

DOES FAITH CALL FOR THE CHURCH?

My topic involves a consideration of faith and the Church. The point at issue is the relation between the former and the latter. Whether faith calls for the Church is the question that has been posed. Because of the ecclesial context in which this inquiry is to take place, I shall assume the object that is to be discussed is not that general and humanly indispensable type of belief John Dewey had reference to when he wrote *A Common Faith*,¹ or that which William James commended in *The Will To Believe*.² I shall rather take it for granted that the faith to which I am to address myself is specifically Christian in character.³

Ours is an age of profound religious questioning. For various reasons many are asking themselves, perhaps, explicitly for the first time: "What is Christian faith today?" An effort must be made to offer an answer if the relationship of that faith to the Church is to be discussed.⁴

During the sixth decade of the twentieth century, this question was posed by numerous writers and speakers. The replies that have been forthcoming are remarkably diverse. This is true not only of Christians in general, but of Roman Catholic Christians in particular.

A number of clearly recognizable approaches have appeared among the latter. For one group faith is above all an experience

¹ John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1934).

² William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, (New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1897), (Paperback edition: New York: Dover Publications, 1956).

³ Much however that will be said of that faith is applicable to the case where it exists in one who is really but anonymously Christian.

⁴ Here it is the necessity and role of the Church that I see connected with divergent answers to that question regarding Christian faith at the present time. In another context I have attempted to show that I consider the analysis that follows significant in considerations of that same faith in relation to an ordained ministry. Cf. "Faith and Ministry: the Place of Philosophy in the Training of Future Priests," to be published in the *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Assn.*, 1970.

or an event.⁵ It is that which happens when God's people come together in the freedom that opens new horizons. If one is constrained to describe it in reference to human cognition, it is knowing someone as distinct from knowing about someone.⁶ Conventional language and conduct do not easily give rise to it or flow from it.⁷ Hence its presence is detected much more readily by the spontaneity of personal existence than by conformity with past patterns of life.

For others in our day, Christian faith is far more a tested expression than a fleeting experience of an individual or group. Indeed it is a world-view that is divinely guaranteed. It is inspirational, and in that sense dynamic, first of all because it is noetic or informative. Human language can be instrumental in evoking it—either for the first time or over and over through long centuries.⁸

⁵ Cf. Gregory Baum, *Faith and Doctrine, a Contemporary View*, (Paramus: Newman-Paulist Press, 1, 3, 9-13). In this there is an affinity with the presentation of faith as the state of being ultimately concerned; cf. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1957). On a more popular level, the secular press has found this approach newsworthy; cf. *Time*, "Catholic Freedom versus Authority," November 22, 1968, 42-9.

⁶ Gregory Baum, *ibid.*, p. 11. Not a few Catholics as well as others lay stress on the element of encounter, that has been so well described (and criticized), by R. W. Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox*, (New York: Pegasus, 1968), 24-59. See also E. Shillebeeckx, O.P., "L instinct de la foi selon S. Thomas d'Aquin," in *RSPT* 48 (1964) 377-408; Leslie Dewart, "Shadow and Substance" in *The Critic* 37 (1969), 74-6.

⁷ Gregory Baum, *ibid.*, p. 1. For this phenomenon in a much wider perspective, cf. Robert Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1966). Paul van Buren contends that only with a profound change of its religious language will the Gospel become credible for many contemporary men; cf. *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, New York: Macmillan, 1966; *Theological Explorations*, (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

⁸ At one stage of his writing, cf. *De Deo Trino, Pars Systematica*, (Rome: Gregorian Univ. Press, 1964), 21-2, Bernard Lonergan wrote of the Nicene Creed in a way that seems open to this interpretation; cf. Robert Richard, "Contribution to a Theory of Doctrinal Development," in *Continuum* 2 (1964) 505-27. In his Encyclical *Mysterium Fidei* (AAS 57 [1965] p. 768), Paul VI accords dogmatic formulae a transcendence in relation to particular cultures. Relying on John XXIII's distinction between the substance and formulation of doctrine (AAS 54 [1962] p. 792), Eric Mascall insists on the contemporary value of expressions of faith from the past; cf. *The Secularization of Christianity*, (New York: Holt-Rinehart-Winston, 1965), 38-9. To be sure others

