TRUTH AND LIFE

By WILLIAM REISER

ANYONE familiar with the voices of contemporary theology has heard the insistent reminder from Latin America that right doctrine must be matched with right practice, that orthodoxy and orthopraxis go together. If faith were defined merely in terms of correct knowledge about God, then such faith would be insufficient for salvation. As Jesus says in the gospel, 'Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven'.[1] The latin-american theologians appealed to the Church for consistency between knowledge and action, for the truth of the gospel can only be authenticated by virtuous living.

In the same way, the fathers of the second Vatican Council in speaking about atheism in their Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, had recognized that fundamentally atheism is not so much an intellectual as a spiritual problem. The disposition to believe is fostered more by the attractiveness of christian living than the persuasive power of theological discourse:

> Atheism must be countered both by presenting true teaching in a fitting manner and by the full and complete life of the Church and of her members. For it is the function of the Church to render God the Father and his incarnate Son present and as it were visible, while ceaselessly renewing and purifying herself under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is brought about chiefly by the witness of a living and mature faith. . . . This faith should show its fruitfulness by penetrating the whole life, even the worldly activities, of those who believe, and by urging them to be loving and just towards those in need. Lastly, what does most to show God's presence clearly is the brotherly love of the faithful who, being all of one mind and spirit, work together for the faith of the Gospel and present themselves as a sign of unity.[2]

The truthfulness of the gospel is proven, therefore, by holiness of life, by service of one's neighbour and concern for justice, and by our being a prayerful, forgiving and loving community.

[1] Mt 7, 21. [2] *Gaudium et Spes*, 21.

This point should strike us as fairly obvious, even though it may require a few prophetic voices to make us hear the implications of the gospel's continuing call in our lives. However, the obvious point can be turned to insight if we examine the relationship between truth and life against the background of Jesus's words, 'I am the way — and the truth and the life'.[3] For truth is much more than a matter of conceptually correct knowledge; truth concerns what we are. Ultimately, only God is truth, and human beings are truthful to the degree that they are of God.

This insight deserves to be explored. We read in the First Letter of John that the person who professes to love God without loving his brother or sister is a liar,[4] does not know where he is going because he is blinded by darkness,[5] and is a murderer.[6] The breakdown between knowledge and action, or between faith and practice, or the failure to appreciate the practical consequences of accepting the gospel, is not merely a matter of oversight. The problem is deeply spiritual and personal, for it means that we have not yet really known the Lord. The truth is not yet in us.[7] Growth in the truth, therefore, depends on prayerful attention to the person of Christ.

The problem can be viewed from another angle. The breakdown between knowledge and action may stem from a rather static idea of what truth is. If truth is regarded as a set of premises from which conclusions are to be drawn for correct performance, then one has missed the point about knowing God. Why? Because a static conception of truth can only arise from a static conception of God. God who is truth is neither a correct first principle nor a set of premises. What is urgently needed is a fully theological and richly biblical understanding of the nature of truth.

Centring the problem

For christian theology, the issue about truth is by no means the speculative, abstract and dry considerations of a philosophy of knowledge. Rather, the issue touches deeply upon our spiritual life, and we should take a few moments to understand its dimensions.

Since the time of St Thomas, the christian thought-world recognized two kinds of truth, logical and ontological. Logical truth referred to the truth of human thinking and designated a certain

[3] Jn 14, 6. [4] 1 Jn 2, 4. [5] 1 Jn 2, 11. [6] 1 Jn 3, 15. [7] 1 Jn 2, 4.

correspondence of the human mind with reality. But the world or reality had resulted from the creative intelligence of God. Thus God was seen as the source of all truth; ontological truth designated the correspondence of the world to the creative idea of God. The truthfulness of human knowing depends, therefore, upon the way the world is, and the world has been created by God. For St Thomas, truth is a relation between a mind and reality. To know the truth means, consequently, that the creature is properly related to the world as the created expression of a divine act of understanding.

This way of viewing truth was somewhat different from the perspective drawn by St Augustine. On Augustine's terms, the human mind was a created participation in uncreated grace. The human mind was truth, even as God was truth: truth, goodness, and beauty cannot be dissociated from the mind which thinks, the will that chooses, and the heart which loves. To distinguish an idea from the power to think, or goodness from the power to choose, or love from the capacity to desire, would have been somewhat misleading. Similarly, it would be misleading to distinguish in God his truth from his intelligence, his goodness from his will, his love from his Spirit. God *is* truth, God *is* goodness, God *is* love. Since we are made in God's image, human beings are true, beautiful, good, and loving in the measure that they contemplatively look at him.

