

# ORDERING ALL THINGS SWEETLY

Theological reflections on Christian experience

By JACQUES PASQUIER

FROM THE *Inch' Allah* of the Mohammedan, who accepts each event fatalistically, to the resignation of the Christian visited by disease, sorrow or disaster, who takes refuge in the 'it is God's will' syndrome, the basic weakness would seem to be the refusal to accept responsibility.

In a world where universally accepted categories have merged into one another, where so many traditional values are challenged and definitions evacuated of their meaning, the only solution for the vast majority is to have recourse to a certain fundamentalism. The image of a God who protects and shelters us can, in fact, be used as a device for shrugging off personal responsibility. The image quickly becomes that of a 'castrating' God, of one who makes us impotent, powerless. The felt need for this protective God-image is often so strong that the 'providential' becomes a synonym for seeking the security of the maternal womb, where there is no freedom, and therefore neither risk nor responsibility. The God we affirm is a loving, caring God, the God who has created us, 'engraved us on the palm of his hand'.<sup>1</sup> But he is also the God who has created us in his own image, given us the power of our own freedom; the God who calls for a free response, an openness to his continuing self-revelation. He is not the God who is going to 'order all things sweetly' for us.

Our own history, like that of Israel or of the Church, is made of this constant interaction of call and response, of good and evil, of grace and sin. This constant tension – the day-to-day frustration and fulfilment of our human existence – invites us to reflect on the way the Spirit is working in us. How does the God who has created us expect that we should be patterned according to his likeness: each one of us with our individual psychological make-up, our freedom and unfreedom, in our power and powerlessness? We know, and

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<sup>1</sup> Isai 49, 16.

our every-day experience confirms it over and again, that we are not masters of our own lives. Our plans go awry, our dreams crumble, our visions shatter, and it is with feelings of anger and frustration that we address ourselves to God, echoing the words of Jonah: 'I might as well be dead as go on living . . . I have every right to be angry, angry enough to die'.<sup>2</sup>

Within the limits of this article, I wish to consider how we can deal creatively with the struggles of our human experience, so that they may become the source of our inner growth, and also of our awareness of God's continuing self-revelation. I begin with two theological assumptions which are basic to my understanding of theological reflection on experience: first, that we are created for freedom; secondly, that no human experience is foreign to the unfolding process of God's revelation.

### *Created for freedom*

One implication of Paul's call to the Galatians, 'You, my friends, are called to be free',<sup>3</sup> is that, in the desire to transcend our human limitations, we are constantly dreaming the impossible. In some sense, this dream for freedom is linked to our dream for power. Beyond all possibilities of our choosing, we long for the freedom of the Resurrection: a longing characterized not so much by the 'choice' element as by the overpowering awareness that we are not really limited by the flesh and everything which is included in it: time, space, environment, temperament and character. Could it be that in this dream for complete freedom, we are trying to reject the very condition of a creature?

I think not. The freedom I mean is that which is experienced in unfettered dialogue with another person: it is the response that we give to the gift of personal power, a gift which we experience as constantly limiting and expanding, giving life and death, liberating and enslaving. The freedom to which we are called, the exercise of our own power, demands the realization and the acceptance of our own creatureliness, the realization and the acceptance that God is God, who can neither be possessed nor manipulated. The exercise of this freedom and power can be realized only in the paradox of our existence: the awareness equally of our limited nature and of the potentiality which comes from the fact that we are totally pervaded by the power of God. In this paradoxical state we are called

<sup>2</sup> Jon 4, 3.8.9.

<sup>3</sup> Gal 5, 13.

to recognize the ways of the Lord and to respond in freedom to his gift: the gift of his Spirit.

*God in the totality of reality*

In past times, and by this I mean the so-called 'primitive cultures' as well as the Middle Ages of western man, the distinction between sacred and profane was not so sharp or so prevalent as it is in our modern times and culture. Even when God was hidden behind clerical forms of worship, his presence both in nature and in everyday experience was far clearer. The daily round of human activity both symbolized and conveyed the divine presence in signs and mediations of the powerful, in which God's immanence and transcendence came together 'sweetly'. Today, we have lost our sense of both sign and mediation, so that we have relegated God to certain limited areas: prayer-experiences, withdrawals from life (such as retreats), the awe-inspiring phenomena of nature. We seem to have lost the ability to look at life: so that it is no longer a sign of presence, no longer that communication with the divine which is prayer. Even the modern 'prayer-renewal', in some of its forms at least, such as withdrawal to the desert or the search for peak experiences, seems to result from the failure to see life. We no longer recognize the presence of God in 'the totality of Reality'.

