

new paradigm, or reform the old, at any rate in sexual matters, it will have to rediscover in some way the concept of nature while coming to grips with the analysis of symbolic behaviour.

#### SOURCES

For the reason given in the first paragraph, I have not supplied a list of references, but here are some of the sources of the ideas put over here.

The quotation from Walter Benjamin is taken from *Illuminations*, English edition of 1970, pp. 211-12. My ideas on language and symbolism come from Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, and also from Chomsky and his disciples, assuming I have understood them. For anthropological ideas about taboos as boundary-markers, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, and for the biological roots of ritual symbolism, see V. W. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*.

The question of the reduction of population pressure by contraception is really a separate question to those considered in this article. However, I would ask anybody who thinks that I have been irresponsible in not discussing this question to look at Epstein and Jackson *The Feasibility of Family Planning* and the article by Alan Macfarlane on "Social Anthropology and Population" in RAIN (Royal Anthropological Institute News), February 1978. The relevant point which they make is that the availability of efficient contraceptives is not in itself sufficient to cause a fall in the birth rate. This in turn opens up enormous questions (e.g. the nature of the social changes required for fertility to fall) which it would take another article even to outline.

## Faith and Experience VI

### Is Conventional Religion Necessarily Naughty?

Simon Tugwell O.P.

One of the most intractable questions involved in the whole programme of research undertaken by the Religious Experience Research Unit is: "What kind of experience counts as religious?" Very wisely, RERU have not, as yet, given themselves any definite answer to this question. But at least some of them realise that an answer will have to be found eventually (*This Time-Bound Ladder*, 1977, p. 48). Sir Alister Hardy seems to envisage an answer emerging from the actual empirical research itself, but, as I pointed out in my last article, (*New Blackfriars*, February, 1979), he can be convicted of being more dependent on certain dogmatic presuppositions himself than he seems prepared to admit. I find it difficult to see how any collection of reports of experiences, backed up by any number of observations and investigations, could yield a definition of religion, independently of any kind of doctrinal principle. At some stage I strongly suspect that RERU will find them-

selves faced with the need to make a serious study of religious and metaphysical doctrines propounded by different individuals and schools of thought. *This Time-Bound Ladder* is a lightweight, but interesting, beginning. Obviously no one is going to regard a series of after-dinner conversations as a substitute for careful theological and philosophical enquiry; but it may well be the case that this kind of informal airing of issues picked more or less at random was, in fact, the most appropriate mode of encounter, at this stage of the investigation, between RERU and the theorists. The results, at any rate, make rewarding reading. But they make awkward reviewing material. In what follows I cannot pretend to be doing justice to the richness there is in the book; but it seemed to me that the most useful thing to do was, in fact, to join in the conversation myself. And I wish to do so in connexion with one essential question: is "conventional religion" necessarily an inferior, maybe even dangerous, kind of religion?

I suppose the classic statement of the case against orthodoxy comes from the pen of RERU's most famous precursor, William James, and it is worth quoting at length:

The religious experience which we are studying is that which lives itself out within the private breast. First-hand individual experience of this kind has always appeared as a heretical sort of innovation to those who witnessed its birth. Naked comes it into the world and lonely; and it has always, for a time at least, driven him who had it into the wilderness, often into the literal wilderness out of doors, where the Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, St Francis, George Fox and so many others had to go. . . . A genuine first-hand religious experience like this is bound to be a heterodoxy to its witnesses, the prophet appearing as a mere lonely madman. If his doctrine prove contagious enough to spread to any others, it becomes a definite and labelled heresy. But if it then still prove contagious enough to triumph over persecution it becomes itself an orthodoxy; and when a religion has become an orthodoxy, its day of inwardness is over: the spring is dry; the faithful live at second hand exclusively and stone the prophets in their turn. The new church, in spite of whatever human goodness it may foster, can be henceforth counted on as a staunch ally in every attempt to stifle the spontaneous religious spirit and to stop all later bubblings of the fountain from which in purer days it drew its own supply of inspiration.

