

Dom John Chapman's Spiritual Letters

I. 'A ROUNDED THEOLOGICAL THEORY OF THE WORLD.'

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It is cruel to analyse a favourite spiritual book: 'Philosophy will clip an angel's wings'. Nevertheless last summer I tried the experiment on Abbot Chapman's spiritual letters.¹ I had long been dissatisfied with Dom Roger Hudleston's presentation. He arranged the letters according to correspondents, distinguished by quaint anonymous titles—'To one living in the world', 'To a literary man'; he separated the letters to 'lay folk' from those to religious, and he put last of all the 'Letters to a Jesuit' which, in fact, begin first. As a result the reader, having to jump backwards and forwards in time, is reminded of *Eyeless in Gaza*. For Aldous Huxley this literary device may have had some advantages, but the reader of Dom John Chapman stands only to lose by this departure from chronological order. He will only meet Dom John's 'rounded theology' towards the end of the book; he will not be able to follow the development of Dom John's theory and practice of contemplative prayer; nor, perhaps, will he notice the subtle changes of view which followed Dom John's study of de Caussade. Such at least was my experience. Now the angelic wings, which suffered temporarily from their clipping, seem all the brighter.²

In this first article I propose to consider the two main themes of Dom John's rounded theology as they are developed in his first three letters to a Jesuit, written at Erdington Abbey in 1911. They are the foundation upon which he based his spiritual direction, but they have an interest in themselves as a personal document—what the French call a *témoignage*. 'I believe one ought to have (a rounded theological theory)' wrote Dom

¹The *Spiritual Letters of Dom John Chapman*, O.S.B. 2nd edition, 1935. My references are to this edition (reprinted 1954).

²Dom Christopher Butler's essay on Dom John Chapman in *English Spiritual Writers*, edited by Charles Davis, London, 1961, needs of course no commendation.

John. 'The Creed only gives outlines . . . I have nothing original to say (of course—else it would be heresy).'³

But first I must put these letters in their context. Dom John was born in 1865, received into the Catholic Church in 1890, professed as a monk of Maredsous in 1893, and ordained and sent to Erdington in 1895. In 1911, therefore, he was already 46 years old; he had been a Catholic over 20 years, and he had been at Erdington 17 years. He had made something of a reputation for himself as a patrologist, exegete and historian of the primitive church; he was also in demand as a preacher of retreats. To this man a young Jesuit scholastic wrote with a problem. He had had an extraordinary experience of the reality of God and of the nothingness of everything else.⁴ He had hoped to find an explanation of God's infinity in scholastic philosophy, but he had not been satisfied (it would seem because scholastic philosophy does not use personal 'intuitions' or experiences of God). Other systems seemed better adapted than scholasticism, but none was really satisfactory.

Dom John replied that the experience was supernatural—'a revelation of the true'⁵—and exceptional—'to me it is a source of joy merely to know that God does such things'.⁶ 'You . . . experience what others know, by reason (presumably by reflection on public revelation), must be.'⁷ Philosophy cannot explain a supernatural experience; scholastic philosophy *ex professo* does not try; other philosophies try more or less unsuccessfully under another name. Since only theology can give a full explanation, 'a Christian cannot live by philosophy. Only the light of Christian revelation gives the end as well as the means of life'.⁸ In order to drive home this point he set out his rounded theological theory of the world. 'Because I assume that you get no theology . . . But if you don't meditate (it would seem that the scholastic passed his meditation time in stunned awe), you get *nothing!* For rosaries and litanies don't give you much.'⁹

Ultimately we receive our religion *ex auctoritate*. In the lapidary phrases of the first Vatican Council we do not believe on account of the intrinsic truth of things perceived by the natural light of reason, but on the authority of God himself, who reveals.¹⁰ While man may make happy guesses about his supernatural destiny, 'it is not capable of being deduced by reason from anything we know by nature.'¹¹ Moreover, 'revelation was not given for the sake of philosophers, but for the poor

³p. 204.

⁴p. 202. ⁵*ibid.* and p. 236. ⁶p. 204. ⁷p. 236. ⁸p. 205. ⁹p. 235.

