker’s words to the speaker himself. Yet its import is more profound than the jews could have imagined. For what matters is not just that this demanding moral teaching should be *heard*, but that the teacher himself must be *met*. We are dealing not only with *words*, but with the *Word*; a historical word *and* a person to be met. It is this which provides the key to the experience, offered to everyone, of encountering Christ.

Christ himself did not allow the attention of his followers to stop short with himself. If there is a sense in which he was self-effacing before men, he is perpetually self-effacing before the Father: ‘Philip, who sees me sees the Father’, ‘I say what the Father has told me’: ‘my food is to do the will of the Father’. It is in the truest sense, then, that he who presents himself as the life and the truth, also speaks of himself as a road to be travelled, as the road leading to the



Father. The image is an invitation to us not to stop. We pray to him certainly, but the dominant form of christian prayer is addressed to the Father, 'through Christ our Lord'. 'You are Christ's', declares St Paul, 'and Christ is God's'.

The essential encounter with Christ appears in the words of Peter: 'you are the Son of God'; and the apostle is led to this encounter not by flesh and blood but by the Father himself. The event typifies, indeed, that ascent in Christ himself, by means of and through his humanity, towards his own divinity, towards the Father of whom he is the expression and the radiance, the manifestation, the revelation. 'The apostles', writes St Augustine, 'saw the man and believed in the God'. Such was the direction of their encounter with Christ, and it is the direction of ours, too. Its term is to recognize the Christ of the fourth gospel who comes from the depth of eternity, from the right hand of God, as his expression, his Word; to recognize him as leading to God, gathering all men to the Father, in the Son.

The experience here is indeed of an 'other', of a subject with whom presence and mutual revelation are established. At the same time it goes beyond or 'transcends' the other encounters of life, for it is the meeting with Someone who comes from another and who is entirely directed towards that other. The Father is in him and he is in the Father, and he sends the Spirit, who will 'receive from him'. This brings us to what is distinctive in the encounter with the christian God, who is not an undifferentiated or neutral divinity but Trinity. Christ did not teach this fundamental mystery in the manner of a professor of theology; he lived it, in the presence of his apostles and of ourselves. The subsequent tasks of drawing up the articles of faith under the guidance of the Spirit, of putting them into readily memorized formulae, of systematic exposition – all this was left to the Church and the theologians.

Would all the first christians have been capable of proclaiming as we do that Christ is God, or the manner in which he is the 'Son of God'? Even St Augustine, after his first conversion under the influence of Ambrose and his return to the catechumenate of the Church, had as yet no precise knowledge of these matters. They would have been able to declare, no doubt, that Christ was more than a prophet, that he was 'the Lord', that he was the Son of the Father in a sense proper to himself. They did not possess the clearly defined notion of the 'hypostatic union', so laboriously formulated by subsequent councils. But they believed Christ and they believed in Christ, in an absolute faith and a presence to which they set no limits.

*Encounter with Christ in the Church*

We have considered so far the personal encounter with God within oneself and in the events of the world, and the encounter with God in scripture, which culminates in the presence not only of words but of the Word. Such experience is real and concrete; yet if we were to go no further than this, the whole question would still be rather abstract. We would have failed to take account of a context which not only provides a framework for experience, but actually forms part of it. This is the *ecclesial* context of experience.

This is not only a matter of contact, of experience shared with others. It is certain, of course, that our convictions and our commitment gain in strength by being shared with others. Attention has been rightly drawn to the importance in the Church itself of small communities as a support for the faith. This is a fact of human society which applies to the Church, just as it applies to any commitment and any faith, whatever its content.

But the ecclesial context is not only that of a chosen group, where everyone is more or less in agreement; it is the universal context of all those who have encountered Christ, and in its most universal aspect, of all those whom Christ calls, that is to say of humanity in its entirety. The personal and scriptural experience of God finds its ultimate concrete expression in the Church.

This has been true from the very beginning, from the first years of christian expansion. The first christians who had not seen Christ, and yet, following the word of the Lord himself, considered themselves at no disadvantage in regard to the original witnesses, encountered him through the apostles and the disciples. Like ourselves, they had no access to the Word except in its first human expression, which is simultaneously a response and a manifestation. Throughout history, the words of Christ have come to us through the language of the primitive community, a language inseparable from that of Christ himself. In this language revelation is expressed in the very faith of the apostles and the evangelists. Christian experience has always occurred within the faith of the Church.

This is also evident, one is tempted to say 'even more evident', in *sacramental experience*.

It would seem that our own generation is much concerned with this ecclesial character of the sacrament. We react, sometimes perhaps excessively, against the pride of place accorded in the eucharist to the element of solitary contact with the Lord. We are intolerant of all that savours of artificial sentiment and overworked emotions,

and indeed efforts to produce these must always ultimately fail. It is by no means rare to find men and women who have been left permanently disorientated by their failure actually to 'feel' the presence of Christ in the eucharist. For them the day of their first communion was not 'the most wonderful day in their life'; the impression of 'being visited by heaven' was not theirs.

In reality the eucharist is a summons to our faith and it signifies an encounter which occurs on quite a different level from that upon which a moving ceremony leaves its impression. Anyone who took part, in a by no means distant past, in a congress of Hitler youth at Nuremberg, is likely to be insuperably sceptical of anything that looks like psychological conditioning. The aim of the liturgy is not to put spells on the assembly. We are dealing with the 'sacramental', with a symbolism accommodated to man, certainly – water, bread, oil – but also historically instituted and given by Christ to the Church.

It seems clear that to the christian mind this 'institution', this link with the historical will of Christ, is embodied precisely in its universal character ('that which is always and everywhere observed by all') and the fact that it is in a certain manner 'official', in other words that in its essence it is not handed over to the wide variety of individual caprice.

Within the scope of an article it is obviously impossible to offer even in outline a treatise on the Church. But it is indispensable to remember that the Church enters into the most personal christian experience. Religion and faith can never be solitary. That a heightened sense of this ecclesial experience could open the way to a neglect of silent prayer, behind closed doors and in secret, is certainly possible and even probable. Nor should we deny that song and ritual can always provide an escape from that confrontation with God which is sometimes fearful and always purifying. But for all this, in the renewed sense of the Church which is a feature of our own day, we can certainly recognize a movement of the Spirit. It may well be that God manifests himself to the present generation principally by the way of community, in a faith which remains authentic.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> This article is an abridged translation of 'L'Expérience de Dieu dans la foi', which first appeared in *Christus*, tom 15 (1968), pp 28–44. We are grateful for the permission to publish it here.