

## FREEDOM AND OBEDIENCE

Freedom, obedience, authority, all of these and their relation to one another are much discussed these days. There are some who refer to our current difficulties as the crisis of obedience; some, as the crisis of authority; still others, as our crisis of freedom. The mode of expression makes little difference, for all are related facets of the one problem. But since the problem is of profound importance, this hour of religious renewal calls for a fundamental re-evaluation of our thinking on freedom, obedience and authority.

Now any penetrating re-evaluation of this problem area with a religious interest in mind must seek out its theological origins. And if, as we hope, these hours of anguish are a prelude to a better appreciation and a more faithful practice of obedience, then the steps to this end can only be seen in view of the philosophical context in which the problem was conceived. Regretfully, it is in this that much of the recent discussion and writing on obedience and freedom fails. It has so isolated the problem, lifting it out of its historical setting, that discussion and writing frequently go off on tangents, or merely remain on the surface of the problem. By the same token, if we do not penetrate into the underlying causes of our present crisis, then we shall never reach a satisfactory solution. At best we might achieve a temporary remedy with the ever-present risk of only adding to the difficulties by applying the wrong treatment.

The burden of this paper is to investigate the philosophical and theological background of our current crisis. I would like to point out some values derived from recent trends, but I think it also necessary to single out the dangers inherent in these same trends.

In the pre-Christian Greek world, one finds the roots of man's intellectual relation to something or someone above himself. This intellectual relation includes two interrelated elements: reason and transcendence. Both Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies had a deep concern and a healthy respect for human reason, and it was by

reason that man was led to the appreciation of a relation to something higher. For Plato, it was by a participation in a higher unity; for Aristotle it was the unmoved knowing principle. This intellectual relation to the divine is deep within the patrimony of western civilization.

Yet the work of the Greek philosophers left many questions unanswered—questions which were of the greatest importance to the appreciation of man's dependence on God. However, God has not left man alone. Through the ages of Jewish history, He taught the chosen people who was the Lord God of Israel to whom obedience was due. On the cross, he taught by example obedience to God even unto death.

God not only instructed man, but invited man to a still more intense participation in the divine life. The philosophic insights of the Greek philosophy, combining reason and transcendence, were not destroyed but perfected by the coming of the Savior. And through the long stretch of the medieval period, the philosophical and theological dimensions of these were gradually distinguished. Christianity afforded as complete a concept as possible of God, the world and man. The distinction and coordination of philosophy and dogma reached its splendor under St. Thomas and Duns Scotus, and it was during this period that we find the development of a precise theory of knowledge and a complete metaphysics.

Relatively speaking, this period was short-lived. At the risk of over-simplification, it can be said that the breakdown came with the introduction of conceptualism, leading toward nominalism and typified by Ockham. He contended that our universal ideas were without foundation in things, thus removing at one stroke both the possibility of rationally planning order among men and the foundation in men which would make such an ordering consonant with their nature. Moreover, he removed the possibility of arriving by means of reasons at anything more than the fact of God.

The classical connection of reason and transcendence was broken. There remained no foundation for religious obedience in man, nor could man understand and appreciate his relation to God.

Here we have the root of so many difficulties of the modern world, and obedience is one of them.

Briefly, let us look at the subsequent events to see more clearly the growth of our current dilemmas. First, man lost his sense of transcendence and the human intellect was turned back on itself. Descartes gave greater impetus to this by his theory of knowledge. According to Descartes, man does not come to his ideas by experience; he finds them in himself. He knows God, but the entire emphasis is on man. And once again transcendence is absent.

Two main philosophical traditions flow from Descartes. The empiricists held man does not know things directly, but snatches impressions which objects make on him. Hence, man remained the center of all knowledge. The other branch—the rationalists—so concentrated on the human intellect that the God it recognized tended to become pantheistic.

