Beliefs and Authenticity

by Quentin Quesnell

In a subject-centered theology based on conversion, the classic problem of faith and reason becomes the concrete, personal question: How shall I respond authentically to God's gift of love without betraying authentic reasonableness as a knower and a questioner? For conversion and faith do not come pure and unmixed. They always appear linked with some belief system, some set of teaching about God and God's relations to the world and to you. Conversion itself may be just falling in love with God; and faith itself may be the new, heightened perspective on reality which is inseparable from love: the "eye of love."[1] But these always come linked with some preceding notion of the God you are in love with.

This notion is normally part of a system of beliefs you yourself did not create. It comes to you within an integrated religious picture provided by the religious tradition with which you are most familiar—the one you grew up with or one which has more recently been convincingly presented to you by someone eager to foster your conversion. After a fourteen year lapse, you attended midnight mass in the cathedral; you read the Krishna literature handed you in the airport; you listened to an evangelist preaching on Sunday morning TV. One way or another, your conversion did not happen without some preceding image of God, and your conversion happened in terms of that image. With this God, not with God-in-general, you have found yourself in love.

---

[1] B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), p. 115.

Yet the pure desire to know cannot stop its restless questioning. The drive to understand and above all to judge the truth or falsity of whatever you experience cannot be suppressed without major inauthenticity.

The tension is inescapable. By awareness of my conversion

> "Whether at once, as once at a crash Paul
> Or as Austin, a lingering out sweet skill"[2]

a given image of God has come to life for me. I have come, without knowing adequate grounds for it, to perceive the God of the religious tradition as my God, the one who has given me infinite love and stirred in me a desire to return that love without measure. But since I am aware that this image is not the result of my own reflection on experience, nor the result of evidence generally available, widely confirmed or universally accepted, I cannot help questioning it, at least in details. For if it came to me as part of my education, it must have come accompanied by the imperfections of my education. I must sort these out. Yet it came accompanied by demands for belief, and now serious critical thought in regard to that belief has become serious critical thought in regard to my living God.

Worse, according to the belief system itself, serious reflective criticism of the revealed objects of belief is an offense against the God who has so generously revealed. In Tertullian's classic statement: "You seek and go on seeking for such time as you fail to find. But when you have believed, you have succeeded in finding. Those only seek who either never possessed, or else have lost what once they had. If you think there is something else to be found, you either have not believed or else have ceased to believe."[3]

This view is emphasized for modern Catholics by the First Council of the Vatican, which teaches that Catholics, unlike followers of other religions, never have a just reason to change or doubt their faith; never have a just cause to suspend assent to the faith they have once received from the Church's teaching, calling it into doubt while they work out a scientific demonstration of its credibility and truth.[4] This would imply that in whatever belief system you found yourself when you came to faith, in that you would have to remain for the rest of your life. The belief system itself could never be subjected to serious significant criticism and reform by you. But this is

[2] G. M. Hopkins, "Wreck of the Deutschland," in *Major Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (N. Y.: Dutton, 1979).

[3] Tertullian, *On the "Prescription" of Heretics*, trans. T. H. Bindley (London: SPCK, 1914), paras. 10-11.

[4] Cf. Vatican I, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*, Chapter 3, "De fide" in H. Denzinger (ed.), *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Freiburg: Herder, 1963), 32 edition, pp. 590 ff., # 1790 (= DS [33 edition] #3009).

such a contradiction of the way our inquiring minds work that there results a very real problem.

Someone might try to deny that a reasonable person would ever get into such a precarious intellectual situation; might claim that unless one had successfully laid the reasonable premises for the move into faith, conversion and the accompanying beliefs, one should never have made the move. This is logical but utterly unreal.

The model in an old-fashioned textbook of apologetics might indeed think through all evidence and decide coolly at the proper time that now was the moment to proceed to a justifiable act of faith. But in fact human beings are not logical thinking machines. They do not with the dawn of reason reach out for a first premise or celebrate their seventh birthdays by explicitly formulating the principle of contradiction. In fact, by the time we begin to ask the right questions we are already deeply embroiled in many wrong answers.

We are each of us born into a world which preexists us and which, from the moment we begin to learn anything at all, overwhelms us with a great flood of doctrines—commonsensible, scientific, historical, philosophical, and theological. We are handed a world, or more exactly we are socialized into a world already organized for us by others, and our task as responsible human beings is to try to sort it all out and decide how we stand in its regard, what sense we think it makes, how much of it we judge to be true. We must decide how much of it we will concede is beyond the capacity of our single lifetime to settle for ourselves and how much therefore we will calmly take on faith so that we have some time left to enjoy the world and the one life we have.