¹⁰Denzinger-Bannwart 1789. ¹¹p. 239.

and unlearned'.¹² Apologists nevertheless devote some attention to the reasonableness of religion; unfortunately their business forces them to concentrate upon showing that reason cannot destroy the truths of religion, rather than upon showing how religion dovetails into the structure of our natural experience. At a time when absolutes are démodé it seems a good idea to give more attention to the contingent. St Thomas uses the words 'necessary' and 'contingent' with a slightly different meaning when he is talking about 'beings', and when he is talking about knowledge of future events.¹³ In the famous 'Third Way' he calls material beings contingent, because they can cease to exist. A dog, for instance, is a contingent being, because once it dies it no longer exists. But men—with souls—are in part spiritual beings, and, as they are immortal, they cannot not exist. Consequently they are necessary beings. But they are not absolutely necessary. God could have not created men. Only God is absolutely necessary. The processions of the three persons within God's nature are absolutely necessary, but their external processions (the creation, for instance, and the redemptive mission of the Son) are not necessary. God did not have to redeem the world.

By a contingent event St Thomas means something unpredictable which prevents the obvious from happening. Thus according to the laws of nature the seed should germinate and become a plant, but a late frost kills it. God knows these future contingent events—he knows that the frost will kill the seedling; otherwise he would not be omniscient.¹⁴ He is like a man on a mountain watching a road. He can see that the two men walking towards each other will meet, although they do not know it themselves. He uses contingent events to fulfill man's destiny.¹⁵ But St Thomas, while fully recognising the contingent, develops no theory of it.

There is nothing unusual—except perhaps the precocity—of Dom John's 'insight' of the absolute. This is how he describes it: 'At 12 (or 13) years old I felt that religion ought to be transcendent, infinite, necessary. I suppose that the vague unexpressed notion that was in my head was the idea that the ultimate explanation of everything must be "The

¹²p. 206.

¹³Anyone who wishes to pursue this subject is recommended to read the following articles by two scholastic philosophers: J. Maritain in *Angelicum*, 1937, pp. 281-295, and C. Fabro in the *Rivista della Filosofia Neoscolastica*, 1938, pp. 132-149. There is a good article on 'Contingenza' in the *Enciclopedia Filosofica I*, col. 1213 by C. Carbonara.

¹⁴S.T. I.14.13. ¹⁵S.T. I.22.4.

One".¹⁶ Later when he was reading for Greats at Oxford, he found that most of the Greek philosophers had come to the same conclusion. Now, however, something strange follows: 'This idea', he wrote, 'of the necessary and the One seemed to me a temptation to infidelity, for Christianity is a complex of un-necessary, contingent, arbitrary facts and doctrines'.¹⁷ Therefore—and to me this seems very important—he had to satisfy himself also of 'the contingency, arbitrariness, surprisingness, of the universe we know'.¹⁸ 'There are many odd and (*a priori*) most improbable things in the world besides space and time and matter—such as colour and light, music . . . not to speak of the moon; and there are many questions one might ask, which philosophy might find it hard to answer, such as why . . . things don't fall upwards, why I cannot describe heat and cold, why things don't look larger in the distance.'¹⁹ The world, then, is not a wound-up clock slowly running down, nor is God an unconcerned perfection 'out there'. The arbitrariness of certain aspects of the creature argues a possibility of arbitrariness in the creator. In other words one must realise not only 'God's immensity, fulness, unity, transcendence, etc.', but also 'the unmeaning wildness, astonishingness riot of phenomena,—a drunken dream, a fantasia, and so forth'.²⁰ And hence 'the world is so surprising and so curious, that I could not easily not believe in the miraculous'.²¹

The way of ascent to the supernatural has been prepared. God has made a number of arbitrary, self-conscious intelligences ('I am one of them'²²). Is it unreasonable that the creator should act in the world in the same way as his creature—arbitrarily and contingently? Such actions would be miracles. 'In his way He manifests Himself . . . Except by miracles, external or internal, God has no way of making Himself known in His own world. The "impossibility" of miracles is another way of saying that everyone can act in the world except the Creator'.²³ One of the axioms of scholastic theology is that grace is an 'accident' in the natural order. We have already seen that any action of God's outside himself is a non-necessary, contingent event. Paradoxically from the oddness of natural phenomena Dom John justifies the reasonable possibility of a supernatural reality.²⁴

I will return later to this first theme of Dom John's 'rounded theology'

¹⁶p. 205. ¹⁷p. 206. ¹⁸*ibid.* ¹⁹p. 211. ²⁰p. 211. ²¹p. 209. ²²p. 208.
²³p. 208.

