

Contemplation and The Knowledge of God

by Simon Tugwell, O.P.

This is not an exhaustive study of contemplation, and I omit several important aspects of the subject; most drastically, I omit any discussion of Christ as the ultimate revelation of God. I feel entitled to do so for two reasons: first, that Christ characterized himself as 'the way', and it is therefore permissible to make a preliminary enquiry, such as this present one, into what, in general, one is looking for in an approach to God. And secondly, we no longer know Christ himself in the flesh. To see Christ is to see the Father: but how do we see Christ? To some extent we may re-assimilate the problem of knowing Christ to that of knowing God (though since the Incarnation, one cannot leave it at that, obviously; otherwise the Incarnation would have no enduring revelatory significance, which it clearly has).

In English we are unfortunate in having only one word 'know' for both *savoir* and *connaître*; for the distinction is very important between knowing a fact, and knowing a person, and it is easy to create devastating problems for ourselves by tacitly assimilating contemplation of God to *savoir* rather than *connaître*.

The most obvious distinction between knowing a fact and knowing a person is that the former is abstract and general, while the latter is particular. The object of the former type of knowledge, being an abstraction, only exists in my mind. In Buber's terminology, there is an I-It relationship, an It always being only a part of my world. (Let me insist in advance that I use this terminology without wishing to posit two completely separate relationships (I-It, and I-Thou); rather these are two distinct components of a single complex relationship, at least where there is a fully integrated relationship, involving the whole person.) A world made up of facts is necessarily solipsistic (cf. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: 'the world is *my* world').

By contrast, an I-Thou relationship requires that the Thou be outside myself: it is a precondition of such a relationship that I should not seek to ap-propriate (make my own) the other party involved. 'Where there is self-appropriation there is no reality' (Buber). An I-Thou relationship involves a displacement of the Ego, in that it must recognize in the Thou an independent 'centre of existence'—another I, in fact, different from mine. And such an alien I can of course have no place in my egocentric (solipsistic) world. This displacement of the Ego (ec-stasis) is pseudo-Denys's definition of love, and it is a good one.

But here we meet the fundamental problem: how can I enter into a relationship with some entity which, by definition, can have no part in my world? Or, to put the same question a different way, how can I displace my Ego, step outside myself, into a broader world which is not confined to the system revolving round my own Ego? Unless we opt for some degree of solipsism, we must, with Jungian psychologists, acknowledge relationship as a basic, irreducible fact of our own very nature: there are two levels to the Self, only one of which is egocentric, the other being, in some sense, communal, We-centred. It is this latter that makes an I-Thou relationship possible, insofar as the Thou is a part of my own We. An I-Thou relationship occurs within a We.

This means that the Thou cannot be an object which I experience. Insofar as I and Thou experience each other, we are It to each other: it is only insofar as we are complementary to one another as co-subjects that we are Thou to (or rather, with) each other. (Cf. Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*: 'Whom we truly love like our own selves, we forget their looks, nor can our memory retain the idea of their faces: and it is no wonder, for they are ourselves, and our affection makes their looks our own . . . it (sc. affection) is a body of enigmas, mysteries and riddles, wherein two so become one as they both become two'.)

It is interesting to look at the Yahwist account of creation and the Fall in Genesis from the point of view of the distinction between I-It and I-Thou relationships (Gen. 2, 18-24). The animals are brought to Adam, but there is no suitable companion for him among them, no one with whom he can form an I-Thou relationship. He forms an I-It relationship with them, by naming them; but this is an external affair, he has no 'inside' understanding of them. They are simply objects to him. But woman is an entirely different matter. Adam can react to her from inside, for she is a part of himself. Her very name is an expression of their relationship, no longer an arbitrary, external imposition. And so man and woman can cleave to each other to form a single subject, 'they become one body'. Their paradisaical condition is a perfect I-Thou relationship.

