

TRANSCENDENCE AND THE EXPRESSIONS OF THE MAGISTERIUM

Two routine definitions. "Expressions of the magisterium": the public or official teaching of the church, stated in human language. It includes the fallible teaching as well as that which is called infallible or irreformable. (I prescind at the outset from an interesting and possibly embarrassing question: to what extent do the deeds, history, image, and over-all external self-presentation of the church, and especially its hierarchy and papacy, contribute to or form part of its official teaching? Actions speak almost as loudly as words.) "Transcendence": that which is comprehended by "ultimate religious truth"; that is, whatever there is of an ultimate ontological nature beyond or outside of ordinary everyday worldly existence as such; God or the ground of being. (This definition does not prejudge the questions whether, how, or to what extent the transcendent merges with or is present in or identical with the world. In any case the transcendent will remain at least dialectically distinct from the immanent. The definition does assume, however, that the ultimate *ontological* transcendent and the ultimate *religious* transcendent are one. This is also Aquinas' assumption in the Five Ways. An alternative assumption might be that the ultimate religious categories are entirely immanent or this-worldly, and that there is no such thing as any ultimate ontological ground. Such seems to be the position of certain forms of Buddhism and secular theology.)

"Expression" is of course different from that which is expressed. The latter can be further divided into 1) cognitional awareness, apprehension, or knowledge, which the expression seeks to express, and 2) that objective thing or state of affairs which the cognitional awareness attains, approaches, or intends to attain, and which is also intended, mediately, in the expression. There are then, in the present case, three things: transcendent religious reality, cognitional awareness or grasp of that reality, and (partial?) linguistic expression of what is thus grasped (at). Unless it becomes crucial,

however, I shall keep the distinction between cognition and expression in the background, take the latter as inclusive of the former, and speak directly of the expression (rather than the knowledge) of the transcendent. Thus, for instance, the "inadequacy" of the magisterium's expressions of the transcendent may be due to the inadequacy of the magisterium's awareness, or of its expression of its awareness, or of both. Needless to say, the epistemological questions are legitimate in their place; but for my purposes I shall leave them aside and speak simply of the relation of linguistic expressions to the transcendent.¹

Can the transcendent come to expression in human language? This is a general question and belongs to the philosophy of religion. It has frequently been raised with respect to the religious utterances of the world religions. It is important to keep in mind that the Christian's theological problem is only a special case of the general philosophical problem. All religions claim to be in some way bearers of the transcendent, expressed in their creeds, codes, and cults. Christianity's claim to be the sole or principal bearer of God's revelation is not very different in this respect from the claims of other religions. Unless the generality of the question is borne in mind, one may tend to overlook the contributions of non-Christian thought in this area. The question of the expressions of the magisterium is not *only* one of "revelation" as customarily treated in Catholic and Christian theology, but belongs to a wider context. (Of course the Christian problem of revelation just taken by itself is terrifically broad. In this limited study I have to omit most of the relevant correlations.)

Christianity claims to have a teaching that has been divinely revealed. The Catholic Church holds, more precisely, that this revealed teaching is infallibly guarded and interpreted through the magisterium. One would expect, then, if these claims were true, that the expressions of the magisterium would render a true and perfect account of transcendent reality. The fact, however, that any expression couched in human language is a created, finite, and imperfect

¹ A similar line is taken by Frederick J. Streng in *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), pp. 17-18. Part III of this book is particularly relevant to our problem.

thing automatically raises the question of the possibility of a *gap* between the transcendent itself and the expressions of it in human language. (Notice that nothing is lost by disregarding epistemology here.) One may well grant that the magisterium expresses the revealed teachings of Christianity, without at the same time committing himself to the view that the divine truths have been captured perfectly in that human expression. It may be that the imperfect character of human expression by its very nature precludes any such perfect mirroring, even though the "content" of the mirroring is "revealed." This is indeed the position that I am taking in this essay.

When one says that Christian teaching is "revealed" by God, he means at the very least that God himself has participated somehow in the appearance on the human scene of said teaching. It is hard to say how much more than this is necessarily implied. A satisfactory answer would require a systematic account of what it means for God to "act" within the created world. Recent theology has cast doubt on the traditional solutions. Naturally I cannot attempt an answer of my own now. It can be pointed out, however, that revelation *need* not mean, and quite possibly *cannot* mean, that God has directly imparted to us, in miraculous ways, certain informations (facts) about himself, man, or the world; or that such informations have been directly and perfectly translated into human speech in expressions such as "Christ ascended into heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father, whence he is coming to judge the living and the dead" (Apostolic Creed). One could allow that what is expressed here is revealed, *without* at the same that he knows what this revelation (or interpretation of revelation) means, or that it means what it "literally" appears to mean. The nature of the information about the transcendent provided by such expressions is still undetermined. There remains the philosophical question: what does this kind of expression express? What exactly does one learn from these expressions that he didn't know before? As a believer I may be confident that words which in some way embody a revelation bring me into the presence of, or put me in contact with, the transcendent. ut what this presence or contact amonuts to will not have been settled.

