

SALVATION OF THE CONTEMPORARY NON-BELIEVER

A POST-CHRISTIAN AGE

It is being said with increasing frequency that these are post-Christian times. The age upon which we are now embarking is seen not as one among many periods of history dominated by unbelievers, but as something quite different. Its spirit is atheistic; not one which argues heatedly for the proposition "God is dead" but which takes it for granted or considers the question irrelevant. Contemporary man, by and large, does not believe, does not want to believe. Faith in God is too far away for him; mystery religion and any connotation of the supernatural is meaningless and looked upon as a kind of gnosis. No longer is it possible to take for granted a substratum of theological assumptions.

The new vitality the Church has come to know within herself is no contradiction to this general God-less condition which surrounds her. Indeed this very alienation from God may in part explain the renewal of life within the Church. However the vision of the Christian Church as triumphant within world society seems to be fading.

In its philosophical presuppositions this atheism is a denial of order and meaning in nature and things. There are no laws fixed by a God (however distant) and open to the mind of man, as there were for Greek, Roman, medieval, and even modern man all the way down to Freud. The only intelligibility is that which man himself imposes; man who now has become the measure of all things. There is a reflection of this in art and empirical science. Art has long since abandoned traditional forms which convey intelligibility in favor of purely imaginative symbols. In literature the irrational and the rebellious are extolled; our most significant drama is the so-called "theatre of the absurd" emanating from France and Germany. The search for personal identity that agonizes so many characters in contemporary literature is expressive of this existentialist truth that

man has no meaning save what he gives to himself. And in empirical science what were once "laws" discovered in things are now spoken of as hypotheses created by the human mind without objective foundation.

Theologically, the counterpart to this is that the only *destiny* man has is one he creates for himself. A main tenet for contemporary atheism is the rejection of salvation, a rejection moreover seen as an act of courage. For Corliss Lamont this is the only response in keeping with true human dignity; the french author Thorez sees no other response worthy of man who knows himself swallowed up in nothingness. M. Blanchot writes of the purpose of spiritual life being discovered only in the non-existence of salvation. At bottom this is an assertion of absolute human autonomy. Man is alone and there is no Other. There is nothing to be saved from (he has no concept of sin) and nothing to be saved for ("eternal life" is a meaningless phrase).

Like it or not the Christian is part of the post-Christian world. The very Church of God, visible society that she is, is incorporated in the cities of men. The original and continuing advent of God to his people is always historically conditioned. We cannot avoid the truth that we are made of matter and as such subject to the categories of time and space. In short we are historical beings and salvation comes to us within this historical process as a contingent event. The Church then cannot but be attentive to these historical conditions in which "de facto" she has her existence. She must consider the "location" of contemporary man if, in any effective way, she is to address the word of God to him.

THE PROBLEM

These reflections on the "location" of contemporary man serve to raise an old problem with new urgency. Really there are two aspects to the question: (1) first, is it possible for such non-believers to be saved? and granting some sort of affirmative reply; (2) how can and does the Church (if she be the totality of the means of salvation) mediate this salvation? The concern here is not with salvation by way of conversion to the Church, not with the possi-

bility of gaining some kind of discernible bond, however tenuous and fragmented, with the Mystical Body. Rather is salvation possible within the context of agnostic, and (negatively at least) atheistic society?

That God desires the salvation of such non-believers can be considered unanimous Catholic teaching. A Scriptural index is had in I Tim. 2:4 ". . . God our Saviour who wishes all men to be saved." Such a view is confirmed in the teaching concerning the universality of Christ's redemptive act, and that concerning the bestowal upon all adults of grace sufficient for salvation. But the problem becomes considerably more acute when we consider the words which complete the text from I Tim.: ". . . and to come to a knowledge of the truth," as well as other words of St. Paul in Hebrews 11:6: "But without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing; for he who comes to God must believe He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." In short, *faith* is a prerequisite for salvation; moreover, faith that is supernatural both in the content of what it assents to and in its motivation, one which makes possible supernatural love of God. But is not this exactly what atheistic man is incapable of; are these not conditions which he cannot fulfill?