The scholastic legacy owed more to Thomas than to Augustine, however; and it suffered an unfortunate distortion. Preoccupation with the truthfulness of ideas rather than with the truthfulness of persons paved the way for a divorce between theological epistemology and spirituality. A certain sterility of thought, a formalism within ethics and morality, and a kind of immobility of religious and theological ideas, owed their origin to neglect of the intimate connection between truth and life. This neglect is reflected, at least for christian thinkers, in the history of philosophy since St Thomas.

The signal that something had gone wrong with scholasticism came from philosophers who challenged and tried to overturn the scholastic tradition. With Descartes there occurred a turn to the human person or 'subject' who thinks; but his introduction of the difference between subjects and objects drove a further wedge into the tradition. He overlooked St Thomas's insight that knowledge was a unifying relation of human beings with the world. A great deal of modern thought since Descartes has alternated between a deep alienation of human beings from their world and romantic attempts to re-establish a unifying relationship.

According to the more ancient, biblical witness, the Spirit of truth is also the Lord and giver of life, so that life is the measure of truth. Life, however, is concrete. We cannot speak of it without drawing on terms like freedom, peace, joy, compassion, and so on. In the final analysis, truth cannot be reduced to abstracting forms (ideas) from matter, as the scholastics taught; nor to the clarity and distinctness of ideas, as Descartes taught; nor to the *a priori* conditions of knowledge, as Kant proposed. One can only guess what might have happened in the last few centuries if christian theology had paid more attention to Ignatius Loyola's rules for the discernment of spirits, for example, than to the theories of great epistemologists, in trying to arrive at a better understanding of what truth is. For what is significant about ideas which are labelled 'true', and what distinguishes them from correct information about the world, is that such ideas transform people: and not just once, but over and over again. The mechanics of that transformation are better known to good spiritual directors than to philosophers of knowledge.

Theologically, perhaps it ought to be said that ideas can only be derivatively true, for primarily God alone is true and we have been made for him. Ideas are true in so far as they lead human beings to life: that is, as they form us more closely into the image of God by uniting us more intimately with the person of Christ. Centuries ago, the alexandrian church father, Origen, reasoned that whatever truth was to be found in the christian and non-christian worlds alike had to be the result of the wisdom or word of God, and that Jesus Christ, as the expression of uncreated Wisdom, was the concrete norm of what is true:

> This Son, accordingly, is also the truth and life of all things which exist. And with reason. For how could those things which were created live, unless they derived their being from life? Or how could those things which are, truly exist, unless they came down from the truth? Or how could rational beings exist, unless the Word or reason had previously existed? Or how could they be wise unless there were wisdom? . . . Whatever, therefore, we have predicated of the wisdom of God, will be appropriately applied and understood of the Son of God, in virtue of his being the Life, and the Word, and the Truth. . . . [8]

Whether by virtue of creation or of revelation, all truth came from God. But the purpose of revelation (and thus of creation) was not

[8] *De Principiis*, I, 2, 4.

to communicate information about divine things; it was to lead human beings into union with God. To be sanctified in the truth meant being drawn by the Spirit into communion with one's neighbours and to union with God. *Gaudium et Spes* picked up this theme.[9] To understand what truth is we need to grasp what truth does: it makes people holy. And so Origen wrote:

> Since it is by partaking of the Holy Spirit that any one is made purer and holier, he (the believer) obtains, when he is made worthy, the grace of wisdom and knowledge, in order that . . . the nature which he received from God may become such as is worthy of him who gave it to be pure and perfect, so that the being which exists may be as worthy as he who called it into existence. . . . That this may be the case, and that those whom he has created may be unceasingly and inseparably present with him, who IS, it is the business of wisdom to instruct and train them, and to bring them to perfection by confirmation of his Holy Spirit and unceasing sanctification.[10]

The early church fathers sensed and respected the Spirit's presence in the world. Indeed, divine Wisdom was responsible for a basic unity and harmony within creation; there could be no dichotomy between what is religious and what is genuinely human. Those ideas discovered by non-christian thinkers which were humanizing in the best sense of the word (where Jesus Christ is the norm for what is authentically human) had to be religious, for they made people holy by forming them into the image of Christ. Truth was 'discerned' by what it accomplished. The fathers appear to have realized that reaching truth is not like the discovery of information. Rather, it involves a movement from God's Spirit who is working to bring people to truth; for God is eminently active among his people in drawing them to himself. A theological notion of truth cannot afford to overlook this fact.

A problem of cultural difference

The philosophy of St Thomas grew out of the cultural experience of the middle ages as well as out of his own christian faith. While we are heirs to the same faith, and while the Church has encouraged its ministers to be instructed in the philosophy of St Thomas, our cultural experience is profoundly different from his. A philosophy

---

[9] Cf *Gaudium et Spes*, 19.