Further, the fundamentalist attitudes prevalent in some 'prayer-groups' may well be an over-reaction to the loss of this symbolic awareness. The danger here is not the blindness which cannot see that God's presence is everywhere mediated; it is the refusal of the responsibility which personal freedom involves of discerning and responding to the experience of God: the very warp and woof of human experience.

Crushed as we are between the denial that the symbol reflects reality, and the fundamentalism which tends to deify every human experience, we have to struggle to find a spirituality which will involve us in the immanent and mediated presence of the God who desires us to be free. Teilhard de Chardin says somewhere that because of the creation and still more the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see. No experience, when it is truly human, whether of joy or pain, life or death, liberation or frustration, is foreign to the reality of the God made flesh for us, the Emmanuel. Such a view can by no means excuse us from our tremendous responsibility and eliminate the risk of decision. Because we are free, and because God is in the totality

of the Reality, we are constantly called to respond creatively to possibilities and options, knowing that there are no blue-prints, no maps to point the way; only the constant struggle to seek with integrity and fidelity. It is in situations such as these that what has come to be called 'theological reflection on experience' can be so beneficial.

Theological reflection is currently used by theologians, by clinical and pastoral education groups, task forces and religious congregations, for discerning priorities in ministries and new directions to be taken. It is, however, a term that is vaguely and loosely used; and the methodology it claims to describe often turns out to be aimless and slipshod. Hence the need to consider the various senses in which it is employed. Theology today, as ever, labours under a twofold defect: a gnosticism which makes it the preserve of an élite and tends to reduce knowledge of God to a wholly abstract science; and a dualism which ultimately separates out God from human experience. Clearly, the one has strongly interacted with and influenced the other.

'Now we are seeing only puzzling reflections in a mirror; but then we shall see face to face'.<sup>4</sup> The word 'mirror', in the pauline context, is not the same as in modern usage. For Paul, the mirror was more of a window, a piece of alabaster, say, which, though it lets the light pass through, refracts and distorts the image of its object, to the extent that imaginative reconstruction is required if we are to capture the real. Equally, knowledge is a complex process: there is indeed a relationship between the objective term and the subjective awareness of the self in the act of knowing; but knowledge is not so much a knowing of the objective term as of the relationship between the knower and the object, so that it can have a very real affective dimension. If we apply these epistemological considerations to Paul's statement, we must first ask what this mirror-like knowledge really means: who is this God whom we know 'enigmatically'? We can be so caught up in the 'puzzling' nature of the reflections, that we may wonder whether we are seeing what is objectively real or simply a figment of the imagination. Where then do we see God, if not 'face-to-face'? First, surely, in the awareness of our own identity, of the self in relationship with the Other: but the Other as perceived through the eyes of the 'beholding self'; which is not to say, of course, that the reality exists only in the eye of the beholder and as a figment of his imagination. Theological

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor 13, 12.

reflection presupposes that we recognize and accept the primacy of human experience as being the locus of God's revelation, and that we have the capacity to align ourselves with the 'God-dimension' in our every experience; and furthermore, that this capacity to see and know God is the gift of faith. When the Church reflects on her experience, on what happens to her, and what she initiates and effects from day to day, she is scanning new horizons and undertaking new responsibilities. When the theologians of latin America reflect on their experience of oppression and exploitation, they develop not so much a theology of liberation as a process of liberation. When religious congregations reflect on the daily struggles involved in ministry, prayer and community, they are being called to articulate a new meaning of spirituality. All this is possible because in their every experience there is this God-dimension, which is there to be seen and felt.

Theological reflection on experience may therefore be described as the capacity we possess for getting in touch with the most basic truth about ourselves and our experience; and the process by which this is accomplished. The truth is that we are created in the image of God with the capacity for perfect freedom. Theological reflection on experience allows us to return to the source of the life and truth of our being, so that, becoming more and more like God, we may 'order all things sweetly' in collaboration with him.

It follows that this process of returning to the truth of one's own being demands certain fundamental attitudes, which can be simply stated in three words: trusting, listening, sharing.

#### *Trusting one's own experience*

Our educational system has reinforced in most of us the rooted doubt that of ourselves we cannot learn anything. If we run to others for therapy, counsel or direction, it is because we do not believe that we are or can be our own best counsellors. I am not denying the need for counselling or spiritual direction, when this is understood as helping in the articulation of personal experience. But one cannot begin any process of theological reflection without trusting one's own experience. Products as we are of a scientific culture where results can be measured, tested, controlled and predicted, we find ourselves ill at ease with the knowledge that our experience cannot be submitted to the same methodology. If I reflect on my experience of prayer, I have no scientific norms to help me in making a judgment on the quality of my prayer. I do not even

know whether or how far my prayer is an experience of reality or an illusion. This reluctance, amounting to inability, to trust one's experience has inevitable repercussions on the quality of one's own self-image. Because of the expectations that others put on us, which we too readily adopt for ourselves, we have never learned to live at our own pace or rhythm; rather we are constantly trying to match up to an image which is not consistent with our real self. Instead, we build for ourselves defence-mechanisms which vary in subtlety, so as to protect ourselves from our own feelings, our pains, our loneliness. And yet without the basic trust-self-acceptance, we cannot discover the God-dimension of ourselves. To trust oneself is not only to recognize the 'I am o.k.' of good functioning; it is also to recognize that the real self is a self created by God for freedom, a self which is lovable and made for love.

