

# CHRIST AND THE NON-BELIEVER

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**T**HIS PAPER is called Christ and the Non-Believer. Where shall we start, with Christ, or with the non-believer? Let us attempt to begin with the non-believer. I suppose by a non-believer we mean someone who has either rejected or not examined or is ignorant of christian faith, or indeed of any of the great historical faiths found in the world – buddhism, hinduism, moslemism for example. But we may have some difficulty in detecting the genuine non-believer. It is not at all unusual – in fact it has happened again this year – for a collection of essays to appear called *What I Believe*, in which half of the contributors, though manifestly non-believers in the sense mentioned above, none the less talk about their ‘belief’ in the richness of life or in compassion or something similar. So they think of themselves as believers in some sense. And what are we to make of the marxist, who in spite of the repeated claim to present a scientific view of the universe, certainly calls for a faith which rapidly outruns the available evidence? Where are the non-believers, where can one run them to ground? Is there anyone who believes nothing?

Let us leave this question in suspense for a moment and turn to the other term in the title: Christ and the Non-Believer. That suggests that we are not talking about non-believers generally, but about people who do not believe in Christ, and so the field is somewhat narrowed. Obviously, the non-believer in Christ cannot have a relationship with Christ – if I don’t believe in fairies I cannot be said to have a relationship with fairies except one of ignorance or negation. But the very fact of putting the question implies that Christ has some sort of relation with the non-believer. We must start from Christ, because only by starting from Christ can we provide something positive. There are at least two starting points in scripture. The first is the universal saving will of Christ.<sup>1</sup> This starting point alone does not establish a relationship. I can will all

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<sup>1</sup> Cf 1 Tim 2, 4.

sorts of things without thereby achieving them. The objection of course comes immediately that here we are talking about the will of God. This is true, but without going into the question of predestination, faith presupposes a free human response (although prompted and sustained by grace) and the will of God here is not absolutely determining.

The second starting point is Christ as second Adam: here we would begin from the fifth chapter of the Epistle of St Paul to the Romans and show Christ as the head of a new humanity. Just as all men, simply by being, are related to Adam (and it little matters whether they recognize their ancestry or not); so, since the incarnation, Christ is related to all men, really related, objectively related, even though once again they may not recognize their ancestor. These traditional assertions of faith and of theology which is the articulation of faith, are taken up in the dogmatic constitution on the Church and again in the pastoral constitution on the Church in the world of today. In these texts we can distinguish three things: a principle, a conclusion and an implication. The principle is this:

Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear . . . He who is 'the image of the invisible God', is himself the perfect man. To the sons of Adam he restores the divine likeness which had been disfigures from the first sin onward . . . For by his incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind, acted by human choice, and loved with a human heart.<sup>1</sup>

Now the conclusion: the christian is one who has received the grace of the Spirit and who has been conformed to the paschal mystery and is a son in Christ, the elder brother of the new humanity. But the conclusion which interests us here is the following:

All this holds true not only for christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

This principle and this conclusion have the following implication: the non-believer is a man in quest of his true identity, someone who thinks he is alone in the universe and an orphan, whereas in fact (or in faith) he is a brother of Christ and a son of the Father. It follows that 'conversion' for the unbeliever would mean discovering the answer to his quest for his identity and in a sense coming home. Already at work in him, without him being aware of it is grace, and all grace is grace of Christ.

We ought to examine a little more closely this talk about grace working in him 'without him being aware of it'. This is my phrase, but the text says 'in an unseen way' and the word is a reminder that grace always works in an invisible fashion – in you and in me too, since we cannot perceive grace. But clearly, the invisibility (or the unconsciousness) of grace means something different in the case of the believer and that of the unbeliever. What is the difference? The believer may not be aware of grace in the sense that he can put his finger on it and say here it is, indisputably – that would be presumption; but he is aware of his need of grace, he prays for light and help, he sometimes thinks he is aware of its effects in himself. St Ignatius talks about discerning spiritual influences. So there must be some sense in talking of an experience of grace, whether of the grace of forgiveness or that of union with God, to give two examples. If we can talk of experience, then we can talk of consciousness of some sort, incomplete, fragmentary, inchoate consciousness, but at least something more than unawareness. 'Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures'?<sup>1</sup> say Cleophas and his companion describing the effects of the liturgy. But the non-believer, by hypothesis, is totally unaware that grace is working in him in an invisible manner. He may not even know what such language would mean. He might know what it would mean and reject it energetically. He is unconscious of grace or consciously anti-. Yet we still have to say that grace is working in him. How can it be if he knows nothing of that to which he is invited? How can he be anonymously christian? – for that is what we have been saying all along: he does not know his identity, his true name, he therefore is anonymous. He will only know it when he responds personally to the personal invitation of Christ who knows us by name.

