

THE UNITY OF FAITH ITS "REALISM" AND "FORMALISM"

IF there be a typical trait of faith—an attitude of spirit or an act characteristic of it—this is certainly its *simplicity*. It is already observable in that indeterminate thing which we term the "religious sense"; whatever may be its context, its forms, the act of the cleaving of man to the Divine is eminently simple. In the most complex souls, in those most burdened by analysis, who seem to us irremediably torn by passions, problems and agonies of inward conflict and distress, when once this shock has come out of nowhere to compel the proclamation of God . . . , a sort of polarisation comes into action. Under all the excesses, many-sidedness, and beyond superficial deployments, a directness, a spiritual purity, is cutting its way through in the search for freedom: a certain primitive and simple thing at the very root of our being has been touched.

How much more so in faith! The religious factors which create this attitude of basic adhesion are transposed and "planted" in God Himself Who is the source and consummation of the entire change. No longer adoration grounded in the shivering dread of an annihilated creature, but communion in the life of a personal God by active "outpouring" of divine light interiorly.

What paradox, then, to wish to analyse it, analyse this faith which, like life beneath the surgeon's scalpel, escapes us in proportion as analysis goes deeper!

Must we leave it alone?—Let ourselves be involved in a sort of spiritual wave where, assent once given, we have to renounce every control, every recall to *terra firma*, under pain of falling into any kind of "rationalism"? Attractive, enduring temptation for the believer!

No. We repudiate this pseudo-romanticism which will deform faith. Simplicity, we said. But simplicity of an "organism." Life is simple, eminently simple—and all the same we possess limbs and a skeleton.

Indeed, after a first glance at the bearing of the (Catholic) believer, we discriminate two disparate psychic strands, and we would easily go on and say: two types of inward life seem to make up faith. Better still and deeper, and touching the very adhesion itself at its slenderest point, two *exigencies*, both whole and entire, seemingly (for one who does not discover their intertwinement) refusing all mutual differentiation:

—On the one side an *adhesion* to a truth taught by God, to a teaching proposed in formulas, in dogmas, by an hierarchically ranged authority,

—On the other side a secret trust, which is ceaselessly being revitalised in a direct and mysterious meeting with God. Uninterrupted dialogue of God, the divine Person, with me, the human person.

Exigencies which certainly appear both indestructible and incompatible. All of me in submission—*or* all of me in love.

If we try to co-ordinate these two exigencies—*formalism* of adhesion, *realism* of communion, that is to say not laying them alongside each other by compromise, disguising their drift, but discovering their mutual inclusiveness—then shall we have comprehended.

I. *Realism of faith*

It is a *perception*. A perception by a becoming-like, a sharing, of the knowledge God has of Himself. In faith we see, says St. Thomas, “with the eye of God.” To see. To look. To contemplate. Not a conclusion, not a manipulation of ideas and concepts which would allow us to steal reality. Not a proof. Not an explanation of the world, an argument from causality, an apologetic from creation. But a looking. The data do not matter much. We are talking about the dialogue between my soul and God, concerning the very life of God; in this light my vision attains anew, discovers with wonder what God means by Himself, by the life of the world, by my own life; myself in the mysterious destiny of the world, with my own destiny, mysterious too, before the Triune God.

THE UNITY OF FAITH

The *realism* of such perception: I mean its worth as knowledge. It is the look of a mother upon her child. The look of love upon its object. An attentive look, all-embracing, with, behind it, to make it ready before it grows rich with its revelations, all the plasticity of a soul.

It is also a work of *will* and of *love*. Faith does not appear here as the logical conclusion of a proof: God has spoken, so I must cleave unto His message. We are talking about a faith, a cleaving, where the decisive part is taken by the will, for such faith involves love, if not in its entire scope (yet who no longer loves is growing weary of dialogue with the beloved), at least in its first act, all longing and hunger. The elemental birth is stimulated, in fact, by the hunger for joy, indestructible in man and primal to his essence, which joins the human heart to this God Whom we have discovered, longed for, known as *giving joy*. Change involving the whole being; a voluntary relinquishing of self which is at the opposite extreme to the restless curiosity of a spirit hungry to see, sometimes deceived, and always on the surface, never deep down.

