

FAITH IN GOD AND FAITH IN THE WORLD

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THE TITLE indicates the problem: what is the relationship between christian faith and everyday activity? How are these two related, my faith and my ordinary experience? Granted that faith is at least a part of my experience, how can it become a more important dimension of all my experience? To put the problem a little differently: how can prayer and other activity be integrated; how can I integrate my non-prayer activity into my relationship with God, and so make my whole life a prayer? What is the value of my work, my family or community life, mundane activities, in terms of my relationship with God?

The 'upward' and the 'forward'

Christians today are often torn in two directions. On the one hand, they believe in God, worship him, want to respond to his love; they take their faith seriously, and they take God seriously as a person. On the other hand, they also believe in their family, their friends, their work, the world around them; they believe in man, in man's capacity to build a better world, and in human progress, especially as these broad concepts are made concrete in the particular circumstances of their own lives. It is here that the problem lies. There is, in the life of many christians, an 'upward' component of faith in God, or worship, of adoration and love for God. There is, also, a 'forward' component of faith in the people around one, in one's work, in the whole human enterprise in general: and, in particular, in one's place in that enterprise. Both of these sectors seem important. Both directions, the 'upward' and the 'forward', seem good and deserving of all man's efforts and dedication. But they seem to be two different directions. The problem is met and handled differently by different people. Some simply forget about God, at least for the most part, and give themselves entirely to the 'forward'. Others, a very few, use religion as an escape from the world around them, and try to give themselves entirely to the 'upward'. Most, however, try to go in both directions at once. This is

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not easy. It results in a kind of compartmentalized living, where one part of everyday life is given to God in times of prayer and worship, and the rest is lived to some extent on a simply natural level.¹

To be torn between the vertical and the horizontal, between faith in God and faith in the world, is a common enough situation. Yet it is intrinsically unstable. Even if, in order to cope with the conflict, I organize my life into compartments, there will remain a nagging sense of a lack of unity. And I may, for example, in a time of dryness in prayer, tend simply to give up prayer, not finding satisfaction in the 'upward'. I may reduce that impulse simply to formalistic observances and seek all my real satisfaction and happiness in the 'forward'. Or I may feel that my ordinary work is always at the level of a spiritual encumbrance: in spite of the practice of right intentions and the 'morning offering', time spent in ordinary duties, at the office or factory, in the home, at school, can seem to be just time taken away from prayer and adoration.

And yet the constant teaching of the Church has always been that faith should permeate all of life, that the christian faith-commitment gives the key to the on-going experience of a new life, that faith should have an all-pervasive coloration – like the experience of love. The question is not, then, whether the synthesis between the 'upward' and the 'forward' can or should be made, but how to make it. It is a question of practice, of living out a synthesis between the two faiths. But to live out this synthesis, an understanding of how the two faiths fit together is necessary. Practice must be based on understanding. So the question is now: how can faith and everyday experience be understood as integrated, how can I *see* the intrinsic relationship between the 'upward' and the 'forward'?² This is a matter of how I view reality.

What is needed is a faith-view of reality, a faith-view that works, that is operational: a view of reality in terms of which faith in God and faith in the world can be lived out in synthesis. The question can be put simply: how can I understand myself and the world around me in terms of my faith in God?

¹ See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 'The Heart of the Problem', in *The Future of Man*, (trans. N. Denny, New York, 1964), pp 260–269; 'What the World is Looking for from the Church of God at this Moment', in *Christianity and Evolution* (trans. R. Hague, New York, 1969), pp 212–220.

² For a treatment of a different but closely related problem, see Sr. Catherine McIntyre, R.J.M., 'Man's Experience of Insignificance and the Christian Response', in *Spiritual Life*, 18 (1972), pp 24–46.

Faith as relationship

In order to see myself and the world around me more in the light of my faith in God, I can begin by trying to deepen my understanding of what faith is. It is true that faith involves intellectual assent: faith is a supernatural virtue by which we assent to all the truths that God has revealed, accepting those truths on God's authority. However, faith is something more than assent to truth. As the word is used in the New Testament and generally in contemporary theological writing, 'faith' has a more profound and richer meaning that includes, but goes beyond, intellectual assent. In the gospels, for example, and especially in St John's gospel, Jesus invites men to have faith in him. This faith is a believing and also a hoping and loving adherence to the person of Jesus recognized as Saviour. It is an affirmative response to God's invitation, the acceptance of God's saving love present for men in Jesus. Faith is the acceptance of Jesus as Saviour, a response to him, and an adherence to him. This faith is not just an act or an initial commitment, nor is it a series of acts; it is an enduring relationship.