ANCIENT SOLUTIONS

If the faith here envisioned as necessary be explicit faith in such mysteries as the Incarnation and the Trinity, then the answer is that they cannot. The unbeliever cannot be saved as long as he remains an unbeliever. God's willing of his salvation then must be seen as an instance of what in technical theological language is called the antecedent will of God. By his consequent will (which alone is efficacious) God would desire the salvation only of those who possess Christian faith. This position finds authority in St. Thomas' teaching that explicit faith in these two mysteries is necessary for salvation ". . . post tempus autem gratiae revelatae, tam maiores quam minores. . ."¹ It by no means follows from this premise that God wills the damnation of such non-believers. Invincible ignorance would probably result in the attainment of natural bliss, in entrance

¹ *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 2, aa. 7 and 8.

into the state called Limbo. This at least is the contention of Cardinal Billot.

However the context and the whole procedure of St. Thomas in this place indicate that what is said here is to be understood against the background of the Gospel adequately promulgated everywhere. These are the formulations, the articulations necessary for one whom revelation has reached. On the contrary, the modern agnostic should rather be numbered among the non-evangelized. Christ has not been revealed to him for what He is; the obstacle may be something as commonplace as inherited prejudices, collective complexes, etc. At any rate, it does not seem that such can be looked upon as men who *understanding or being able to understand*, refuse belief. St. Thomas writes elsewhere "Whoever does what he can will be saved."²

Father Ricardo Lombardi has attempted a solution by reducing the material object of faith here required to the barest minimum.³ All that need be believed is that God exists and rewards the good. This is readily accessible to all, especially in the light of God's universal salvific will, and suffices for salvation. However minimal, it is nonetheless an *explicit faith*. As salvific it must be supernatural. Attempts have been made to explain this supernaturality in terms of an assent to revelation. One such explanation supposes the perdurance of a primitive revelation. But there seems no evidence for this, and indeed after so many centuries the suspicion of the contrary seems more likely. Another explanation might be the extraordinary intervention and direct illumination by God. Both St. Augustine and St. Thomas speak of this possibility. It has been suggested that this might occur most frequently at the moment of death, as the soul is in the process of leaving the body. But this, too, is unsatisfactory. It would mean that the extraordinary intervention of God would have to be the common thing, and as Fr. Charles Davis remarks, the extraordinary acts of God should be reserved for extraordinary events. At any rate, in this explanation the non-believer is saved, but only by becoming in fact a believer, though in the barest sense of that term. A principal difficulty with the theory is its excessive juridic, almost casuistic character.

² *Q. D., De Ver.*, q. 14, a. 11, ad 1.

³ *Salvation of the Unbeliever*, Burns and Oates, London, 1956.

IMPLICIT FAITH THAT IS SALVIFIC?

But are there any possibilities for salvation without such explicit faith? St. Thomas opens up a suggestive line of thought here in his well known (though perhaps not too well understood) teaching on the first moral act in each man's life. Upon arriving at the age of reason man first of all deliberates about himself, ". . . and if he directs himself towards the true end, grace is given him and original sin is remitted."⁴ What seems to be involved here is the act of freedom, wherein man makes free and decisive determination of his own destiny. It doesn't seem necessary to envision this reaching the age of reason as occurring in one isolated act; more probably it is the consequence of many acts in which reason is to some degree operative. But neither would it seem to demand any explicit awareness of God. As morally good or vicious there would be intrinsic to such an act an orientation towards God or an imputable aversion from him. Between good and evil there is no neutrality, and the good ultimately is God himself. What the will is doing implicitly is choosing its ultimate end which will specify its entire moral life. This end "de facto" is supernatural; there is no other destiny for man. Also, the inner movement of God's grace can readily be assumed. These would suffice to constitute the act as supernatural, and would thus amount to a merely *implicit* yet seemingly salvific faith. The terminology is that of Yves Congar;⁵ Father Gardeil in an earlier work refers to it as an intentional faith, radicated in man's good disposition ("praeparatio animae") regarding his last end.⁶ Appeal to "intentions" and "good dispositions" suggest the extension of invincible ignorance to the material object of faith. The position is not without its difficulties, especially regarding the supernaturality. The end of such an act is supernatural really ("ut res"), but is it such precisely as object specifying the act? It hardly can be except, once again, implicitly or virtually. However, this could well suffice, granting the subjective animation by grace. The German Fr. Seckler attempts a further explanation of the supernaturality necessary here

⁴ *Summa Theol.*, I-II, q. 89, a. 6.

