

## The Ultimate Indiscernibility of Faith

My title seems to advocate subjectivism, that is to deny any criterion of truth outside the subject, to propagate a radical subjectivity familiar to the post-Kantian idealist tradition developed by Hegel. It also appears to repudiate any criterion of evaluation for the superiority of any faith, and to entirely eliminate the question of the relevancy of Christian tradition, in particular its claim of unique truth and of absolute necessity and its history of dogmas and anathema.

In the Christian tradition, Faith is regularly defined as a surrender of the mind, as a submission of our intelligence, moved by love, to the truth revealed by God. Faith is seen as an obedient acceptance of Church teaching. For too many Christians, new truths are somehow added to our intelligence (regarding the Trinity for instance), truths, to which human reason cannot reach, revealed by God and handed down by the Church, which will make sense only in the next world.

Today faith, for more and more Christians, has come to mean some type of handing over of oneself to a Transcendent named God. No longer are many believers quite happy to accept revealed mysteries that made very little sense to them in this world, but they remain open to transcendence, with the hope, too, that it will somehow enlighten their human way. Faith in this sense, then, is not only a leap of acceptance, but also the continuous call within one to go beyond oneself, probing what is most human.

The Indian Catholic theologian Raimundo Panikkar understands faith as an openness to the beyond, to transcendence, personal or not; but it is an unlimited capacity for growth, a dynamic constitutive dimension of man who continuously wishes, searches, questions.<sup>1</sup>

In that perspective, faith is not essentially a doctrine or a moral, but an essential element of man, grounding man's unlimited ability to grow. Through faith, man may discover his limitation, contingency, indigence, and also his "natural" desire for perfection, his unlimited capacity to

---

\* Dr. Goulet teaches at Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

<sup>1</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, *L'homme qui devient Dieu. La foi dimension constitutive de l'homme*. (Paris: Aubier, 1969).

know, to love, to live, his unquenchable thirst for more, for better. That possibility of discovery constitutes Faith as a central tension: a tension between two axes: my "I" which wants to be autonomous, securely limited, and the Transcendent within me calling me. My being must lose itself first, by acknowledging a second axis, and then by going as far as to acknowledge that the beyond is the true axis.

"The progress of faith means the conflict between these two poles. There are mutual feints, approaches, and withdrawals; alternate tension and relaxation; until finally both poles coincide to form what we call a Christian existence, expressed by the words of St. Paul: 'I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me!'"<sup>2</sup>

But as Panikkar explains, faith, having its roots in the Absolute, cannot be bound by a final mode of expression, because that faith must always be expressing the Transcendent. Since man is "viator", faith has to be a 'pilgrim' faith.<sup>3</sup> And so the condition of Faithfulness appears as a process whose articulation is radically secondary to the core dynamism of its undefined presence.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this root subordination of articulation, or creed, to ultimate faith, reveals the basis of common opinion regarding good faith.

Someone who is, thinks and acts according to his conscious interior conviction is of good faith. The man of good faith is someone whose conscious commitment is in accordance with reality as he experiences and understands the authenticity, honesty, personal integrity. The man of good faith acts according to his conscience understood in its triple dimension or role: as an ontic element of the personality itself, as a judgment formulating general ethical norms, and as an existential act of personal decision in the actual situation.

Good faith is personal: my faith! it belongs to the individual to develop an interior conviction, which must include the integrate as harmoniously as possible all that a person is, all his experiences—neurotic, psychotic, whatever—and all their ramifications. And we can then say that the "will of truth" is the "truth of the will", that is, the authenticity of the will.

Such a personal faith as articulated is my limited, relative, contingent way of understanding, of living and of celebrating. It includes growth, doubt, search, my uniqueness, and therefore change which acknowledges my gradual transformation and that of others.

However, there is the ever-prevalent temptation to universalize and

---

<sup>2</sup> Romano Guardini, *The Life of Faith*, Transl. by J. Chapin, (London: Newman Press, 1961), p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, *op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Catholic theology has been slower than Protestantism in appreciating this distinction. For a recent catholic expression, see Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), chapter 4.

absolutize as divine Truth and Will insights and values specifically bound and limited to a local temporary culture. Too often the high priests of those various cultures accuse their competitors of infidelity, of deception, of heresy, of superstitions, of atheism.

By contrast, the man of bad faith is one who refuses to live according to what he considers true. The following terms could describe that person, namely: liar, cheater, inauthentic, simulator, deceiver, willfully ignorant, voluntarily self-deluding, unfaithful, sinner.

In contrast to good faith, open to the oddities of subjectivity, true faith is considered to be that of the believer who not only is committed according to his conscience, that is to say by interior conviction, but whose experience, insight, understanding, judgment, decision and action correspond *de facto* to reality. But what criteria can be applied to demonstrate such a correspondence? None which could definitely establish it as manifest, unveiled. To claim otherwise is to place in the finite subject a luminosity of Intelligibility that denies his historical finitude. Intelligibility is us, and hence efforts at objectifying it or its criteria, are irremediably perspectival<sup>5</sup> and opaque. The objectification that is our pronouncement, our ritual, our living, is infinitely remote from the extrinsic infinite intelligibility to which Faith threads us. And it is this infinitude of gap that ultimately constitutes Faith as indiscernible.

Yet even that indiscernibility is not manifest. Just as the difficulty of the Socratic project, "know thyself", is manifested to the individual only in so far as that individual labours long for self-knowledge, so that opaqueness of the seed of transcendence in history only reveals itself slowly through the toils and labours of religious living and conflict and reflection. So in our time, it is significant that with the growing realization within the *Geisteswissenschaften* of the remoteness of human meaning there comes forward a renewal of the theology of mystery and the theology of hope, a reacting for "things unseen".

