

# **VI: The Meaningfulness of Christian Beliefs**

## 22: Miracles as Signals from the Creator

### Introduction to this part

Up to this point I have neither asserted the truth of Christian beliefs nor considered their meaningfulness. In this final part I deal with the question of meaningfulness. I do not deal with the question of truth, because this question is not within the competence of a philosopher. Whether Christian beliefs ought to be accepted as true can be decided only after one considers three distinct sorts of questions: 1) philosophical questions concerning their possible meaningfulness, 2) historical questions concerning certain alleged matters of fact, such as the life, death, and subsequent appearances of Jesus, and 3) a moral question as to whether one is either permitted or obliged to assent to Christian teaching. An answer to this last question would presuppose answers to the philosophical and historical questions and some standards of moral judgment.

The question of the meaningfulness of Christian doctrine is twofold. Christians claim that the creator has opened a conversation with mankind and that in this conversation he has communicated certain truths about himself which otherwise would be inaccessible to human inquiry. Examples of such alleged truths are the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. The first question regarding meaningfulness is whether it can be meaningful to say that the creator has communicated to man some otherwise inaccessible truths about himself. This question again has two aspects. One aspect is the possible meaningfulness of the alleged *communicating*—in other words, does it make sense to say that God has spoken? The other aspect is the possible meaning-



fulness of the alleged *content* communicated—for example, does it make sense to say that God is three persons, one of whom has become man? The second question regarding meaningfulness is concerned with the possible existential meaningfulness of the alleged communication: Would there be any *point* in a communication from the creator to creatures? This second question is important, for even if Christian doctrine is not logically absurd, it might be wholly pointless and irrelevant to man, and so belief in it would be existentially absurd.

In chapter twenty-four I will consider the first and in chapter twenty-five the second of the two questions distinguished in the preceding paragraph. There are two prior questions. Can some particular event within human experience be regarded as a signal from the creator? I take this question to concern the *possibility* of miracles; I discuss it in the present chapter. The other prior question is what “person” and “community” mean when these expressions are used of human individuals and groups. This question will be treated in chapter twenty-three.

In taking the question of the possibility of miracles to be equivalent to the question whether any particular event within human experience can be regarded as a signal from the creator, I set aside two concepts of *miracle* which are irrelevant to my present concern. First, there is the concept of *miracle* according to which some specific happening might demonstrate the existence of God or might conclusively prove the truth of religious claims to someone who as a matter of principle took a sceptical attitude toward such claims. I set this concept aside, because a signal requires interpretation, and it is at least a necessary condition of interpreting some occurrence as a signal from the creator that one supposes that there is a creator and that receiving a signal from the creator is not regarded as impossible. Second, there is the concept of *miracle* according to which unusual happenings, even mere coincidences, might count as miracles if they are regarded by believers as striking examples of the general self-expression and communication of the creator which pervades all of experience. I set this concept aside, because *signal* implies one segment of experience clearly distinct from others; a signal must stand out from background noise.

The question of whether some particular event in human experience can be taken as a signal from the creator becomes acute in the context of the argument of parts two and four, for that argument concluded that every positive reality is altogether caused by the creator. In chapter twenty-one I drew the conclusion that creation as a whole can be regarded as the self-expression of the creator or as a communication of his goodness. If this conclusion is correct, why should any one event more than any and all other events be regarded as a signal from the creator?<sup>1</sup> Before I attempt to answer

this question—which emerges from my own position—I must clear the ground by considering Hume's objections to the possibility of miracles either happening or being known to have happened.

### Hume's critique of miracles

Hume includes a treatment of miracles in his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Section X). Presupposed by what he says on miracles is his general theory of causal knowledge, according to which knowledge of cause-effect relations is built up by repeated experiences. Sometimes the connection between two events is observed in all cases; sometimes only now and then. Hence, a wise man proportions his belief—his degree of expectation—to the evidence. If a connection is constant, one expects with absolute confidence that it will hold. If a connection holds only sometimes, one expects it to hold with a degree of confidence proportionate to the times it has been found to hold.

Now, Hume continues, the connection between the testimony of witnesses and the truth to which they testify is a cause-effect relation. The only reason to expect testimony to conform to reality is that it often does. But this relationship is not one which holds in all cases. Sometimes witnesses disagree; in such cases their testimony cannot be altogether true. Sometimes witnesses are few and possibly mistaken; sometimes witnesses are biased and dishonest.

When direct experience of the course of nature provides ground for one belief while the testimony of witnesses provides ground for a different belief, a wise man must weigh the conflicting evidence. If the experience of the course of nature is not a constant one—for example, if it is the experience of the weather in a certain place at a certain season—and if the witness has been found to be reliable in statements of fact of this sort—for example, the weatherman talking about *the past*—then one can reasonably believe the witness against one's expectation based upon experience. For example, if the weatherman reports that the temperature in Miami in June dropped below freezing for a short time, one might reasonably accept the report; however unreliable weathermen are as predictors, they are usually honest and competent reporters, and with respect to the weather one must be ready to expect the unexpected.

However, if the testimony of witnesses is on one side of the scale and all direct experience of the course of nature is on the other, then it is reasonable to believe the direct experience instead of the witnesses. Hume mentions the case of an Indian prince who doubted what Europeans told him about frost and its effects. The prince was reasonable, Hume says, although the phenomenon of frost and its effects is not "*miraculous*, nor contrary to uniform

experience of the course of nature in cases where all the circumstances are the same.”<sup>2</sup>

A miracle for Hume is not simply an unusual event, such as a coincidence, nor is it merely an unexpected event, which nevertheless turns out to occur more or less regularly under suitable circumstances. A miracle is an event which either in itself or in its mode of happening is contrary to the laws of nature. A dead man coming back to life is proposed by Hume as an example of an event in itself contrary to the laws of nature; a sick person becoming well or a healthy person falling dead at the command of someone claiming divine authority would be examples of events contrary in their mode of happening to the laws of nature. Thus Hume defines miracle as “a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent.”<sup>3</sup>

It is worth considering carefully why a coincidence or an unexpected but explicable event cannot count as a miracle. (I think Hume is correct about this point, although I do not accept his *definition* of miracle.)

A case in which a skydiver’s parachute fails to open but he survives unhurt, because just before he hits the ground a truck loaded with feathers passes under him and breaks his fall, is a good example of a coincidence. Some people might say that the skydiver was “saved by a miracle,” but they would not need to assume there was any special causal principle at work. Both the skydiver’s fall and the manner in which it was broken would be explicable by ordinary causal factors. Even a religious believer might deny that the happening was attributable to God in any special way, particularly if the skydiver ridiculed such a suggestion and boasted that he intended to take advantage of the additional years given him by “lady luck” to live a dissolute life.

A case in which a primitive man first encounters black rocks which do not merely become hot when placed in a fire but which themselves catch fire and burn, contrary to all his previous experience with rocks, is a good example of an unexpected but explicable event. The primitive man might at first regard the black rocks with considerable wonder and awe, but his wonder and awe would recede when he discovered that similar rocks left in a similar fire for a similar length of time regularly catch fire and burn. The experience of burning coal, at first extraordinary, becomes accepted as part of the ordinary course of nature, no more nor less intelligible than all the rest of nature.

Thus, Hume concludes, if any event is to count as a miracle, it must be more than unusual and more than unexpected on the basis of past experience. The event must be inexplicable as a coincidence and it also must be unique—that is, not a member of a set of events which regularly can be observed or made to happen under certain definite circumstances. Unusual but lawlike happenings will not do; the appearance of a comet is not a miracle, even though it is unusual.



To this point I agree with Hume's position; I think he is right about what *cannot* count as a miracle. I disagree with Hume's definition of miracle as an event *contrary to the laws of nature*, contrary to all the direct experience one has of the actual course of events in the world.

Given this definition, Hume is in a position to compare the evidence in favor of miracles—which he takes to be limited to the testimony of witnesses—with the evidence against. By definition all direct experience counts against. By the common canons of assessing the testimony of witnesses, no testimony can be absolute evidence in favor of the truth of that to which testimony is given. Hence, testimony always must be assessed as having less weight than direct experience when a purported miracle is at issue.