²⁴Dom John's sense of contingency remained strong. Cf. Letter X, p. 51 (1923): 'My habitual feeling is that the world is so extremely odd, and everything in it so surprising. Why *should* there be green grass and liquid water, and why *have* I got hands and feet?'

in order to show its relevance to his spirituality. This can be done more simply after considering his second theme, which is simply: 'God is love'. The second half of an article is hardly the place to treat so large a theme; I propose only to suggest how Dom John with a more traditional approach succeeds, where others who have wished to make God relevant to the modern world perhaps leave something to be desired. The words 'God is love' cannot fail to ring a bell. One is reminded at once of Dr Robinson's brave attempt to bring God back from 'out there', to encourage us to search for him within us, and to find in him 'the ultimate ground and meaning of personal relationships'.²⁵ Now, wherever God is (and he is everywhere), we have to try to speak of him as he is apart from and independent of his creation, yet in language derived from our experience as creatures. Love, in scholastic language, is the operation of the will. God's will operates to perfection within himself. If we speak of this love in God as Triune, we say that from the Father loving the Son proceeds the Spirit. But love diffuses itself. The operation of God's will overflows as it were into creation with manifestations which are (to us) constantly new. There is a hierarchy of unions and a corresponding hierarchy of loves, ranging from the Trinity down to natural creatures; the perfect unity of Father and Son in the Trinity somehow extends into creation with the 'mission' of the Son, the substantial union of God and man. Men are then united to Christ in his mystical body. How is this possible? Man is endowed with the capacity to respond to a supernatural destiny. Grace infused into the soul raises the capacity to an actuality. Man may actually *will* the union with Christ which unites him to God.²⁶

Man not only may will union with Christ; if he wishes to attain his supernatural end, he must do so. 'God has not chosen to diffuse His bounty on machines.'²⁷ Man and angels have free will, 'the highest point in the natural order, and the most perfect resemblance to God'. They must use it in order to earn their happiness. 'The Way is a Probation, a journey in patriam, and the probation is one of choice, good or evil, to God or away from God.'²⁸ Dom John held the view that evil and its consequences are necessary in order that we may be tried. We do not know whether God intended the incarnation if Adam had not sinned. 'But I hold that we *do* know that God intended what has happened. He *meant* to permit sin . . . He wanted a real trial, real pain, real victory for

²⁵ *Honest to God*, by John A. T. Robinson.

²⁶ pp. 215-219, and 226-228.

²⁷ p. 219. ²⁸ p. 220.

the Saints.²⁹ 'This is the meaning of life. The victories of Martyrs over suffering, the triumphs of Confessors in temptation, the daily conquest of self, the turning to Him, the aversion from sin; resistance, patience, war, work, suffering for justice, death for God's sake . . .'³⁰

It is interesting to confront Dom John's insertion of evil, physical and moral, into his rounded theory, with Teilhard de Chardin's theory of diminishment.³¹ Teilhard considers evil in the light of the mystical synthesis of matter and spirit which seems to inform all his religious thought. (He almost identifies the cosmos with Christ's mystical body in a way so unfamiliar that one is constantly driven to recollect that St Paul's assurance in Romans VIII that *all* creation is somehow concerned in our redemption is the foundation of Teilhard's view of things. He quotes this chapter, v. 22, on page 33.) For Teilhard the final victory of good over evil is complete in the totality, not in individual short lives. 'We are like soldiers that fall in the assault that leads to victory.'³² The process of union between God and creatures involves an acceptance of both internal and external defects, and especially those internal passivities about which we can do nothing: 'Natural failings, physical defects, intellectual or moral weaknesses, as a result of which the field of our activities, of our enjoyment, of our vision, has been pitilessly limited since birth.' Others, such as old age, are lying in wait for us later on. 'Death is the sum and consummation of all our diminishments.'³³ Thus both bring into the foreground a neoplatonic fulfilment in the return of all redeemed humanity to God in the mystical body of Christ, and both insist that the physical and mental defects of man expose him to the action of divine grace. 'We must cherish,' says Teilhard, 'the passivities of life, and the providential diminishments through which Christ transforms directly and eminently into himself the elements and personality which we have tried to develop for him.'³⁴ However, I am inclined to agree with Maurice Blondel (writing of another work by Teilhard) that Teilhard is in danger of representing 'd'une facon trop naturaliste, trop physique . . . la fonction universaliste du Christ.'³⁵ Dom John is saved from this danger mainly by a traditional sense of analogy, but also, I think, by the polarity of the necessary and the contingent. 'The trial of this life lies in the unforeseen, the improbable, the inconceivable . . .