Kant attempted to reunite what was positive in these trends, but he succeeded only in canonizing man's inability to appreciate transcendence. Herbart and Schopenhauer introduced another development. Taking Kant's induction that things *in se* might be attained by the human will rather than the intellect, Schopenhauer started with experience and concluded we can know things *in se* by means of the will. This introduced an element of subjectivity into the essentials of real knowledge. Although this emphasis on the will did not supply the basis for a new system in philosophy, it did exercise a strong influence in later movements, especially that of Kierkegaard.

Soren Kierkegaard strongly felt that the nineteenth century was in need of a return to a full living of the Christian life to replace the formalism and secularism rampant at that time in Denmark and many other places. To accomplish this revival, he stressed the subjective living of the Christian life, rather than knowing it.

After the second World War, Kierkegaard attracted a great deal of attention when there arose a reaction to the extreme rationalism of the New Hegelians, the group called existentialists. In fairness to Kierkegaard, it must be said that he would never recognize some of his progeny. He started a crusade to revitalize Christianity, but

many of his followers seized upon his subjectivity and abandoned Christianity so that there arose a new form of atheism.

Existentialism defies definition because existentialists themselves abhor such a thing as a system and hence there can be as many varieties as there are existentialists. Nor can they be grouped together into Christian and atheistic existentialists. Fr. Gustave Weigel, in his colorful manner, said of existentialism that "a definition will not contain this thing because it oozes out of the container; it is so liquid."<sup>1</sup>

However, the noted Dominican philosopher, Charlesworth, has drawn up a broad but workable definition. He defined it in this way:

The essence of existentialism . . . lies in its insistence upon the *primacy of subjectivity*. First, in the speculative order . . . this primacy of subjectivity means the rejection of all systematic thought—of the abstract and the necessary and the universal—for the sake of the individual and singular, and unique and ineffable experience of the subject. . . . Secondly, in the practical or moral order, the order of moral action and choice, this primacy of subjectivity means the rejection of any *a priori* morality and the affirmation of the complete freedom, the complete gratuitousness of the liberty of the subject.<sup>2</sup>

This definition includes three elements, each of which gives rise to difficulties for religious obedience.

First, there is the primacy of subjectivity, that is, the understanding of things as related to the consciousness of the individual. This is but a continuance of the emphasis inaugurated by the nominalists. The primacy of subjectivity places man, instead of God, as the center of all. As a result, obedience loses its religious character which is predicated on the subordination of all to God.

If, however, the appreciation of this subordination to God is not present because of this primacy of subjectivity, could such an appreciation be supplied to phenomenology from another source such as faith? Certainly; but not without creating an irresolvable tension,

<sup>1</sup> "The Background of *Humani Generis*," *Theological Studies*, XII (1951), 221.

<sup>2</sup> "The Meaning of Existentialism," *The Thomist*, XVI (1953), 473.

for the subordination to God thus known remains contrary to the basic philosophical perspective which centers all on the individual. Thus, authority will always be accepted uneasily and obedience will require a certain violence because it is contrary to the subjectivity.

Secondly, let us consider the primacy of subjectivity in relation to the speculative order. Here it implies that the value of the intellect's attainment of the abstract, the necessary, and universal must be rejected in order to emphasize the individual, the singular, the unique, the experience of the subject. This must necessarily follow once the individual human person is made the center of all things. It also follows that any grouping together of individuals can only be had at a great cost to the individual. It is precisely here that we encounter our modern problems of authority and obedience.

The authority in a religious group must see the group as one in its relation to God. His directives or laws must usually be in universal terms applicable to the whole group. But a conflict necessarily arises when the universal law or directive meets the principle of the primacy of subjectivity. In view of this principle the subject considers the law not simply accidentally deficient, but he feels it to be necessarily the result of a systematic ignoring of his most profound values. Hence, dialogue is called for, not simply in order that the superior might better learn the facts or that the subject might better understand the order given. Rather, once the primacy of the individual subjectivity has been accepted as the context, this most important element of all can never be grasped by authority which looks rather to the whole, to the universal. Dialogue is felt to be necessary so that what the order or law is to be might be determined by him who alone appreciates this personal center, that is, the individual subject.