### *Listening to one's experience*

The first step, which is, without any doubt, the most painful, is to recognize that we are each of us shadowed by a false self, an illusory self. But it is only when we renounce our false self that we are enabled, paradoxically, to find ourselves, to listen to ourselves. The popular expression, 'getting into touch with oneself', expresses the need to break down defences, to strip off the masks, so as to recognize and to own our true feelings. Listening to oneself requires constant attention to our different movements, different moods; it means trying to identify the various patterns of behaviour, of responses, of defences. It requires courage and honesty, the courage born of honesty, to try to face oneself as one is: extremely vulnerable, fragile, rootless.

However, the listening process must go one step further. To listen is not only to recognize what is happening; it is to try and make sense out of what is happening. In fact, if we are afraid of listening to our own feelings, this is mainly because we do not know what they mean, so that we prefer to ignore them. There is a constant interaction between experience and meaning; it is our very experience which forms our concepts: concepts which help us to understand our experiences. 'We cannot know what a concept "means" or use it meaningfully without the "feel" of its meaning'.<sup>5</sup> It is important to be able to relate the experiencing to a symbol (verbalized or not) which helps us to specify the experience and to give meaning

<sup>5</sup> Gendlin, E.: *Experiencing and the creation of meaning* (New York, 1962), p 8.

to it. To take a very concrete example: if I were to ask you to think of your body at this moment, to close your eyes and to concentrate on the experience of your body, you would begin to 'feel' the experience, to name it with such words as 'tension' or 'ease' or 'relaxed' . . . These 'felt' words, 'tension', 'ease' and so on, are born of our past experiences, of past symbols, and the present experience makes sense because it is related to a larger context. This example can help us to understand what listening to one's experience can mean in the context of theological reflection. Every felt experience – the acute feeling of loneliness, the recognition of jealousy, the joy of intimacy, the thousand things we experience every day – can be listened to against the background of the larger question, 'Who am I?' To listen to my own experience is to enter into the depth of my identity where I am known by God and loved by him, because here I begin to know and love myself.

### *Sharing the experience*

Trusting and listening to one's experience is not achieved in a vacuum, but in the context of dialogue and community. Discovery, the acceptance to return to the true self, is at the same time the discovery of responsibility to other selves. Somehow, the totality of the Reality which says something of God to me includes the other: the other with all his or her different aspects; the consoling and comforting other, the challenging and disturbing other; the mysterious other whom we are longing to know, yet who will remain elusive, beyond the reaching. Sharing experience is not simply or mainly telling one another our stories, interesting as these may be; rather, it is accepting to be vulnerable, to be open, no matter what the risk. In taking the risk of sharing our gifts and our guilt with others, we are abandoning our protectiveness, self-defence: we are giving others power over us. In this act of vulnerability we are somehow allowing experience, God's multi-faceted revelation, to touch us, shape us. The fear of listening or being listened to by the other – a fear which compels us to build walls around ourselves, arises out of our reluctance to be vulnerable; and, whilst we are escaping from the reality around ourselves, we are living in alienation from our real self, the one that is open and submissive to God.

The attitude of being vulnerable is totally expressed in Mary's 'Let what you have said be done to me'.<sup>6</sup> Mary's stance is not one

<sup>6</sup> Lk 1, 38.

of sheer will-power (the 'I will do' syndrome); it is rather a stance of active passivity. She accepts to be formed, shaped by the reality, the events, the people in her life. Extremely vulnerable, she shares with others her faith, her ignorance of who Jesus is, her struggles. She shares her awareness of God's marvels working in her, she shares her silence at the foot of the Cross.

It is also in this process of theological reflection that we discover the quality of genuine love: a love which is constantly transcending possessiveness. Possessiveness aims to destroy the God-dimension of the love-experience in the other, as much as in oneself. To transcend it is no easy task. It requires the kind of death to self which makes a person transparent. Getting in touch with the reality of who I am, of the true self, that is both lovable and able to love, I am suddenly called to go beyond myself. To use Buber's terminology, I am called to recognize in the other the 'Eternal Thou' whom I have met in myself, and to let the other call forth the 'Eternal Thou' in me. Our love for another is the way to realize the sign of God in our being. It is only in these attitudes of vulnerability and genuine love that we can call forth one another to our true identity: sons and daughters of the Father.