Its formulation is neither accidental nor temporally subsequent to its perfection. The credal aspect of faith is here in the forefront and its similarity with certain forms of information-reception, retention, and retrieval is undeniable.⁹ Such different views should not be surprising, although the opposite often seems to be the case. The reason is that Christian faith is complex.¹⁰ There is another way of putting this. The question posed at the outset is simply too broad, too vague, and hence unmanageable. The answers that are being given appear to be poles apart. If they are so in fact, definite practical consequences follow not merely for church members, but for the rest of humanity as well.¹¹ Hence it is imperative to see whether the replies correspond to the same question in any way, whether those who are doing the asking have utterly irreconcilable notions of Christian faith. That means determining whether the diversity may not arise from an inadequate way of posing the question in the first place.

In other words, the question of many today may well be too imprecise to permit its being handled with hope of success. If so, there is the danger that further questions of significance may well be overlooked and that the answers may appear to be worlds apart whereas they are compatible as long as the claim to be complete is not made for any of them. "What is Christian faith?" is a question that is meaningful, but because of its form it may mean needlessly antithetical things to different people. If so, there is much to commend breaking it down into further questions that are evidently connected and clearly presupposed if the first is to be answered satisfactorily.

have found this aspect of Faith overly emphasized. Cf. J. J. Powell, S.J., "The Ecclesial Dimension of Faith," in *On the Other Side*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1967), p. 58; Henry Nelson Wieman, *Is There a God? a Conversation*, (Chicago: Willet, Clark, & Co., 1932), p. 324.

⁹ Frank Sheed, *Is It the Same Church?*, (Dayton: Pfau Press, 1968).

¹⁰ Cf. Juan Alfaro, S.J., "The Dual Aspect of Faith: Entrusting Oneself to God and Acceptance of the Christian Message," in *Concilium* 21 (1967), 53-66.

¹¹ The prospect of a happier world for more and more human beings depends to no small degree on the way its professed Christians in Europe and the Americas meet the challenge of faith arising from the gospel. Only so are they likely to share of their goods to make *Have's* of the *Have-Not's*. Irreducible differences as to what that faith is and implies are not conducive to this end.

When a person asks another what something is, to state what his question means involves posing two further questions. He wishes to know what that other thinks the thing is. He inquires as well whether the thing is in fact as the other says, which often requires the other to tell why he thinks the description fits.

One might take the example of dialogue. When someone asks what it is (and would that more did so), he wants to know what sort of actions people perform precisely in dialoguing; what they do and what happens to them. But he also needs to be informed why that type of happening is dialogue rather than conversation, debate, or argument. Finally, the object of dialogue cannot be omitted. What is it that one dialogues about; everything, or only certain categories of ideas, opinions, feelings and the like? The example is not unique. The same approach is applicable to questions regarding most of man's attitudes and actions.¹²

If one reacts that all of this is no more than playing with words, the assumption could hypothetically be granted and countered with the contention that at times there is much practical value to be gained from so doing. Questions at once very broad and fraught with consequences can be handled when broken down into more limited ones in this fashion. Yet they successfully resisted attempts at answers in their generalized form.

Like other human beings, the psychologist was able to recognize anger long before he could define it satisfactorily. But he would never have been able to know it well enough to be of direct or indirect help to people obsessed with it if he had contented himself with inquiring what it is. To deal effectively with that query he had to ask others. What happens to a person physically, chemically, cognitively, emotionally, precisely when he is angry? Recourse to testing was involved here. He wound up with a set of characteristics that for him corresponded to anger. But he had to ask himself whether that was really anger or not, whether he was mistaken in so thinking. He felt compelled to answer the question why this was anger and not something else, perhaps very similar but not the real thing. He had tested; he had reflected; he had to verify. Otherwise, epil-

¹² For its application to knowing, cf. B. J. F. Lonergan, *The Subject*, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1968), p. 33.

psy in adolescents might still go undifferentiated from drug addiction, temper tantrums, or even diabolical possession. Because these questions were painstakingly asked and the drudgery involved in effectively today. If that is word-play, it is humanly justifiable. attempts to answer them was accepted, people are helped more

It is the contention of this paper that the same is true of the question "What is Christian faith?" There may have been a time when posed in that form it could be answered with less difficulty than today. But at the present the case is different. To reply to it with any hope of success—and the success can be of practical significance for humanity regardless of religious affiliation or its lack—other fundamental questions may be asked, indeed must be. They are three in number and deal with Christian faith in its exercise, its norm or verification, and its content or object.

