

## CRISIS OF FAITH AND YOUTH

Christian faith has always presented some difficulty for those in the process of growing up. In the past, however, the question generally posed by the teacher of the young was how to find and make use of the right tools for getting the youngster over this difficult period. This conception of the problem is no longer tenable. A more radical and searching examination of the meaning of faith itself is what is called for today. In this paper I shall deal first with the contemporary world's difficulties with faith; second, with the proper Christian response to these difficulties; third, with the peculiar character of the adolescent faith crisis.

We are today in a period of great crisis in regard to Christian faith. That statement is so commonplace these days that it is almost a platitude. Perhaps it is platitudinous since Christian faith always has been and presumably always will be in a state of crisis. Whether this crisis is really worse today is I think highly debatable. One need not maintain that the world is getting better and better every day in every way to hold that at the very least contemporary developments are religiously ambivalent. No era of Christianity can make a final judgment on its own worth and perhaps the safest thing—or the only thing—we can say is that no judgment should be made because the issue still hangs in the balance.

To say that every era of faith has had its problems is not to deny all novelty to our present situation. It is only in the modern era that the question of faith has itself become thematized for theological inquiry. The question of faith had previously lain beneath the surface as a continuing undercurrent to theological and religious discussions. But as many other religious issues have evaporated and as a multiplicity of distracting questions has been recognized as merely distractive, the central problem of faith has emerged into conscious and reflexive clarity. The contemporary world's difficulties with Christian faith might be characterized by the three terms of apathy, absence, and attack.

The first attitude, that of apathy, has always been with us and

perhaps needs no examination or explanation. The one question that may need asking is whether apathy is particularly striking or widespread in our day. In many respects it would seem easier to be apathetic in a world which provides a luxuriance of pleasant diversions. Much of American advertising, for example, seems dedicated to the obscuration of life's harsh realities and the destruction of all deep probing into the ultimate mysteries of life.

On the other hand, there are characteristics of our contemporary world that seem to make apathy less of a possibility. In particular there seems to be more recognition of the precariousness of human existence and the need for responsible decisions. There is a new seriousness of the sixties often accompanied by great pessimism about the world and its future. The theme of many of the folk songs being sung by young people today is not "when I grow up . . .," but "if by any chance I should grow up . . ." In a world faced daily with decisions of peace, justice, and survival, apathy or indifference regarding faith hardly seems to be the appropriate response.

It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that the constant complaint of college teachers of theology is the apathy of the students. This is a frustrating situation to be sure and we are liable to feel that it is useless to go any further. What is the sense of discussing a lot of historical and theological data when the problem is that the listeners have no interest in any of it? I am not sure that I have the answer to that question but I suggest that it is through understanding the other reactions and their causes that we might best come to grips with the problem of apathy. For many people apathy is not indifference; it is a definite answer to questions which they recognize as not at all unimportant. They have decided (sometimes while retaining all the right practices) that Christian faith is not to be taken seriously. This conviction is not always the fault of the man currently trying to preach or teach the faith. Apathy is born of years of listening to tired preachers preaching meaningless answers to unintelligible questions. Rather than let this reaction of apathy paralyze our efforts, I am suggesting that we look at the other attitudes which though characterizing the minority may hold the key to understanding the majority.

I have named the second reaction absence, that is, the experience

of emptiness, loneliness and abandonment. This is a phenomenon peculiar to our own day. Whatever problems men of the ancient world may have had, they never had a lack of gods. Primitive religions oscillated between monotheism and polytheism; gods died and were reborn. With the advance of western civilization, however, the heavens were stripped of the gods until only the Judaic-Christian God could make serious claim to man's allegiance. But now he too seems to be eclipsed behind the heavens. Nietzsche's flamboyant and paradoxical announcement of the death of God seemed until recently to be of small significance. But now the word is out (mostly via *Time* magazine) that the radical left of Christian theologians is wrestling with this utter absence of God as the starting point of Christian faith. One may have reservations about these new and suddenly famous theologians. I think, nevertheless, that they are witnessing to an experience more common in contemporary life than we have usually admitted, namely, the feeling that God is absent from the world, the conclusion that there are no longer any "religious questions" which belong to a special province of supernatural faith, the uneasy but inescapable conviction that religious beliefs, practices, and devotions are embarrassingly naïve.

