

## A Personal God: Does it Matter?

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More correctly this article ought to have been called “The Transcendence of God: Does it Matter?”, but on the front cover it could have been very off-putting!

A number of recent articles in *The Times*<sup>1</sup> have given clear evidence of the total loss of Magisterium in the Church of England. That is to say, there is a total loss of divine certainty in the proposal of doctrine, and a total loss of divine authority in the interpretation of doctrine on faith and morals as *the way* (cf. John 14:6) which is the Christian life as lived. This disintegration and crumbling is not unique to the Church of England. It is even more marked, if possible, in the Non-Conformist Churches. It is the common problem of all the Churches of the Reformation, because it proceeds from the prime principle of the Reformation itself. This first principle of the Reformation was the denial of the inerrancy and infallibility of the Church. Because popes could err, councils could err, the Church herself could err, therefore the received doctrines of Christendom could be attacked and swept away. The Book alone was infallible.

Now the Book is far from infallible: at least it is not infallible as the printed word, subject to the charismatic interpretation of the private individual. The Book is infallible only insofar as, through the ages, it is *the Church* speaking, living and writing. The Book, as *the Church writing*, is always, and has always been, subject to the Church living and speaking. The Book is not a final dead letter of the first Christian century, but the living voice of God the Word: a voice that lives on in popes and in councils and in universally received Catholic doctrine. For the Church’s voice is guided always by the Holy Spirit, who “will take what is mine and declare it to you.” (John 16:14)

Insofar as Humanism and Neo-Modernism sweep whole provinces of the Church—Benelux, France and Germany in particular—then once again we live in the era of the Reformation. For all Humanism proceeds from *the one prime principle*: the denial of divinity in Christ, and from the denial of its corollary, Magisterium in the Church as a teaching institution. Therefore our present ecumenism, as it is taught by leading Catholic theologians, some of whom are bishops of high prestige, is an utter nonsense, and is itself disintegrating the Catholic Church. This is because it is trying to bring about the reunion of the Churches without the renunciation of the *prime principle* of the Reformation itself: the substitution of human theological opinion for transcendent, divine Magisterium. To try to effect a reunion on the basis of the prime principle of the Reformation itself is a total contradiction of the very being of the Roman Catholic Church.

### The Importance of the Transcendence of God

To affirm that God exists as *transcendent* means, in the language of theology, that God is personal, and exists independently of creation. He is self-explanatory, self-sufficient, and infinite. The creation need not exist: it does exist, and is explained, only because of Him.

If God is *not* transcendent then God is immanent in creation. God emerges in space and time through the intelligent human creature, through *us*. God speaks in history only insofar as He

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<sup>1</sup> C. Longley, “The Difficulties of Defining Anglican Doctrine”, *The Times*, 16 Feb 1976; letters from Rev. Graham Dowell and Rev. Prof. Peter R. Baelz, *The Times*, 20 Feb 1976; Bishop F.R. Barry, “The Un-Making of Christian Doctrine”, *The Times*, Feb 1976.

speaks through the consciousness of men. God, and the teaching we ascribe to God's revelation, is subject to *historic relativism*, which means to say, the limitations of given men at a given age in a given culture. There is no escape from the closed circuit of the prime principle of the Reformation, the subjection of doctrine to human understanding.

If God *is* transcendent then a certain vision unfolds before us. All creation is gathered up and poised in its being by the Alone Necessary and Almighty God. And it is poised towards its destiny to climax in Christ, the Heir of the Ages. This Christ is God the Word, God in Person, literally divine and transcendent. The alternative is that creation, as it evolves, throws up 'Omega-points'<sup>2</sup> or 'Christ points' in its development, as the race of mankind proceeds to 'Christo-genesis', to a becoming divine which embraces the whole stock. The process, and its interpretation, is subject to human wisdom and human judgment. In so much as Teilhard de Chardin reduces the Christ of historic Christianity, so much he makes himself—but quite unconsciously—the *greater* than Christ. The same is true, much more true, for those intensely arrogant Nordic theologians, Fuchs, Ebeling, Bultmann, Marxsen, Pannenberg, along with the rest, who have reduced Christ to their own personal interpretation of a dead book. For Teilhard de Chardin Christ is at least a mighty person, even if unconsciously made in the image and likeness of the Phenomenon which is Man.<sup>3</sup> For these Germans Christ is just 'the event'. He could not be more, of course, because they only know Him by what they humorously name 'faith'. They just do not have any adequate *historic* evidence about Him *at all*.