In the third element, existentialism applies its subjectivity to the practical order, the order of moral action and choice. If the intellect cannot provide an adequate basis for the superior to grasp the place of the individual in relation to the group, then the subject's intellect cannot do this for himself. Therefore, the act must be specified by some other power and hence enter the affections, the



will or the senses. The liberty of the subject thus takes on in principle a gratuitousness precisely where concerned with what is now made the ultimate value, the determination of the individual person.

It should be obvious what effect this will have on religious authority and obedience. The religious element cannot be present because of the philosophical perspective which allows it to be at best accidentally related to God rather than man. Neither authority nor obedience can be present because the ultimate decision must be left to the individual working in a gratuitous fashion.

Having considered the basic principles of existentialism and how this theory gradually evolved, it remains to illustrate how, in recent times, authority and obedience have in fact been affected by these philosophical developments.

The existentialist movement, so common in Europe after the second World War, eventually had its influence in the field of theology. There arose what has become known as a "new theology." It was not necessarily Catholic existentialism, but since this new theology grew up in the atmosphere of post-war existentialism, it was bound to absorb its spirit, its attitudes. Many of the leaders of this new theology were sincere men, anxious to apply the Christian message to a war-torn Europe.

Fr. Weigel, in an article written in 1951 on the background of the then recently published encyclical, *Humani Generis*, said that Catholics, living in an atmosphere where existentialism is prominent, may try to move along with it as far as a Catholic context will permit. "They will try to adopt existentialist postures with the hope of transcending existentialist theory. If this be done consciously or unconsciously, strange things will take place."<sup>3</sup> He then presents a number of examples to illustrate how such a philosophy will affect theological thought. A Catholic, he foresees, with existentialist preoccupations will find the consideration of the Mystical Body as a living, human thing, very congenial. However, a legalistic consideration of the Church as an abstract juridical institution will be annoying because it will look too much like fencing him in.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Art. cit.*, 223.

<sup>4</sup> *Art. cit.*, 224.

He further sees the existential theology as Christocentric, but at the same time he sees in the existentialist's divinization of Catholic life a dangerous possibility. "The Catholic can become so inward in his belief and piety, that he can easily remove himself from the Church's external authority, doctrinal and jurisdictional."<sup>5</sup>

Fr. Weigel appears especially clairvoyant when he imagines what the theologian's attitude will be toward authority if he is carried away by the existentialist's vision of the Church, especially if the theologian is more distinguished by uncritical enthusiasm than humble docility. He said such a theologian will simply ignore all directives from authority which are not compatible with his persuasions.<sup>6</sup>

If one peruses papal documents over the past 20 years, it is at once evident that the popes have been keenly aware and seriously concerned about the effects existentialism has been having on philosophy and theology, especially as related to authority and obedience.

Prior to the issuance of *Humani Generis* in 1950, Pius XII on several occasions warned of the dangers of existentialism. In the encyclical itself, he made reference to this philosophy in three places, singling out those of its doctrines which were dangerous: neglect of immutable essences, its theodicy and its ethics.<sup>7</sup> In a radio address of 1952, when speaking of the formation of the Christian conscience, he took issue with the new theology's contention that man's conscience should be free from "oppressive overseeing by the authority of the Church" and return to the primitive simplicity of Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

In 1956 the Holy Office issued its condemnation of situation ethics which was the application of existential principles to the moral law.<sup>9</sup>

The concern of the popes over the effects of this philosophy in the

<sup>5</sup> *Art. cit.*, 228.

<sup>6</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> *AAS*, 42 (1950), 561-78.

<sup>8</sup> *AAS*, 44 (1952), 413-19.

<sup>9</sup> *AAS*, 48 (1956), 144-45.

area of authority and obedience is particularly evident in the papal statements on religious life and seminary training.

Pius XII's address to the Second General Congress of the States of Perfection in 1952 was concerned in part with religious obedience.<sup>10</sup> He took occasion to answer the criticism being made against religious obedience that it imperils the human dignity of the religious, retards the development of his personality, disturbs his orientation to God, degrades the personal and social value of the religious and creates an obstacle to the direct dominion of God over his conscience.