The evolution of this predicament of God being edged out of the world is fairly easy to trace at least on a visible level. For centuries Christian apologetics kept just one step ahead of an advancing science that was giving better answers than religion could. A place was always found for God but he became the God of the interstices, the one who filled the gaps in scientific explanations. Scientific progress, however, has meant a steady retreat of faith from each position successively taken up. In the long course of its historical development, science is no closer today than it was in the past of disproving God; but undeniably it has made man feel less and less the need for God. He died by inches, by the successive qualifications, by the ridiculous-looking rear guard action fought in his name. This process has become apparent only in the past few decades with the acceleration of scientific and technological progress, but the fact of this process is an inescapable feature of our present world. When I say inescapable, I am carefully choosing the word. The air we breathe is that of a scientific world and no man can simply escape

from this world to construct his own set of beliefs unaffected by modern scientific criticism.

Scientific technology, then, has been the most obvious factor in the developing crisis of Christian faith. I think, however, that it is not the most profound cause. The most important key to the understanding of the contemporary faith problem is found in the third attitude, that which I have called attack. By attack I do not mean here the kind of opposition that has been common in the history of Christianity. There have always been those who rejected Christian faith because they preferred self interests or more rational explanations, or an easier code of life. But the attack upon Christian faith peculiar to the present is based upon the charge that Christianity is just not good enough, that it degrades man, that it is lacking in charity. Those who see Christianity this way base their contention upon both the theoretical works of Christian writers and the practical consequences that have resulted. Camus was led to conclude that only an atheist could truly be charitable.

The issue in the mind of these men is to choose between God and man. Faced with such a choice there can be little doubt what the outcome must be. And so it has happened in the last century that men have passionately defended humanity against the avenging and destructive God of Christian faith. Feuerbach wrote:

Life is destroyed by the beyond, the disintegrating, poisoning, bloodsucking—why a beyond if not as a means for besmirching this world. The concept of God was constructed as a contradiction to life—it contains everything harmful, defaming, everything at enmity with life.

Philosophy, I would strongly suspect, could never of itself have given birth to such agonizing and demonic cries. It was rather out of a desperate struggle against a corrupted notion of Christian faith that this violent attack upon God arose.

The most profound difficulty we face is not the advance of science but the fact that Christian faith has *never* been able to present a united front to rethink its position *vis-à-vis* this scientific world. Modern science arose in a world torn by an internecine war of Christian faith. In the Reformation struggle and its resulting op-

positions a partial negation of human values was incorporated into Protestant and Catholic conceptions of faith. So long as faith is justified on such a basis there is little hope for a real coming to grips with the whole human problem of faith. The reformational and post-reformational struggles instead of healing the split between faith and reason exacerbated the situation, opposing the more strongly faith and reason, the *this worldly* and the *other worldly*, the nearness of God and his transcendence above the heavens.

This is why the ecumenical movement is not a peripheral question here. The Christian response to the contemporary crisis of faith is inextricably bound up with the unresolved problems within Christian faith. What is called for today in answer to the attitudes of apathy, absence, and attack is that we should become catholic, with a small *c* as well as a capital. We must become rooted in a deep catholic tradition and take to ourselves the catholic or universal principles of a mankind to become so human that it will be more than human. We must face with complete honesty and sincerity these contemporary attitudes and ask what they mean and how they are related to our traditions of faith. Let me speak from this viewpoint first with reference to the notion of absence and then to the attitude of attack.