⁵ "Salvation and the Non-Catholic," *Blackfriars*, July-August, 1957, 290.

⁶ *La Crédibilité et l'Apologetique*, 1912.

by seeing human nature as elevated to the supernatural order so that natural instincts and tendencies are, at least existentially, and empirically, now in an order to the supernatural.⁷ Such instincts then are expressive of God's intentions and amount to a non-verbal revelation—which is in some way supernatural and available to all men. What gives one pause here is understanding how the natural can be existentially supernatural. The calling to salvation if it be more than a mere velleity, if it be indeed an instance of the consequent will of God, must have some entitative effect in the subject called. And since human nature is found only in really existent individuals, it is there that the elevation occurs. If then God freely chooses to elevate some of His rational creatures to the supernatural order why should not this involve some illumination of the intelligence, if not by evangelization at least in the sense of St. Augustine's "special illumination." The difficulty is not, I think, insurmountable. God is not constrained to give his graces equally. And there seems no repugnance in His providence allowing for vast numbers of non-evangelized men who in the depths of their souls are really elevated to an order which exceeds the intrinsic and positive orientations of their natures without their being made the recipients of an explicit revelation admitting of conceptualization. The inclinations towards natural good in the volitional faculties might, for instance, be transformed by God at some given moment of existence, so as to reach through to the Divine Object. The natural desire for happiness, to take a possible example, could it not be made supernatural by God, both in principle and in object, without any explicit revelation? True, some prior knowledge must measure the response of love. And there is not here any knowledge of God as He is in Himself. Still there seems room for a cognitional consciousness of being moved towards the good not as subordinate to the self but as something absolute and transcendent. This theory is perhaps not too far removed from that of intentional or implicit faith. It differs in this that the will is moved, unawares, to a formally supernatural object rather than to a formally natural end that merely coincides materially with God, or is supernatural only in virtue of implicit intentions.

⁷ *Theology Digest*, Autumn, 1961, 168 and Spring, 1962, 66.

In this same line of thought can be enumerated Fr. Charles Davis who characterizes the minimum faith necessary for salvation as "embryonic."⁸ It demands an inner enlightenment due to God's grace enabling the individual to discern signs of his supernatural destiny, whose origin and end are God. This rests upon no historical revelation of explicit message from God but the mere recognition of his moral helplessness, the experience of the deprivations of his fallen nature. This occasions in man the presentation of a moral ideal which transcends the ethical and actually is (although not recognized as such) the supernatural.

HOW IS THIS IMPLICIT FAITH CONCRETELY REALIZED?

Supposing that the possibility of such a faith—implicit, existential, or embryonic, yet truly salvific—can be envisioned within theological science, certain reflections of a less technical nature seem called for. How exactly, in more concrete and human terms, is such implicit faith realized? First of all it is helpful to see the act of faith as a highly personal encounter with God, one involving not only cognitional but volitional and affective elements, as well, and engaging the deepest sources within human personality, especially human liberty. It is an ultimate commitment, inter-personal in nature, wherein the soul responds to a summons from God coming at once on the social and the individual plane, and uniquely marked by the sweet contingencies of God's love.

It may further help to note that the implicitness of this requisite faith need not be a *logical* one, one consisting in an objective nexus between two propositional truths, the admission of one being thus the admission of the other idea virtually contained therein. Rather it would appear to be more a *real* implicitness, in the sense of a moral encounter that initiates a response which of its very nature tends toward God, yet non-conceptually.

The psychology of faith also may serve to bring us closer to an understanding of what occurs here between God and the soul. In adults who arrive at the fulness of faith from a state of unbelief, conversion comes gradually and at the end of a long process. The

⁸ *Theology for Today*, Sheed & Ward, New York, 1962, 114-120.

faith takes hold at first in a somewhat rudimentary way and undergoes a gradual process of growth. Yet from the very beginning there is assent to God. In a parallel way the faith of the Church herself undergoes this evolutionary growth—not as regards the essential content of that faith, it is true, but as regards her deepening penetration into the intelligibilities of that faith, the explicitation of it.