Since that is the real project, the real starting place for serious reflection is ourselves where we actually are—within or outside of, for instance, the religious traditions which we personally have received some knowledge of. Therefore the question from which our discussion began is not singular or rare. It must arise for every thinking person who is religious and for every religious person who thinks: If I am loyal to this conversion/love/faith experience I feel to be mine, to what extent must I yield unthinking commitment to the religious tradition in which this faith experience has come to me? And how can I then be loyal to myself as a seeker after truth, a lover of wisdom, an honest human being?

To reflect profitably on this issue in a subject-centered, conversion-based theology, the terms of the problem must be more concretely specified. For instance, distinctions must be drawn among various religious traditions as to how much of the tradition can or cannot be questioned without betraying the conversion itself. In a young cult the answer may be that absolutely nothing may be ques-

tioned. All is done as willed by God and revealed here and now through the leader. Most religions tend to be like that in their earliest stages, but all develop some role for reasoning by at least the end of their first generation if they are to continue. In an extremely liberal tradition, where there is minimal emphasis on conversion, it may be correspondingly difficult to discern what limits on questioning a conversion might impose.

As representative of the Catholic tradition, one can safely follow the First Council of the Vatican, as Lonergan does in his treatment of "The Permanence of Dogma" in *Method in Theology*.[5] Then that which I have to believe without questioning are the mysteries; and the mysteries are defined in terms correlative to my lack of knowledge and need of revelation: they are the truths so hidden in God that they could not be known except by revelation. Analyzing this, as Lonergan does, against the background of Aquinas' orthodox teaching in S. T. II-II, q. a. 4-5, one concludes that loyalty to the Catholic tradition requires that I believe what I do not yet know and what no human being can ever know.

There are some not insignificant consequences. Believing, and not reasoning, is the proper response only to truths so hidden in God that they could not be known without revelation. These are truths that do not leave tracks. There is not by definition any evidence for them; but there is not by definition any evidence against them. Whether there is one person in God or three or a baker's dozen there are no compelling evidences one way or the other; nor is anyone able to specify in what exactly such evidences might consist. That God was or was not incarnate in this man, Jesus of Nazareth—how would you prove it? Besides the intrinsic philosophic absurdity of the attempt, so powerfully described in Kierkegaard's *Postscript,* there is the fact that the belief system itself says you could not prove it and must not try: it is a truth hidden in God.[6] There is no natural effect to be checked out, and therefore there is nothing for reason to do.

That each of us is conceived in original sin; that one woman, some two thousand years ago, was conceived without it; that God does or does not sanctify us with his grace, elevate our good actions, will punish our bad ones—not one of these is evidential. If any of them were evidential, they would not be objects of belief. As soon as there is anything for reason to work on, reason ought to get to work. If there is contrary evidence, or seems to be, that is to be reasoned upon. If a religious teaching said the moon is made of green cheese, that would not be a mystery to be believed, but a thesis to be investigated. If it were Catholic teaching that human society functions better under capitalism than communism, with a wider distribution of wealth, security, and happiness, this might be something to be checked out. But if the belief is that a certain woman many centuries ago conceived a child without the intervention of a male, the *a priori's* may be strongly against it, but the fact itself cannot possibly be checked.

[5] *Method,* pp. 320-324.

[6] Vatican I, op. cit., p. 594, canon 5.

If it is said that the same might happen to anyone who believed, that could perhaps be subjected to some checking. When Jesus said: "If anyone eat of this bread, he will live forever," and if that meant would not experience natural death, this was not something to be believed but to be tested. When the test failed, as it did when Christians continued to die in the same percentage as others, then the saying had to be reinterpreted, as it was, along with similar statements like: "Some of those standing here will not die before the son of man comes in his kingdom."

The principle then is clear: you believe only what you do not know and what you cannot know. The mysteries of faith calling for belief and restricting your right of investigation must by definition be teachings on matters for which there is no evidence either pro or con. Those revealed mysteries are not to be verified, modified, or substituted for. No major figure in the history of Catholic theology, not even Abelard, has denied those limits. But on the other hand, as soon as any claim is made which could produce perceptible effects or evidence, that claim is to be met not by belief but by critical reflection, and accepted if found true, rejected if found false.