Let us now look at it, for a moment, from the point of view of

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<sup>1</sup> Lk 24, 32.

the non-believer once again. He may very well feel resentful if you tell him that he is an anonymous christian. And he may reasonably reply: 'But this is a typical piece of theological double-think. Numbers of believers are diminishing, the churches are deserted (we will allow him a little polemical exaggeration), and to disguise this fact now you begin to talk about anonymous christians and try to rope us in, all unwillingly. It is another example of christian unreality and christian totalitarianism'.

It is possible that we had made a bad tactical approach to our non-believer, that we had brushed him up the wrong way. Surely we can do better than this. I think perhaps we can. For all is not clear in the non-believer's position, there are gaps into which we can infiltrate not faith, but at least a question about it. For in some of his attitudes he can give himself away, or at least give away more than he wants to give away: there can be a hint of grace. One can only give rather dud examples here, since it is a matter of individuals and their experience. But take for example the protest against death as the ending of things. Simon de Beauvoir ends her moving book on the death of her mother in this way:

There is no natural death: nothing that happens to man is ever natural since his presence is a perpetual question in the world. All men are mortal: but for each man his death is an accident even if he knows it and consents to it, and it is an act of violence.<sup>1</sup>

The radical protest against the meaninglessness of death, or the demand for love that is absolute, or the borstal officer arguing that the only way to emerge from the impossible and intractable situations in which young offenders could find themselves was 'love': these are only hints, adumbrations, momentary weaknesses perhaps, and no doubt they can be explained away. But there is nothing to prevent the christian (who knows the score) from reading them off, interpreting them, at least wondering if there is not something of the *simul fidelis et infidelis* in these positions.

It might be wiser not to say so in too loud a voice. Yet it does give the theologian something to work from and perhaps something to work for. In his approach to the non-believer he has something he can address himself to: the values the non-believer recognizes implicitly. He certainly does not come to him as one who has all

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<sup>1</sup> *Une Mort si Douce* (Paris, 1964), p 164.

to one who has nothing. His only advantage – and he can easily throw it away – is that he has begun to enter into the divine design and can see something of the pattern.

But at this point the question might be asked: how do we know the things that I have been putting forward? I keep switching the point of view from the unbeliever to Christ. How do we know the truths we have been asserting about Christ and his relation to men? The usual answer would be to say that we know them 'from faith'. Or that we know them 'from revelation'. Of these two terms, revelation is the primary one, since it is the invitation to which faith is the response. Since faith cannot be described without reference to revelation, of which it is a correlative term, we will now have to try to say more precisely what revelation is. One proposition on which christians and non-believers who have studied the question would agree is that christianity presents itself as a religion of revelation. This for some has been a reason for embracing it; and for others a reason for rejecting it. For the former, the intervention, the irruption as it were, of God into human history is the original, the distinctive and decisive thing about christianity, and if the claim can be substantiated, then one must give it the assent of faith. Others would make the claim itself the grounds for refusal. Apart from atheists or agnostics who have preliminary difficulties, many religious men have asked how absolute truth can take on historical form, since by its appearance in history at a particular time it must be contingent;<sup>1</sup> others would claim that we have in this supplementary mode of knowing the abolition of human knowing, introduced a joker into the epistemological pack which keeps mankind in a state of immaturity. But we are going too fast. We are assuming that we are all perfectly clear on what revelation means, that is, partly at least, that we are all clear on how the word is used.

Does ordinary usage then throw any light on revelation? If we see a headline in a popular newspaper which says 'Revelations about X', where X is a well known film star, we may reasonably suppose the following things: (a) that there has been something hidden, probably discreditable, which is now about to be disclosed, and (b) someone had to ferret out this secret information, do some research or interloping. So far we have a disclosure and a discloser.

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard gave the classical form of this difficulty: 'Is an historical point of departure possible for an eternal consciousness? How can such a point of departure have any other than a mere historical interest? Is it possible to base an eternal blessedness upon historical knowledge?'

There is a third element which is not absent from a revelation of this kind: a response. The point of the disclosure was that we should be shocked, gratified, horrified, delighted, or reflect that 'idols have feet of clay' or that 'she is human after all'. There is, however, a built-in limitation to this sort of revelation-situation: we do not know, after reading the article, whether the journalist has told all, or whether he had kept back something, or whether indeed there is something which he doesn't know and which would be highly relevant to the points he is making.