Hume's statement of the argument deserves to be quoted; I omit the examples:

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. . . . Nothing is esteemed a miracle if it ever happen in the common course of nature. . . . There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle, nor can such a proof be destroyed or the miracle rendered credible but by an opposite proof which is superior [note omitted].

The plain consequence is . . . that no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish.<sup>4</sup>

Hume's observation on this conclusion—an obvious allusion to the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus—is that if anyone says he saw a dead man restored to life, one should consider which would be the greater "miracle": that the witness was mistaken or lying or that the purported event had actually occurred.

Having built this foundation, Hume proceeds to argue that no miraculous event ever was established with the sort of evidence he regards as necessary. His argument partly depends upon assertions of historical fact; it is not my business to consider these matters. But Hume's argument also involves the assertion of some general rules of criticism. First, he holds that the number and reliability of witnesses is important for assessing the value of testimony; he claims that no miracle is attested by many reliable witnesses. Second, he holds that people are naturally gossipy and credulous about reports of highly unusual events; he claims that these psychological characteristics account for the propagation and acceptance of miracle stories. Third, he holds that

reports which originate among distant and long-past “ignorant and barbarous nations” cannot be checked and ought to be regarded with scepticism; he claims that reports of miracles are of this sort. Fourth, he holds that conflicting witnesses render one another incredible; he claims that all different religions conflict and that all religions abound in purported miracles.<sup>5</sup> Hume adds to these four points a further one. A person who is interested in a certain cause must not be trusted too far in matters which bear upon that cause; Hume claims that religious believers are motivated by vanity to consider themselves witnesses to the divine, and that they are motivated by fanaticism to use pious frauds to promote their faith.<sup>6</sup>

From this argument Hume draws the general conclusion that no human testimony can have sufficient force to outweigh direct experience of the laws of nature, and thus establish a miraculous event and so provide a basis for any system of religion. Yet Hume admits that “miracles”—extraordinary and unrepeatable exceptions to natural laws—might occur in nonreligious contexts. He offers the example of an imaginary report attested by unanimous historical evidence of total darkness on earth for eight days, beginning January 1, 1600. He thinks such a report, if so attested, could be accepted, because general experience admits the possibility of decay, corruption, and dissolution in nature. On the other hand, if Queen Elizabeth I were supposed to have died and then risen again, Hume thinks any testimony to that purported fact would have to be discounted, since people often are dishonest and foolish, and since the appearances might be explained as error or fraud. With respect to purported religious miracles Hume concludes:

As the violations of truth are more common in the testimony concerning religious miracles than in that concerning any other matter of fact, this must diminish very much the authority of the former testimony and make us form a general resolution never to lend any attention to it, with whatever specious pretense it may be covered.<sup>7</sup>

Hume’s final comment is ironic: Christian teaching is totally irrational, and thus anyone who believes it should be directly aware of a continuing miracle in his own person.

Recent followers of Hume have taken a harder line than Hume himself. Hume seems to be saying that miracles are not logically impossible, but they are never to be accepted, particularly not as a basis for religion. Some of Hume’s recent followers try to rule out the logical possibility of miracles or the methodological possibility of confirming their occurrence. For example, it is suggested that purported miracles involve the conflict between a particular past event—the miracle—and a general law of nature. The past event cannot be verified; the law of nature can be verified whenever one wishes. Therefore, the law of nature always has the advantage.<sup>8</sup> Again, some argue

that since laws of nature say what happens, either the purported miracle did not occur or the supposed law of nature is not really a law. This amounts to saying that any supposed miracle, if it actually occurred, is merely a counterexample to a generalization.<sup>9</sup> A third suggestion is that if the miraculous event were explicable by the action of a god, this fact would only show that the factor called "god" would have to be included in the natural world. Thus, a miracle would not show the reality of any transcendent entity.<sup>10</sup>

### Defects in Hume's critique

The first point to notice about Hume's position on miracles is that he and his followers assume that any event must be natural—that it must be according to the laws of nature or contrary to those laws. Recent followers of Hume make this point clear by excluding the possibility of anything *really* contrary to the laws of nature; the alternative becomes: according to the laws of nature thus far known or according to laws of nature as yet unknown. Hume, because he regarded natural laws as nothing more than generalizations based upon repeated experience, was not in a position to be quite so exclusivistic. He had to admit the logical possibility of an inexplicable unique event, such as an eight-day eclipse. Yet, even in this case he suggested that the event would conform to the general character of nature known by many analogies as liable to "decay, corruption, and dissolution."

This suggested account of the imaginary unique event has an odd metaphysical ring. The metaphysics it implies is a closed naturalism. I suspect that in the back of Hume's mind—certainly in the back of the minds of his present-day followers—is a picture of nature as a huge machine, grinding away inexorably and regularly, every event locked into the whole. Only some such picture as this would warrant the assumption that every event must be either in accord with known or discoverable natural laws, or else—and how *obviously* absurd!—contrary to them.

The assumption is false. Consider a unique event: Hume wrote an essay on miracles. I see no reason for saying that it occurred either in accord with or contrary to any law of nature. Doubtless, the psychological processes of thinking out the essay, including the deep emotional factors which led Hume to take an interest in this subject and to write about it in the way in which he did, occurred in accord with certain natural laws. The physical behavior involved in writing also occurred in accord with certain natural laws. But Hume's act of writing this particular essay, while not contrary to any natural law, hardly seems to follow from any natural law or any set of such laws.

A follower of Hume who is a determinist would argue that there are natural laws of such complexity that no one yet understands them, but that if



someone eventually does come to understand them, Hume's authorship of this essay could be fully accounted for. However, I assume here a point I believe has been argued successfully in another work, namely, that determinism is self-defeating.<sup>11</sup> Human persons can make free choices. In chapter fourteen I outlined a descriptive metaphysics of the orders of reality within experience—taking “experience” in a broad sense. The physical order is one of these, but if free choice is possible, the existential order is distinct from and irreducible to the physical. The physical order of nature, understood as one of several orders, must be open or loose-textured enough to admit the effects of thinking, of choosing, and of symboling. Hume's physical and psychological behavior in writing his essay on miracles was within the physical order and was not exempt from the causal factors which condition what occurs in that order. But in virtue of the irreducibility of thinking, of choosing, and of symboling to natural processes and events Hume's writing of this essay, considered as an integral human act, was a unique event neither contrary to the laws of nature nor in accord with them.

The loose-textured character of the physical order of nature permits testimony to count for more than Hume allowed. If one were compelled to regard every witness as giving testimony either for or against a natural event, and if one also were compelled to regard the giving of testimony itself as a natural event, then Hume's theory of the relationship between testimony and expectations based upon past experience would be plausible. However, very often witnesses testify to happenings such that neither the giving of the testimony nor that to which testimony is given either agrees with laws of nature or is contrary to them. A simple example is the happening to which testimony is given when an individual says to a friend of the opposite sex: “I love you. Believe me, I will love you no matter what.” A person who hears such a declaration hardly regards either the love or the declaration of it as happening in accord with any natural law; neither, however, is it contrary to any law of nature.

Hume admits that someone might deny that reasoning based on testimony is founded on a cause-effect relation. He says, “I shall not dispute about a word.” He regards it as sufficient to note that belief grounded in testimony is based on the principle that the reports of witnesses and the facts usually agree.<sup>12</sup> The trouble is that more than the meaning of a word is at stake. Hume bases his argument on his own theory of cause and effect. But something more than past experience of the relation between testimony and facts is involved in one's belief in another's declaration of love. In this example, in fact, the only access to the facts is by way of the testimony, because the facts to which testimony is given are existential, not physical.

Even when a person bears witness to facts which could be empirically verified, the interpersonal relationship enters into the rational criteria of

evaluating testimony. One trusts witnesses or does not, not only on the frequency with which their reports have been verified or falsified but also on one's appraisal of their character, of their desire to be careful and accurate in this particular case, and of the conviction and sincerity which they communicate *as persons*.

Moreover, it is not unreasonable to trust others somewhat further than Hume's criteria would allow. If one does not extend trust, others are unlikely to act in a way which will compel trust in them. If one does extend trust, one runs a risk of disappointment, but one also takes the only possible opportunity for developing a relationship closer than *common* criteria of trustworthiness would admit. No new depth of intimacy can be achieved unless one is willing to venture beyond the limits of caring and sharing reached in one's previous experience.<sup>13</sup>

Hume assumes that when testimony and laws of nature seem to conflict, all past experience stands against testimony. This assumption is faulty on several counts.