[10] *De Principiis*, I, 3, 8.

cannot, however, be simply transposed from one cultural context to another without undergoing severe conceptual dislocations. A philosophy will only be as perennial as the cultural tradition in which it was born and transmitted. New experiences within that tradition, or a transition from one historical period to another, or the move from one cultural context to another, will necessarily affect a philosophy by modifying it or rendering it obsolete.

In its day, the theological synthesis of Aquinas was comprehensive and brilliant. His appropriation of Aristotle became a model for theology's relationship to philosophy in later Catholic thought. In the hands of men like Joseph Maréchal, Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner, Aquinas's achievement has been rescued and its meaning repeated for our time. Nevertheless, that meaning has been enriched by the contributions of other thinkers like Immanuel Kant, Martin Heidegger, and Alfred North Whitehead. Thus what stands out more prominently than Aquinas himself is the tradition in which his thinking has survived, and which, as tradition, remains open to the experiences and problems of later ages.

According to St Thomas, truth is discovered by the human mind; truth remains timeless and immutable. What was once true will always remain so. In this he was influenced by Aristotle's model of what science was, especially the greek scientific ideal of truth. Not until the nineteenth century did christian thinkers begin to wonder whether truth could develop; for with the advent of historical studies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the history of dogma revealed that *something* had developed. The problem of development set into relief the conflict between two ideals of what truth might be, the difference between two cultural experiences within the same general tradition of western thought. On the one hand, if truth develops, would not that imply that the later Church possessed more revelation than the apostolic age had? Yet, on the other hand, if truth did not develop, how does one take seriously the history of dogma? Or is the history of Christianity like the history of a great idea, unfolding organically (with a bow to Cardinal Newman), and demonstrating novelty and appetite (with a bow to Whitehead) down through the ages?

The question reveals to some degree the limitations of philosophical ideas which are transported unchanged from one cultural setting to another. For, in the first place, we recognize on the basis of personal experience that as we grow older we are in some ways different and yet the same. We maintain an identity with our past even as we are

changed by new experiences, ideas, problems, and so forth. The basic issue is not whether ideas develop or not, but whether we develop. It makes little sense to talk about the development of an idea apart from a development of the person or societies who entertain it.

In the second place, the philosophy of Aquinas arose in a climate of thought where truth was sized up in terms of permanence and timelessness; but today's believers are familiar with notions of historical process, an expanding universe, development, the preponderance of theory and hypothesis over certitude, and pluralism. For Aquinas, the primary analogue of being, truth and perfection was God, the unmoved mover. Since movement involves change from potency to act, and since there could be no potency in God (for that would imply limitation), God had to be pure act, unmoved, unchanging. This manner of fixing an idea of God is quite different from the unsystematized, humanly-faced God who appears on the pages of Scripture. But if such a view of God underpins one's notion of truth, then, of course, truth cannot change. Doctrines of faith, as instances of logical or propositional truth, are as unchanging as their underlying ground.

Gaudium et Spes moves comfortably in an evolutionary, processive world-view. Its understanding of nature is dynamic, focused more on the future than on the past. Its vision is marked by a radical incompleteness: by the hunger and thirst for justice, by hope of peace and disarmament, by the community of nations that might be:

> The destiny of the human race is viewed as a complete whole: no longer, as it were, in the particular histories of various peoples; now it merges into a complete whole. And so mankind substitutes a dynamic and more evolutionary concept of nature for a static one, and the result is an immense series of new problems calling for a new endeavour of analysis and synthesis.[11]

It is sympathetic towards every form of struggle and attempt to overcome alienation, and renders a sober assessment of the vast human energies which could move the world towards peace or towards war. While aware of human history's great tragedies, *Gaudium et Spes* finds reason to hope in the fact that men and women are made for God, and that what happens to us is of concern to him. God is not passive to our fortunes, but actively involved in inspiring, strengthening, and drawing people to desire the kingdom of God.

---

[11] *Gaudium et Spes*, 5.

The call to justice is articulated out of the Church's native optimism about history, confident that all holy desires come from God, assured that those who work for justice are co-operating with his Spirit. For human history has but one goal.[12]

The Church's vision of the world, then, is drawn much more in terms of the future and mankind's possibilities, much more in terms of hope and prayerful longing, than ever before. Its situation is not that of a people trying to escape history, but a people deeply immersed in the theatre of human life, the very life and history which God entered through the Incarnation. Our cultural experience is sharply distinct from that of the patristic or medieval Church. Because of our feel for a world in process, we would resonate with St Thomas's understanding of 'final cause' as God ahead of history drawing it towards himself. But we would add a texture to Aquinas's notion of finality that the thirteenth century did not dream of. We might tend to define truth in terms of what is yet to be, or in terms of the realization of God-given possibilities, instead of in terms of what is timeless, unchanging, and permanent. Truth is resident in the Church, not as a secure possession of all the right answers to the meaning of life, but as the gift of faith in God's promise that 'all things work together for good to those who love him' (Rom 8, 28).