*(Varieties of Religious Experience, XIV & XV)*

Much the same line is taken, in TBL, by Raynor Johnson and Michael Whiteman. It appears also in a revealing exchange between the anonymous RERU interlocutor(s) and Freda Wint and Car-

men Blacker. The RERU man harks back to numinous experiences of his own childhood and comments: "I don't think one need lose it really. Though Wordsworth did, as he became more and more of a conventional Christian. It's terrible to see the alterations he made in the 1850 edition of *The Prelude* all to bring it into line with established theological doctrines". Freda Wint comments drily: "Perhaps he felt them to be true". The interlocutor (or another) says: "I always feel the earlier version reflects the numinous more vividly; it's a far more spiritual vision than the later one". Carmen Blacker says: "You mean then he was speaking from actual experiences, whereas later he was saying what he felt he ought to say". There, unfortunately, the exchange ends (TBL pp. 135-6).

The questions raised by all of this are most interesting and important. It seems to be assumed that saying what you feel you ought to say must always be, in some way, wrong. But surely Miss Wint's comment is totally devastating of any such assumption. "Perhaps he felt them to be true". That surely settles that, and introduces the far more important question: *Are they true?* But that question is just sidestepped by the RERU interlocutor. He does not seem even to see that there is a question of truth involved. But of what value is a "spiritual vision" of "the numinous" if there is no truth there?

It is worth considering what would happen if we were to apply the doctrine of the necessary heterodoxy of experience to other spheres of life. For instance, if I find a man gazing at a row of empty bottles which I can clearly see to amount to four, and he assures me that he is seeing eight, am I to venerate him as a great original genius who has escaped from the tyrannical conventions of mathematical priestcraft? Or would it be more appropriate to smell his breath?

Or if somebody tells me that if I twiddle a particular knob the radio will come on, and I do duly twiddle the knob and the radio does come on, am I simply living conventionally and at second-hand? Why does first hand experience have to be heterodox? Can I only claim to be having first hand experience if I twiddle the knob and something other than the radio comes on? A fit of giddiness, perhaps?

Of course people sometimes make original discoveries, and find that the appropriate scientific body, or whatever, looks askance at them. But why shouldn't they look askance? An alleged new discovery or theory has to be tested, it must prove its worth. Originality is no guarantee of truth or usefulness.

To come back to Wordsworth: of course one may judge the rewritten *Prelude* to be in many ways a much less satisfying work than the first version. But, supposing such a verdict to be true – which I do not propose to go into here – one plausible interpreta-

tion of that fact would be that in the rewritten version Wordsworth was trying to do something vastly more difficult and was proportionately less successful. It is surely not uncommon for someone to have a sudden flash of insight when he is first embarking on some piece of research, which he finds it easy to write up and which makes easy and exhilarating reading; but, as the research progresses, the student becomes more and more aware of ramifications and complications, so that the material becomes much harder to handle, and he also becomes more cautious as he realises that on many points considerable diversity of interpretation is possible. As a result, his subsequent writings on his chosen topic seem dull and pedantic by comparison with his juvenile effusion. But there is a fair chance that they will be more rewarding and helpful.

Of course there is some truth in the contention that mystics have not always got on very well with ecclesiastical establishments. But an analysis of such conflict simply in terms of a necessary tension between dogmatic orthodoxies and personal religion is naïve and unproductive. After all, there have been similar conflicts between theologians and ecclesiastics and between liturgists and ecclesiastics. I do not see that there is any reason to posit a special cause of trouble in the case of mystics. Any institution is almost bound to find it difficult to hold together creativity and existing, traditional values and achievements. And it would surely be far more noxious always to kowtow to creativity and novelty than sometimes to be unduly cautious about welcoming originality.

Nor is it fair simply to identify institutionalized orthodoxy with rigid conservatism. After all, one of the valuable services being performed currently in the church by ecclesiastical authority is the attempt to protect us from the various extreme right wing movements deriving from alleged apparitions of our Lady at Garabandal, Amsterdam and elsewhere. Indeed, in the Roman Catholic Church at present there are a number of people who regard the official leaders of the ecclesiastical organization as dangerously progressive and prone to innovations.

It is also not true to say that Christ was opposed simply by the existing religious power structure; in the gospels he is far more often shown in conflict with the progressive and mystically inclined Pharisees than with the Sadducees.