In the first place, knowledge of laws of nature is based largely on testimony. I know no one personally who has verified the principle of inertia for himself. In all my experience objects in motion seem to slow down and stop by themselves. If one accepts Hume's example of resurrection from the dead as a miracle, the law presumably violated would be that dead persons do not come back to life. I do not see any way of verifying such a law for oneself. I think it is true in general only because I know of no dead person among my immediate acquaintances who has come back to life, and I have the testimony of many witnesses that their experience is like mine. Insofar as the proposition is a universal negative, I can imagine an experience which would falsify it but can conceive no experimental method for verifying it.

In the second place, one can confirm or disconfirm testimony by indirect methods and by direct ones. One can inquire into grounds for regarding a witness as credible; one also can seek other evidence, including various sorts of traces. By "traces" here I mean the sort of evidence which might be admitted in a criminal trial, such as fingerprints, bits of skin, and the like. In a historical investigation traces might include subsequent, independently knowable occurrences which would be difficult to explain if the testimony were rejected.

In the third place—and this point is very important—Hume fails to take into account the experience of learning by experience. One important factor which makes one accept reports of events contrary to previous experience is that one has had the experience of having other empirical certitudes undermined by fresh evidence. Thus, the certitude of no "law of nature" is as great as Hume makes out for the purpose of his essay on miracles.<sup>14</sup> In rejecting reports of frost and its effects the Indian prince was not as reasonable as Hume suggests.



My reference to this example is not intended to suggest that Hume is wrong in distinguishing between miracles and natural events hitherto foreign to one's experience. Events of the latter sort cannot count as miracles. Yet if Hume's theory of evidence and testimony is correct, the Indian prince ought not to have yielded to *any* testimony. Hume himself points out that the manner in which water must be described as freezing is contrary to analogies of experience. Yet, paradoxically, he suggests that it only "requires a pretty strong testimony to render it credible to people in a warm climate."<sup>15</sup>

If a reputable scientist were to announce tomorrow that he had discovered and carefully tested a remedy for leukemia, and that the remedy had worked successfully in one hundred cases, people would very likely believe what he announced, even if his testimony were supported only by a few close colleagues, and despite the fact that the new remedy, if genuine, would reverse all previous experience of this disease.

I do not say that the fact that one accepts such testimony against past experience shows that stories of miracles also are acceptable. What I do say is that if Hume's argument against accepting the testimony for miracles were correct, one would have no reasonable basis for accepting much of the testimony which almost everyone does accept.

### **The possibility of miracles**

Much of the plausibility of Hume's theory of miracles arises from the fact that he treats the entire subject in the framework of a legitimate, but very special, question: Can the testimony of witnesses to miracles serve as a foundation for religious belief? Dealing with this question, Hume has no occasion to ask himself what his attitude would be if he himself were to experience a happening which might be regarded as a miracle.

My main objective in the present chapter is more limited than Hume's. I wish to clarify what a miracle would be like and how one could know that a miracle had occurred. In other words, my question is whether a happening could reasonably be regarded as a signal from the creator and, if so, what sort of happening it would have to be and under what conditions it could reasonably be accepted as a signal from the creator. For the limited purpose I have in view it will be sufficient to consider first-person situations and imaginary states of affairs, setting aside the problem of evaluating the testimony of others with regard to purported historical events.

Suppose an individual has a personal experience of a peculiar sort. While he is writing at his typewriter, the machine suddenly rises a foot above the tabletop, hovers in the air for some seconds, and then drops back in place with a loud "plop." One having such an experience might suspect that he was hallucinating. However, if he knew no reason to doubt his own perception, he

might well look for some hidden cause of the strange happening. He might suspect the presence of a magnetic effect, or an invisible fine wire, or a strong jet of air under the machine. If inquiry closed off these possibilities, the possibility of hallucinating might be considered, even with no special reason in favor of it. But suppose that the individual's wife had heard the "plop" of the machine falling, and had come running from another room to see what the trouble was. Suppose further that a glass top on the desk had cracked when the typewriter hit it.

Any reasonable person faced with this set of data—admittedly a product of pure fantasy—would admit that the typewriter had risen, hovered, and fallen. He would admit that he had no explanation for the event. The interesting question is: Would he think that the event violated any laws of nature? More precisely, would he think that his typewriter had defied the law of gravity?

He might say so, but he might also think that *some unknown factor* brought about this queer happening. On this supposition—which is very likely the one a person would accept, even if he *said* that his typewriter had "defied gravity"—gravity would no more be violated than it is when a magnetic field, an air current, or something of the sort suspends a heavier-than-air body in thin air.

If one were herding sheep in a desert countryside, where there was little brush, and if one thought he saw a bush burning for a long time, one might go to see why the fire was not burning out. If the flames seemed to shoot up from the bush as if it were on fire, but without consuming its branches, one might suppose that some hidden fuel supply was keeping the fire going. But if investigation revealed no hidden fuel supply, one would be faced with an unexplained event. If one observed no factor which might cause the peculiar event, he would not know how to try experimentally to bring it about again. Although all one's past experience supports the generalization that whatever burns is consumed, one would not necessarily suppose that a law of nature was being violated. One might well suppose that *some unknown factor* was causing the flame and protecting the bush from being burned by it.

If one were a member of a revolutionary group whose leader announced one evening to all his companions that in a few days he would be captured, machine-gunned to death, and disemboweled by a bayonet, but that a few days afterwards he would rise from the dead and return to the group, one might reasonably be sceptical that these predictions could be fulfilled. If the capture and death occurred as predicted, one probably still would be sceptical about the promised resurrection. If another member of the group telephoned a week later and said that the group's leader had shown up, alive and well—though still full of holes—one would have reason to remain sceptical. But if one then saw the person himself, if one put one's finger into the holes left by the machine-gun slugs and put one's hand into the cavity left by the

disboweling bayonet, then one hardly could deny that *some unknown factor* was at work.

Of course, someone might wish to say in the last example that the happening would be contrary to the laws of nature. However, even here it is not easy to say precisely what law of nature would be violated. A person having such an experience would be faced with a fact contrary to his previous experience; one never has seen a dead man come back to life. But which natural law would be violated by it?

Werner Heisenberg points out that in its beginnings modern science made statements about limited relations and thought these statements were valid only within limitations. However, eventually the modesty was lost:

Physical knowledge was considered to make assertions about nature as a whole. Physics wished to turn philosopher, and the demand was voiced from many quarters that all true philosophers must be scientific.<sup>16</sup>

Today, according to Heisenberg, physics is returning to self-limitation. Its focus is on individual properties of phenomena; questions about the ultimate nature of body, matter, energy, and so on are left open.

If Heisenberg is correct, one should not assume that the physical order is a rigid mechanism, every aspect of which could be fully described by an interlocking set of natural laws. Rather, one should assume that known laws of nature are partial accounts of phenomena. To the extent that these partial accounts are sound one assumes that certain factors are involved in a situation. If something unexpected happens, one need not assume that the usual factors are excluded; one simply assumes that some other factor is operative.<sup>17</sup>

In reading theological discussions of miracles one often observes the excessive alacrity of theologians conceding that a miracle such as a resurrection from the dead is "scientifically impossible." Sometimes no reason is given for the alleged impossibility; sometimes a reason which sounds scientific is given—for example, that physicochemical processes which are *irreversible* begin at death. The question is: What is irreversibility? A process is said to be "irreversible" in a strict sense if it occurs in a closed system, and if the occurrence of the process so alters conditions within the system that the initial state of affairs cannot be restored. In a looser sense many observed processes are said to be "irreversible." For example, if one throws a stone in a pool, the impact makes ripples. The reversal of the process is not strictly impossible, but no known physical causality would bring it about.<sup>18</sup> Obviously, in neither the strict nor the loose sense of "irreversibility" does the irreversibility of the physicochemical processes which begin at death show that a miraculous resurrection from the dead is "scientifically impossible." Those who believed in such a miracle did not assume that the physical order



is a closed system nor did they suppose that the causality involved was of any usual sort.