But if God *is* transcendent, then Christ is literally divine, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, *of one Being* with the Father. And if He is divine, the Church must also be infallible and magisterial. The development of her doctrine, though not necessarily *foreseeable* from the limited understanding reached by men of an age before, must follow with direct continuity and without any loss or diminution in faith or morals. This is because the Holy Spirit, who happens also to be *transcendent*, is the 'soul of the Church'<sup>4</sup> and guides her into that one fullness of truth which is a *living unity* in the intellect of God the Logos, the Word of God—alias Jesus Christ, for less theologically educated readers. I ask pardon for pointing out that this total meaning, which is one living unity in the Divine Word, is possible because He also happens to be *transcendent*.

If God is *not* transcendent but immanent, i.e. part of man himself, then there is no authority higher than the mind of man, which is God emerging in history. There is no divine rule or guidance outside of man and the limits of purely human history. There is no literal divinity in Christ. And even if you think there is, *you cannot prove it* (for lack of historical evidence, you see, and the impossibility of generalising doctrine from one segment of human experience, etc.). There is most certainly not any infallibility in the Church. And the Christ we know and reverence could very possibly be superseded. In any case (one nearly wrote 'event') Christ becomes one figure measured against other figures on a finite scale in 'religious anthropology' (which used to be known as 'theology'!).

So, you see, there is quite a lot at stake in that word *transcendent*.

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<sup>2</sup> The term *Omega-point* was used by P. Teilhard de Chardin to signify the end-point of history, in which all individual minds will be fused into a cosmic, divine consciousness.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the title of Teilhard de Chardin's most well known work, *The Phenomenon of Man*, first published in French as *Le Phénomène Humain*, 1955, first published in English in 1959.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Lumen Gentium* 7.

## The Viewpoint of a Young Theologian

February of this year was indeed a month of inexplicable theological fertility! While the very important articles cited above were being written, the editor had the privilege of a most interesting exchange with a young American theologian studying at Oxford. Among his comments one notes:

I would say that your Conciliar document *Dei Verbum* was the best Catholic answer available to all that is best in Protestant existential scriptural technology, as you find it following the pipes of pan with Fuchs, Ebeling, Bultmann and others. As I see the end-of-century theological scene, the Germans are on top and look as immovable as Hitler's Reich looked after the breakthrough of 1940. The French are, in their own word, *passé*: even Teilhard only just about manages to gather a Gnostic spiritual clique around him. The Germans can't stand him. Whether that is temperament or nationalism I would not know. They would not even consider the implications of his synthesis. ... The theological mind of the Church in the USA, in Germany, and I think here at Oxford, and Rome also as far as I was able to assess in a brief visit, is *wasting its time* descending on the 'Good Book' armed with existential powers of *total demythologisation*, and we are, all of us, following the New Protestantism.

You, Sir, are claiming for theology something quite astounding, namely that it can and does attain *existentially* to the Wisdom of God, and that is why the theologians used once to be saints, and the only theologians who have been any good in the Church *were* saints. If you could make them understand that you are trying to say just that, I would gladly fight with you back to back. You won't even get looked at by the theological establishment of today, because you will get written off as a neo-Scholastic, and therefore a stick-in-the-mud, the sort of dinosaur that exists only in places like your Loch Ness after twenty years of very thorough, very learned, German led 'theological renewal'. You see, Father, my problem is not to show to my elders (I cannot consider them my betters) that there is a distinction between that which is controlled and directed, and that which controls and directs, but *that the distinction is at all important*.

## The Theological Divide

This is the heart of the matter. If they don't consider it *important* whether there is a distinction between that which controls and directs and that which is controlled and directed,<sup>5</sup> then they don't consider it important whether God is transcendent or not. If you don't think it matters, then in fact you have said that God is not transcendent. That means to say He is not personal, not distinct from creation, not the direct controller of the mind of man. It means that Jesus Christ is not literally God Incarnate, and that there is no objective, magisterial infallibility in the Church or anywhere else. The word *transcendent* covers the whole difference between a God who made man, teaches and governs man, fulfils and saves man, and a 'God' who is merely man's own spirit and mind, made conscious in history as idealism, and seeking for the good and true. This is

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<sup>5</sup> This distinction of spirit and matter as "that which controls and directs" and "that which is controlled and directed" is a key idea in Holloway's theology. – *Ed.*

the whole difference between Catholicism and Humanism flavoured with a Christianity which is now passé.