Relationship is thus an irreducible human fact: 'we are parts of one another' (Eph. 4, 25). The Fall has disrupted the organic unity of mankind (man and woman are set against each other as objects to each other: 'your yearning shall be for your husband, yet he will lord it over you'—Gen. 3, 16. The LXX has: 'your turning (*apostrophe*) will be to your husband'). But in Christ we are again set on the path to unity, until we all become One Man (Christ)—Gal. 3, 28 (notice the masculine). (En passant, it seems probable to me that this is where a discussion of the sacramentality of marriage must start. If a sacrament is a canonical focus or actualization of Christ, then marriage is a canonical actualization of the unity of mankind, which is itself made divine (sacramental) in Christ. This particular coming

together of man and wife to become one body is an authentic actualization of the coming together of all men to become the one Body of the *totus Christus*—which also shows how marriage is ordered to the central sacrament of the Eucharist.)

To sum up then, an I-Thou relationship is not one in which I experience or apprehend a Thou as an other, but one in which I co-experience together with a Thou, either ourselves reflexively, or anything else. This is possible because there is an actual connexion between us (in scholastic jargon called *connaturalitas*), enabling us to sym-pathize (the Greek derivative corresponding to co-experience).

It may seem that this account makes the idea of knowing a person highly problematic. But it is a highly problematic idea. Let us take that delightful sentence from the German textbook: 'dieser Mann ist mein Vater, ich kenne ihn gut' ('this man is my father, I know him well'). What does it actually mean? It obviously includes knowing certain facts about my father—that he is bald, has blue eyes, etc., but that is scarcely knowledge of him as a person. I may know plenty of such facts about, say, a film star, whom I should hardly claim to know personally. And conversely, I might feel that I 'know' some long-dead poet (Catullus, Keats) as a 'friend', without knowing any such facts about him.

What then does distinguish knowledge of a person? Surely it is simply a capacity to 'get inside' him. I know when to catch my father's eye at a particular sort of joke, I can sense when he is unhappy or worried, I can understand what he is trying to get at when he is talking rather incoherently; I recognize certain things as typical of him ('I know Father—that's just like him—that's Father all over!'). I know his way of doing things. And if I want to talk about him, or about our relationship, I have in myself an intuitive check of the truth or falsehood of what I say. I have the 'feel' of my father.

The sort of knowledge I have of a person is thus a genuine knowledge, it is to do with *intellectus*, not *voluntas*, in scholastic terminology, despite its essential connexion with love. (St Thomas's discussion of whether *sapientia* is a function of *intellectus* (II.II Q.45 art. 2) is highly relevant.) But it is knowledge from inside; it is precisely the sort of knowledge that I have of myself.

Within this reflexive knowledge, there is room for, and even need of, an I-It relationship (an 'objective' relationship), but this must always be authenticated by the direct contact which is only possible within the co-subjectivity of the I-Thou syzygy. The role of the I-It relationship is both to safeguard and to give multiform expression to the I-Thou relationship. It gives expression to it, not as an accidental appendage, but as an essential development: compare the significance of what the artist does when he expresses his aesthetic experiences. The expression is necessary for the complete actualization of the experience. I have rather stressed the need to displace the Ego as the centre of consciousness; but this must never be total. A man with

no egocentric consciousness is subhuman. And a fully personal I-Thou relationship must involve the egocentric consciousness as part of the I, and formulation and expression of the relationship is at least one effect of this involvement. And this is how the I-It relationship can also safeguard the I-Thou relationship: by giving a proper value to the egocentric consciousness, it prevents me from simply swallowing up the alleged Thou, so that the We is made up of I and a projection of my own I—no relationship at all, in fact. The separation of I and Thou, always within the I-Thou syzygy, ensures that the We remains a complex of two unconfused entities. (One's tendency to use language reminiscent of the way we talk of the Trinity is significant; originally, we may surmise, I-Thou relationships were designed to be a created replica of the Trinity, so that there would be a complete unity of activity and experience, without any confusion of persons. Just as God (singular) enjoys himself (singular) in his own plurality, so the prototypical couple Adam + Eve (singular) would enjoy itself (singular) in its own duality.)