Finally, even if we allow that there is very typically a conflict between the spontaneous religiosity of personal experience and the institutions of organized religion, we should not forget that there are more ways than one of being conventional. Bryan Wilson has reminded us that "spontaneity and subjectivism have become powerful elements in contemporary culture. Inner feeling has been widely hailed as more *authentic* than intellectual knowledge"

(*Contemporary Transformations of Religion*, p. 37). "The old idea of learning, of a steady habilitation, of socialization, of necessarily recurrent dedication to God, 'each returning day', is set aside for religion by rapid results. The change is entirely in conformity to the pressure of contemporary society. The idea of steady growth in grace, perhaps of a lifelong cultivation of understanding, is replaced by the modern demand for instant access to authentic reality. The authenticity is guaranteed by subjective feeling, reinforced by group-engendered emotions, for the reality is to be felt rather than realised cognitively or learned by habituation to orderly procedures" (*Ibid.* p. 86-7).

I am not suggesting that all exponents and practitioners of mystical religion, even if this is defined in strict opposition to institutional religion, are necessarily just succumbing to the norms of present day society (which Bryan Wilson finds typically expressed in the entertainment industry and in modern sales technique). For one thing, not all exponents of a rigorously mystical spirituality accept that raw, spontaneous experience has anything to do with the higher realms of mysticism. But it is worth reminding ourselves that the reasons for preferring an emotional, experiential account of religion may not all be religious, and may not be at all nonconformist in fact. In our present state of society there may actually be a greater element of nonconformity involved in adherence to a formal body of religious doctrine and practice and discipline than there is in more free-lance styles of religion.

In TBL we find two different kinds of attack on institutional orthodoxies; one is based fairly clearly on a preference for raw spontaneity, and we shall come back to this shortly. The other is a far more seriously thought out attack, consisting of an impressive analysis of the different levels at which human beings operate, each level yielding its own particular kind of religiosity. There are elements of such an attack in the contribution made by Raynor Johnson (TBL pp. 139ff), but it is most clearly and fully expressed by Michael Whiteman (TBL pp. 151ff).

Whiteman distinguishes between the mystical, the psychic and the psychological. Mysticism, in its purest form is essentially noetic, it yields complete intellectual clarity, a complete intuitive grasp of reality, unmuddied by "fixations" of an emotional or rational kind. The psychic covers such things as levitation, telepathy, and so on, and these can become a "fixation". The psychological covers the emotions and (here we apparently reach rock bottom and can sink no lower) the rational. It is at this level that organized religion operates, and it has two kinds of denizens: the devout, who are bad enough, and the theologians, who are appalling.

The distinctions proposed here seem to me to be valuable, and

they might well be serviceable in RERU's attempt to classify their material objectively, though I dare say that not everyone would be as confident as Whiteman in allocating different reports to particular categories. But the evaluation of the three levels is far more questionable. One can only be grateful for Whiteman's excellent presentation of his own views; but his doctrine is, it seems to me, in serious conflict with Christian doctrine, and a discussion of this conflict will shed a great deal of light on our problem about the definition of religious experience – indeed, it will oblige us to ask whether it is not more important to define *religion* than to isolate religious *experience*.

The real question is: What is man? Whiteman is evidently neither the first nor the only one to answer that man is, essentially, *Nous*, intuitive Mind. The great mystics, on this view, are the ones who manage to realise this to the full. Most of us, though, including the followers of the great mystical Masters, cannot achieve this, and so religion in the more diffuse sense arises, essentially as a muddled and reduced version of what the real mystics see. At this level, it gets all mixed up with the psychic and the psychological, and becomes a prey to “fixations”, and, since it is at this level that churches arise, churches will inevitably be found to operate in a confused, pathological way, generally hostile to the clear noetic insight of the mystics.

Churches and religious believers obviously do often operate in a blind and cruel way; but surely no Christian could accept Whiteman's account of the genesis or significance of churches, nor could he accept his anthropology.

Let us consider an alternative anthropology, such as we might construct with the help of St Irenaeus. Man is intended to be a microcosm, with a share in every kind of created being. He is intended to be the point of concentration, as it were, where all created beings converge and enter into loving communion with their Creator. Man is thus God's most ambitious and most complex work. The full flowering of this convergence and communion will be the final product of a long, long process, involving the whole of time and history. Throughout history God is working to this end, so that (as Irenaeus says) all that he does is *plasmatio hominis*. In the final consummation, which we can at best only glimpse from afar from our present vantage point, everything, however humble, will be fulfilled, nothing will be discarded. It is not only the powers that man shares with the angels that will be involved, but also what he shares with the dust, and all that comes in between. (In my interpretation of Irenaeus, I have been greatly influenced by Antonio Orbe, *Antropologia de San Ireneo*).