Let us examine further the case of a doctrinal formula whose content is said to have been revealed, but whose meaning, according to the questions asked above, is in doubt. Consider the statement, "it is revealed that God is a trinity of three persons in one nature." By what procedure is meaning to be derived from this expression? One answer is that these words are like a message in code; that each word stands for something not immediately evident—indeed, for something that may have very little, if any, relation to referents ordinarily intended by the words. The expression, then would be like an *allegory*, and, though necessary (as revelation) for one's enlightenment, would be of no use unless an additional key was provided. Such was the hermeneutical presupposition of Origen and other exegetes. It is also similar to the view of those who hold that all religious language (or knowledge) of divine things is equivocal: the human term means one thing, but the transcendent referent is utterly other. If this were the way revelation conveyed its meaning, revealed expressions would stand to ordinary expressions much as a real piano stands to a toy piano with painted keys: neither one could make music by itself; and, without a piano-player, the real one is of no more use than the toy. Evidently no one today is interested in reviving allegorical techniques of interpretation, whether for Scripture or for the magisterium. Yet the theory that religious language is largely or entirely equivocal does have worthy adherents, and must be kept in mind as one of the positions that is consistent with the notion of revealed teaching. The truly amazing thing is that the Fathers did not (that I know of) allegorize the creeds. That they did not is due to an inconsistency which reflects the lack of an important insight into the nature of magisterial expressions.

An expression, then, can be true, while still being at least partially undetermined not only as to its meaning, but even as to the hermeneutic principles by which its meaning is to be found. It might be supposed that it is the role of the magisterium to act at this point as interpreter of the meaning of revealed doctrine; and this is just how the magisterium seems to think of itself today.²

² See René Latourelle, S.J., *Theology of Revelation* (Staten Island: Alba House, 1966), pp. 412, 483

But as I have tried to show in another place, the basic question is not really solved by this, for the problem still remains: how are the interpretations of the magisterium to be interpreted?³ Especially, if the expressions of the magisterium are statements about something transcendent, the same difficulties will hold here as with revelation in general: *what* do such statements mean, and in what way is their meaning available? The problems of interpreting the magisterium are not really different from those involved in the interpretation of Scripture. In the first place, what does the human word by itself mean (historical background, literary genres, philology, history of ideas and culture, and so on); and second, how is the divine word involved in the human word (inspiration, role of the Spirit, hermeneutic circle, etc.)?

It might be helpful to ask whether the expressions of the magisterium are to be interpreted as *poetry*. Although allegorical interpretations of language are of no help in approaching the transcendent, perhaps the same cannot be said for poetic or *metaphoric* interpretations. Most of the world's great religious writings are poetic; indeed, it is hard to conceive of their being anything else; and this is certainly true of large portions of the Scriptures. One can get hold of the literal or intended meaning of such writings only by reading them as they were meant to be read—as poetry. What, then, of the expressions of the magisterium? Magisterial pronouncements can surely be considered metaphoric to the extent that they borrow expressions directly from the poetry of Scripture. For example, whether Christians have always adverted to it or not, such creedal expressions as “sits at the right hand of the Father” are purely metaphoric. But what about statements which make no pretence of being poetic—like the canons of Trent?⁴ Or in the creed just referred to: is the expression “he ascended into heaven” metaphoric in the same way that the reference to the Son's session is metaphoric? Obviously, many magisterial assertions are far from

³ Anselm Atkins, “The Problem of Infallibility,” *The Lamp*, LXV (April, 1967), 14-15, 28, 30-31.

⁴ I understand that the London Traffic Code has been set to plainsong and sung. This is great, but does not demonstrate that such documents contain true poetry.

poetic; but the relation of human language to the transcendent realities will require that they be treated as such. (Metaphoric is to allegoric as incarnational is to docetic.) Thus, on this view, any prosaic proposition at all from Denzinger's *Enchiridion* would be metaphoric with respect to that which it attempts to express; and an intentionally poetic statement would be *doubly* metaphoric over and above the intended sense of the human poetic metaphor. To summarize, then, the answer to the second question (above): *whatever* the meaning of the human word might be, its relation to the "divine word" would be metaphoric.