Within the limits suggested, what room is left for thinking and judgment? First, there is left everything which purports to be a matter of evidence—to have concomitant or subsequent measurable effects or indispensable measurable antecedents. As soon as an effect or a cause in the world of experience is appealed to, all judgments are to be rationally determined. Who ruled Israel in such and such a year, if the biblical texts contradict each other? Did Jesus teach freedom from the law or conformity to it? Written texts are evidence and to be handled as such. So also are all historical, literary, sociological, economic, geological questions; everything except mysteries so hidden in God that they cannot be known unless divinely revealed.

But secondly, the Catholic tradition itself specifies another base from which the converted person can criticize the tradition. For the tradition teaches, with Augustine and Aquinas, that in infused faith "the light of your countenance is signed upon us, Lord" and "in your light we shall see light." This is considered to be a fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy that "they shall have no need for any man to

teach them; for they shall all be taught of God." It is confirmed by the modern teaching of Vatican II on the role of charisms, and is implied in the same council's teaching on the infallibility of the faithful.[7]

The point here is that your faith/love/conversion constitutes in you a new eye for recognizing truths and values you might otherwise have missed. As such, your conversion becomes, like the light of intelligence itself, an internal source of ultimate judgment whose manner of operation provides an inescapable norm. That norm finds concrete expression only in material from the religious tradition in which the conversion occurred, but the norm itself exceeds any concrete expression, and, as an internal norm in a living person, stands in tension with any existing version of the tradition as presently expressed. So too in natural reasoning, our critical powers come to birth within a given culture, but we are not helpless to reflect critically upon that culture and to contribute by our criticisms to its improvement.

This happens in the theological area in at least three ways: first, insofar as current teachings are always incomplete; second, insofar as current teachings are always imperfect; third, insofar as it is the task of the theologian at any given moment to rank the teachings in order of importance.

First, the current teachings are incomplete. This is manifest from the fact that the act of faith is related to the mysteries; but the current teaching, rather than include all the mysteries, tends to be summed up in the dogmas. Now the dogmas are not the mysteries. The mysteries are the revealed truths. The dogmas are not the revelation. The dogmas come later, much later. Many Christians lived and died before the dogmas existed; many Christians and Catholics live and die without hearing more than a few of the dogmas.

The dogmas are not the revealed mysteries, constitutive of the religion. They are the rules for speaking correctly about the mysteries. The dogmas are the grammar of faith. They tell how to use correctly the words and relate correctly to one another the sentences that abound in the Scriptures and in the tradition about the mysteries themselves. That is why the dogmas are phrased, "If anyone shall *say*... let him be anathema [or let her be anathema]." To define a dogma is not to proclaim a truth, but to specify exactly how to speak and think about a truth which was always believed.

---

[7] Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium,* chapter 2, "The People of God," n. 12, in W. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966), pp. 29-30.

The mysteries are behind the dogmas and are more than the dogmas. Theology, as the understanding of faith, demands engagement with the mysteries. But to that engagement the dogmas are, at most, a help and certainly only a partial help. If we allow them to play too prominent a part in our thinking, their effect can be crippling. That is what has always been wrong with doing theology in terms of an outline of dogma or even a history of dogma. It is like learning a language by reading grammars. Theology wants to understand the religion itself, the language as lived and spoken, not some collection of the rules most frequently violated in using that language.

Theological surveys in terms of dogmas are understandable insofar as theology is done within a religious community whose history of bloody wars of mind and spirit is recorded in its dogmas. But the dogmas do not necessarily outline the most essential abiding characteristics, and may miss some important points entirely.

The mysteries are conveyed not only in dogmas and creeds, but also in the preaching and worship of the Church, in the Scriptures, in the lives of the saints, in the prayers, devotions, and Christian lives of the faithful of every age. We might consider here, for example, some instances just from the Scriptures, which appear in no creeds and have never been defined as dogmas, but are just as truly mysteries constitutive of Christianity.

Take, for example, such a statement as "As long as you did it to one of these my least brothers, you did it to me." No evidence is offered or expected. No reasonable, human verification is possible now or was possible when the words were first spoken or written. If accepted and believed, it is believed on the authority of God revealing. It is the revelation of a mystery. Its importance in the history of Christianity is acknowledged by all. Yet it has never been defined. It is not a dogma or the theme of any dogma.

Take another: "He laid down his life for us; we also ought to lay down our lives for one another." Except as the revelation of a mystery, an exposition of God's values for our lives, it does not follow. God may want us to draw that conclusion from Christ's death, and we may believe that is the proper conclusion to draw; but we draw it, not because it follows reasonably, but because we believe God has revealed that it should follow for us.