The faith relationship between the christian and Jesus Christ is the fundamental and central relationship of christian living. It is this relationship between the christian and Jesus that is the integrating factor in daily life.

The reason why personal relationship with Jesus Christ is the synthesizing factor that integrates dedication to God and involvement in the world is this: God is present to man in Jesus, and this same Jesus is he in whom all things have been created, he in whom the world is centred and holds together. This raises two new questions: what is meant here by 'world', and – most importantly – what is the basis and the meaning of the statement that the world holds together in and is centred on Jesus Christ?

The world

What do we mean by 'world'? In the first place, the word can be taken in a negative sense as referring to the world of sin and self-centredness, the world that is under God's judgment, the world that turns away from Christ. When the word 'world' is understood in this sense, then it must be said that the serious christian shuns worldliness, flees from the world. On the other hand, scripture, the documents of the second Vatican Council, and contemporary theologians often speak of the world in another sense. This is the world that God so loves that he sent his only Son to save it; it is

the world that has been created in Christ and is centred on him. This second and positive meaning is more common today than the first and negative one.

When the term 'world' is taken in the positive sense, then it is clear that there is inherent in christianity a commitment to the world. It is clear that the christian should, by reason of what he believes, be more committed to the world than the non-believer. The christian should be involved in the world more, not less, than anyone else. And involvement in the world can be properly christian, can be an involvement in terms of personal relationship with Christ, because Christ is the centre and the keystone of the world.

Christ and the world

The two great theologians of the New Testament, St John and St Paul, although their expressions differ, both teach the same doctrine concerning the relation of the world to Jesus Christ. The world, as well as everything in it, depends on Christ for its existence, its harmony, and its meaning. John, in his gospel, identifies Jesus as the creative word of God of the Old Testament. In the first chapter of Genesis, God creates by his word; he speaks and things come to be. 'God said, Let there be light, and there was light'.³

By the word of Yahweh
the heavens were made . . .
He spoke, and it was created;
He commanded, and there it stood.⁴

God's word, furthermore, is sent for a purpose and does God's will.⁵ It is a word that saves those who are in trouble.⁶ In the prologue to John's gospel, the word is seen to be the Word.

In the beginning was the Word;
the Word was with God
and the Word was God . . .
Through him all things came to be,
not one thing had its being but through him.
All that came to be had life in him.⁷

This Word of God has become flesh and come among men so that, through their faith-response to him, men – and through men, the world – might be brought back to the Father. Jesus has come to save the world that has its existence in and through him. In this

³ Gen 1, 3.

⁴ Ps 33, 6 and 9.

⁵ Isai 55, 10-11; Qoh 42, 15; Wis 9, 1-3.

⁶ Ps 107, 20.

⁷ Jn 1, 1-4.

way, just as it was in and through him that the Father started the world in the beginning, so it is in and through him that God's work is being brought to completion.

This same teaching is presented by Paul, especially in the epistles of his captivity, by the use of the metaphor of the body. Just as Christ is the head of the Church, which is his body, so too – in a different way – Christ is the head of the whole world, and the world is his body.⁸ As in John's gospel, all that exists comes from God through Christ and remains in existence through him.⁹ God's plan from the beginning has been to bring everything under Christ as head,¹⁰ for Christ is the ruler of everything and he fills the whole creation.¹¹ All things have been created in Christ, and through him and for him; and he holds everything together in unity.¹² Not only do all things exist in Christ; but it is God's plan that 'all plenitude be found in him and that all things be reconciled through him and for him'.¹³ In Paul's perspective, everything is seen as somehow suspended from the risen Christ, and everything finds its existence and meaning and value in him. And so the world itself, begun in Christ, will – somehow – be saved in him; even now the whole world is groaning toward its salvation.¹⁴

For both John and Paul, there is a certain mutuality between God and the world, a mutuality that is in, and because of, Jesus Christ. God is not aloof from the world, indifferent to it; on the contrary, he is committed to the world: he is its creator, and he is profoundly involved in his creation through the Incarnation. The world and all that is in it is of the highest importance to God.