A notion of truth for a pilgrim Church

We have pointed out that one cannot do justice to the notion of truth by examining it on a philosophical level alone. Spiritual experience is critical, since to understand what truth is we need to know what truth does. And this led us to incorporate the Spirit's role as the action of God drawing us to union with himself. But this required another turn of thought, because the fulness of truth has yet to be realized; neither our individual sanctification nor that of the whole world is yet complete. Truth, then, is marked by a radically unfinished character. We observe this by reflecting on our personal journey of faith, since individually and as a people we are growing in the truth: it is not the truth which grows but ourselves, as men and women of faith. Truth functions in our lives as a call to become more fully human, and thereby to share more fully in the divine nature. Indeed, truth is sanctifying.

In parallel fashion we need to acknowledge the radically unfinished character of our real knowledge of God. For the point is genuinely

[12] Cf *Ibid.*, 10.

to know him. We cannot be saved just because we possess correct information about him. Knowing the Lord leans upon our experience of him, and we should be careful not to allow metaphysics to dictate what that experience must be like. The God of christian faith — the God whom Jesus also experienced — is not the timelessly unchanging one. The God we know works on human hearts, has a vested interest in the fortunes of human history, desires to share himself with a people whom he loves, and wants to be where his creatures are. It is not possible to develop the christian experience of God here, but we need to put the question: is not the notion of truth dependent on one's prior notion of God? Indeed, we have suggested that they are inseparable, that one's notion of truth expands as one's notion of God is enlarged by prayerful encounter with him.

What strikes the reader of *Gaudium et Spes* is the Church's implicit conviction that God is immensely interested in 'the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted'.[13] The conviction is warranted by the biblical portrayal of a God at times jealous, angry, desirous, compassionate, gracious, reckless, liberating. This God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who calls us: this God is the primary analogue of all that is true and holy. In other words, christian faith cannot tolerate a static notion of truth because it cannot afford a static notion of God. Only when believers are no longer meeting the endlessly active Lord and Giver of life is the notion of truth emptied of its power to sanctify. In that case, truth is neutralized; it is merely correct information about God, life, and the destiny of human history.

Perhaps an illustration would prove helpful. The dogma of the Incarnation is one of the truths of our faith. Taken merely as a statement that in Jesus Christ God has become human, this dogma correctly articulates one of the chief components of christian faith. But when believers begin to ponder the meaning of the dogma, and meditate on the God who comes close, when they reflect on the significance of God's solidarity with his people, then the dogma is no longer in the realm of correct statement but in the realm of mystery. The dogma works on us, re-fashions our view of the world and of ourselves; in brief, it calls us to life. No amount of thinking can exhaust its meaning; it lives in us and transforms our thinking, our choosing, our love. As truth, the dogma of the incarnation lies 'ahead' of us, drawing us towards God.

[13] *Gaudium et Spes*, 1.

We began this essay by noting the breakdown between right doctrine and right practice, as described by latin-american theologians. But what is the reason? Surely, our failure to act does not stem from ignorance of the gospel's moral demands; nor does it arise from deep-seated pessimism about the prospect of improving the lot of the world's poor. Maybe the reason lies in our reducing the gospel's truth to mere correctness of belief, which is all that orthodoxy means. Christian practice is not so much the logical inference from christian belief as it is the inevitable result of learning to be where God is. To be a believer, to be in the truth, to be drawn by the Spirit of God, results in learning to see as God sees, to desire what he desires, to esteem what he esteems. In a word, to be a Christian is to want to be where God is. The great mystery of our faith is that God wants to be where his creatures are, and therefore, Christians will want to do no less. The Church finds itself turned towards the poor and oppressed, concerned about the problems of injustice, hunger and armaments, because it was into this world that Christ came, and here is where it must discover the Lord. To take the incarnation seriously brings the Church into the midst of the world around it, *not as a practical conclusion to a religious dogma, but as the very possibility for the christian experience of God.*

There are a number of responses that the Church could make here. But only one response is available to Christians which is genuinely sanctifying. In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church spoke with hope about the essential dignity and beauty of the person, the destiny of each human being for union with God, and the active concern God has for his creation. What is indeed astonishing, even frightening, is a God who has become so deeply involved in the affairs of his creatures. The Church can help people to know this God, the one who became flesh and dwelled among us. It must make John's words its own: 'The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth'.[14] Only in this way, it seems to me, does the notion of truth become correlative to the christian notion of God. In fact, is there any other way in which the dichotomy between doctrine and practice, knowledge and action, can be overcome? As I have tried to argue, the very fact that this issue has been raised at all illustrates the danger of separating a theory of knowing from spirituality, at least if one is a christian thinker.

[14] Jn 1, 14.