In these criticisms of obedience, we can see the unfolding of the implications of the philosophical perspective mentioned above in which man's subjectivity is made the center of all and a communal relation to God becomes difficult.

The following year, the same Pontiff took up the question of authority when he spoke to the Superiors General of religious orders and congregations of men.<sup>11</sup> He recalled that he had previously warned the members of the states of perfection not to indulge in the attitudes of existentialism. Then he cautioned superiors not to derive regulations by which they govern their subjects from what people are saying, or from what is considered the latest thing in doctrine and conduct, but from the font of revealed truth and the teaching of the Church.<sup>12</sup> A wise superior, he said, will freely consult and listen to advice, but having heard those especially whom the rule appoints as consultors, he must come to a decision and not be afraid to impose it as a norm of action for his subjects.<sup>13</sup>

Here we have a recognition of authority's need for advice in order to make prudential judgments, but at the same time the ultimate decision rests with authority. This affirms authority's ability to issue universal norms of action for subjects. Pius stressed this same point in a message to the Society of Jesus in which he praised their obedience and warned that they are certainly mistaken who hold that the doctrine contained in St. Ignatius' letter on obedience

<sup>10</sup> *Canon Law Digest*, V, 349.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 366.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 367.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.



should now be abandoned and be replaced by a certain "democratic" equality in accordance with which a subject would discuss a matter with the superior until they arrive at a solution pleasing to both.<sup>14</sup>

During the reign of the benign Pope John XXIII, two circular letters were issued by the Sacred Congregation of Seminaries and Universities and one by the Sacred Congregation of Religious. All three make mention of obedience and in rather strong terms. The first letter was sent to the bishops of the world on June 5, 1959 and deals with various problems in ecclesiastical formation.<sup>15</sup> It points up the need to develop in seminarians a sense of responsibility, initiative and judgment, but it deplors the attitude of teachers who are afraid to command lest they invade the sanctuary of another man's mind and do violence to his personality. Nor must the vigilant presence of a superior be regarded as "something injurious to personality, but rather a help toward securing spiritual development."<sup>16</sup>

The second letter was issued to the hierarchy on September 27, 1960 and deals with the selection and formation of candidates for the priesthood.<sup>17</sup> Once again it stresses the need to care for the individuality of the students, but it laments the tendency, even in ecclesiastical circles, to shrink from the duty to educate and to submit to the individualism of modern youth who seem intolerant of all discipline. It recognizes the need to understand the new generation, but it observes that this need often terminates in a surrender to the shortcomings of the new generation. And therefore, it says, we have an increasing amount of naturalism creeping into clerical formation.

The instruction from the Sacred Congregation of Religious, dated February 2, 1961, is concerned with the selection and training of candidates for the states of perfection and sacred orders.<sup>18</sup> In the section on obedience it recalls that in modern times the Roman

<sup>14</sup> *The Pope Speaks*, IV (1957-58), 448-9.

<sup>15</sup> *Review for Religious*, 18 (1959), 321-27.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>17</sup> *Review for Religious*, 20 (1961), 161-79.

<sup>18</sup> *Canon Law Digest*, V, 452-86.

Pontiffs have spoken on religious obedience and on the "false concept of personality and a certain popular or democratic spirit which is making its way into men's minds and which makes obedience as taught and practiced by Christ altogether void of meaning."<sup>19</sup>

It seems evident from these documents that the Holy See has been concerned and is concerned over the crisis of obedience. And rightly so, because the Holy See is aware of the inherent dangers of the existential principle of the primacy of subjectivity and is continually seeing its effects on authority and obedience.

Pope John, in his opening address to the Vatican Council, made an appeal for the up-dating of the Church while at the same time preserving the traditional doctrine undiluted.<sup>20</sup> This applies to our attempts to solve the crisis of obedience. The existential emphasis of recent years has given us fresh insights into the value of the human person; it has brought him into better focus. This, as well as other developments over the past 20 years, cannot now be ignored. However, in the process of emphasizing the human person, we cannot dilute the traditional doctrine.