The religious cry of the absence or silence of God has multiple roots. Human sinfulness and the evil powers of the universe undoubtedly are partly responsible for it. Human progress and scientific discoveries perhaps made this development inevitable. But what Christians must be especially attentive to is that behind these other causes lies Christianity itself that has brought on such a crisis of faith. From the beginning Christianity was a destroyer of gods and a depopulator of the heavens. Men had had a variety of religious faiths to fall back upon. The gods were at least close at hand even if not always cooperative with man. But Christianity in its conception of God could brook no opposition. Men of the ancient world were correct in perceiving that their world was being de-sacralized, that their gods were being killed, and that god was no longer to be a piece of this world. Not entirely without cause was the kind of reaction cited, for example, in the *Martyrdom of St. Polycarp*: "The

whole mob astonished at the heroism of the God-loving and God-fearing race of Christians shouted: 'Away with the atheists.'"

Christian faith thus introduced within mankind a unique conception of God, a God of faith, a God beyond all earthly dreams and desires. Never had the world possessed such an exalted notion of God as the one which Christian faith presented. The question one might pose is whether this notion was too exalted to live with. God was so high above the heavens he was beyond being; he was so much to be that he himself no longer existed. This terminology is not that of the contemporary radical left but that of St. Thomas Aquinas. The God of Christian faith, according to Aquinas, is *supra-ens*, not one of the objects of this world but the presupposition of them all. God does not exist; he does not have existence because he is "subsistent to be," the source and origin of all acts of existing.

This was a most profound understanding of God and God's relation to the world. But this was also a dangerous business that Christian faith had initiated: the insistence that *no* earthly image is commensurate with God and the conviction that the world possesses its own autonomy unmixed with the fates of the gods. Thus it has been in our own day, in the Christian era, that the oracles have become silent and men have become painfully aware that there are no divine words fallen from the sky which men can cling to as their salvation. "Holy words," wrote Heidegger, "are lacking to us." In this perspective, empirical science has simply hastened the process which Christian faith had begun: the de-sacralizing of the universe. Science has continually killed the idols that a superficial apologetic has kept placing in its path until today we have grown weary of constructing new gods and tired of protecting the old ones. Now in the midst of our privately constructed world of precepts, doctrines, and devotions we hear: silence. As was true of Israel long ago, we have gotten more than we bargained for, which proves only that man is not in a position to bargain with God.

Silence can be a terrible thing—but not necessarily. Silence is part of the rhythm of personal existence, the point at which words fail to convey the deepest meaning. It is in silence that relation grows in the pre-verbal and sub-conscious levels of the interlocutors. Silence is possible only for a being that can speak. Rocks and rivers

and trees are not silent; their lack of speech conveys nothing. But if the world does experience, even among a few, the absence and silence of God, this is a most heartening reaction because the experience of absence is not at all equivalent to nothingness. To experience God's absence is a Christian phenomenon unthinkable without the pre-suppositions of creation, faith, and redemption. The question for Christians is whether they are a match for this agonizing silence, whether like Christ on the cross they can cry out of the darkness without despairing.

The response of Christians today, therefore, must not be an attempt to plug the gaps with petty defenses, working more and more feverishly to stave off the advancing world. Instead, the life of Christian faith demands that the world be accepted in its totality in order that we may go beyond it. Undoubtedly there is a danger of ending with a purely secularistic humanism and this is a danger never lightly to be dismissed. But, paradoxically enough, the danger of turning faith into a self enclosed secularism is greatest precisely when the humanizing process is opposed in the name of faith. Those who try to escape from historical evolution and the struggle to improve the human condition do not succeed in choosing the divine over the human but only in idolizing the elements of a past human culture.

This consideration has already involved me in the response to the attitude of attack. I have said that the most profound difficulty of Christian faith in the modern era has been the fact that it was based upon negations. By seeing God's function as the forgiver of sin, by exalting faith at the expense of reason, by over emphasizing selected institutional elements, post-reformational Christianity could not find God by going beyond man because it could not accept man. Its belief in God was interwoven with a partial negation of human existence. As a result, it was left to non-Christian forces to take a stand in favor of man. This was the most devastating attack ever launched upon Christianity because it arose not from the outside but from the very roots of Christianity itself. Freedom, dignity, equality, personality—all these Christianity had helped to give birth to. Now they had come back to haunt the parent. What was needed in response was not a faith that could hold back the surge of human

freedom. What was needed was a Christian faith that could recover its own roots and let loose humanity. Christian faith does not add to the human nor subtract from the human. It is rather what supports and gives ultimate meaning to the whole of human history. God does not intrude as a competing force in his creation; he is the beginning, end, and presupposition of all experience.

