

Literalism and Tolerance

P. V. Rooney

Saint Paul (2 Cor. 3:6) is often quoted in support of a position of leniency, though some would say laxity, with regard to the precepts of the law, whether it be those of the state or those of the church. Or he may be cited in support of an anti-literalist, anti-fundamentalist interpretation of scripture generally. But what is wrong, exactly, with that aspect of fundamentalism, or that approach to church rules, that can be characterized as literalism? Consider two instances in which literalism is decried. First, a parish priest “proves” that scripture is not to be taken literally by relating the story of Abraham, Isaac and the attempted or would-be sacrifice of the son by the father. He explains that, since we know that God is loving and could not have commanded such a sacrifice, we can be sure that this story is not literally true, but must have some other significance: it must be symbolic or allegorical, or is possibly intended only to be thought-provoking. To take it literally is to fail to understand the goodness and love of God. Second, a parishioner wonders whether attendance at mass late on Saturday afternoon falls within the period when Saturday evening observance stands good for Sunday, fulfilling the weekly obligation. She is considered to have misunderstood, through too literal a conception of rules, the nature of the duty to attend mass once a week.¹ There are of course different forms of literalism, but my plea below is for tolerance of what they have in common: a straightforward acceptance, when possible, of the letter.

It is worth remarking that literalism was once the norm in Christian circles. It has never, of course, been a universally adopted approach;² but as Clark rightly points out, it is unprofitable “to imagine that our predecessors, even when they were mistaken, were fools”.³ There are other reasons for accepting literalism than ignorance or unintelligent and unreflective acceptance of what one has been told. There are other ways of reconciling the account of Abraham and Isaac with God’s love than by doubting the literal truth of the story. That God’s love is not like our love can be known both a priori and empirically. The rejection of literalism can raise more difficulties than it is meant to avoid. Attempt to

apply principle “in the spirit” (flexibly) to attendance at mass; but then go on to do the same in relation to theft, blackmail, rape, abortion, divorce, torture or state oppression. Somewhere in that list, I do not doubt, even the most hardened opponent of a literal reading of the law will find a sin the proscription of which could be shown to admit of exceptions only with the greatest contortions, if at all. But is that response too simplistic? There are differences between sins, differences of kind, are there not? Attending mass at noon on Saturday, or at two, three, four, four-thirty, and laxly allowing that to stand for the fulfilment of one’s Sunday obligation — that could not compare with bending the rules (applying them in the spirit rather than the letter) over the killing of an innocent. But why not? What we are discussing is rule-bending, that form of rule-bending which allows one to disregard the letter in favour of the spirit. It is the morality of that which is in question; and that is a separate issue from that of the gravity of the offence which the rule-bending is designed to permit or excuse. Or is rule-bending not like that? Is there a graduated scale along which, at some point (An arbitrary one? A flexible one? An unalterable one?) it moves from being a sensible approach to being a wicked liberty?

What might be said “in the spirit” to the parishioner mentioned above? “You are missing the point: the actual *day* or *time* is unimportant!” Or perhaps, “It doesn’t actually have to be *weekly* attendance . . .”; or “It doesn’t actually have to be *mass* that you attend. . .”; or even “You don’t actually have to attend...”. Without literalism one is hard pushed to discriminate on principle between those possible replies. The danger of regarding all written laws as generalizations which allow exceptions, or as prescriptions of ideals to which we need only approximate — need only try to approximate — rather than to aim at directly, should be obvious: “that way madness lies”, the madness of moral relativism and subjectivism. Let us take a traditionalist line and accept that such rule-bending is always wrong, but that its gravity and blameworthiness can vary. In Thomist language, it has a wrong as its material object, though circumstances or intention can modify it (but never make it right).

Literalism is out of fashion, but it is much more defensible than fashion supposes, particularly in the context of a religion which claims revelational support. What are the “simple faithful” (if one may so describe, without offence, those unsophisticated believers without theological or philosophical expertise, but not on that account without intelligence or common sense) to make of the position which, in terms of their literal truth, admits the Resurrection but denies the flood? Which admits the Incarnation but denies the stone tablets? Which