Yes, you love all that exists, you hold nothing
of what you have made in abhorrence.
For had you hated anything, you would not
have formed it.
And how, had you not willed it, could a
thing persist,
How be conserved if not called forth by you?
You spare all things because all things are
yours, Lord, lover of life,
You whose imperishable spirit is in all.¹⁵

⁸ Eph 2, 9–10. See H. Schlier, 'The Pauline Body-Concept', in *The Church* (New York, 1963), pp 44–58. ⁹ 1 Cor 8, 6. ¹⁰ Eph 1, 10.

¹¹ Eph 1, 23. ¹² Col 1, 17. ¹³ Col 1, 19. ¹⁴ Rom 8, 18–25.

¹⁵ Wis 11, 21–27. Robert Farrar Capon writes: 'The world exists by the divine *applause*, by means of the intimate and immediate delight that God has in the sons of men and in

What is more, because it holds together in Jesus Christ, the world can be understood in personal terms. The world is personalized by being anchored in the person of Jesus. Sometimes theology speaks of a 'cosmic Christ', but the fact is that it is not Christ who is cosmic; it is the cosmos, the whole world, that is 'christic', in Christ. I can, then, be involved in the world precisely in terms of my personal involvement with Jesus. I can love the world and love Christ without going in two directions at once. The God of the 'upward' is, at the same time, the God of the 'forward'. In him in whom all things have been created to find their fulfilment, I – together with all I am and all I do – can be brought together, integrated, and find my own fulfilment.

Two other religious understandings

This understanding of the relationship between God and the world in Jesus Christ can be made clearer by contrasting it with two quite different understandings of the God-world relationship: the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms, and pantheism. In Martin Luther's theology of the two kingdoms, the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the world are seen as in tension, in some kind of opposition, in antithesis. There is the same antithetical tension between God's rule of power in the world and his rule of grace through the gospel, between the Church and the world, and between the order of creation and the order of salvation. And there is a presupposed tension between faith and mundane experience, between prayer and action, between the 'upward' and the 'forward'. In the two-kingdom view of reality, there is no place for synthesis between faith in God and faith in the world.¹⁶

In the view presented in this paper, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world are seen as integrated in the kingdom of Christ. There is no opposition or antithesis: rather, God and the world are united in a certain mutuality in Jesus Christ, and the possibility of a lived integration between faith in God and faith in the world exists.

Another common religious world-view is that of pantheism, the

the being of everything that is . . . He keeps it *on his person*, because he will not get its delight out of his system'. Cf 'The Secular and the Sacred', in *The Sacred and the Secular*, ed. Michael J. Taylor, S.J. (Englewood Cliffs, 1968), p 177.

¹⁶ On the two-kingdom doctrine in contemporary theology, see especially Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (trans. J. Leitch, Philadelphia, 1963), pp 386–406; Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms* (trans. K. Hertz, Philadelphia, 1966); Carl E. Braaten, *The Future of God* (New York, 1969), pp 145–152.

belief that God and the world are identical, that God is not only everywhere but everything. Pantheism is the basic belief of several religions of the far east. Pantheistic religions always have a great reverence for the world, for they consider it to be divine. The pantheistic insight is that God is everywhere, and that he is more interior to the world than the world is to itself, more interior to things and to persons than they are to themselves. This, of course, is true. The fundamental error of pantheism is that it overlooks God's creativity. To create means to make to exist in its own right. God, creator, holds the world and all in it in existence: he makes it to be. And in causing the world to be, he causes it to be – not himself – but itself. This is what it means to create. Whatever God causes to be, creates, he takes to himself; and in taking it to himself, he causes it to be itself, grants it autonomy. God has created the world, holds it in existence, and takes it to himself in his Son, Jesus Christ.¹⁷ God and the world are not to be identified, but rather distinguished in their union. Just as the divine nature and the human nature of Jesus are united in one person but remain distinct, so – analogously – God and the world are united in and through Jesus Christ, but they remain distinct. Because God and the world are distinct, we can distinguish the sacred and the secular, Church and State, worship and work, the 'upward' and the 'forward'. And because God and the world are intimately united, we can understand and try to live a union in faith between those interests and activities that refer directly to God (the sacred) and those that refer to him through the world (the secular), a synthesis between the 'upward' and the 'forward', an integration between faith in God and faith in the world.