This view of God's relation to the world requires something of a revolution in thinking for all of us. We have consistently based our faith upon the gaps in the world and the negations in human existence. Though we have become more sophisticated at this in recent years our approach is still an insertion of God through the crevices rather than the opening of man beyond himself to the God of hope and love. We still poke around in man's psychic entrails and when we have men shaking a bit then we overpower them with a God out of the sky. Perhaps this is still effective to some degree; I would question whether it is. At any rate, it is unchristian and it fails to understand the historical position we are in. It fails to reground Christian faith in Jesus Christ who did not come around distributing solutions to problems but who took humanity as it was and lived human life to the end. God cannot be *used* today; neither can man. All that is left today is the total acceptance of both, the one through the other.

The argument of the Christian with atheism, therefore, cannot be that the atheist is too humanistic, but that the atheist is neither humanist nor atheist enough. "The total recovery of man by man" was a Christian program before it was Marxist. It must be carried beyond the point where Marxism leaves it. For in Communism man is not totally recovered, he is sacrificed to the idol of history. This last idolatrous god must also be destroyed; the decks must be cleared for the emergence of a new humanity. This can happen only when Christianity finds its Creator and Lord of history who invites man into a personal relationship of faith and love, the one who stands in no need of us though we stand in desperate need of him.

What I have said up to this point can I think be generally applied to the problems of the adolescent. I will simply highlight some of these things as particularly relevant to a person of that age and development. The basic problem of man is in becoming human.

As the Church has always taught, one can become human only by becoming more than human. The adolescent in particular has this difficulty: he is in search of humanity and trying to find his own identity as a man. He could use a helping hand rather than a lot of people telling him what to believe and do. He cannot believe in God because he does not believe in anyone, least of all himself. Or, rather, if we take into account all the levels of belief, there is in the adolescent a tenacious grasp upon God and upon his own experience, but he is so confused in his head that he cannot be fully aware of his belief.

What adolescents need is to find someone they can trust, someone they can be sure is not making a business out of them, someone who trusts them enough to desire the full expansion of their human potentialities. If becoming a mature adult means leaving behind the world of childhood, so much the worse for childish idols. If it means young people must pass through a death to childish faith, then this also means that they need the help of a mature Christian who will not push them but who will wait patiently while they find God on the other side of disbelief. It was only by dying that Christ rose to a new life and what he could have used when dying was a little human consolation and not slick arguments to prove that he was incorrect in his experience.

The problem of the maturation of faith for child and adolescent is interwoven with the over-all difficulty of growing up in present-day America. The intense emotional feelings of childhood and adolescence will pass away and this should be to our advantage. Certainly religious teaching ought not to be played too closely into their feelings. Any kind of religious revivalism among adolescents is, I would suggest, a highly risky and doubtful business. I would support the contention that any deeply felt experience which helps to open them out to the reality of living with other men in a world to be perfected unto God is all to be praised. But there is a certain kind of salesmanship of religion that plays upon young people's feelings without bringing to bear human understanding and control. This approach to children and young adults is I maintain not only useless but unchristian and inhuman. I would be more than a little skeptical of attempts to bring on an ultimate and total commitment to Christian

faith as early as possible in the lives of students. Life must be kept multi-dimensional; they have to learn how to think from different perspectives and to choose beyond the worlds of illusion that their intense private feelings construct. Into this turbulent eruption of human flesh and psyche Christian faith cannot be inserted as the answer to their problems nor as the primary motive for their actions. Christian faith can only be the ultimate option that lies beyond the immediate physical and psychological struggle; not the answer to their problems nor an escape from their problems but the ever calm invitation to find themselves and the real world of God and people by trust and by the love that overcomes fear.