The original presentation of divine truth by Christ Himself suggests that He operated on just this level. Truth is constantly offered in *parables*. The explicit truth is frequently veiled in image. Our Lord appears to seek less a sort of credal affirmation than to discern a certain openness of heart. The dialogue at the well with the woman of Samaria comes readily to mind. What Christ seeks to implant is some recoil from isolation in self, from that egotistic "aloneness" deriving from wounded nature. When he heals the man born blind he says to him "Dost thou believe in the Son of God?", however, at this point the blind man has as yet no explicit knowledge as to who Christ is. In his response to being cured Christ perceives only the beginnings of faith. And yet surely even at this point the blind man is among the saved.

Fr. Yves Congar in a theological reflection upon this states suggestively that every *event* is at the same time and on a higher level a *sign*.⁹ It contains and reveals an inner meaning that is in an order to God Himself. In this sense nothing is trivial and all things have some relevancy to God's predestining designs. The Resurrection of Christ is one thing as historical event; it is quite another as mystery. The reading of the sign amounts to a sort of revelation, and this is dependent upon a certain good disposition of soul.

Most of all, perhaps, this "sign" will appear in contact with one's neighbor. Here one is brought face to face with the mystery of another person, which is in its own order an absolute. This could well be a hidden encounter with God, all the more so since one's fellowman is made to God's image and may well bear God dwelling in him by grace. Somewhat in confirmation of this are our Lord's

⁹ *The Wide World, My Parish*, trans. by Donald Attwater, Helicon Press, Baltimore, 1961. For many of the observations which follow I am indebted to this work of Fr. Congar.

words to the effect that the second commandment is like unto the first, which is only to say that the fulfillment of the latter is the fulfillment of the former. Even more profoundly, perhaps, is the implication that in the Incarnation all men are made "neighbor" to the God-Man. At least nothing is so concretely significative of God as another human person.

MEDIATED BY THE CHURCH?

This implicit faith, however conceived of, is not entirely autonomous from and irrelevant to the Church. She would not be the totality of the means of salvation otherwise. The phrase "extra ecclesia, nulla salus" (taken in the positive sense we give to the words nowadays: only *in* the Church is there a "saved" life) would likewise lose much of its meaning. There are not, in short, two distinct orders of salvation: one within, the other outside of the Church; explicit faith in one instance, merely implicit faith in the other. On the contrary, at least in some minimal sense, there is truth in the statement that the Church "conceives" these non-evangelized who enter upon the preformations of faith and charity. She conceives them in intention, in her womb of prayer and merit; above all in her continued offering of Christ sacrificed in virtue of which God draws near to them with the offer, the promise even, of salvation. They are then in a state of gestation, like the child in the womb before birth, even if never to be brought forth. The causality here is reductively quasi-material, commonly called dispositive or meritorious causality.

More obvious perhaps is a causality that is at once exemplary and final. This is only to say that the beginnings of faith are ordered to consummation within the visible Church; these initial movements are preformations of the only faith there is, which resides only within the Church. If in them is to be found a *promise* of salvation, it is only in the Church that there is to be found the reality which is salvation life itself. St. Thomas' teaching on the nature of image involves the understanding of a derivation from the exemplar of such kind that in its dynamism the image experiences a recoil towards its exemplar. Now man is the image of God and Christ is the exemplar

of man's return motion towards God. So it is not saying too much to speak of these saving responses as unconsciously assimilative to Christ.

There remains efficient causality. If the Church cannot minister here through her sacraments, there is still what is called the "sacrament" of the word—the exercise in varied ways of her teaching power. To what extent she shall speak to the non-evangelized depends upon what is taught, and the highly contemporary meaningfulness of such teaching, especially since the teaching act is here a non-authoritative one. But there are truths which these men must have and which can come only from her. Purely by way of suggestion some of these might be:

(a) The doctrine of *salvation*—not mere personal fulfillment but genuine salvation, salvation from hell and damnation (man can fail, though modern man knows only success or a kind of neutral non-achievement) and salvation for heaven, not merely an escape from the unpleasantness of this life, not a superficial and worldly imagined place, but a true destiny, the recovery of an original order of truth and goodness and beauty that was lost through sin.