The Cross in everyday life

It is possible then, and reasonable, to live one's daily life in terms of personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Truly christian living consists precisely in this: to be fully involved in the world according to one's state in life and in line with one's relationship with Christ. This involvement in the world means, inevitably and even necessarily, hard labour, painful effort, suffering. It means the cross in one's life.

Christian life is a life of loving relationship with Jesus Christ; this includes a direct and prayerful relationship with Christ, and an indirect relationship with him through the world. It is a life of

¹⁷ See J.-B. Metz, 'A Believer's Look at the World', in *The Christian and the World* (trans. H. Wansbrough, O.S.B., New York, 1965), pp 68–100.

personal adherence to Christ, both in prayer and in other activity, a going out of oneself to him. This going out of self is a self-emptying. There is no love without sacrifice, without an emptying of self. This is true, too, of Christ's love for us, a life that we are called to imitate.

In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus; his state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself to assume the condition of servant, . . . even to accepting death, death on a cross.¹⁸

It is in his adherence and attachment to Jesus Christ that the christian finds a call to detachment from his own selfishness. 'If anyone wants to be my disciple, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me'.¹⁹ Relationship with God is not entered into by trying to flee reality, but by entering into it, becoming involved in it, facing and working through it. In this world, relationship with God is in the structure of the cross. It is in the cross that the 'upward' and the 'forward' come together in synthesis.

Prayer and integration

The question still remains: granted that an understanding in faith of how God and the world are united in Jesus Christ makes it possible to see *that* christian faith and ordinary experience can be integrated, *how* can this integration be brought about? How can my faith be an important element, not just in my prayer, but in all my experience, a dimension of my whole life? How can all that I am, all my activities, all my relationships, be brought together, integrated, lived out along the central axis of my faith relationship with Christ? This integration takes place for the most part in prayer.

If the core of christian living is personal relationship with Jesus Christ, then the condition of that relationship, its foundation and its heart, is prayer. My relationship with Jesus is most personal and most direct when I am most fully given to that relationship as such, and this is when I am at prayer. It is ordinarily when I am at prayer that I am most open to the healing action of God's love for me. And so it is particularly at prayer that God's love for me, present to me in Christ, pulls me together, knits up the various poorly organized parts of myself, makes me more one, gives me wholeness, integrity. When I am most present to the Lord in prayer, I am most being made whole.

This is why it is so important in prayer to be as completely present

¹⁸ Phil 2, 5-8.

¹⁹ Mt 16, 24.

to God as possible, facing God from where I am standing at that given moment, with all my emotions, attitudes, problems and pre-occupations, at that particular time. Distractions in prayer have a serious importance here; they indicate what is on my mind, what my concerns and cares and worries are, and they provide an occasion for me to bring those cares to the Lord and to put them in his hands. The content of a distraction – what it is that distracts me – is something that remains, at least to some extent, unintegrated into my relationship with God. If it were integrated into that relationship, it would not be a distraction. I can bring the matter of the distraction into my prayer, pray about it, ask the Lord's help, refer the person or the problem concerned to him. In this way, in my prayer, with the help of God's grace, I will be gradually and increasingly synthesizing my christian faith and my everyday experience.

The most important prayer is the mass. It is above all by participation in the mass that I encounter God present to me and for me in Jesus Christ in such a way that my life becomes unified. The Eucharist is the sacrament of unification; it brings the individual person together. And it brings persons together, uniting them in Christ. This is, in fact, the sacramental grace of the Eucharist; we are one because we share in one loaf.²⁰ It is, furthermore, at mass that the opportunity is present to offer all my daily activities, together with myself, to God at the offertory, together with the bread and the wine. The bread, which 'human hands have made', and the wine, 'work of human hands', in the words of the offertory prayer, are the symbol of each person participating in the mass and of each person's work, efforts, concerns, problems. The bread and wine stand for me and my involvement in the world around me. All of this, symbolized by the bread and wine, is offered to God at the offertory. At the consecration, the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ symbolizes the transformation of my daily activities in Christ. And at the communion, Christ makes what has been symbolized real by actively uniting all that I am and do to himself. It is in a special and profound way at mass that the upward and the forward components of my life are brought together in synthesis.²¹

²⁰ 1 Cor 10, 17.

²¹ See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 'My Universe', in *Science and Christ* (trans. R. Hague, New York, 1968), pp 64–66; 'Introduction to the Christian Life', in *Christianity and Evolution* (ed. cit.), pp 165–167.