Still, none of the imaginary examples I have proposed thus far—not even that of the revolutionary leader who returned from the dead—would count as a miracle, although any of these imaginary occurrences would be incredible on empiricist principles. Strange things happen, and normally one writes off strange things to *some unknown factor*, and lets the matter drop. In some cases one might suspect that there were spirits or demons, ghosts or invisible persons at work. Certain peculiar phenomena are investigated at present by parapsychology; its findings suggest that perhaps mind has immediate power over matter other than one's own body. Such possibilities do not indicate anything miraculous. They merely point to previously unknown aspects of nature—or of the other orders of entities within experience.

I do not see why one would ever consider any happening a miracle unless one had an independent ground for thinking that there is a creator. I proceed now assuming that the previous parts of this book have supplied a ground for thinking there is a creator. On this assumption I think that under certain conditions one might suppose that the *unknown factor* in virtue of which the typewriter levitated, the bush burned without being consumed, or the friend came back from the dead was not an unknown created factor.

What are the conditions under which such a supposition would be reasonable? I do not think that the supposition would be reasonable merely because one had to admit that some unknown factor was at work, even if one also accepted the conclusion of the previous chapters. After all, events which initially seem unique and inexplicable often are eventually explained. If one is confident that no immanent explanation will be forthcoming, there must be a special reason for such confidence.

A few years ago there was a proposal—I do not know whether it was carried out—that radio waves be beamed in a certain pattern at some nearby stars in the hope that if rational beings lived on possible planets of such stars, they might receive the message and answer it. If this project were carried out and a signal were picked up which included creative variations on one's own theme, one might reasonably—after any earthly explanation was ruled out so far as possible—suppose the message had been answered.

Analogously, if one who has read the previous chapters and accepted their conclusions were to say to himself, "If the creator can do so, I wish he would cause my child who is suffering from leukemia to get well," and if the child shortly afterwards actually recovered completely, and if the condition before and after was documented by the clinical records made by two different specialists on the disease, and if there was no recurrence during a five-year period, then one would have some reason to think that the creator had *responded* to one's wish.

The wish that the creator might cure one's sick child would not be wholly irrational if the arguments of the preceding parts of this book are sound. One would have ground for thinking that the creator causes the obtaining of all other states of affairs; one might reasonably think of the creator on the model of a human person; one might therefore suppose that the very idea of appealing to the creator is itself caused by the creator. One also might suppose that this idea is not obviously evil. Thus one might think that making an appeal to the creator either would be a good thing to do or at least was permitted by him for the sake of some ulterior good. A person making an appeal in this frame of mind would be disposed to interpret a seemingly inexplicable cure as a response.

Similarly, if we add to the example of the burning bush the additional detail that a voice seems to come from the bush, claiming to be the creator, and if examination reveals no hidden speaker or electronic source of the voice, and if the voice gives directions for seemingly impossible deeds which one succeeds in carrying out as directed, then one would have a warrant for saying one had heard from the creator.

Likewise, if the group leader who rose from the dead had claimed to be the "son" of the creator and if he asserted that he had been restored to life by the power of the creator, one who experienced the whole happening would have ground for saying that in a special sense the creator *had acted* in this case.

In these examples one who regarded the cure of leukemia, the burning bush happening, or the resurrection event as a signal from the creator would not exclude that in all other cases the creator is the cause of all the causes by which anything whatsoever obtains. The understanding of the special character of the miraculous events would depend upon interpreting them not only as requiring an *unknown factor* but also as pointing directly to the creator himself as that factor—"pointing directly" because no suitable immanent cause is discovered or can even be projected with a general description on the basis of the evidence, while the existential relations of appeal/response or hearing/speaking provide content for the supposition that the required unknown factor is no created cause.

It is worth noticing that on this definition of "miracle" the possibility of knowing that a miracle has occurred is part of the possibility of the miracle. For a miracle is defined, not as an objective event contrary to natural law, but as an event which can be taken as a signal from the creator. Without the signal aspect the possibility that the happening is merely an unexplained natural event could not be ruled out.

Malcolm L. Diamond argues that it is reasonable to reject *a priori* the supernatural explanation of "miracles" because to admit the possibility of such exceptions to scientific laws would force scientists to sacrifice their

autonomy. In some cases they would hold for an ultimate scientific explanation, but in others they would have to accept a nonscientific judgment that no immanent explanation would ever be forthcoming. Diamond makes the loss of autonomy appear particularly unacceptable by sketching a fictional situation in which a scientist would have to subordinate his personal as well as his scientific judgment to that of a religious authority—the Pope.<sup>19</sup>

Diamond's view obviously is shaped by the assumption that scientific laws are all-embracing. I have criticized this assumption already. But what about the question of scientific autonomy?

The interest of Dr. Alexis Carrel in the allegedly miraculous phenomena at Lourdes, France, and the manner in which Carrel reacted to these phenomena shows that Diamond's concern about the autonomy of science is misplaced. Carrel, as a young physician around the turn of the century, became interested in the supposed cures at Lourdes. In 1903 he went to see for himself. Impressed with the facts, he did not set aside his scientific objectivity. Instead he observed and later described the conditions under which miracles occurred:

The miracle is chiefly characterized by an extreme acceleration of the process of organic repair. There is no doubt that the rate of cicatrization of the anatomical defects is much greater than the normal one. The only condition indispensable to the occurrence of the phenomenon is prayer. But there is no need for the patient himself to pray, or even to have any religious faith. It is sufficient that someone around him be in a state of prayer.<sup>20</sup>

Carrel was certainly a competent scientist; in 1913 he won the Nobel Prize for his work in surgery. He did not assume a supernatural explanation of the phenomena which he described; he instead supposed that there are as yet unknown relations between psychological and organic processes. Only near the end of his life did Carrel come to a *personal* conclusion that "everything happens as if God listens to man and answers him."<sup>21</sup> In reaching such a conclusion Carrel did not yield his scientific autonomy to a religious authority. Rather, he admitted the limitations of the physical order; he claimed for himself the right *as a person* to think beyond the limits of scientific method. As Charles A. Lindbergh wrote:

Most men of reputation are cautious in discussing phenomena which lie beyond science's accepted frontiers, knowing the argument and criticism that such discussion brings. On these subjects, as on others, Carrel spoke and wrote more freely than many scientists can think.<sup>22</sup>

Lindbergh observed that Carrel's extrascientific thinking was often sweeping and undisciplined. However, Carrel's honesty and scientific integrity remain beyond question, despite his attitude toward miracles. He observed the facts,



including the *factual relationship* between the phenomena of healing at Lourdes and prayer.

Diamond also raises the question why miracles, if genuine, are so infrequent. Why does God not cure everyone at a shrine such as Lourdes who seeks his miraculous intervention?<sup>23</sup> One can answer this objection along the following lines.

A miracle is not primarily a personal favor. It is rather a signal, a special communication from the creator. Yet, according to believers miracles were not only signals of a further communication to come and of a further relationship to be established; they were statements *in* a communication and gestures *in* a relationship. Believers held that one who did not get his cure at once would get it—or something better—later on. The motto of believers was: “Persistence always pays.” Those who believed in the future resurrection of the body as a sure hope for all who love God tended to regard miracles which they believed in as mere samples of that much greater miracle yet to occur. Thus, believers maintained that all sincere prayers are answered—in due time.

Believers also considered miracles such as healings to be a divine example of the works of love which they themselves were asked to undertake on behalf of others. That not all diseases are cured miraculously thus could be regarded as an instance in which the principle of the creator’s inefficiency—discussed in chapter twenty-one—is operative.

Whether miracles as I have defined “miracles” do or do not occur is not under consideration here. However, I think it worthwhile to conclude this chapter with some remarks on the criteria for evaluating alleged miracles.

First, all of the grounds for probability should be taken into account. These include the independently established conclusion that there is a creator, that this creator can reasonably be thought about through using the model of a human free agent, that creation is a self-expression of the creator, and that any attempt on man’s part to communicate with the creator or any alleged communication from him is a state of affairs which would not obtain unless the creator caused it to obtain.