It should hardly be surprising that in our society the experience of the absence of God hits the adolescent particularly hard. He exists at the crossroads of a Christian culture shedding its adolescence and his own biological frame racked by the pull of adulthood. Adolescents can no longer believe in their god, the god of their system, the god of Fellini's Juliet "behind the trap door covered with dust over the stage of the convent school." They can hold on to that god for a long while but when the door is finally thrown open they find neither god nor a ravaging spider but instead emptiness or open fields. Their utter amazement, confusion, and despair at this absence spring partly from two faults of ours: a) the mythical picture that all children have of God has been re-enforced in every detail by teachers who thought they were building up a religious life; b) what is worse is that when this picture begins to disintegrate as it surely must in our modern world we do not rejoice with them and urge them forward, but we try to make them return to childhood when in fact they have nothing to go back to.

Caught then in the crossfire of religion and personality, their response to faith must largely be one of either apathy or attack. The apathy often springs not from a lack of concern about these questions but from a concern which is being protected by a defense wall. The one thing about Christianity many young people are sure of is that Christian faith has nothing to offer, that it shot its bolt long ago in their lives, that it has been tried and found wanting. And the more desperately religious salesmen try to answer all adolescent problems with Christian faith the more the young people are convinced that

faith is hopelessly and ridiculously irrelevant. They are being given the hard sell these days, which is for them the final reason that they should not buy. Their problems are deeply human, intensely physical, confusedly psychological; no cute system of immediate relief is even to be considered. When religious faith does appear to have something to say it is not to be trusted for it has too often lied, mistaking fairy tales for facts and confusing loyalty to ideals with blindness to faults. Thus in order to resist the temptation to Christianity one remains apathetic and all attempts to break the barrier verbally succeed only in strengthening it.

The student, on the other hand, who openly opposes Christian beliefs and refuses to fulfill the demands of the Church is I suspect not so different from the apathetic. Here there may be a tragic misunderstanding of Christian faith which makes it appear incompatible with the development of human personality; or there may be a suspicion of what Christianity demands and a fear to face it alone. Though they are outwardly so different, I suggest that apathy and attack both grow out of the experience of absence or loneliness. I am further suggesting that the breakthrough must come from adult human beings and most preferably from a dedicated Christian community. What those growing up so desperately need is a human being who will take them from where they are, who will believe in them to such an extent that they also will come to believe, who hold on with an adult love that will never overwhelm but will never let go.

My remarks in this paper may have sounded harshly critical of the past; I did not mean them to be so. Great numbers of priests, parents, and educators have succeeded in providing the help toward Christian maturity that I have just described. The deepest and best influences of faith worked by these teachers has often been in ways unsuspected by the teachers themselves, sometimes even against their own words. While we should appreciate all that has been done in the past, it must still be said that there is need today for the teacher who is cognizant both of theological developments in the Church and present changes in society. We need men who are trying to face candidly the difficulties of belief and who can live with a deep conviction of faith together with uncertainty regarding many individual points of faith. These are the men who can hold

out some real ideal for the struggling adolescent. Adolescence ought to be a time of conflict and struggle; it is not for adults to play it safe by trying to avoid all conflict. But it is incumbent upon the adult world to see that the struggle of youth is a fruitful one. This means that the young must be aided by the light of human intelligence that is freed from its shackles of fear through the testimony of Christian life and understanding.

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### Digest of the Discussion:

The problem of adolescence seems to be the problem of all human development: becoming a person more and more through each experience of life, in our relationships with each individual we meet. A person develops in his humanness by experiencing himself with some elements of stability, as over against other elements of his experience that he grasps for only a time. This is precisely how each person learns his own identity while living in a changing world.

The problem of faith is this: will any individual person accept Christianity as a stable element in his life, or will he see it as something to be grasped for a while and then discarded? In other words, will the adolescent's faith become part of his identity or not?