Since it is man's task to be the point of convergence for everything, clearly his relationships too are going to be important.

There could be no genuine communion between man and God that did not involve a communion with God's other creatures. So the establishing of proper relationships between men, and a proper responsibility towards creation, are integral elements in the project of *plasmatio hominis*.

From this point of view, any attempt to abstract *Nous* for some noetic fulfilment of its own would have to be regarded as a dreadful diminishment of concern, a "fixation" as deadly as any other. And religion, with its multiplicity of interests, is not just a watering down of mysticism, but a very necessary completion of it.

There is no doubt that there is something attractive about the drastic simplicity of a purely noetic view of life. But I wonder whether it works even on its own terms. It is instructive to see how Plato, for instance, was led into ever greater complexity precisely by the initial simplicity of his view of Ideas: the Ideas themselves refused to be simple. The One refused to be One (this is the thrust of that marvellous and under-read dialogue, the *Parmenides*). Already in the *Symposium* Plato had to recognize that there was a vital principle of fecundity about The Beautiful, which would make it impossible to rest content with a spirituality or a metaphysic constructed simply on the basis of a flight of the alone to the alone. And, as the *Timaeus* shows, he was driven more and more to ponder the derivation of complexity and of phenomena from his supreme principles. Cosmology was bound to become an important topic, and it is, it seems to me, entirely natural that Speusippus should have devoted himself to meticulous observation of things as one of his contributions to Platonism. But, if I may venture on a more controversial claim, it seems to me legitimate also to suggest that the late neo-Platonist acceptance of theurgy, associated with Iamblichus and Proclus, far from being an absurd degeneration of philosophy into superstition, is a harmonious development from principles already apparent in Plato's own work. (For the reluctance of modern scholars simply to re-iterate the jibes of their predecessors, cf. R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, p. 107). But once theurgy is accepted positively into the system, institutionalized religion with its official ritual procedures can be seen as a proper part, if not actually the supreme part, of the noetic ascent to the One. Iamblichus and Proclus, for all their fidelity to Platonist dialectic, reckoned that it was theurgy that brought men closest to their goal. And it seems clear that their kind of Platonism contributed a great deal to the development of Christian understanding of the sacraments and of the usefulness of images.

It would be wrong to speak too dogmatically here. Not all versions of noetic spirituality lead to cult, and if a Christian theologian wishes to stress the significance of those versions which do

lead to cult, it will always be possible to accuse him of bias.

Nevertheless it does seem fair to point out that it is characteristic of human maturity to be less intolerant of complexity and unclarity. As Lacordaire complained to Jandel, "The absolute is the infancy of everything" (*Ex Umbris*, p. 138). Though we may well hope that there is an ultimate simplicity and an ultimate clarity, though we may allow that people can sometimes catch a glimpse of it even now in our world, it is important that we should not cheat. There is a simplicity and a clarity which are appealing because they seem more immediately accessible to us now, but which are won only at the cost of ditching most of our experience of life and thought.

It is an essential element in Christian belief, at any rate, that "conventional religion" enshrines positive values which are not to be had in any other way. The sacraments give us a symbolic fullness of access to God which, though more opaque in some ways, is nevertheless more penetrating than mysticism. And the institutional unity of the Church is not required merely to satisfy clerical ambition: it is commanded by a vision of what man is meant to be, a vision of what the *mysterion* of God has shown itself to be. This comes out with passionate impressiveness in the letters of St Ignatius of Antioch. Though he only drops occasional hints of an anthropology, he gives the impression of being strongly convinced that our very humanity depends on our being "inside the sanctuary" within the unity of the Church. It is all about unity. God is One. From him comes the Word, who is also One, One with the One Father. And in him we are summoned to Oneness, a oneness with him, with each other and within ourselves (a oneness of inner and outer). And this is revealed and enacted in the Oneness of the Church, structured round its hierarchy. Ignatius is aware that bishops are not always impressive, but that does not matter. No doubt you could have a much more exciting time in little conventicles with their prophets and teachers, discussing higher things; but you would be missing the most important thing of all.