Second, Hume’s criteria for accepting evidence for miracles, though not sound in all respects, are near enough to the mark that one should take them quite seriously. Stories of miracles are not to be accepted lightly, and most such reports probably are false. It must be noticed that not everyone is as credulous as Hume makes out, and not all reported miracles are alleged to have happened in the distant past in barbarous and ignorant nations. Moreover, not all religious differences are a matter of conflict, and not all religions abound with *well attested* miracles.

Finally, if there is a place at which miracles are reported to happen in our own day; if the alleged miracles include cures of cancer otherwise regarded as incurable, cures of organically caused blindness with restoration of the

function of vision even prior to the healing of its organic cause, and cures of other diseases such as tuberculosis with otherwise unknown rapidity; if all serious scientific researchers, including medical specialists who are sceptical of the whole affair, are welcomed at this place and provided with facilities to examine those who claim they have received miraculous cures; if many cases in recent years are well documented, including clinical records made both before and after alleged miraculous cures; if some researchers, so outstanding as to rank among the leading medical men of the world, have had their initial scepticism overcome by the facts they encountered at this place; if this place is associated with a religious body which maintains the possibility of miracles in the sense previously defined, but at the same time discounts and rejects the majority of miracles alleged by her own members to occur; then that place surely deserves to be investigated by anyone who wishes to assess the facts with respect to miracles.<sup>24</sup>



## 23: The Human Person and the Human Community

### The human person

This chapter clarifies concepts which will be used in the following chapters dealing with divine persons and human persons. These chapters also will deal with communities of such persons, including communities made up of persons of both sorts. Throughout the present chapter I am speaking exclusively of *human* persons and *human* community. First, I clarify the concept of *person*, then the concept of *community*.

The human person is complex. Both predicables ascribing outward corporeal characteristics and predicables ascribing states of consciousness can be applied to any normal person. For example, "John is touching something hot; John's hand is moving rapidly; John's hand is blistered" ascribes corporeal characteristics to John. The same sort of predicables can be applied to any primate; somewhat similar characteristics can be ascribed to certain plants and even to inanimate bodies. "John senses heat; John is frightened; John's hand hurts" ascribes certain states of consciousness to John. Similar states of consciousness might be ascribed to any primate, but they cannot be ascribed to a plant or a nonliving body. "John thinks that the problem is badly defined; he is committed to arriving at a solution; he is working out a model for developing a better answer" also ascribes certain states of consciousness to John. The behavior and activities of subhuman primates do not lead us to ascribe similar states of consciousness to them. Moreover, these peculiarly human predicables are both noncorporeal and different from other states of consciousness. One's thoughts, commitments, and projects do not cease to exist when one goes to sleep; unconsciousness of these entities during some

time is compatible with them continuing to exist as dispositions for later specifically human experiences and acts.

This complexity of the human person poses a classical philosophical problem. How is one to interpret the relationship between body, consciousness, and self? Usually the problem has not been formulated as clearly as this question, for often the distinction between states of consciousness and specifically human dispositions is ignored. If so, the tendency is to ask about the relationship between body and mind, or about the relationship between body and soul (self). In the former case consciousness is emphasized and specifically human dispositions generally ignored. In the latter case the dispositions and the self to which they seem somehow to belong are emphasized, while consciousness is considered only peripherally. Ancient and medieval thinkers emphasized the self; modern, especially recent, philosophers emphasize mind or consciousness.

I know of only three main approaches in previous philosophical works to the body/mind or body/soul problem.

One approach is to set up a model in which the two are regarded initially as distinct entities, one material and the other immaterial. Given this model, one asserts that either there are two entities such as the model suggests, or one of these two is irreducible while the other is reducible. Thus, the first approach to the problem gives three solutions: dualism, physicalism, and idealism. The dualist says that body and soul (or mind) are distinct entities somehow tied or glued or mixed together. The materialist says that the body is real and the mind is only an appearance or a corporeal quality or a disposition for bodily behavior. The idealist says that the mind is real and the body is only an appearance or an objectification or a projection of mind.

The second approach to the body/mind or body/soul problem is to set up a model in which the two are related as copinciples of a single living and personal whole. To prevent the copinciples from becoming distinct entities, a solution based on this sort of model must make the relationship of the copinciples nonsymmetrical and make them depend upon each other to exist. This approach has been followed in some major philosophical reflections, perhaps the most important of which was that of Aristotle in *De anima*. Aristotle regards the soul as an actualizing principle which unifies and makes to live and to act in a human way the materials which are formed into a human, living body.

An analogy—but only an analogy—is a running machine. The parts which make up the machine are matter; they *are* the machine only potentially. In other words, the parts are the machine when it is taken apart and not running. The way the parts are put together and its running also *are* the machine; these give the machine its actuality. The soul organizes the materials which make up a human body; the soul makes these materials a body capable

of living. Conscious states and dispositions are the working of the body and its adjustment to work in certain specific ways.

The third approach to the body/mind problem is to set up a model in which the two are related as different moments in a single, continuous process. The body can be regarded as the residue of this process; the mind as its unfolding toward an open future. Sartre's analysis of the person in terms of the in-itself and the for-itself uses a model of this sort.

None of these ways of dealing with the body/mind or body/soul problem is satisfactory.

Dualistic attempts are at odds with the facts of human experience precisely to the extent that a dualist sets up a dichotomy between two entities. When John carries on an inquiry to which he is committed (dispositions which characterize the self), he does various things such as seeing (state of consciousness) by opening his eyes and focusing them (bodily behavior). How all this fits together if the elements are attributed to diverse entities is inexplicable.<sup>1</sup> Dualists propose various accounts of the relationship—for example, that the two things interact, or that they work parallel to each other, or that the states of one entity are reflected by the states of the other. None of these accounts is plausible; all suffer from the fatal defect of having to link together disparate entities with links which always remain either too mental to tie into the body or too bodily to tie into the mind.<sup>2</sup>

Idealistic attempts are unsatisfactory because they must reject the reality of the body, and this reality is part of the data of the problem. Moreover, the idealist has no criteria by which to convict the body of nonreality, because in principle he cannot explain the standard of reality from which his own body—and any body as such—falls short. What *is* a body if no body is *really* a body?

Materialistic attempts are unsatisfactory because they cannot make sense of the specifically human dispositions which are characteristic of most persons. These dispositions are related to certain characteristically human acts and states of consciousness. For example, the materialist cannot admit the possibility of free choice. But this possibility is real.<sup>3</sup> A person can make a free choice. In such an act one is aware of determining himself to one of two or more alternative possible courses of action. The commitment is a disposition; it does not go away when one is not conscious of it. Yet it is not, as disposition, located anywhere in one's body; it has no corporeal characteristics at all. Moreover, it is a disposition to action, and human action, while it often includes bodily behavior, is not reducible to such behavior.<sup>4</sup>

Some contemporary versions of the materialistic account of the complexity of the human person are called "the mind-body identity thesis." Proponents of this thesis devote most of their attention to states of consciousness which might be ascribed to any primate; they pay little attention to



specifically human dispositions. Although the thesis concerns mind-body *identity*, proponents of it make clear that they do not mean that the body is nothing but a state of consciousness. Frequently the position that mind and body are identical is dignified with the title "identity hypothesis" or "identity theory," although it is unclear how the thesis would *explain* the data. The data are the distinct sets of corporeal characteristics and corresponding states of consciousness. To assert that these sets of data are not after all distinct—even assuming this assertion to be intelligible—hardly seems to explain anything. Since facts are irrelevant to the mind-body identity thesis, arguments about it concentrate on attacking and defending the logical coherence of the "theory." This debate seems to me a case of speculative inflation of the sort I criticized in chapter five (pages 80-82).