But perhaps metaphor too has limits. Can metaphoric expression attain truth or convey meaning in a true or perfect way? Does "perfect" mean "literal" or "exact?" What could "exactness" mean in the present discussion? Its meaning in the empirical sciences and in the everyday exchanges of human intercourse is clear. Even there, however, exactness is relative and somewhat fictional.⁵ No two dozen of eggs are exactly the same. The grass in Kentucky is not exactly blue. Now, in the case of the trinity, supposing that one knew exactly and precisely what a "person" is (and I for one do not), could he say that God is exactly and precisely three persons? Is the Father exactly a person? One might wish instead to side with Rahner: although it is "true" that there are three persons in God, even so the word simply cannot mean here what even theologians ordinarily take it to mean.⁶ The Father, then, is a person—but not exactly. Yet it is still true that he is a person; and this may be a revealed truth. Truth, it seems, can be other than "exact." The failure of language to achieve exactness is not a telling blow against poetry. For one must respect the commonplace notion that poetic truth is not the same as scientific truth. There is a deeply held human belief that great poetry attains profound truths. Admittedly poetry contributes little or nothing to our knowledge of empirical facts, and often seems to fly in the face of them. It is very hard to say just what the truth of poetry consists in, yet its truth is universally sensed. If the expressions of the magisterium are in any way like poetry—that is, if their meaning is to be understood in terms of

⁵ See Alfred North Whitehead, "Immortality," in *Science and Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1948), p. 104.

⁶ See Karl Rahner, "What is a Dogmatic Statement?" in *Theological Investigations V* (Baltimore: Helican Press, 1966), 56.

metaphor, paradox, irony, symbol, and myth—then they stand in a good way of possessing or expressing truth in much the same way that poetry does. (I find that the argumentation in this paragraph, despite my best efforts, comes out looking like that of an ambiguous poem. The reader who is more than ever puzzled by this last remark might take a look at the first chapter of Cleanth Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn* or the fourth chapter of Philip Wheelwright's *The Burning Fountain*.)

The same question can be put with regard to "adequacy." Is poetic language adequate or inadequate for expressing truth? If the latter, then taking magisterial expression poetically would be tantamount to admitting that they were "inadequate." And inadequate they surely are, as far as scientific notions of adequacy go. For vast portions of mankind, however, even in the present age, poetic knowledge has not less but more validity than "scientific" knowledge. The wisdom of the East is essentially a poetic, unscientific wisdom. The philosophy of the existentialists—as well, one might say, as the theology of the Augustinian and mystical tradition—adopts the same view (one has but to read Heidegger and his followers to see the vehemence with which the nonscientific view of truth-standards can be put forward). Poetic language, far from being inadequate, seems to be the most adequate, if not the *only* adequate, means for expressing certain kinds of truth—especially religious or ultimate truths. From this point of view, the best thing one could say about magisterial expressions would be that they communicated indirectly, metaphorically, poetically.

But can poetic language express the *transcendent realities of revelation*? Certainly poetic language can express things that are beyond our ordinary reach; and some of these things are of a religious nature. The *Bhagavad Gita*, the fragments of Heraclitus, T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, and similar writings might be cited. Nevertheless, the supernatural (grace) is by definition that which the unaided powers of man cannot attain. To the extent that the religious and ontological ultimates are one, this will be true of the transcendent as such. One is forced to say that what poetry achieves, however grand, is only a human thrust toward the transcendent and ever fails of its goal. It is not that poetry cannot be a vehicle of

revelation, God's preferred locus of self-manifestation. It is just that poetic language is human, and can no more express the transcendent fully and perfectly than any other mode of language. Strictly speaking, a prosaic proposition has as much chance of being "infallible" as a poem. In this respect, technical theological language and poetic language are on a par.

What can perhaps be said, however, is that poetry has the advantage over scientific theological language of being aware of its own metaphoricality. I have suggested above that even ordinary propositional language must be interpreted as metaphor when it purports to deal with the transcendent. But magisterial statements do not themselves openly invite such interpretation; and this may be a fault. Now, if magisterial statements were frankly poetical, there could be no misunderstanding on this point, and an appropriate hermeneutic might be applied to them. I am not saying that magisterial language should actually *be* poetic. God forbid that the assembled bishops try to produce poetry. Besides, there certainly is room in the theological enterprise for philosophical and other relatively exact expression. What is demanded is simply the recognition that exact language—or any language—can never give more than a metaphoric transcription of transcendent reality, whether revealed or not. The need, then, is less for a magisterium that expresses itself poetically, than for a hermeneutics consciously analogous to that used with poetry.