The answer will be given in the field of personal relations, in the family and in the persons whom the adolescent lets influence him as a person. Sociologically, faith must be a value in his "primary group." If he encounters faith as a value that is only academic, or only relative to the institutional aspects of Christianity, then faith will be disposable, "secondary," and unstable in his life.

It is expected that each adolescent to some extent or another, by the very fact of his adolescence—even if he has grown up in a milieu in which faith is a value—will undergo a crisis of faith, a time of confusion in which his values will mature and possibly change.

Today's adolescent finds himself in a world in which there is a "climate or crisis" about faith. It is stylish to be selective in belief, to rely on one's own gifts, to demand freedom, to disdain institution

and established order. Even the practical instances of clash between institution and freedom today are neatly emphasized to increase the problems of the adolescent.

Faith, then, is only one dimension of the adolescent crisis. The identity crisis and the authority crisis, both characteristic of adolescence, and of our age, also complicate the problem. We have a syndrome of critical factors here, the faith crisis being only one of them.

Each of these crisis seems to be soluble only in the context of personal relations. The family solves the issue. Faith is a matter of tradition, the adolescent must receive it from a loving adult, and communicate it in love to younger brothers and sisters. So it is with the identity he can receive and give, and the authority he must both accept and exercise. In love, these things work themselves out. Without love, they are resolved only by substituting persons with whom love is possible. Faith must be made close and familial, rather than academic and institutional.

Faith, even as communicated academically must respect this. It must spring out of love, demand commitment, and reach the adolescent closely. No mere techniques can accomplish this, but only a loving teacher—student relationship that reflects the total Christ—person relation.

*Father Gallagher* then brought up a problem which he thought was peculiar to our country and had a great bearing on the crisis of faith in youth, namely, the problem of the child-centered parish. The point was made that the majority of our resources are used for the benefit of children in the parishes and yet the desired effect is not achieved. Because of this concentration on the children the adults in the parish, especially the parents, do not receive a continuing Christian education and formation. This is to the detriment of both parents and children since the parents are the primary communicators of values including that of faith as regards their children. *Brother Moran*, in a rather long comment agreed that this was a very serious problem which had bearing on the crisis of faith and stated that great institutional changes and changes in educational procedures need to be made in the Church. He stated also that part of the problem is lack of appreciation of faith and its communication. It

should not be committed in terms of propositions but rather in terms of value that can be lived and appreciated.

*Father William G. Topmoeller, S.J.* of Mundelein then asked how one can reconcile the fact that faith is an intellectual assent to truth and at the same time entails commitment. *Brother Moran* answered that the two can be reconciled if we do not dichotomize. Faith is an assent to God and not to particular propositions. Since faith is directed to a person and not to a series of truths, the assent is both intellectual and volitional. It is because faith terminates in a person that the reconciliation is possible and in fact demanded by the act of faith itself.

*Father John D. Gerken, S.J.* of Carroll University then asked what Brother Moran meant by the revolution in thinking demanded of all of us today. What things must be changed? *Brother Moran* cited three instances in order to give an idea of the type of changes that he was referring to. First, the complete rethinking of a child-centered parish; second, re-evaluation of the church's effort on the secular campus. Less than 1,300 chaplains, the majority of which are part time, are trying to cope, both educationally and pastorally, with more than three quarter of a million students. This averages out to about one chaplain for every 630 students; third, the development of programs in order to continue the Christian education of adults.

*Father John M. Ballweg* of Seton Hall University, N.J. asked Brother Moran to clarify what he meant by religious revivalism and further wanted to know if Brother included liturgical participation with hymn singing, etc. under the notion of revivalism. *Brother Moran* said he was referring to a certain kind of salesmanship of religion that plays upon young people's feelings without bringing to bear human understanding and control. He said he felt that intense emotional experiences were harmful at this age. We must deal with them as persons and not manipulate their emotions which are in a rather volatile state. An appeal can be made to their emotions and sensitivity but it must always respect the integrity of the individual.

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