In the final section of chapter fourteen I sketched an argument against the position that thinking is nothing but a physical process. There are other, more developed critiques of materialism and arguments for the irreducibility of thought to physical processes.<sup>5</sup>

Aristotle's attempt to clarify the unity and complexity of the human person is initially more plausible than any of the attempts based on the dualistic model. However, if the soul or self really is nothing but what organizes the body and makes it function, then the acts and dispositions of the self would be limited by the materiality of the body. Aristotle does not seem to have been aware of freedom of choice, but he was aware of the nonphysical character of propositional knowing, which is revealed by the human ability to distinguish between the material and the immaterial. Aristotle seems to have realized that such a capacity and its dispositions could not belong to a human self as he conceived it, and so he suggested that a nonhuman agent also was involved. With this suggestion Aristotle avoided materialism, but at the cost of slipping into dualism—a position he desperately tried to avoid.<sup>6</sup>

An attempt to clarify the unity and complexity of the human person which regards body and mind as different moments in a continuous process has to give an account both of the process and of its continuity. The process must be such that bodiliness is a residue, that the mental can be transformed into the corporeal. The continuity must be such that either the body or the mind or something else undergoes the process. If one denies that the process belongs to anything, the two moments become alienated from each other, since they are defined by their opposition, and dualism breaks out afresh. If what undergoes the process is the body or the mind, then either dualism or a one-sided reduction recurs. If what undergoes the process is neither the body nor the mind, one escapes dualism, but at the cost of introducing a third factor, which an approach of this sort tries to avoid. The self which is creating and the self which is created cannot be identified and yet must be identified

if one wishes to regard the body and the mind as two aspects in a self-generating process.

In chapter fourteen I proposed a descriptive metaphysics of four orders of reality within experience—taking “experience” in a broad enough sense to include everything of which man has direct knowledge. These four orders are the physical, the intentional, the existential, and the cultural. The four orders are distinguished from one another; they are not reducible to one another; however, they are not separated from each other; each includes the content of the others *in its own distinctive way*. My view of the person presupposes this ontology.

Many philosophies treat the person as if he were primarily or even exclusively limited to one of the four orders. The fact that the four orders are distinguished *within* experience—“hearing another” has four meanings—indicates that human persons are related to one another in all four orders. Hence, human persons must be understood as belonging to all four orders and somehow embracing them all. The consequence is *not* that the person is four realities—quadralism instead of dualism—but that the person is a complex reality whose unity is other than the unity of entities which are limited to any one of the four orders.

The person considered as pertaining to the physical order is a plurality of vital and psychic functions, integrated into the personality which psychology studies. Psychic life gradually emerges in the course of evolution. The human organism is the product of a long process of differentiation and complexification by which organic nature achieved this level of fulfilling the potentialities of matter. Psychic functions realize potentialities of a biological substructure—the nervous system. The biological structure and vital functions of the human organism depend upon and integrate physiochemical processes.

I think that Aristotle’s account of the unity of the sentient organism is plausible for animals other than persons and for persons as natural bodies. Aristotle takes care of the body/mind problem to the extent that this problem is a question of the unity of the body and sense consciousness. The fact that states and functions of sense awareness are not reducible to vegetative functions of organisms, and *a fortiori* not reducible to the characteristics of inorganic bodies, does not mean that sentient mind is not an aspect of the organism. The transcendence of sense-consciousness to bodies lacking it—for example, that sense consciousness is *of* all sorts of bodies and that consciousness itself is not outwardly observable—does not argue against the natural and material character of sense consciousness; all life is remarkably different from merely inorganic matter.<sup>7</sup>

P. F. Strawson provides arguments which I consider sound for holding that the concept of “person” is primitive, and that the ascription of both objective bodily characteristics and conscious states to one and the same individual

depends upon recognizing the indivisibility and irreducibility of the "person."<sup>8</sup> The only difficulty with Strawson's theory is that it is not a theory of persons but of sentient organisms in general, including both persons and brute animals. Strawson deals effectively with the mind/body problem but he does not touch the self/body problem.

The person considered as pertaining to the intentional order is a self-conscious subject for whom things known are objects. The person can know anything, including himself; what is other than the person is known as belonging to—but does not know—a world of objects. As Hegel pointed out, the subject is reflexive; the subject can think of himself as other and then recapture himself in this very thinking.<sup>9</sup> The person as thinking of himself and as thought of by himself is one as person but two as subject and object of thinking. Negation originates in such knowledge; negation belongs to the world of thought and not to the world of nature.

As I explained in chapter nine (pages 178-179), it is only because human persons are self-conscious subjects that human knowledge of the world is an objective knowledge of things themselves, not merely an indirect relationship with things *as known*. A person in knowing understands his own knowing; he grasps what his knowing itself contributes to knowledge. In understanding his own knowing he adjudges the content to be other than the knowing; the content is not reflexive. The content known thus can be posited in a proposition (*pro-positio*) or projected (*ob-iectus*).<sup>10</sup>

The person considered as pertaining to the existential order is a self-determining agent, a principle of his own action by free choice. The person acts; the world is a scene in which one creates and plays the role of his own life. Choice depends upon and involves understanding. The reflexivity and negation characteristic of propositional knowledge also condition choice. In choosing, one proceeds upon prior deliberation regarding objective possibilities, one excludes at least one real possibility which therefore never will obtain as an empirical state of affairs, and one proceeds toward the realization of another possibility with which one partially identifies one's self. In the chosen possibility one finds some degree of self-fulfillment.<sup>11</sup>

The person considered as pertaining to the cultural order is man symbolizing, man the maker and communicator. By thought and freedom man engages in a creative interplay with his environment. But this environment is not merely a natural world; it is a human situation. Man builds his home in nature and continues to build his cultural home as he lives in it. In using symbols and tools man becomes aware of himself as master of the things he uses; he also should become aware of his dependence upon these things, of his finitude, and hence of his obligation to respect and to wonder at the subhuman world even as this world comes under subjection to human persons.

Each of these four considerations focuses upon an important aspect of the



complex unity of the human person. However, if one takes any one of these considerations and sets it up as *the* model of the person, something important will be downgraded or omitted. The discussion of various formulations of the body/self problem indicates the consequences of taking any of these considerations in isolation as an adequate model. A naturalistic consideration grounds Aristotle's model; the consideration of man as knowing subject grounds a dualistic model which tends toward idealism; an existentialist consideration grounds a moments-in-a-process model; the consideration of man as culture-maker grounds an operationalistic dualism which tends toward materialism.

A better model can be developed by beginning from the fact that the person is not limited to one of the four orders. A person is in all four of the orders, and he embraces all of them in himself. In the person the four orders are distinct, irreducible, yet normally inseparable. The unity of the person is unlike the unity of any entity which is enclosed within one of the four orders. The unity of the person is mysterious and must remain so. This unity is immediately given in human experience, and it cannot be explained discursively, since reason cannot synthesize the distinct orders in a higher positive intelligibility. One can reason from any order to the others only insofar as all the orders are included in any one of them.<sup>12</sup>

A preliminary suggestion of the model of the person I propose can be given by means of an example in which certain important aspects of the person are reflected. The example is a statement (*S*): "This set of marks can be used to express a proposition the assertion of which can serve as a point of departure for articulating and communicating a new model of the person."

Like any other statement, *S* unites the four orders in itself. First, *S* is a set of ink marks—or a succession of noises—entities in the physical order. Second, *S* expresses a meaning and it has a logical structure. Third, to assert the proposition *S* expresses is a human act, and this act is oriented to the social purpose of communicating something. Fourth, *S* is a use of natural objects to express meaning, and this use has a creative intent inasmuch as I am attempting to work out a new model for understanding the complex unity of the human person.

Unlike many other statements, *S* is peculiar in that the proposition *S* expresses is self-referential. Thus, *S* refers to *S*, and *S* says of itself that it has the four predicables mentioned in the preceding paragraph. This fact makes clear that the four orders which are present in *S* are not so distinct that they are not also united. Still, the physical marks on the paper, the assertion, the act of asserting it, and the creative effort are distinct; confusion of any one of these with any of the others would make it impossible for one to understand *S*, since each of them is referred to by different propositions—namely, by the four propositions set out in the preceding paragraph.

Unlike many other statements including many self-referential statements,

the act of asserting *S*, insofar as it is a human act, also has a reflexive aspect. The act of asserting *S* promises to articulate and communicate a model of the person, and that very act itself is the first step in carrying out what it promises. The human act itself involves the use of physical objects which are ink marks or sounds; the act gets its meaning from what one is doing; part of what one is doing precisely is asserting this proposition; and the act aims beyond what one does in it to the ulterior purpose of creating and communicating the model set out below.