I have taken the position above that magisterial statements, like metaphoric or poetic statements, can be "true" without being scientifically "exact." I have maintained that not even poetic language, however, can express the transcendent adequately. I have suggested that magisterial expressions must therefore be interpreted as a kind of religious metaphor even when their literary form and supposed intention do not encourage such treatment. The upshot of this is that one can readily grant that the expressions of the magisterium have to do with revealed truth, or are "infallible," without at the same time having to say—or even being *able* to say—that such statements automatically yield accurate information about "how things really stand" in the sphere of transcendence. Of course one

could not and should not conclude from this that such expressions are of no use to man in his religious search. But it is not immediately evident just what their proper use is. Perhaps one could say that as a *minimum* they are to be "taken into account" in *some way*. Some of them may serve as centers around which theological reflection revolves—like the reader's or critic's meditation on a poem. But others may appear to have exhausted their theological fruitfulness in this respect; perhaps the "account" that should be taken of them is to revise, restate, or even negate them.⁷ At any rate, this whole question is one that must be left open to theological discussion.

Meanwhile, back at the church. All human language, poetic or other, falls short of the transcendent, *even though what is expressed in such language is classed as "revealed"*; consequently the expressions of the magisterium cannot perfectly capture the transcendent. But what does the magisterium itself have to say on this subject? Even before making any study of the matter, one can be fairly sure of one thing: that the magisterium has not tended to think of its teachings as deficient. It has not been beset by a sense of inadequacy. Suppose, then, for the sake of argument, that one could find among the expressions of the magisterium statements of the very strongest kind asserting the truth, adequacy, correctness, or exactness of its utterances. One recalls, by way of example, Leo XIII's definition of inspiration, in which he says that the sacred writers "expressed . . . properly (*apte*) with infallible truth" the things God wanted them to (D 1952). The word "*apte*" (which might also be rendered "adequately"), though used here of the inspiration of Scripture rather than of the magisterium itself, probably also describes the magisterium's self-understanding of its own pronouncements. The chapter on the infallible magisterium of the pope in the dogmatic constitution on the church at Vatican I of

⁷ I have dealt at length with these latter possibilities in several earlier essays: "Religious Assertions and Doctrinal Development," *Theological Studies*, XXVII (December, 1966), 523-552; "Doctrinal Development and Dialectic," *Continuum*, V (Spring, 1968), 3-23, and "Nihilism and the Negation of Doctrine," (manuscript).

course confirms this impression. *Humani Generis* is even more explicit (D 2310, 2312). The real question here, however, is one that can be settled a priori. The important thing for the moment is not, what exactly does the magisterium think, but, what is the theologian to think of *whatever* it thinks? Evidently the magisterium's utterances about itself, whatever they are, must be treated just like its utterance on any other subject on which it is competent. Its own self-interpretation is subject to the *theologian's* interpretation; and any censuring it may do of these theological interpretations is again subject to theological interpretation. The theologian therefore can say the same thing about any such self-interpretations that he says about all magisterial utterances *in genere*; and what he says may be something like what has been said here. If magisterial pronouncements are by nature in some sense inadequate, then this must likewise be true of the magisterium's self-interpretations. Thus, even though the magisterium may express its understanding of its own expressions in a way that does not seem to invite doubts as to their adequacy, the theologian may, if he has good reasons, continue in spite of that to regard any such expression, along with all the rest, as inadequate. My own view is that the assertion that magisterial expressions are adequate would itself be an *inadequate* assertion, and could never be more than that. If this theological position were to be condemned, the magisterial condemnation could not be considered above theological interpretation, or be thought adequate. This position, of course, like any other theological position, can be disputed or abandoned. The point I am making is that the magisterial expression by itself does not settle the question finally, for it is the character of these very expressions that is in question. On this score, the opinion of the magisterium about itself is just one more opinion (however weighty) among others. No doubt, the magisterium's self-interpretation is true in some metaphoric sense: it simultaneously expresses and fails to express a transcendent truth. Magisterial expressions may be "apt" as religious metaphor. It would be beyond the scope of the present essay to attempt a more detailed elucidation of the metaphor "apt metaphor."

If these last reflections seem to undermine the teaching authority

of the magisterium it would be well to consider that the strength of the church's teaching authority may not lie after all in its ability to produce exact or perfectly correct and informative assertions, but elsewhere.

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