Clearly my purpose is not to offer a detailed treatment of Christian faith in terms of these three questions. I am convinced they offer real possibilities for a contemporary systematics of belief,¹³ but this is not my point at present. What I do maintain is this. There can be real service at this period if Roman Catholic theologians in discussing Christian faith¹⁴ ask themselves and attempt to answer these questions:

- a. What sort of an experience or interaction is it?
- b. Why is it that and not something else?
- c. What is believed in and through it?

What is more, in a day when Christian faith is being analyzed and criticized as perhaps never before, it is important that these questions about it be asked. Those who see the reality of Christian belief in terms of revealed truths independent of any personal religious experience on their own part no less than those who regard

¹³ Indeed I am presently engaged in an attempt to produce such a systematic treatment based on precisely this approach.

¹⁴ Given the problematic to which it seeks to respond, this way of considering faith is different from those chosen by a number of other Catholic theologians. Cf. R. Aubert, *Le Problème de l'acte de Foi*, (Louvain, 1958); J. Alfaro, *Fides. Spes, Caritas*, (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1968); K. Rahner, "Natur und Gnade" in *Fragen der Theologie Heute*, (Zurich-Cologne, 1958), 209-30.

the inverse relationship as holding need to recall the complexity of that faith. Both groups must ask themselves whether the reality of Christian faith can be lived, much less be discussed in scientific theology worthy of the name, without the elements these questions point out or, in the language of contemporary philosophy, label.

What I am saying is this. If Christian faith is not simply any type of experience, if in other words there are experiences honestly to be sure but nevertheless incorrectly designated as Christian believing, then it is important that those involved ask what makes a truly human experience one of Christian believing. Conversely if some truths believed, however orthodox their articulation, are nevertheless lip service, then those inclined to underestimate the experiential element in Christian believing must try to determine what makes accepting certain truths believing as a Christian.

It is my opinion that groups roughly equivalent to those described above do in fact exist among Christians and indeed Catholic Christians. What is more, there seems to be a growing tendency to polarize. Since this in context implies a profound disagreement with regard to the nature of the central reality that is faith itself, the practical consequences are clear. With less and less communication between those experience-oriented and those object-oriented, the likelihood of a conclusion that the faith in question cannot be lived by both increases considerably. And I submit that further divisions in faith among those united in the name of Jesus have yet to be shown to be conducive to the good of man or God. Hence if Christian faith not only is but must be both an experienced union with the divine Other¹⁵ and as well an awareness of that mystery, it is important that the norm or guarantee of that faith be permanently available to intelligent believers who today no less than previously seem tempted to say "Either-Or" when "Both-And" is called for.

If there is any source to which man may have recourse in determining why a certain type of experience rather than others, why certain judgments and not all, are involved in Christian believing, it is imperative that that source be operative. Otherwise one or the

¹⁵ Or better *Others*, in a trinitarian perspective.

other or perhaps even both of the two poles may well be destined to isolate its own brand of Christian faith totally and therefore falsify it if there is a norm requiring both elements as a condition of the possibility of just that faith.

If there is such a norm, one indicating what if anything it is to believe as a Christian in terms both of experience and intellectual outlook, that norm needs to be real for men. One would expect that such a norm would likely involve in itself a paradigm or at least an example of believing, and that the latter would be preserved through long centuries when its services would be needed. The purpose of its retention would surely not be that of literal repetition (even if that were possible hermeneutically),¹⁶ but one of assistance. It would function as a guide never to be ultimately replaced by another however much it would be in need of constant reinterpretation in different cultural horizons by various generations in history.

Now it is my contention that such a norm exists in the New Testament and in the Christ event it expresses and seeks to communicate.¹⁷ Whether men agree or disagree with the tenets that are distinctively Christian, whether they find the distinctively Christian experience desirable or even harmful to the cause of man, there is general agreement that the New Testament serves as a norm to preclude the attribution of *Christian* whimsically to whatever one may feel like so designating. Faith is Christian as involving both experience and expression in which the New Testament is normative in a positive sense though by no means always con-

¹⁶ It is in this context of different horizons merging that one ought to see the necessity of dogmatic development.