Teachings like these are mysteries in the fullest sense. Their truth could not be known by any human means or by any rational analysis. For if taken seriously they point in the direction of self-diminution, self-sacrifice, and self-destruction. But if reason shudders at any suggestion of limits being placed on the freely inquiring spirit, how much more must reason repine at the suggestion that it move toward terminating itself, imposing an absolute end to all its inquir-

ing forever. Never to ask another question about anything at all? Never to give the benefits of one's wisdom to another, in the present or in future generations? Lay down one's life? Without even a Plato at one's side to record the event?

A milder example may illustrate the irrationality more clearly. If one were exhorted to submit oneself in certain special circumstances to a brain operation which would render one a vegetable, could this truly be accepted as a reasonable course of action? The horror which the thought provokes in a mind devoted to free inquiry is an indication of how little reasonable would be the more extreme conclusion that one might lay down one's life for a friend. It is the conclusion that never follows logically from principles of reason alone.

A similar analysis can, I believe, be done on many another gospel command or promise. Most of them turn out to be affirmations in one form or another that if you go to the cross you will find salvation, resurrection, and life. As such they are revelations of something which could not be known except by revelation. It might be dreamed of, guessed at, hoped for, even occasionally aspired to or practiced, but it could not be known. That happy are the poor, the lowly, those who weep and mourn, suffer persecution for justice's sake—if anyone believes these they believe them because of faith in the word of God; that is, they believe them as revealed, and from that alone comes their certainty. For they certainly are not logical conclusions of reason.

"Sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." "Resist not evil. Take no thought for tomorrow." "Forgive one who offends you, not seven times a day, but seventy times seven times." "Turn the other cheek." "Go the extra mile." "Give to everyone who asks of you." "If anyone takes away your cloak, give him your tunic as well." "It is more blessed to give than to receive." "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven." "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." "When you give a banquet, don't invite your friends or relatives or anyone able to repay you by inviting you in return; but invite the poor and the crippled and the lame and the blind, because they cannot repay you, and you will receive your reward in the resurrection of the just." "Happy are you when they curse you and revile you and speak all manner of evil against you for my name's sake. Be glad and rejoice, for your reward is very great in heaven."

There is not a one of these which can be validated by reason. There is no evidence to support the truth of any one of these statements. They are mysteries, as great as the revealed mysteries of the Trinity, Incarnation, redemption. In fact, they may be greater. A

theology which gave even equal time to these other mysteries might be revolutionary. In fact, to some extent such a theology is being produced in our time or at least being dreamed of by some liberation theologians, and it is revolutionary.

(It will be noticed that the sort of mysteries just outlined, to which less explicit attention has been paid in classical theology, are revelations of mysteries of value. Previously, attention was paid primarily to mysteries which were revelations of matters of fact. Though both types are mysteries and revealed, it may be well to be able to distinguish them by separate terms: mysteries of fact and mysteries of value. The distinction will be of some importance in the third point, below.)

Second, we said that any existing formulation of belief is always imperfect. In some ways this needs no explanation. It follows from the very goal set for theological reflection by the First Vatican Council, quoting the fifth century Vincent of Lerins: that without betraying the same teaching, the same sense, the same opinion, it was still possible that "each and all, every single person as well as the entire Church, should in the course of generations and of centuries grow and make extraordinary progress in understanding, wisdom and knowledge."[8] If each of us and all together are to grow and make extraordinary progress, the implication is that we are going to leave behind previous states of understanding, wisdom and knowledge for better ones to come.

But more fundamentally still, the mysteries cannot be known apart from divine revelation. But all revelation is in sensible forms or in human words, and so is necessarily imperfect. As the Fourth Lateran Council taught in 1215, no matter how great a similitude of God with a creature is ever expressed, the dissimilitude will be still greater.[9]

Third, the Second Vatican Council encourages theologians to remember that "there exists an order or hierarchy of the truths of Catholic teaching, according to their diverse connection with the foundation of Christian faith."[10] Now what the Council meant by the foundation of Christian faith they tell us often enough. It is the Christian mystery, the salvation event, the Christ event. It is the death and resurrection of Christ, preached by the Christian community from the beginning as a message from God to us. Vatican II sums up that message as the "perfection of revelation"; namely, that God is with us to save us out of the darkness of sin and death and to

---

[8] Vatican I, op. cit., p. 592.

[9] In Denzinger, op. cit., # 432 (= DS # 806).