Revelations do not have to be total revelations, exhaustive. For this reason, I would not accept the analysis of Downing<sup>1</sup> where he takes revelation to mean revealing all; thus, he says: 'A blind flew up revealing a man's face at the window'. The man's face was made plain to view. It was not veiled, nor was it a mask etc.<sup>2</sup> The point is a serious one, because if you are going to decide that revelation means revealing all, then christianity is not a revelation, since obviously God is not made plain to view in the sense that the divine essence is unveiled.

But we have no need to come to this conclusion. We do not need to deny the title of revelation to partial revelation. This becomes more important if we consider the case of self-revelation. Though deceit is of course possible, self-revelation can be more reliable and trustworthy than the revelation of an outsider, since all the critical questions on revelation tend to centre on whether the revealer knows what he is talking about, whether he has truly inside information. Where it is a case of self-revelation, this critical question is not of course ruled out, but at least it is less likely to be upsetting. Another feature of self-revelation is that it can be done in words or in deeds. It is not simply a matter of communicating information on what the self-revealer chooses to say to us, but can be gathered from looking at what he does. Thus one might say: 'The way she managed her horse was a revelation to me'. The speaker had never seen her riding a horse before, and had never suspected that she had this talent. Once again there is his response to the situation: he is surprised, he had not expected this at all, henceforward he will be less hasty in his judgements.

All the elements we have seen in the revelation situation, we will find duly transformed, when we come to christian revelation.

<sup>1</sup> Downing, F. Gerald, *Has Christianity a Revelation?* (London, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> Cf Copleston, F. C., *Heythrop Journal* (April 1965).

Ordinary language may not take us very far, but it helps us to sharpen the tools of the trade, the language we must inevitably use, especially when we are dealing with the unbeliever.

Now we come to the conciliar treatment of revelation. The Council has a dogmatic constitution on divine revelation which presents revelation in these terms:

In his goodness and wisdom, God chose to reveal himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of his will (cf Eph 1, 9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man has access to the Father in the holy Spirit and comes to share in the divine nature (cf Eph 2, 18; 2 Pet 1, 4). Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (cf Col 1, 15; 1 Tim 1, 17) out of the abundance of his love speaks to men as friends (cf Exod 33, 11; Jn 15, 14-15) and lives among them (cf Bar 3, 38) so that he may invite and take them into fellowship with himself. This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man is made clear to us in Christ, who is the Mediator and at the same time the fullness of all revelation.<sup>1</sup>

This is to say, in the language we were using earlier, that Christ is both the agent and the content of revelation, and therefore we have here a case of self-revelation, of self-disclosure. Revelation is God's self-disclosure in Christ. The second comment on this passage is that the revelation is not simply a matter of information, communicable in words to the understanding. The text says that the words and deeds have an inner unity, and this inner unity excludes even any sort of simple parallelism between them. The sources of the christian idea of revelation are jewish, and jewish thought on the subject centred on the marvellous and mighty work of the Lord in bringing the people out of Egypt. There is a divine action in history, an action which becomes part of the history into which it breaks, which sets history off on a new course. And this is what christian revelation is. If the judaeo-christian faith asserts the existence of a 'living God' – not a first cause – then its certainty is

<sup>1</sup> *Dei verbum*, 2.

derived most properly from the manifestation of God's vitality and concern provided by his historical interventions. The climax of these historical interventions for the Church is the raising of Jesus from the dead.

This approach renews, I think, a set of traditional problems connected with the evidences of revelation. Often these were presented in the past in a rather external and rationalistic way, and individual miracles and individual prophecies were pressed as evidence. The dogmatic constitution adjusts this emphasis: 'Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making himself present and manifesting himself: through his words and deeds, signs and wonders, but especially through his death and glorious resurrection from the dead and the final sending of the Spirit of truth'.<sup>1</sup> The great mistake of past apologetics was to suggest a rationalistic, quasi-scientific pattern in the recognition of revelation. When we are dealing with the recognition of signs, we cannot add to the sign-value of what we are considering by piling up signs. To recognize a sign you have (a) to recognize signs generally, that is to have a certain sensibility to the question in hand and (b) the sign must be presented in a credible context. The resurrection is not just one 'miracle' among several others which we might choose as part of our apologetic argument. It has to be seen as an event which knits together a whole complex of events and scattered impressions, it has to tie together roughly all that we know about Christ. And the credible context for the sign is the existence of a christian community living its life according to the Spirit. This is why in the phase I have just quoted the sending of the Spirit of truth is a part of the revelation in its completeness. It is true that the two elements I have just mentioned – a sensibility to signs and a credible context – cannot combine to produce the response of faith, but they are the best we can do 'from this side of the hill'.