Again, unlike many other statements, including many self-referential statements, the creativity projected in *S* also involves reflexivity. If the effort made here to set out a new model of human personhood is creative, then *S* is a step in that creative effort. The creative effort uses the material objects, the proposition, the act of asserting—but the creative effort to develop a model of the person also uses the creative effort of formulating *S* and setting it out. And, in aiming to go on from *S*, as I am now going on from it, the creative effort of *S* also aimed toward producing a certain experience, developing a model (which is an entity in the intentional order), affecting human action, and completing the work of this chapter.

The statement *S*, considered precisely as a set of marks or sounds—natural entities in the physical order—makes possible but also limits the other aspects of the reality of *S*. The meaning, the human act, the creative attempt—all depend upon the physical reality of *S* and none could exist without it. These aspects of *S* are limited by the characteristics of its natural reality, characteristics which must be accepted as they are and respected for the possibilities they offer. The physical aspect of the reality of *S* is not isolated from the other aspects, although it is distinct from them as they are from one another. What is peculiar about the physical reality of *S* is that this aspect is not reflexive; it provides a fixity and a self-containedness which the other aspects lack. What is physically, is other than the reflexive self; physical objects cannot be transformed dialectically; a bodily entity is what it is in its *self*, regardless of what one thinks or chooses or makes of it.

The model for understanding the complex unity of the human person now can be proposed. In contrast with any model which would confine the person to one of the orders, the model I propose is that there are four distinct and irreducible aspects of the person. A person is a physical body; a person is a propositional knower in whose world of meaning logical entities exist in being thought; a person acts by free choice; a person is a maker and user who puts things to work for new purposes and brings into actuality values which are otherwise only ideal possibilities.

These four aspects of the person are united, as the four aspects of the statement *S* are united. This unity is unlike the unity of any entity which is



limited to one or another of the four orders. The unity of the person is not an intelligible principle of a fifth order, distinct from the four, nor is it something like an entity belonging to one or another of the four orders hidden behind all of them. The four aspects of the person all involve and in a way include one another, as the four orders always do. Moreover, the four aspects of the person are mutually irreducible to each other, as the four orders always are. If it were not for both the unity and the irreducible diversity of these four aspects of the person, the distinct sorts of reflexivity belonging to one person as thinker, doer, and maker, and the irreflexivity of the same person as body, would be impossible. The person is the self who *unifies* these four distinct and irreducible but normally inseparable aspects. The self is a unifying principle; various aspects of the person are unified by the self but not identified with it.

The unity of the person, by which the person is one self, is evidenced, first of all, by the compenetration of the four orders. Each of the four unifies itself, in its own way, with the others. The person includes these four modes of unity. The body thus includes the other aspects of a person; the other three aspects of the person each includes the body; the bodily aspect of a person is not one *thing* divided against the rest of the person as another *thing*. Indeed, on this model the soul or self is not part of the body or something hidden within it; it would be better to say that the body is one aspect of the person, united with the others by the soul or the self. But this statement must not be taken in an idealistic sense, as if the body were not a material object—a sentient organism in the physical order.

The body of a person differs from the material reality of a statement in an important respect. A human body as such has a mind; a person's body is capable of sense consciousness. Sense consciousness, like materiality in general, is not open to dialectical transformation. But sense consciousness provides an imperfect reflexivity, as is evidenced in the guidance of perception by perception (noticing, paying attention), learning by experience, and the like. Reflexivity in such cases is imperfect, for the two terms of the relationship are distinct moments in a process. In other words, though both ends of the relationship are within the unity of a human organism, the feedback of sense consciousness cannot of itself establish a relationship which distinguishes its own terms.

The reflexivity of propositional knowing, in contrast with that of sense consciousness, is complete. Knowing, insofar as it is reflexive, distinguishes itself into subject and object; when knowing itself is known, the two terms are other only as opposite terms of the relation. If such reflexivity did not occur, one never could know his very knowing, something one does in any true self-referential proposition, for example: that any proposition is either

true or false. It is worth noticing that this reflexivity, while complete in its single instance, is not total. The proposition has other instances which are not self-referential.

One could carry out an analysis of the reflexivity of choice and of symboling parallel to the preceding analysis of the reflexivity of propositional knowing. In making commitments a person determines himself; in using anything a person uses his own abilities. But the reflexivity in each case while complete is not total; one commits oneself to a value which is not wholly identical with oneself and one uses something other than the abilities immanent in oneself. Thus self as knowing subject, self as existential agent, and self as culture-maker are open to and dependent upon what is not self. For this reason the self which unifies the bodily aspect of the person and these three reflexive aspects of the person is easily distinguished from the creator.

However, the self which is the principle of the unity of a human person is not identical with the knowing subject, the existential agent, or the culture-maker. All of these are included in the self; they are aspects of it. But the constitutive self of a human person is revealed in the *unity* as well as in the distinction and interrelationship of the four orders.

As I argued in chapter twenty-one (pages 319-320), the created universe does have unity—that of being created—which transcends the diversity of the four orders. This unity cannot be reduced to a rational system, as can the order proper to each of the four orders. The unity of the human person somehow embraces the community of everything man experiences. The unity of the human person is the image within creation of the unity of the creator. The unity of the creator is the unity of the term of all arguments toward an uncaused cause; these arguments begin in the diverse orders. These arguments have nothing in common at their starting points except the contingency of everything which is experienced and the unity of the person who experiences.

Thus I conclude that the complex unity of the human person is a fact for which one ought not to expect an explanation. Nothing else within experience is precisely the same sort of complex unity, although a statement can serve as a model for the person as the human person can serve as a model for the creator.

When death happens to the bodily person, is the self totally destroyed? I do not think any conclusive rational answer can be given to this question. It is difficult, if possible at all, to know to what extent the other aspects of the person need bodily life and to what extent the self depends upon the distinct aspects of the person which it unifies. The statement, *S*, could have none of its other aspects without the physical reality of sounds or ink marks. But *S* is not a person; *S* is only a model of the person. The person has an additional unifying factor, namely, the selfhood which is the common principle of

reflexivity in thinking, choosing, and using. The statement, *S*, participates in this unity only insofar as this statement is embraced within a person. Thus, one can think it possible that when death happens to the bodily person, the self is not utterly destroyed but perhaps survives, although, as it were, in a mutilated condition.<sup>13</sup>

The very possibility of disembodied survival has been under attack in recent years.<sup>14</sup> Believers, of course, were far more heavily committed to the resurrection of the body than to the immortality of the soul.<sup>15</sup> However, I am not convinced by the arguments that disembodied survival of a self is impossible. Many of these arguments rest upon the impossibility of satisfying a demand for a criterion of personal identity after death. The demand for a criterion often involves covert verificationism, as I explained in chapter seven (pages 119-120); in this particular case those who argue against disembodied survival frequently seem to assume that only a criterion exactly like continuity—which more or less serves as a criterion for the identity of an organic individual—would be acceptable.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, many arguments against disembodied survival reject various proposed criteria of personal identity on the ground that these criteria might—mere logical possibility—be met by two or more distinct individuals.<sup>17</sup> Such arguments presuppose a rationalistic theory of individuation—that is, identity of indiscernibles and intelligible difference between any two individuals.

On the theory of the person which I have proposed, it is in principle impossible that one should provide a criterion—that is, a logically sufficient one—for the self-identity of a *person*, but this impossibility does not show that persons are not self-identical. It merely shows that one cannot have a criterion for everything. Of course, each self which survives—if any do—in a disembodied condition is distinct by being the mutilated self of a person who began to be when a certain organism was conceived at a certain place and time. But this unalterable fact—which might be known only to God—is not what is demanded by those who ask for a criterion by which a “disembodied spirit” could be identified as the “soul” of a particular dead man. They are asking for a statement of the criteria by which one could recognize mutilated selves existing under conditions of which we have no experience. Obviously, there is no way to satisfy this demand.

### **The human community**

“Community” is a narrower concept than “interpersonal relationship.” Some relationships among persons are not very different from the relations of animals to one another or of persons to nonpersonal entities. A community is



a unity of many persons, achieved in all four orders of reality, which transcends the unity of any multiplicity of entities within any one of the four orders, just as the unity of a person transcends the unity of any entity within any one of the orders.

The natural unity of distinct persons is chiefly their biological relationship. In sexual reproduction a man and a woman become a single principle of a new human person. Human life is not caused in a child by any nonpersonal principle; rather, life is transmitted in a continuous stream. The sperm and the ovum live by the life of the parents until they unite to form a new human individual. All human persons are blood brothers, or at least blood cousins.