It seems to me that it is a fundamental instinct of Christianity to resist any kind of spiritual élitism. Even if this has sometimes meant that life has been made intolerable for fastidious aristocratic souls, even if it has meant that democratic concern not to despise the little ones has sometimes degenerated into a positive persecution of outstanding individuals, there is something too basic at stake for us to be able to jettison it. The Church as a whole is a far greater and far more truly spiritual thing than the mystical excellence of gifted individuals. Nobody could accuse the pseudo-Macarius of being anti-mystical; he repeatedly exhorts his readers to aspire to the heights of prayer. Yet he is one of the



most insistent of all monastic writers that the mystics need to be complemented by those who perform the most ordinary fraternal tasks of service. If they are not so complemented, their mysticism turns devilish.

RERU was not established as a centre of specifically Christian research, and they are in no way obliged to accept Christian or any other doctrinal principles. But, if Christianity is going to contribute any evidence to their investigation, it must be allowed to highlight its own theological refusal simply to identify its mystics as the highest or most typical manifestation of its own nature. The *culmen* of the whole Christian life – whether it be a life of mystical ecstasies or a life of scrubbing floors – is the eucharist. So the proverbial man in the pew, is, in his own way, just as important and relevant as the mystics who fly around the ceiling.

On this point there is some interesting discussion in TBL with Kallistos Ware. One of the RERU team suggests that one of the effects of their work might be to “help to enlarge the Church’s sympathies, its criteria of what it will look at or consider relevant” (TBL p. 123), and Fr Kallistos is surely right to accept this. The clergy and theologians probably need to be made aware that all kinds of people have all kinds of funny experiences which seem to them, at least, to be in some way religious. It is not helpful to them to discover that the clergy or the theologians are too blasé to take any notice, or even unprepared to allow that peculiar experiences occur. If something odd happens to you, it does not do you much good to be told by your parish priest that “that kind of thing does not happen” (I know of a case where a lady in such circumstances did receive precisely that answer).

But just as important is the observation made by Fr Kallistos that “there must also be many people who consider that they have religious experience in a wider sense, as something which extends through their whole life, though they could not point to any special moment when they had any extraordinary experience of which they could send you a description . . . If I told a member of my own parish, ‘Here is this institute investigating religious experience, why don’t you write in to them?’ he would probably say, ‘But I have nothing that would interest them, nothing remarkable or exceptional.’ But if I then said to him, ‘But surely you have religious experience, surely your religion is not just a formal profession of faith, a mechanical performance of ritual; do you not feel that you know God personally?’ he would (I hope) say ‘yes’” (TBL p. 119).

Such a defence of the ordinary practising believer is imperative for a Christian. There is only one clarification which I should wish to add, and I do not think that Fr Kallistos would reject it: the “experience” of the ordinary practising believer is precisely the

experience of being an ordinary practising believer. There does not have to be anything exotic about it. Nor does there have to be some special emotional quality which prevents the profession of faith from being merely formal, the performance of ritual from being merely mechanical. The religion is "personal" because it coheres in all kinds of ways with the purposes, interests, attitudes and so on which make up a man's life. It can be regarded as "experience", then, in much the same way that life itself can be regarded as "experience". But this, in turn, suggests that it is "non-experience" rather than "experience" which wears the trousers. It is only in the context of some alleged or threatened or conceivable state of anaesthesia that the question whether we "experience" life (or religion) can be given much meaning. And this suggests that we should be pursuing a chimaera if we were to take up R.R. Marett's proposal which Sir Alister Hardy quotes with approval (DF p.71), that the essence and true nature of man's religious sense must be sought "in that steadfast groundwork of specific emotion whereby a man is able to feel the supernatural precisely at the point at which his thought breaks down". Or if it is not a chimaera, it is a presupposition which would disastrously bias and limit the object of our investigation of religion.

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Let us now turn our attention to the other kind of attack on conventional orthodoxies, based on a preference for raw, spontaneous experience.

This comes up in the conversation with Peter Baelz. There the problem is raised about the difficulty some people have in making any connexion between their experiences and the kind of theological language available in the churches. Maslow's phrase "helium-filled words" is quoted approvingly – meaning words which rise gently above the earth and continue to float away beyond all contact with this world as we know it (TBL p. 82).

This can obviously be a problem, but it is a problem which can be exaggerated, and whose exaggeration may sometimes be due to tacit ideological prejudice. Immediately after the mention of "helium-filled words" one of the RERU interlocutors (and it would have been helpful if we had been given some indication whether or not it was the same one that first raised the difficulty)<sup>1</sup> says, in what seems to be a complaining sort of way: "You see, we get some people who write in, I am sure in total sincerity, describing perfectly genuine experiences, and they go on about sin, salvation, redemption and so on, using all the old theological clichés, and these, to many people, are totally 'helium-filled'".