### **The Prime Principle of Catholic Christianity**

Catholic Christianity also has a prime principle. It is the *transcendence* of God. It means that God is HE WHO IS, at all times, independently of the universe. Through His free will the universe of angels, matter and men came into existence.

In the likeness of this God, the soul in man is also transcendent over the body. That is to say that the intelligent principle in man is not material. It does not evolve with matter or through matter. The soul or spirit in man is that which controls and directs matter; matter is that which is controlled and directed: for matter is deterministic of very being.

When the Eternal Word, the second and *transcendent* Person of the Holy Trinity, becomes flesh for us, then Jesus Christ is literally God in divine Person. There is only *one* personality in Jesus, the *divine* personality; but He exists in the nature of God and the nature of man, and these are truly distinct from each other. Jesus brings the *divine transcendence*, which prompted the Law and the Prophets and the Scriptures, into human history as a divine and a human fulfilment of the order of mankind. Since Christ sent out His apostles with *exactly the same* mission as His own, therefore there is *transcendence* in the very constitution of the Church of God. That is to say there is *divine* truth, *divine* power to rule, and *divine* power to command the conscience of man in the name of the Maker of man's being and conscience.

There can be no vindication today of the Christian gospel, unless in this hour of disintegration we can educe from the entire heritage of the Church a new development in philosophy and theology. It must be coherent with, but expanding from, the pre-Conciliar life of the Church. It must manifest *the divinity which is within her*, by offering to man, from the magistracy of Christ, that control, direction and fulfilment in his life and social order, which the nature of man demonstrably requires. Such a renewal is within our power. It is only arrogance and pride which holds it back. Lord Hailsham, also writing in *The Times* in that most fruitful of Februaries, proclaimed that we need a new Aquinas, a new *Doctor Angelicus*. The noble Lord, one presumes, will be denied a hearing by the present theological establishment because of such gross and open 'neo-Scholasticism'! The first need is for a Pauline era, and one is not referring to the present Pope!<sup>6</sup> We need the vision of the faith to be seen and taught through the perspective of modern, scientific man, pagan though he be. It can be done, but it must proceed from *the prime principle* of Catholicism, from the *transcendent*, which ultimately means the truly divine and truly magisterial. It cannot proceed from *the prime principle* of the Churches of the Reformation, which is private judgment, the immanent, the mind of man made the measure of God.

We may hope and pray that a true movement towards unity will mean the reunion in doctrine, communion, and *spiritual perfection* of the Church of England with the Church of Rome. But we cannot and we may not proceed as if the Holy Spirit had already revealed this intention to episcopal members of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. Without fear of charismatic contradiction, one can say He has not done this. History shows that quite another course could follow. There could be many coming from the East and the West, Anglicans and Free Churchmen. At the same time many could stay on just as they were. Or rather they would decline further, through the agnosticism, from which none of the Churches of

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<sup>6</sup> The pope referred to is Paul VI, 1963-1978.

the Reformation can possibly rise without a true and new vision of the meaning of Jesus Christ, *true God* and true man. There could also be many, very many, *who will go out of the communion of Peter*, from the theological Left, and some perhaps from the fundamentalist Right. There could be a great gathering in, and a great exodus as well.

What is certain is that we must renew the Church not as an open-ended, agnostic body, but as a strongly centred family of Christ, drawing life, strength, vision and fire from a new vision of Christ and the Church, in which not one jot, not one tittle of the former perfection and spiritual idealism has been erased. There is no other ecumenism which is honest or which makes sense of the Catholic Church. There is no other way, ecumenical or otherwise, which can permit the Christian Church to survive into the next century in her historic identity, with a truly divine gospel, and with authority from God to preach it to all the nations. It is time to stop fooling about, and to say the truth bluntly, even at the cost of a confrontation. When it comes to doctrine, there is no doubt who will win. It is also time to proclaim a great hope with a great faith. But it must be the truly *divine* God we proclaim, the truly *divine* Christ, the truly *divine Magisterium* of His Church. There is neither hope nor beauty nor joy except in a return to *the prime principle* of Catholicism.