²⁹p. 223. ³⁰p. 222.

³¹*Le Milieu Divin*, English translation by Bernard Wall, London, 1960, pp. 59-73.

³²*Le Milieu Divin*, p. 65.

³³*Le Milieu Divin*, pp. 60-61. ³⁴*Op. cit.*, p. 73.

³⁵Quoted by P. Grenet in *L'Ami du Clergé*, 15.12.62, p. 676.

The very *arbitrariness* of the universe, as well as the slow grinding of its *unyielding law*, makes our probation.³⁶ 'The weakness, wobbliness of our intellect is the means of our trial.'³⁷ Would it be unkind to say that Teilhard comes near to identifying the arbitrariness of the universe with its unyielding law?

However this may be, a willing acceptance of trials rather than exuberant affectivity is the way for man to love God. 'We know that God wants us to show our love *by fighting—not by conquering* . . .' This is Dom John's austere doctrine of human love, which needs to be supported by 'hope, the practical virtue, consisting of courage and confidence in God.'³⁸ Yet God knows man's frailty. 'The ordinary person . . . finds God far off—unimaginable, cold—a bare desert of perfection. He prefers with Omar Khayyam a glass of wine which is here and now and warming; and love means something nearer and closer and hotter to him. God has answered. He has translated himself into human terms—he has come—in *propriis venit*.' To express what this means to him Chapman quotes three lines from a love poem of Theocritus.³⁹ These two aspects of love—warmth and courage—are combined in Christ's person. In his incarnation we see the full measure of God's charity—God making himself accessible to us—but there is no mitigation of the austere ideal proposed. The Son was to be the chief of martyrs, the example of the saints. He was to strip himself and go up to the cross with poverty as his bride, as St Francis and Dante have sung.⁴⁰

We have to do the same. Our love manifests itself in performance of our duty, which 'is summed up in giving ourselves to God as He gives Himself to us.'⁴¹ Willing the will of God is a commonplace of spirituality, much easier said than done. However, Dom John, following a tradition which goes back by way of St Francis of Sales at least to the Middle Ages, distinguishes two aspects of God's will, which demand two different kinds of response from ours. First there is God's permissive will as expressed for example in the precepts and the counsels; then there is the will of God's good pleasure. To the first we respond by the virtues of obedience; to the second by the virtue of conformity or 'abandon'. I propose to develop this subject in a subsequent article. All I wish to do at present is suggest that there is a parallel between this distinction, and the other between necessity and contingency. We recognise the 'necessary' rules of Christian conduct in, for instance, the ten commandments,

³⁶Chapman, p. 223. ³⁷*Ibid.* p. 224. ³⁸*Ibid.* pp. 225-226.

³⁹p. 229. Cf. Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

⁴⁰p. 230. ⁴¹p. 233.

and this sort of spirituality, easily formulated, is the be-all and end-all of most Christian lives. However, someone who is sensitive to contingency will recognise that God exercises a seemingly direct influence on the soul, much less easy to formulate. One obvious way is by calling a soul to the religious life. But this, while beginning as a contingency (for one is not bound to respond) becomes by the vows a 'necessity'. However, the response to the will of God's good pleasure should not end there. It certainly did not for Dom John, as later on I hope to show.

St Augustine on the Trinity—VII

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In this concluding article on St Augustine's great masterpiece, as well as seeing how he finally completes the many subtle patterns of his thought, we must also recapitulate and try to get a comprehensive view of the work as a whole. In his closing book, xv, he himself provides the reader with a recapitulation of the earlier books. But first we must see how in books XIII and XIV he finishes what we can almost call the history of the divine image in man which he began in book XII. In so doing he also brings to a conclusion the analysis of this image which he had begun much earlier in book IX.

In book XII, then, he had introduced his discussion of the 'inner man', or mind, by distinguishing its lower function of concern with temporal things from its higher function of contemplating eternal things. He told the story of these two functions of mind, or rather made the Bible tell it for him, by an ingenious adaptation of the story of Adam and Eve. It is the story, that is to say, of the fall of Everyman, of the seduction of the noblest in him, the contemplative, God-attracted compass needle of his mind by the deceitful, animal, serpentine lowest element in him, his sensuality, through the intermediary of the practical, inquisitive, busy feminine function of the mind. Thus the image in man, which can only be realised in the highest reaches of mind, is overpowered and smothered and defaced by the not-image, those analogous trinities which in book XI he had ascertained in the lower levels of human awareness.