Of prime importance is the need for a return to the principles of the *philosophia perennis*. All the recent popes, including Pope John, have urged this. Philosophy must re-examine and reaffirm that man is not ultimate, but dependent. In doing this, it will reaffirm the capacity of the human mind to transcend the single, the individual, for there will then be a transcendent basis for reality, for the social unit and for knowledge of this unit which alone can be the base for the acts of authority. Philosophy must also provide an intellectual and objective foundation for acts of the human will so that they will be ordered and directed and not gratuitous. It has been seen that our present crisis in obedience has evolved from a series of philosophical mistakes; hence, the solution of the obedience crisis necessarily involves the resolution of the more basic problem.

In recent years, there have been great advances made in the study of the Mystical Body: the theandric character of the Church, the relationship of the members to Christ and the Holy Spirit, the

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 475.

<sup>20</sup> *Review for Religious*, 20 (1961), 161-79.

corporateness of the Church, the worship of the Church. All of these in recent times have been the object of theological investigation and as a result our appreciation of the Church has been enriched.

And yet, in recent times another equally necessary feature of the Church has been neglected and at times ridiculed. I speak of her juridic aspect. It is true that in times past this feature of the Church may have been overstressed, but usually because of historical circumstances. As a result of this accentuation, there arose a contrary movement aimed at de-emphasizing the Church's juridical structure. Almost at the same time, the excessive subjectivism and existential spirit began to have its effect on the nature of authority. The result has been that the juridic feature of the Church has suffered. In some cases it is now looked upon as a mere appendage, a necessary evil. Such conceptions hardly foster respect for authority.

In bringing forth and explaining the corporate and societal character of the Church, let us also give a proper presentation of her juridical aspect. We cannot have a true, externally visible society of men, ruled by authority, which is not juridical. The juridical order of the Church has its roots in the mystery of the Church.<sup>21</sup> Let us take pains to understand and explain that the juridical feature of the Church is and must remain an integral part of the societal element of the Church. It is not an accretion. Pius XII warned of this attitude in *Mystici Corporis*:

For this reason, we deplore and condemn the pernicious error of those who dream of an imaginary Church, a kind of society that finds its origin and growth in charity, to which, somewhat contemptuously, they oppose another, which they call juridical. This distinction they introduce is false: for they fail to understand that the reason which led our divine Redeemer to give the community of men he founded the constitution of a society, perfect of its kind and containing all the juridical and social elements—namely, that he might perpetuate on earth the saving work of Redemption—was also the reason why he willed it to be enriched with the heavenly gifts of the Paraclete.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> R. Bidagor, "Es Espiritu del Derecho Canonico," *Revista Española de Derecho Canonico*, XIII (1958), 7.

<sup>22</sup> *AAS*, 36 (1943), 223.

In conjunction with the presentation of the total Mystical Body, there ought to be a re-evaluation of the nature and purpose of ecclesiastical laws. Church law is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end—the welfare of souls. However, ecclesiastical law is coming to be looked upon as so many chains restricting our freedom, coming to be looked upon as nothing more than a series of “do’s” and “don’ts.” This is hardly the true concept of law.

Through a proper understanding of law, it will be seen that the Church in exercising her legislative power does not aim at enslaving the human race. Rather, the Church assures its liberty, redeeming it from weakness, errors and aberrations of the spirit and affections.<sup>23</sup> Some of the Church laws are only protective norms, but there are many laws which are built into the very structure of the Church by Christ himself. But in all cases, the nature and purpose of law and its relationship to the Christian’s pursuit of salvation should be emphasized. How else can we achieve a proper respect for the law?