Finally it is a *strictly personal* act. In love one deals with the relation of person to person. You have certainly proved to me the existence of God, first mover of the cosmos, but He with whom I have begun the day and unendingly carried on my dialogue, is the God whom I met suddenly, at a turn of the road, in the very midst of my life. A being as personal as I. He has given me His inward light: the Holy Spirit. Infused grace, say the theologians. And my soul lives, and I look into this light. (It is unnecessary to insist on the basic equivocation confusing a faith in miracles with this divine faith.) A taking possession of the object, without analytic labour, in an unbroken movement of contemplation.

By these three characteristics, each reinforcing the other, we can then define clearly what this perceptive knowledge of faith is. A *realist* knowledge, that is to say which touches the divine *thing*. A direct perception, impregnated by affectivity, eminently personal.

And there we are, it appears, at the polar extreme of one of the absolute exigencies. Shall we ever be able to join it to the other, and co-ordinate both?

II. *The formalism of faith*

Faith is an *intellectual moral* power. One has to cleave to this, to that, think this, think that. The primal homage one owes to God is that of one's mind; and those religious lives which want to develop outside intellectual realms without an adhesion of the spirit to the truth, are doomed to failure, in a backboneless and fanciful mysticism. Faith cleaves to the truth that is God, but also to dogmatic formulas, seemingly crudely material, wherein this truth is proposed.

Faith docile to a *social régime*. A perception, a love, are not relayed, but experienced personally. The revealed deposit though: this is entrusted to the Church which transcends the generations of mankind, is transmitted to each soul through the society, along with all kinds of traditions and earthly lore.

And that same object, God, which we spoke of just now as a Light perceptible by personal intuition in an infinitely purified regard, is there received, just like a scientific object one might say, presented in abstract notions by social tradition. The living truth turned into dogma as an array of concepts.

And the Church defines, condemns, affirms.

An absolute exigency there, as well.

In fact the tendency of mysticism to minimise this side of faith is great. How believe that the life of grace, which is before all else a living faith, can find its expression outside the living soul? And if faith is borne little by little to its ultimate perfection by an ever more simple light, how avoid the suspicion that the objects of adhesion, the expressions of intellectual cleaving, are going to be destroyed, all these heaps of notions, of laborious exactitudes, being volatilised

THE UNITY OF FAITH

in the purifying burning contact of God, all converted into light, without contemplation ever needing ideas and words again?

Tendency of mysticism, tendency of every soul which has found God, and which, in its path, has met this living person who is Jesus Christ. Because we are so frail we yield to the temptation to dissociate light and object, intuition and notion, individual and society, experience and tradition. The temptation of the believer is to reject the human, all the human, to disencumber himself of all that fosters his action in other spheres but seems to fetter him here: must we not surely quicken our steps over the intermediary stages and stir up from here below the revelations of the ever-purifiable dialogue?

III. *The fusion*

But, in pushing the exigencies of realism to their deepest conclusions, might we not be able to conjoin them with faith's formalism—and *vice versa*?

Faith, we said, is an assimilation to the knowledge which God has of Himself, the looking of man intertwining with that of God. But this assimilation presupposes two clearly marked frontiers: there is God, and there is man; and human nature has inviolable laws. Over against every *object* of consciousness and of love, be this object my God, my Creator, I remain *subject*—and this duality, which facilitates so many mistakes and gropings, is engraved upon my quality of being human.—My mind is bound to join and divide the real; I reason, the exclusive and even chief domination of intuition not being for here below. You can talk with weariness or irony of this machine of concepts which burdens us; it remains a fact that we have to pass through life that way.