### *The purpose of theological reflection*

It has been our aim in this article to demonstrate that 'ordering all things sweetly' is not a process which happens outside of our own freedom; it is the result of a constant dialogue between the God who calls us in the depth of our experience and our own freedom. The obedience to self, to the best of self which is the God-self in us, becomes very much identified with obedience to God. Only in this context can we understand Paul's reflection on the role of the Spirit, where he says: 'The Spirit himself and our spirit bear united witness that we are God's children'.<sup>7</sup> To recognize the God-dimension in our experience is itself a call to new responses, to the exercise of one's own freedom in the continuing process of creation and redemption. The fact that we are called to be co-creators is the most challenging of all tasks. The awareness that our free response does make a difference in today's creation does not allow us any rest. We need to be willing to accept the power with which we are endowed in virtue of our creation and Jesus's saving presence.

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<sup>7</sup> Rom 8, 16.



*Memory*

There are two crucial moments in the process of responding: the moment of memory and the moment of imagination and creativity.

Scripture as well as traditional spirituality have emphasized the need to remember. There is no celebration without memory, and the action of celebrating is in fact the re-creation of past events: the marvels of God's creation, the death and Resurrection of Jesus. Birthdays are a celebration of life, the moments when we can cherish our own history. In the act of remembering we make present the past; we get into touch with all the aspects of our life, understanding and accepting a little better the many different ways God has revealed himself to us, the complexity of grace and sin in our life. We not only treasure the joys, but we grieve over the pains; and yet, in spite of the hurts, healing is taking place and wholeness is achieved, especially when this act of remembering is shared and celebrated with the significant and understanding other. How comforting it is to be able to retrace God's faithfulness in one's own history, in the constant paradox of life/death experiences! But because it is so consoling, there is the danger of wanting to stay at the level of 'remembrance'; which would be to be caught up in the tension of the Apostles who witnessed the Ascension. They remained on the mountain, wishing to stay with the experience of presence, at the very moment when they had begun to experience the absence. Gazing up into the sky, dreaming of past visions, is part of our temptation. 'Men of Galilee, why are you standing here, looking up into the sky?'<sup>8</sup> It is at this point that the mission must begin, the long journey of faith.

*Creativity*

Our mission is to create, to go beyond the past in order to continue to exert our own freedom. So often we know how to remember, but we do not know how to create. We are paralysed by the risks, the insecurity involved in the act of creation. In a recent symposium on 'Art and Theology', I heard someone say that the real theologian today is the artist; he alone knows how to transcend the past and let the imagination build new visions. Though the artist returns to past experiences, he allows himself to be led beyond them. New images emerge, which are by no means disconnected with the past; and the depth of his feeling calls the artist to express

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<sup>8</sup> Acts 1, 11.

it in new ways. If we reflect on our traditional theology, it is quite clear that we find ourselves far more comfortable with past concepts than with new images. This is mainly because the boundaries are blurred, and the path is not clearly drawn. When we are talking about the future, whether it is the future of the Church or of religious life, we timidly look at some of the signs of hope as we perceive them in the present. But we rarely make a choice for the future by looking at the present situation to discover the obstacles which may prevent the realization of this preferred and chosen future. We are caught up in the dilemma of our activity and passivity. We find ourselves more comfortable in choosing passivity, which is in fact a way of not choosing; and thus is certainly less risky. But in so doing we are denying that God has created us and missioned us to image himself in his freedom. The experience of powerlessness, the remembrance of one's own sinfulness or pains, can become so paralysing; and yet fidelity to the Spirit in us can never eliminate the risk of new paths. Creativity, therefore, becomes the complex handling of one's experience of powerlessness, and the awareness of the real power of God who is present in us and calls us to new life.

'Ordering all things sweetly' seems suddenly very complex and very demanding.

Somehow the Spirit in us does not seem to draw very clear patterns.

Can our experience teach us anything?

Yes, it can teach us that complexity and ambiguity are life-realities which cannot be eliminated;

that as 'we groan inwardly', we learn to 'wait with patience';<sup>9</sup>

that every moment and experience are telling us who God is and who we are;

that God is a God who provides and cares;

that we are a free people who can choose to let him be God for us; or who can choose not to let him be;

that God is always constant, and yet full of surprises;

that God offers himself to us;

that he makes us free to receive him as gift.

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<sup>9</sup> Rom 8, 23, 25.