Now surely the first thing to say to that is that evidently these

“clichés” are not meaningless to some people; some people find them quite serviceable in writing about their own experiences. What right has a RERU researcher to imply that somehow they ought not to use the old words? Why does it strike him as paradoxical and regrettable that sincere people should want to use the old words? There seems to be an assumption that there ought to be a misfit between authentic first-hand experience and the old terminology of traditional Christianity.

But this brings us back to Wordsworth and the inescapable rightness of Freda Wint’s comment. Why should we object to people saying something commonplace, if that is what they consider to be true? The objection would seem to be sheer irrational prejudice.

Of course it is a perfectly coherent position to maintain that the essential datum is religious experience, and that doctrine is a secondary epiphenomenon. This is fundamental to Sir Alister Hardy’s view. But I am surprised that Professor Baelz accepts it, as he seems to be doing when he says that “the experience of God, as it develops, may involve certain attitudes or beliefs about God, just as our experiencing of other people involves our gaining certain beliefs about them as we develop an understanding of them” (TBL p. 84. The context is Baelz’s acceptance of the proposal for a purely empirical theology as “entirely proper and right”). Of course our own experience contributes to our understanding of things; but nevertheless, at least for those who accept some kind of revealed religion, doctrine too is a datum.

One of the RERU people complains about “the very complicated and sophisticated interpretative structure that theologians offer us to describe our experience” (TBL p. 81). And it is obviously true that theology has sometimes seemed to be revelling in complexity just for the hell of it.

But I cannot see that it makes any sense to make an absolute principle out of the preference for noncomplexity. That would be rather like saying “I don’t want all your complicated scientific theories, all I want is a light bulb that works”. Or “I don’t want all your complicated economic theories, all I want is a higher income and lower prices”.

Nor does it seem to be true in general that personal experience is always more basic than doctrine. My personal experience of discovering that if I turn a particular knob my car springs into life has behind it a fantastic complexity of doctrine. And even if I do not know or understand any of it, I am dependent on there being people who do. And they, with their doctrine, must be allowed to enter into my life as a singularly weighty datum. If my car does not work, there is little sense in my resisting the dogmatic intervention of fussy mechanics telling me to stop putting milk and

sugar in the petrol tank.

Obviously it is not appropriate for theologians to expect everybody to understand all the ins and outs of every theological debate; obviously theologians, like anybody else, may be bewitched by words. But surely the theologians must be allowed to pursue their task in a way as complicated as is made necessary by their material. And it is complicated, for instance, to hold together monotheism and a belief in the Trinity; yet both of these are surely integral to Christian piety and practice. It is complicated to hold together God's grace and human responsibility, but it makes a lot of difference in practice what theories you adopt to help you do it. Unless we are to give up the commandment to "test everything and hold fast to what is good", we must be prepared to explore all the intricate consequences of holding one view rather than another.

Apart from these general considerations, there is an important specific reason why Christianity has to allow doctrine to enter into the scene as an irreducible datum in its own right; and that is that a great deal of Christian doctrine deals with God's promises and with Christian hope. In Christian theology the term "unseen" refers not only to the eternal, transcendent, invisible spiritual realm; it refers also to what is not seen because it has not yet happened. It refers to the promised "new heaven and new earth". Doctrine enters men's lives in many ways, but one important purpose of doctrine is to prevent us from accepting anything that we experience now as being, in any simple sense, "what God has prepared for those who love him". This is a decisive reason, it seems to me, why Christianity can never rest content with a merely empirical or experiential account of religion. It is also an important reason why the eucharist can be taken as the *culmen* of life in a way that no mystical experience could ever be: in the eucharist we act out, symbolically and ritually, the reality of that which is yet to come. This too is, of course, "experiential"; but it is a kind of experience that can only be had through ritual and symbols. And it is not clear that there is any one subjective constant running through the whole Christian experience of the eucharist. What is constant is the doctrine and the ritual practice itself. (A full account would have to complicate the last sentence a lot, of course; but, in spite of differing rites and different theologies, the continuity of doctrine and ritual would seem to be far greater than, and of a different kind from, the continuity of subjective experience of them).