The dialogue of the soul and God needs words; even in this higher realm it has to be my spirit which enters into relation with God, and this spirit needs to be trained. to

be taught even in the sphere of the most personal relation with God. I do not own the revealed truth in myself, inborn as the first principles of knowledge and moral conduct are inborn. This thing which will fashion my joy of bliss for eternity, God proposes it to me in the dogma laid down by His Church: not a shadow in this of arbitrary formality, dry and making dry, but incarnation of light in human words. Without dogma I should never know that Christ—He whom I am meeting—saved me: no, it is for me to go on and make those words integral with my life, transform this truth which thrusts itself forward, into *my* light.—And then, man is a social being who needs traditions to enable him to evolve his own experience.—He is also a “way-farer,” and faith fits this state of expectation; but with it also we have that settled longing which is hope; there, where flowers the sad restlessness of the dark and the incomplete.

God takes man as he is; so does faith, even if the soul has meagre stores of knowledge or of love. Realism of faith, yes, but *human realism*! Not a shade of superimposed excrescency, like some sort of tawdry gilded thing: faith is thrust into the care of the being, as something attuned to its condition. Let us distrust the pseudo-mystical instability of the spirit, at once fully knowing how to suffer the frailty of our dogmatic formulas crushed beneath the massiveness of their content, and at the same time all hungering after the pure dialogue that shall be face to face hereafter. In the essential drift and direction of faith is inscribed the call of the vision. But let us never forget that the very pledge of the realism of faith is in this, that *our faith be always HUMAN*.

Fundamentally it is the very conception of supernatural life that is at stake. False exaltation of the supernatural to put it outside the law and psychology of our nature. Every supernatural thing is an “incarnation” of the divine; if not, the whole business has lost its point. If man must eliminate his normal content, the uninjured totality of his life, in order to arrive at the supernatural, it is a thwarting, for it is just all this human content which has got to be lifted

THE UNITY OF FAITH

up to the supernatural and, then, upon that plane, find its expansion.

The extreme case, where man seems drawn down without hope of return, not only in face of (original) sin, but by law of nature: the work of the flesh. Irreducible, one would think, to the divine life; to this thing that is sometimes even a bewildering of human life and of love. Then look at the supernatural: marriage is a sacrament, that is to say becomes productive of grace, of divine life. *The very law of its union is woven into the pattern of the supernatural.* Not an escapist sham; not wrought by an extrinsic benediction, making the best out of a hopeless case; but by an inward revitalisation of marriage upon the plane of creation of divine life.

It is the law of the incarnation. Otherwise the highest, most joyous of human works (union and generation) escapes the throbbing "circulation" of the divine life. If Christ became incarnate, it was to take up unto Himself all that there is in man, for *total* man is redeemed and deified in him. The Word took flesh; he is man unto the end, unto temptation. Flee this false idealism which would tend to see in Christ only the surface apparition of a humanity (docetism).

The same law of incarnation must come into play in faith. Work of the loving knowledge of God, it will be born, grow, express itself according to the law and movement of human knowledge—formulas and all. Otherwise the whole economy has failed, and by a pretence of mystic exaltation the whole human range of the life of the spirit remains in its distress, under an inhuman (and therefore futile) participation in a higher mind and a higher light.

Formalism of faith: there is a thoroughly genuine embodiment of the divine light *in my* spirit. And it is equally genuinely all the more a grippingly strong and necessary human *realism*.

There you get your natural fusion in the unity of the structure of faith. Incarnation of divine light, one would

BLACKFRIARS

dare to say, in human words. Just as Christ's actions are "theandric" (human acts, thoroughly and richly human, yet divine as well), so, in their own mode, our own reason, and our concepts, and our faith-formulas.

Most certainly faith is no such intellectual act as others are: it is super-natural; but not outside nature. It stands firm that the primal and fundamental components are the *realist* ones: formulary, orthodoxy, "rationalisation," have no meaning except when they feed the perception of the reality of God, the inexhaustible communion in the consciousness that He has of Himself.

M.-D. CHENU, O.P.