admits the Redemption but denies Eden? This sort of position is one short step away from that of Cupitt, according to which there is no historical, literal truth which is immune. Not a few of the religious intelligentsia find this stance puzzling; and cynical atheists are rightly amused. They are indeed "blind guides" who are prepared to swallow what is much larger than the things they feel bound to reject. The criterion which is being used here is not one that modern science has produced. The temptation to explain away, as if these things were a barrier to faith, the awkward, the strange and the miraculous, should be resisted. Such an approach seems far more likely to result either in bafflement at its inconsistency or in complete loss of faith. The fashionable account of human origins (to take an example which has been controversial) is well known, but neo-Darwinian evolution is not yet, thank goodness, official Catholic doctrine; it is no longer *de rigueur* even in scientific circles. One needs only to reflect on Gosse's explanation of fossils⁴ to appreciate that creationism is as consistent with the facts as is evolutionism: had there been a real Adam, and had he felled a tree, he would no doubt have discovered tree-rings inside it. Any creation would necessarily carry within itself the false illusion of past duration. Each of the rival theories "saves the phenomena" equally well. The truth or falsity of the literalist's account is not the issue here: what is clear is that it is unjustifiable to criticize that account as scientifically naive or ignorant. Can Catholicism not tolerate the literalist's account along with the one currently fashionable, and refrain from imagining that anyone who prefers literalism is in need of help? People may fall into error as a consequence of their literalism, but it does not follow that their literalism is a fault, since the consequence is not a necessary one. It would be wrong to suppose that the time of attending mass was more important than the actual attendance. But that fault cannot be attributed to me simply because I express a concern over whether my attendance has fulfilled my weekly obligation. Similarly, that some fundamentalists' literalism leads them into dangerous extremism is no more to be taken as a serious criticism of literalism than it would be a serious criticism of Christianity that some of its adherents had engaged in bloody wars on behalf of it. There is a case to be made for following Chesterton's advice on the matter of the literal interpretation of scripture: "If a literal interpretation is really and flatly contradicted by an obvious fact, why then we can only say that the literal interpretation must be a false interpretation. But the fact must really be an obvious fact".⁵ Further, where law is involved, surely we are not always in a position to separate the spirit from the letter; we do not, at times, even understand what the spirit is. There are precepts which we

must accept but which are not rationally discoverable, just as there are incidents described in scripture which, while not irrational, nevertheless require that a believer should go beyond the rational. Reason is never contravened but is not enough. What has reason to say about the justice and fairness of the treatment of the eleventh-hour *arriviste*⁶ or about the equity of our comparison to the potter's clay?⁷ What has secular, rationalist morality to tell us about Christ's mission being not to bring peace but the sword?⁸ What is a logically-minded rationalist to make of the apparent disregard of the law of identity which allows us to say that God has no body, and Christ has a body, and Christ is God? There are indeed many instances where we have nothing to go on but the letter, and we neglect it or "interpret" it, or apply the doctrine of *epikeia*, at our peril. We *may* wish to say that Jesus did not really mean that His purpose was not to bring peace; but ought *we* to say *that* of *Him*? What else may we arrogantly suppose that He did or did not mean when, in our attempt to discern the spirit of the text, we ignore the letter? It should be emphasized, again, that literalism can be tolerated without having to agree that what literalists hold is true. Literalism's dogmas are no less scientific, no more open to rational refutation, no more intrinsically unlikely (is there a criterion of intrinsic probability?) than either their fashionable counterparts or the essential beliefs held in common by all Christians, whatever their attitude to the letter of the text. Mystery is of the essence of faith and is not avoided by the denial of literalism. People may believe in a non-spatial Heaven while simultaneously looking forward to inhabiting it in a resurrected body. Let us leave things at that, instead of allowing one approach to religion to dominate to the extent that what it has displaced becomes regarded with scorn or worse.⁹ When St. Paul says that "the letter killeth" we should not take him too literally.

- 1 I take this example from Mark Chater, "In Stages or Wings", *New Blackfriars*, Dec. 1994
- 2 See e.g. Barnabas' interpretation of the abominations of Leviticus, in B. Radice, ed., *Early Christian Writings*, Penguin, 1987, p.170. The allegorical interpretation can be more bizarre than the literal one.
- 3 S.R.L. Clark, *The Mysteries of Religion*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, p. ix.
- 4 Gosse, P., *Omphalos: An Attempt to Untie the Geological Knot*, London, 1857.
- 5 Chesterton, G.K., *St. Thomas Aquinas*, London, 1933, p.101.
- 6 Matthew 20 :1-15.
- 7 Isaiah 45:9.
- 8 Matthew 10: 34
- 9 Chater (op. cit.) goes so far as to wonder, tentatively, whether the attitude of the parishioner he mentions is not an instance of *sin*! How fickle is fashion!