This is, perhaps, from a Christian point of view, the most important reason why raw experience cannot be accepted as constituting the only, or even the most significant, datum. But it is not the only reason. Theologians are not just engaged in working out the technicalities, so that the simple faithful will know exactly

how many first Fridays are necessary to ensure salvation.

Theology is in itself a fundamentally human and spiritual occupation. The suggestion that raw, primitive, experience is somehow better than a more reflective approach to life cannot, perhaps, be finally demolished by argument, but it can be challenged. It is curious and rather disappointing that in TBL it is challenged most emphatically by the non-Christian contributors. It is attacked very bluntly, for instance, by Freda Wint. After she has indicated the vital importance of not divorcing meditation from religious tradition, an interlocutor says: "Suppose this (apparently, some kind of religious insight) happens spontaneously, as in the case of a child where there hasn't been a chance for the establishment of any such framework, intellectual or emotional; yet there is still this sense of something greater which can come through a mere relationship with the world around. Wordsworth felt this". Miss Wint tartly comments: "And then Wordsworth lost it" (TBL p. 135). Nothing much comes of raw experience, except perhaps nostalgia.

It is also attacked by Michael Whiteman, who insists that one of the consequences of true spiritual experience is that the experienter sets his mind to work to try to find some appropriate way of articulating it (TBL p. 151f). It is not natural to the human mind to forbid it to reflect on human experience; the more important the experience, the more important it will be to reflect on it. Without such reflection, no experience can really become fully personal to the person who undergoes it. "I would say that always if one has any high-level experience one has a distinct tendency to put it into words somehow, because one has to give it ground in oneself. If you didn't give it ground in yourself you'd lose it; you'd forget it" (*Ibid.*).

To prefer raw experience to digested experience is simply to prefer immaturity to maturity.

Presumably one reason for preferring raw experience is that something which just hits us out of the blue may be much more impressive than something which we have reflected about. We are all of us likely to be more impressed by a first encounter with anything. But possibly Chesterton is right that this is due, not to a strengthening of our sensibilities, but to a weakening of them. Children, as he points out, adore repetition. So, one might add, do scientists.

Falling in love is, no doubt, far more exciting than mature loving. But it would surely be to slip back into a discredited Romanticism to wish to cling to the excitement and resist the more richly interesting process of actually trying to mature in a relationship with someone?

No doubt it is often a startling experience of some kind that launches us on our voyage of adventure and discovery. But as we progress, it becomes harder and harder to pinpoint exactly what it is we think we are engaged in, what we are trying to achieve. And, as reflection blends with an increasingly diversified range of experience, it becomes harder and harder to disentangle the two. It becomes less and less natural and useful to talk in terms of “experiences”; “experience” will be used to refer to a whole experience of life, including a great deal of reflection, discussion, study and so on. It is surely in this sense that the Egyptian monastic tradition is said to be based on “experience” (Cassian, Conf. 13:18).

In our own century one of the most interesting illustrations of the development away from a religion of spiritual experience into a more liturgical, institutional, doctrinal religion is Evelyn Underhill. Perhaps I may be permitted to conclude this article with a quotation from her biography by Christopher Armstrong:

The trouble was that Evelyn’s whole religious philosophy up to the time she met the Baron (sc. von Hugel), while it might hold the doctrine of self-loss and self-transcendence in theory, was, in virtue of its strongly psychological and subjective bent, strongly focussed in practice on spiritual experience as a kind of value in itself. It is impossible to say anything further about her growth in love without grasping this particular nettle and attempting, if we can, to see a little beneath the surface of her inward restlessness. At the same time we shall also be confronting the anomaly that this writer on mysticism who exalted the part of feeling in religious experience as no-one before, became, as the Baron saw, emotionally undernourished and introspective, found herself trapped in a hole from which the only escape might appear to be ecstasy but in which every successive religious exaltation only seemed to anchor her more securely. (*Evelyn Underhill*, pp. 216-7).

If spiritual experience is taken to be an end in itself, or even just as an autonomous value in itself, especially if “spiritual” is more or less identified with “emotional” (which is the implication of the passage I quoted in my previous article from DF p. 28), there is a real risk that people’s emotional and spiritual lives will be cramped and stultified. And the remedy may well be to move on into a kind of religion which places much less emphasis on individual “experience”.

1 I suspect it is, in fact, Edward Robinson in both cases (cf. LQ p. 8 and OV p. 30).

*(To be continued)*