[10] Vatican II, op. cit., *Unitatis Redintegratio,* n.11 p. 354.

lift us up to eternal life."[11] The work of the theologian then will be to rank the mysteries according to their closeness to that central revelation.

Another way of identifying the foundation of Christian faith is ontologically. In theological ontological terms, the foundation of faith for me, the individual, is that the love of God is poured forth in my heart by the Holy Spirit who is given me. Or again, psychologically, from the side of my consciousness, that foundation is the conversion event. The theologian can and should rank the mysteries in relation to that.

Whichever criterion one uses to rank the mysteries—closeness to the preached mystery of Christ's death and resurrection; closeness to the central revelation that God is with us to save us out of the darkness of sin and death and to raise us up to eternal life; closeness to the ontological fact of God's pouring out his love in our hearts; or closeness to one's own experience of conversion, it seems apparent that the mysteries of value stand closer to the center than most of the mysteries of fact. To the extent that they are closer, they rank higher; and one can take up the Council's suggestion that the lower ranked mysteries may be for the sake of the higher ranked ones.

At any rate, the work of the reasonable and responsible Catholic thinker or theologian becomes that of attending directly to the mysteries of value as well as to the mysteries of fact; identifying them, clarifying them, embracing and even incarnating them in practice. Theology means looking for interconnections of the mysteries of value with the infused and recognized love of God, with one another, and with the mysteries of fact. It involves perceiving how the mysteries of value flow from and towards conversion, and how the mysteries of fact are linked to conversion through them; how the mysteries of fact illustrate and exemplify the mysteries of value and motivate their acceptance and practice. The work of theology becomes finally also searching for natural analogies to all the mysteries, those of value as well as those of fact, so that a fruitful insight and progress in them may be made ever easier for all the faithful.

Insofar as the mysteries of fact, the traditional beliefs, are subordinate to the mysteries of value, the belief system may in fact be revealed only in the sense that it shows itself to be a secure embodiment of the mysteries of value; expresses them well, though only implicitly; and makes it possible or easier to live by them. The history of Christian thought could be analyzed as a preserving and safeguarding of the mysteries of value, passing them on primarily in life within the "incarnate meanings"[12] which are the lives of Christ

[11] Vatican II, op. cit., *Dei Verbum,* n.4 p. 113.
[12] *Method,* p. 73.

and of Christians. Explicit recognition, definition, and formulation of mysteries of fact in dogmas would come about only gradually and only insofar as those were found necessary to preserve and safeguard the mysteries of value in various cultural situations.

Traditional beliefs in mysteries of fact can thus be appreciated as products of human culture without betraying one's conversion experience. For the direct effect of an awareness of conversion is an inclination to accept new values. True, these values too have their antecedents in human thought and culture, and to that extent might also be subject to critical reflection. But the accepting of values is not a function of critical judgment (Is it so? True or false?), but of responsible choice (Armed with just the knowledge I have here and now, what am I to do?). The setting of values is not (to use the language of *Insight*) a matter of purely rational consciousness, but of rational *self*-consciousness. Its criterion is not evidence, but moral attractiveness. One learns to be open to moral attractiveness by consistently trying to choose responsibly with readiness to reform as new moral horizons open up, just as one learns to judge well and find truth by consistently trying to be critical, reasonable, attentive to evidence and to possible ways of synthesizing it.

Love itself will incline us immediately to accept a new set of values. Love itself only indirectly and mediately inclines us to accept new beliefs about matters of fact. The values will indeed come within a belief system, carried by a tradition. Loyalty to the God revealed to us will incline us to continue in that tradition that we may continue to cherish the values his love reveals. But anything within that tradition which is a matter of true and false, any supposed facts which imply evidence, will have to be judged by the evidence. Mysteries of fact which are real mysteries, completely independent of evidence, will be accepted to the extent that they are inseparably linked to the conversion experience through the values.

Attending separately to the mysteries of fact and the mysteries of value may add force to Lonergan's demonstration that he is "departing not from the older doctrine but only from the older manner of speaking" when he distinguishes faith and beliefs.[13] If one attends to the mysteries of value, beliefs may be identified with faith and be ideally invariable, as in the "older and more authoritative tradition." If one attends to the mysteries of fact, beliefs obviously differ according to cultural situations and backgrounds, and do so without any harm to faith.

[13] *Method,* p. 123.

Creativity and Method:

Essays in Honor of Bernard Lonergan, S.J.

Edited By

MATTHEW L. LAMB

Associate Professor of Systematic Theology
Marquette University

Marquette University Press
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
1981