Now what of God? One cannot simply assimilate our relationship with God, to our relationships with one another; but it is legitimate to suppose that the basis for all these relationships is the same or similar.

This means that it must be possible for us to 'get inside' God, to become co-subjects with him. And this is classic Christian doctrine: we are made in the image of God (Gen. 1, 26-7), we have the mind of Christ (I Cor. 2, 16), we have the very Spirit of God, which knows God intimately from inside (I Cor. 2, 10ff). The scholastics connect contemplation with the gift of Wisdom, which enables us to know God, to judge of the things of God, from inside, by a certain con-naturalness—St Thomas compares it with the fluency with which a man well practised in chastity can judge of this virtue; he knows it from inside, unlike the man who knows it simply from his studies in moral philosophy.

We have seen that we do not strictly experience a Thou as an other; this is uniquely true when the Thou is God. For in Christ, God becomes the subject of my own life: 'I live now not I but Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2, 20). And so, whereas in an I-Thou relationship with anyone else, I am conscious of him as part of the reflexive awareness of the We in which we are co-subjects, in an I-Thou relationship with God I am conscious of him as part of my own reflexive awareness of myself.

God is to be found precisely in myself; my knowledge of him becomes part of my knowledge of myself, and ultimately, of his knowledge of me (Gal. 4, 9). And this follows from the very condition of my existence: I exist only because of God's creative knowledge of me (St Thomas: I Q. 14 art. 8), which is part of (a finite realization of) his own knowledge of himself (*Ibid.*, art. 5).

This is not just abstract theological speculation: according to

Jung, it is impossible to distinguish in psychology between archetypal symbols of God, and symbols of the self. This means that we have no psychological capacity to recognize God in depth as other than ourselves. So long as we are looking for God outside ourselves, though we may attain to an intellectual, abstract idea of God, we shall not find him as a Thou, We only find God personally as a Thou, when we look for him in ourselves (which is a favourite theme of St Augustine's).

There are two consequences of this, of real import for our lives. One is the possibility of that most radical idolatry which sets oneself in the place of God. This idolatry accepts correctly the real identity of God and the self, but reverses the ontological sequence, making God ontologically secondary, instead of the other way about.

The second consequence is that knowledge (personal, I-Thou knowledge) of God as distinct from myself, can only take the form of knowledge of myself as ontologically dependent. This is the only principle of distinction.

In the case of my I-Thou relationship with my father, to revert to our old example, though I can indeed turn him into a fantasy projection of myself, I can only do so at a distance.¹ Otherwise my actual contact with him constantly overthrows my fantasy. His bodily distinctness from me will see to that, if nothing else does. But with God this is not so easy. God is not 'another person' on the same ontological plane as myself; my self does not exclude his, we can both be the subjects of the same *singular* act (I live not I but Christ). What then, within the I-Thou relationship, is there to distinguish us? Surely only my ontological dependence on him, my secondariness, my contingency.

Here again we may recognize the impress of the Trinity. Our creation is a temporal and finite replica of the eternal and infinite generation of the Son, and, according to the classic theological formulation, the only principle of distinction between the Persons of the Trinity is their origin, their mode of procession, or non-procession in the case of the Father, who is the ultimate source of procession ('*Differentes personarum proprietates circa solam originem quaerere oportebit*'—Richard of St Victor).

In terms of the I-Thou relationship, then, my knowledge of God must take the form of knowledge of myself as not being the ultimate subject of myself, as not being self-originating. And this involves, as I say, a radical displacement of the Ego: I must *die* to myself. For, due to the Fall, we all have an innate tendency to regard ourselves as being precisely what we are not: self-originating, the ultimate subjects of ourselves. We must overcome this tendency, we must be

¹A Charm invests a face
Imperfectly beheld—
The Lady dare not lift her Vail
For fear it be dispelled—
(Emily Dickinson).

reborn into Christ's perfect awareness of dependence upon the Father, of existing only because the Father asserts his own existence in us.