(b) A concept of *sin*—which elsewhere is in danger of being lost. Atonement, expiation etc. are positive concepts compared to anxiety, dread, guilt feelings, loss of identity etc. which agonizes the soul of contemporary man. There may well be some psychological awareness of the consequences of original sin, an experience of helplessness that might initiate the turning of man to God.

(c) Human *freedom*—are we really free enough to lose all or gain all? Mis-conceptions here are rampant. Conformity, technology, mass communication have resulted in major distortions. And it is the deeper, religious dimension of liberty that has suffered.

(d) The Powers of Satan—even if it is God who is being honored in the name of these ideals which occasion implicit faith, still objectively these are not God, and there is always the danger that subjectively they will become idols. If the Powers of Satan of which St. Paul writes do not work so often nowadays in ways perceptible to the senses, could this not be because these ideals are more effective ways of "possessing" people? These powers of darkness, personal

and collective, are at enmity with Christ, and they can incite to a choice of direction in life that is self-seeking rather than self-giving. Absolutes such as peace, progress, brotherhood, race, nation etc. can fail utterly to point to God, they can issue in a use of the world which denies Christian implications.

All of these truths, of course, are specifically Christian ones. What is suggested here is that the nonbeliever will make his own adaptation, entering into an understanding of these truths in whatever ways are possible to him. Neither is this to exclude other mediations, less easy to conceptualize, perhaps, on the level of charity, the lived Christian life.

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DISCUSSION: OTHER PERSPECTIVES

Finally, these considerations perhaps suggest a re-thinking of other, allied theological positions.

(1) The Universal Salvific Will of God. Where unbelievers are concerned is there not a tendency, within certain theological presentations at least to reduce this to a mere velleity, or to see it exclusively as an instance of the antecedent will of God?

(2) Secondly, the Descent of Christ into Hell. Could not this have been for the sake of rendering the implicit faith of those who preceded Christ explicit. The accomplishment of this would be (in this hypothesis) by way of a personal contact with Christ. And if there be truth to this could not the *Parousia* have similar effects?

(3) The "Eschaton." Is it proper to conceive of this as involving a major and externally manifested triumph of the Church, of the minority who are believing Christians, over all of mankind? Or should this rather be conceived in terms of a more universal claiming of the "good"?

(4) The Number of the Predestined? Is it true to speak in the terms of the Fathers who practically unanimously teach that the number of the "lost" is comparatively speaking, much larger than that of the saved? Must the scriptural texts be interpreted in this manner? Can this common teaching be lightly set aside as a conclusion imperated by historical considerations we now know to be untrue?

(5) Theology. Without abandoning the invaluable riches of centuries of Christian thought, are there any possibilities for recasting the truth-content of such theology in existential or phenomenological language, or that of personalist metaphysics? A phenomenological analysis of the act of faith might very well be a case in point. Could such a thing exist as a kind of adjunct to traditional theology?

(6) The Church. Is too much emphasis given to her status as a perfect society and too little to her condition as human, as a Church of sinners, as a society in progress subject to laws of growth and development? Are we not more like the central figures in the Gospel parables? And what then of the Church's posture towards world society? Do the Augustinian categories of the City of God vs. the City of Man present us with the best view, or would there be wisdom in rejecting these as divisive in an undesirable way and adopting instead a view of the whole human family called to God? This call will be only faintly heard in some places, in others it will be rejected, yet rejected mostly in confusion and misunderstanding rather than in malice.

There are the further suggestions of Fr. Hans Küng concerning an explicit declaration on freedom of conscience in religious matters, abolition of the Holy Office and the Index of Forbidden Books. Would these enable the Church to better address the non-evangelized? Does her very nature bind her to always stress her dogmatic presuppositions? And do these hinder her cooperation with society in meeting the challenge of racism, population and birth control, survival of the United Nations, etc. At any rate, some new perspectives, regarding old truths seem called for by the acknowledgment of a merely implicit yet truly salvific faith.

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