But the basic thesis of the ultimate indiscernibility of Faith is not a radical shift in theology: it is unfortunately a hidden tenet of the entire Christian tradition, articulatedly present even through centuries of religious war grounded in its denial. Let us pass on here to view some aspects of that articulated presence. Aspects that we may touch on are long-respected views on the primacy of conscience, on the universality of salvation, and on the fact that propositions cannot be salvific by themselves.

Primacy of conscience as an articulated presence—manifest in words therefore without perhaps the living presence—is spread through Christianity. Already it is in Saint Paul:

---

<sup>5</sup> See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (op. cit.), Index, under "perspective".

"For instance, pagans who never heard of the Law but are led by reason to do what the Law commands, may not actually 'possess' the Law, but they can be said to 'be' the Law. They can point to the substance of the Law engraved on their hearts—they can call a witness, that is, their own conscience" (Romans, 2: 14-15).

and it is echoed as recently as the Second Vatican Council:

"Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths."

and later in the same document:

"Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity."<sup>6</sup>

What is being articulated here is an aspect of the ultimate indiscernibility of Faith, an articulation filled with most life through the historic darkness of departure from the reality it articulates.

Again, there is the ancient tenet of the universality of the salvific reach of God "who wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (I Tim 2:4). But that tenet in history has been performatively contradicted by the zeal with which the coming to knowledge was required. History succeeds slowly in teaching us that the truth in the core of our meaning is seen at but only in a glass darkly—the coming to knowledge is a stumbling of feeble intellect prior to the eschatological dawn.

Thirdly, there is little stress in New Testament writing on the salvific properties of articulate propositions, with a dominant stress on the interpersonal quality of salvation. As Aquinas put it succinctly in the medieval period:

"The act of the believer does not terminate in a proposition, but in a thing."<sup>7</sup>

There is a sense here, as in the example of the other two illustrative tenets, in which history has slowly made manifest the incarnate quality of faith, the shroud of Personal Mystery that hides from us the meaning of divine love.

But there are objections to be met. Is not all this a shift to a basic subjectivism, a relativism? Does it not eliminate even a minimum of certitude and security? Does it not eliminate the possibility of heresy? Let us look at these in turn.

As one contemporary theologian has said, God reaches us "from within outwards", not "from without inwards", that is, from the very core of density of our existence, at the very point where we flow from

<sup>6</sup> Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, No. 16; *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. by Walter M. Abbott, (London: G. Chapman, 1966), pp. 213-214.

<sup>7</sup> *Summa Theol.*, IIa IIae, question 1, article 2, objection 2; transl. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (New York: Benzinger, 1947), p. 1170.

God's creative hands.<sup>8</sup>

A subjectivist theory of knowledge is obviously not proposed. Of course, God, the world of things exist in themselves, independently of me and of my life. What is said in this paper has nothing to do with Hegel or Kant (who see history as only an idea or an ideal), much to do with Blondel's concrete reflections, with Husserl's search for a grounded authentic subjectivity, with Lonergan's position that objectivity is in fact grounded in authentic subjectivity.

The meaningful world in which I find myself, which is seen and lived by me, which gives a meaning to my existence, and to which my existence gives a meaning—my existential world, in other words—does not exist without me; and it exists all the more in that I am and live more intensely.<sup>9</sup>

But, whatever the debates about subjectivity, the proposed indiscernibility surely grounds a relativism? So, for example, are not all faiths equally slavific?

The basic issue here is that "all faiths" is a misnomer. There is only one Faith whose discernment is shrouded in mystery. Has it an authentic articulation which stands out from all other articulations as the day from night? One must distinguish finite articulation from ultimate articulation. Authenticity may pertain to finite articulation, however deviant or feeble. But, yet, that is an Ultimate Authentic articulation, in light inaccessible. And within history there are shreds of articulation that converge on that ultimacy—but who is to discern the meshing of those shreds as they relate to the living of an authentic life?

What then of the minimum of certitude within that life?

Here one might draw on the distinction of Lonergan between religious conversion and moral or intellectual conversion, and mesh his discussion of religious conversion with Tillich's view of ultimate concern. Our ground security, out "peace, joy. . ." is *within* the zone of indiscernible Faith, the zone of being taken up by ultimate concern.<sup>10</sup> Outside this zone one is on the tossed insecure waves of a life in personal and cultural perspective.

Finally there is the question of heresy. What we have said above of the shreds of authentic articulation applies here. But much more pointedly Quentin Quesnell remarks, in a study of the issue,

"But what is the objective value of holding objective criteria to which each of mutually contradictory parties can appeal, finding in them simultaneously their own orthodoxy and their opponent's heresy? . . . How does such an analysis promote the cause

<sup>8</sup> Piet Fransen, *The New Life of Grace*, (New York: Desclee, 1969), pp. 130-131.

<sup>9</sup> Romano Guardini, *The Life of Faith*, (op. cit.), p. 48, note 1.

<sup>10</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (op. cit.), chapter 4, especially p. 106.

of objectivity?"<sup>11</sup>

What is of objective value is that broad ecumenism which listens in the spirit and is willing to share what shreds of light that be, suspecting that Ultimate Concern is bringing forth salvation in ways indiscernible.

In closing, I would make my own the words of Piet Fransen:

"We do not possess truth in faith; but in faith, truth possesses us."<sup>12</sup>

Indeed our Faith does not encompass the living God who remains Transcendent. God reaches every one of us, touches every one of us, calls us by our name, with an Infinite Call but in a human way.

---

<sup>11</sup> Quentin Quesnell, *The Foundations of Heresy*, to be published.

<sup>12</sup> Piet Fransen, as reported in *The National Catholic Reporter*, (Kansas City: Missouri, USA), November 3, 1972, p. 9.