Our relationship with God is totally conditioned by the fact that he is hidden from us. We know him by faith, only insofar as he reveals himself to us. One immediate consequence of this is that the I-It relationship has an unwonted ascendancy, because this is how revelation is communicated to us. By that I do not simply mean that it takes the form of propositional statements, though these are important; I am referring to the whole range of teaching contained in revelation, which is exceedingly diverse in form, ranging from defined dogmas, to mystical poetry (notably the Psalms, and the Canticle so beloved of contemplatives).

This teaching is not simply external to us, for we have the mind of Christ, the Spirit of God: that is to say, we have, in a sense, inside knowledge of God. We have an I-Thou relationship with him, which enables us to 'judge' of the things taught us by revelation. Just as we can get underneath statements made by or about someone whom we know personally 'from inside', so we can get *underneath* the statements of revelation, because we know God from inside (by *sapientia*, in scholastic terms, a gift which is given to everyone in a state of grace, according to St Thomas). But, because we do not see him face to face, we can never get *beyond* these statements.

This means that the scope of the I-It relationship is considerably less than the scope of the I-Thou relationship (in more traditional terms, our love of God makes further advances in God's direction than does our knowledge of him, but this is an inadequate formulation). As having the mind of Christ, who has seen the Father, we have a full I-Thou knowledge of God, we know all things (I Jn. 2, 27). But this knowledge is, as it were, not fully actualized in us, just as, in general, our resurrection life (Eph. 2, 6, etc.) is not yet fully actualized in us. There is a part of it which must remain dark, and this is where we may locate the Dionysian *caligo ignorantiae*, at least as it has been understood in the West.

How then does our I-Thou relationship with God actually operate? It should be clear by now that we must not look for 'experiences' of God: that is precisely what we do not and cannot have. We 'experience' God as It, as the *object* of faith; but, as our study of human relationships would lead us to expect, the more intimate we become with God, the less we experience him as object. Instead, we find that we are coming to live and think as co-subjects with God (co-operators, in St Paul's word, I Cor. 3, 9, *synergoi*, taking part actively in God's *ergon*, his one *ergon*, which is creation in all its fullness). Our relationship with God becomes less a subject-object relationship, and more a matter of living and reacting in and to everything in harmony with God, as co-subject with him, seeing everything from his point of view. My knowledge of him takes the

form of a sort of inside familiarity with his style, his way of doing things. This enables me to get inside the Bible and the sacraments, and the other canonical points of contact with God, and also the great natural sacrament of the created world. This is in large part a deepening of the I-It relationship, which I have by faith in revelation. But the mode of our earthly knowledge of God requires this. Here, unlike our human relationships with one another, our I-Thou relationship needs to be authenticated and tested by our I-It relationship. But as I become fluent in judging of the things of God, as revealed in the canonical places of contact, I learn to walk in step with God in everything, I discern his style in all my life, in all the world, and that not *ab extra*, as a theorist, but with the discernment of sympathy which is proper to the lover.

In an I-Thou relationship with a human being, when I am with him, our actual being-together brings into play and harmonizes the totality of our relationship, both our reciprocal subject-object I-It relationship, and our I-Thou relationship, of which we are together co-subjects; our presence to one another is, as it were, both objective (I see him face to face) and co-subjective. But with God it is not like that; I do not yet see him face to face. The principle of distinction in our I-Thou relationship is only the ontological one, that I am a secondary being, rendered doubly dependent by being a sinner too. My awareness of God comes down to my awareness of my own dependence. I know that I am dependent on God, I can savour this fact deeply: but I cannot actually see the God on whom I am dependent. I can only experience the fact of this relationship. And so, ultimately, we may characterize the whole contemplative life in terms of this. 'Pray without intermission, give thanks the whole time' (I Thess. 5, 17-18): asking for things and saying thank you for things, these are the two, probably the only two, essential specific actualizations of the relationship of dependence. When our whole lives, without intermission, are taken up into this cycle of asking and thanksgiving, of saying 'Please' and 'Thank you', then we have attained to the height of contemplation. If this is childish, what matter? Is not that the condition of entry into the Kingdom of God?