Today there is also much confusion about the structure and organization of the Church. It is true that the Church is a supernatural society, the product of a positive act of God. However, once established, there flowed from her very nature many elements which resemble the structure of a civil society. Now, one of the inherent rules of any society is that, as it grows and expands and provides more services for more people, it must of necessity become more organized, more complex. The Church in the twentieth century cannot be operated in the same simple manner as it was in the second century, anymore than our federal government can revert to the simplicity of the thirteen colonies. Pius XII touched on this point when he spoke in 1956 to the Vienna Law School. He said:

Christ founded his Church not as a formless spiritual movement but as a strongly organized association. . . . We do not need to tell jurists that the few laws of Apostolic times would not be sufficient to direct a world Church of over 400 million souls today. . . . The Church has not come thereby to any “excessive legalization.” Even today a religious will, spiritual power and sacramental life among the faithful can

<sup>23</sup> Pius XII, allocut. “Church Law and Church Life,” 3 June 1956, *AAS*, 48 (1956), 498.

be found which is generally stronger and freer, perhaps, than ever before.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, there is need today to bring before the members of the Mystical Body a clear, precise understanding of the traditional notion of obedience. The classical concept can be found in ascetical books; it is the virtue derived from the gospels and tradition of the Church, the one expounded by the Fathers and Doctors of the Church; the one which all the Holy Fathers in recent times have urged that we practice.

Anyone who has been reading current literature on obedience is well aware of the charges being made against the traditional concept of obedience: it curbs initiative, makes people immature, interferes with the operation of the Holy Spirit, infringes on basic, God-given rights and liberties, stifles one's personality growth, engenders formalism, encourages mediocrity and passivity. These objections are commonplace now, but it is regrettable that there are so few answering these objections. Time does not allow us to go into them here, but I would like to single out a few.

Let us take the so-called "dialogue obedience" which is so talked about today. Obviously, there are times when authority ought to consult subjects, offer explanations and reasons for directives and programs, be attuned to the needs of the individuals and take advantage of the operations of the Holy Spirit in them. However, the danger today is that there is a growing conviction that consultation, explanations, reasons and group discussions between authority and subjects are essential to the practice of obedience—essential to the extent that if subjects are not consulted, not given reasons, or if they don't agree with the reasons given, there is no need to obey. Such thinking contains a twofold weakness. First, it can very easily strip obedience of its supernatural character, since acceptance and execution of the directive is based not on the supernatural motive that an ecclesiastical superior is to be obeyed because of the authority with which God invested him. Rather, he is obeyed because his directive is in accordance with the subject's convictions.

<sup>24</sup> *Loc. cit.*



It is also argued today that just as in the act of faith we are given motives of credibility, so we also should be given motives for obedience, that is, reasons should be presented. As this argument is advanced, it seems to indicate a misunderstanding of the function of the motives of credibility. Motives of credibility do not give us an intellectual appreciation of the intrinsic nature of a revealed doctrine; they assist us in knowing that God has spoken and that it is reasonable to believe. Hence, the motive for obedience is not that we have an intellectual appreciation of the directive, or that we know the reasons for it. The motive is that authority expresses for the subject the will of God, at least here and now.

Secondly, this approach contains a practical difficulty. If obedience is made dependent upon consultation, explanations and reasons offered, authority would spend most of its waking hours defending its programs and directives. Dr. Griswold, former President of Yale University, put his finger on one of the key problems facing college presidents today. "We who hold this office spend so much time justifying what we're doing that we don't have time to do what we're justifying." That is what would happen to ecclesiastical authority.

If both authority and subjects understand and appreciate the traditional concept of obedience, initiative will not be stifled. No doubt there have been and are ecclesiastical authorities who mistakenly think that their subjects are children, that their every thought and action must be guided. Under such domination, there can be little initiative. And it is equally true that there are subjects who labor under the false impression that obedience requires that subjects become inert, passive, blocks of wood which move only when commanded. Both are erroneous. But the trend today seems to be to observe the abuses and conclude that the basic structure is wrong.

It is also going to the extreme to say that the Church in America is being held back because the clergy and religious are too regimented, oppressed and drained of initiative. It might be true in particular cases which can serve to point out to all the need for eliminating any vestiges of excessive authoritarianism. But by and

large the clergy and religious in this country enjoy a good deal of freedom and room for self-expression. If the Church is being held back by priests and religious, a little soul-searching will reveal that what is far more responsible for impeding progress is the lack of courage on the part of the individuals to confront their responsibilities and discharge them.

St. Bernard said that the Savior sacrificed his life rather than sacrifice obedience. May He grant it to us to do likewise.

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