Another question we must ask is about the content of this revelation. The dogmatic constitution says that by revelation 'the deepest truth about God is made clear to us in Christ'.<sup>2</sup> So we must certainly admit that there is communication of knowledge about God. But the text quoted says also that 'the deepest truths about the salvation of man is made clear to us in Christ'. Is revelation, then, really about man and his destiny? Is theology really anthropology? It is worth noting that the text does not say that the deepest truth

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



about man is made clear to us, but that the deepest truth about the salvation of man is made clear to us in Christ. Is this a restriction? In one sense it is not, since if salvation in Christ is the deepest truth about man, if it is his vocation, then it is the most relevant thing that man wishes to know, and his need for this deepest truth should be reflected in all his activity, even if indirectly and by refraction. But it is perhaps a restriction in the sense that we must not expect revelation to provide a solution to our ordinary empirical problems. Christ, we know, was a man of his own time with the scientific world view of his own age. This need in no way be regarded as a limitation of revelation if revelation is concerned with the deepest truth about the salvation of man.<sup>1</sup>

The Council's teaching on revelation can be summed up in the words of Fr George Tavard. The whole purpose of the first chapter of the dogmatic constitution is to show how the revelation:

given once for all in Jesus Christ to mankind as a whole, becomes life in the Church for all those who, by baptism, have been incorporated into Christ. In other words the revelation is neither essentially a doctrine, though it implies one, nor a set of propositions to be believed, though it may be partially expressed in such propositions, nor the promulgation of the ethical law of prescriptions and proscriptions, though it also implies judgement of the morality of human behaviour. Essentially, revelation is a life. It is the very life of God imparted to man through the incarnation of the Son; it is the communication of God's word, understood by man in the holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, can we then sum up our position by using the analysis of ordinary usage which I quoted half way through? There were four elements: (1) something hidden is disclosed, (2) there is an agent, (3) a response, and (4) all this happens in a context which affects likelihood. We can now answer

<sup>1</sup> When the Council was considering the inerrancy of scripture the text proposed by the secretariat spoke of scripture containing salvific truth, *veritas salutaris*. An amendment suggested the omission of the word *salvific*. But this could have led to the suggestion that scripture contained all manner of truths, and could not be faulted out on geographical or scientific points. Although the exact phrase 'saving truth' was not retained, its equivalent was: '... The books of scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted to put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation'. *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (Winter 1966), p 8.

- (1) what is revealed is the divine plan for mankind, or more precisely what is revealed in Jesus is God; Jesus is God's self-disclosure and the disclosure of what is religious man,
- (2) Jesus is also the means of revelation, its agent,
- (3) the response to him we call faith,
- (4) the credible context in which all this happens and in which we learn about it is the Church, the community of believers, community of the risen Lord, of the Spirit, the eucharistic community.

Further, if the revelation is definitive – that simply means there will be no more – and unique, – and that means there is no other – we should expect that something like the Church (a gathering) would come into being as a result of this process, though we might not yet be able to say very much about its actual structure. What its structure will turn out to be is a further question. The second consequence takes us back to our starting point: if the revelation is unique and definitive, then it must be for all men, not for some men, and all men's quest for God will be judged, illuminated and healed through comparison with this vision. In other words, non-Christian religions must be seen in the light of it and not vice-versa. There is a further consequence: this is an objective intervention: it has happened, it is happening. It affects men, even if they do not know.

There is one more consequence relevant to our consideration of the unbeliever: there is something we can call a 'christology from below': God became man, fully man, and therefore all we know about man and all his aspirations cannot be indifferent to Christ, and the more we know about man his thinking, his philosophy, his deepest desires, the more we know about Christ. We can begin from below, we can start from on high; there will be a meeting and coincidence from each direction. And hence the acknowledgement of Christ in faith, the response to the invitation of revelation, should be an experience like coming home. For revelation in the sense we have described throws light on man as well as on God.

All that I have said is summed up in the texts 'Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever, . . . is the way (the agent of revelation), the truth (the content of revelation) and the life (for those who respond in faith)'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf Heb 13, 8; Jn 14, 6.