¹⁷ I have attempted to document this contention at length elsewhere; cf. "Faith and Ministry: the Place of Philosophy in the Training of Future Priests," in the *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Assn.*, 1970. There I maintained that this position finds support in the analyses made by Paul van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, *op. cit.* and *Theological Explorations*, *op. cit.*; J. A. T. Robinson, *The New Reformation?*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), p. 13; R. Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth, a Theological Debate*, (New York: Harper, 1961), 1-44; E. Käsemann, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, (London: SCM Press, 1964), 15-47; K. Rahner, "The Development of Dogma" in *Theological Investigations*, I, (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961), 48-51; E. Schillebeeckx, *Revelation and Theology*, I, (New York: Sheed-Ward, 1967), 57-86.

sciously or reflectively.¹⁸ This in no way diminishes the fact that man has learned how much more freedom that norm leaves than he once suspected and consequently how difficult it is even with that norm to find *the* Christian answer if indeed there is but one in a host of situations where self-confessed Christians find themselves forced to take a position or stand.

The norm of the New Testament preserved for man's sake by the influence of the Holy Spirit does not remove the moral and religious ambiguities from life. Even living with and under its guide the experience-oriented and the object-oriented in terms of faith continue to be such. But as a result of its influence they do not or must not reject radically the contrary or, better, complementary aspect that they may find less congenial. This means their living in communion with others differently disposed culturally; that is, with a community of others professing to live under the influence of God's Word in Jesus whose Spirit dwells in men's hearts to inspire them to overcome evil with good.¹⁹ That good to be sure is vague and its possible realizations are manifold. However different the believers, on the other hand, the Spirit leads them on to choose among the multiform possibilities open to them, to test those options in terms of the Christ event that is mediated in the New Testament and the faith that once led to it and now springs from it.

In this sense to avoid the unguided enthusiasm and the monotonous repetition of sterile formulae which are both the death of Christian faith, a community is important or necessary for the individual believer, one in which the precondition of adult membership is a free acceptance of the New Testament faith as norm

¹⁸ Christian faith is both a free experience or stance and as well one related to the New Testament by way of fundamental compatibility. The observation that the correspondence may remain unnoticed is occasioned by the case of one who is anonymously but really Christian. Cf. K. Rahner, "Philosophy and Theology" in *Theological Investigations VI*, (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969), 79-80.

¹⁹ The trinitarian emphasis is decidedly intended. For secular man's need of confidence today, cf. the different approaches of Michael Novak, *The Experience of Nothingness*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); and the critical review this received from Charles Frankel, "An Unwilling Tribute to Reason" in *Book World IV* (1970), p. 7.

and judge of existence. Faith for its survival as Christian seems to demand such a community. What is more, it seems to call for a community in which among many other functions one in particular cannot be dispensed with; namely, an office of leadership over against individual members and groups with the role of calling to mind publicly (and this must be more than literally repeating it) the word in which the Christian professes to find guidance for his experience and outlook.²⁰ One can make a good case for the contention that if the New Testament had said nothing at all explicitly about the Church, what it does say about faith would indicate that some community is called for with the characteristics Catholic and Non-Catholic Christians alike have come to call ecclesial.

If the New Testament faith is normative, certain conclusions follow. It seems that a community is necessary in which standards are preserved to judge the authentically Christian character of believing; a community in which the New Testament is not a relic from the past but a source of inspiration presently exerting its Christianizing influence. This indicates, it seems to me, that within the community a function exists to help men decide, however difficult that may be to accomplish, what it is concretely to believe as a Christian and whether they wish to do so or continue to do so and whether they can credibly do so. This relation between Christian faith and such a Church is intrinsic and not casual.

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²⁰ This has been expressed with clarity by E. Schillebeeckx, "Catholic Understanding of Office" in *Theological Studies* 30 (1969), 571-3. For the connection of the New Testament with Christian faith today, cf. E. Käsemann, "Unity and Diversity in New Testament Ecclesiology" in *Novum Testamentum* 6 (1963), 290-7; and Raymond Brown, "The Unity and Diversity in New Testament Ecclesiology", *ibid.*, 298-308. For Paul Tillich's assessment of the difference between Catholics and Protestants on this point, cf. *Dynamics of Faith*, *op. cit.*, 97-8.