Mankind is an interbreeding population. Apart from this complex biological society no individual human person could exist. In this bodily community individuals do exist in distinction from one another. One does not die whenever any human person dies. Still, "humanity" not only signifies abstractly what is common to all human persons, in virtue of which one can say of each, "This individual is *human*"; it also signifies the concrete, living process of human bodily life, which is a natural species, a whole to which all individual human persons belong as parts.

Human persons also know together. Two persons think of the very same proposition; they agree or disagree about its truth. (If anyone disagrees with this position, he must be thinking of it, and this fact confirms the position stated and falsifies the disagreeing position.) In this way inquiry proceeds as a dialogue—as an argument which is free for all.

The unity of diverse persons as knowing subjects in the world of thought also becomes clear when we ask the question "Who, today, knows physics or any other field of study?" The answer cannot be the name of one person. No person, not even the most able, knows the whole of any science. The physicists know their subject matter, but only the whole group have all the knowledge which pertains to the discipline. Individual scientists must be specialists; even the scholar who is interested in general questions must specialize in them. His special field of interest is questions which bear upon principles of the whole subject matter, but these questions are specific in that they are only a few of the questions which must be asked about the subject matter.

The unity of distinct persons in common action is a very important aspect of community. Of course, two or more persons may be common agents in the sense that their behavior happens to conduce to a single outcome—for example, their carelessness in driving causes an accident—without uniting as persons. Again, persons can cooperate in a purely contractual relationship without sharing a common commitment. But common action also can originate in a unified principle of specifically personal action. Only such unity constitutes community.

For example, two persons who both have their hearts set upon some one value which they both regard as superior to their individual wishes, desires, or satisfactions can come to appreciate each other's judgments of value. They not only make similar judgments, but each knows that the other shares his view. They not only make similar commitments, but each knows that the other endorses the same value to which he commits himself. Moreover, the two individuals approve and encourage one another's judgments and commitments; in this way each includes the other within his own concern. In such a case the two persons will unite their efforts if they can.

The common good which binds them together cannot be some defined goal attainable by obvious and readily specifiable means. Such a goal would not take a person outside himself to a purpose he could recognize as superior; only an open-ended value can provide the content for a common commitment. The commitment of two or more persons to a single value sometimes is expressed in a community constituting act, such as the adoption of a national constitution.

Derivative from the basic commitment which constitutes a community of action is a set of institutions. These distinguish roles and shape behavior in accord with the basic commitment. The action of each individual person becomes in this way a contribution to a common good to which all alike are dedicated. Each person does his own work, not for himself alone, but as a share in serving the good cause to which all are committed. Each person's dedicated action thus becomes less exclusively yet more truly his own; it becomes his share in what all do together. Each person's contributions are accepted by all as "ours." In a true community members even take responsibility for one another's mistakes and shortcomings.

Some people deny that genuine community of action is possible. If it required individual persons to subordinate themselves to a good proper to someone else—the false ideal of altruism—then genuine community would be impossible. However, persons *can* love one another unselfishly if they are united in pursuit of values in which each person sees a fair promise of his own fulfillment, but which all together see as important enough to demand and to deserve frequent sacrifices of individual satisfactions.

Many people fear community. They are afraid that their own individuality might be more and more absorbed in another or in the others. However, true community takes nothing from individuality. The closer persons come together in dedicated love, the more they differentiate and fulfill themselves as individuals. Each can give as much as possible only by realizing his highest individual potentialities. Absorption follows, not from community, but from the abuse of a relationship which should be community and has become exploitation.

The community of persons in objective culture is so obvious that little

explanation of it is needed. Men have a common language; no one can have a private language. Language exists only in the use of things to communicate. Yet each person uses the common language in a personal and special way. Each person can make a contribution to the common linguistic stock by creatively expressing himself in language.

Men share a common technology. No single person can understand the complex machinery well enough to make it work. All together men can do so.

One could cite many other examples of community in objective culture. One of the best is a fine orchestra. No one person can play a great symphony. The whole orchestra must work together to make beautiful music.

A good family exemplifies all aspects of a true human community. The members share the same flesh and blood. Husband and wife are one flesh; the babies are nourished from their mother's body. The members of the family think and learn together. They gain knowledge by conversation in which they share their experiences and insights. All fulfill themselves by serving and caring for one another. All share the same home and use the same property. Each contributes according to his ability; each receives according to his need.

Communities are mysterious. Social theories vainly try to reduce human community to one of the four orders. They cannot succeed, for persons complete one another in community in all of the four orders. Moreover, the mysteriousness of community is rooted in the mysteriousness of the person. As the unity of the person is immediately present to us, yet beyond rational discursive explanation, so in the unity of community there is an ultimate common ground: we are fellow creatures who together make up the creator's self-expression in a way impossible for any of us alone. The human family was regarded as an image of the creator by believers who said: "In the name of the Father. . . ."



## 24: Meaning. Revelation. and Christian Mysteries

### “The creator speaks to man”

Is it meaningful to say that the creator has communicated to mankind some otherwise inaccessible truths about himself? In other words, does it make sense to say that God has spoken to man? If the concept of the creator's communicating is coherent, how could the *content* be meaningful? For example, how could it make sense to say that God is three persons, one of whom has become man?

The meaningfulness of many Christian doctrines presents no difficulty, at least no difficulty peculiar to Christian doctrine. Christians believed that God creates, that Jesus was crucified, and that it is wrong for any person to refuse to give another a cup of cold water when there is no special reason to justify the refusal.

The meaning of “an uncaused entity creates” was explained in chapter seventeen. “Jesus was crucified” is a straightforward statement of fact; it might pose a problem of verification, but its meaning is clear enough. (Here the truth of Christian doctrine is not under consideration; the problem of verification will be ignored.) “No one may refuse another a cup of cold water without special reason to justify the refusal” is a moral precept. Some philosophers, including many empiricists, think such precepts lack cognitive meaning—that is, that they cannot be true or false. But the problem concerns moral precepts in general; it is no different with respect to precepts peculiar to Christian teaching. I have dealt with the matter elsewhere and shall not deal with it here.<sup>1</sup>

The *meaning* of the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body—as

distinct from the philosophical thesis of the survival of the disembodied self—does not seem to me to pose any difficulties. It is generally agreed that one can coherently describe a state of affairs which would have to be called “resurrection of the dead.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, whether a coherent description, based mainly on imagination, is at all likely to refer to anything is another matter.

The problem of meaningfulness to be considered in this chapter, therefore, is how those Christian doctrines which purport to express otherwise inaccessible revealed truths might be meaningful. Examples of such doctrines are the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the bodily presence of Christ in the Eucharist. These doctrines, and others similar to them, often are referred to as “mysteries of Christian faith.” Christians did not claim to be able to explain the meaning or to prove the truth of such mysteries. They did think it possible to answer any specific objections attempting to show these doctrines meaningless.<sup>3</sup> Each of the Christian mysteries involves special problems of meaningfulness. I do not attempt to deal with all such problems here. However, I will try to show, against a few specific reasons to the contrary, how the three important Christian mysteries mentioned above could be meaningful.

Before taking up these three mysteries, however, I first consider the more basic problem whether the very concept of revelation is coherent. I think this question can be answered adequately in the Old Testament context. Moreover, what will be said about the purportedly revealed *content* in the Old Testament context will be relevant to the discussion of the content of the Christian mysteries. Therefore, I begin from the purported revelation of the creator, Yahweh, to Moses (Ex. 3).

Thomas Aquinas holds that God exists of himself, that God is his very obtaining.<sup>4</sup> He thinks this truth was taught to mankind when God, revealing himself to Moses, was asked by Moses to state the divine name, and answered this request:

“I am who am.” Then he added, “This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you.”

God spoke further to Moses, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.” (Ex. 3:14-15)

Contemporary biblical scholars think that this passage should not be read as a philosophical doctrine.<sup>5</sup>

What, then, did the name mean? There are several suggestions. One is that in semitic thought knowing the name of an entity gave one a certain power of control over that entity. It might be that “I am who am” was meant to be an expression of a refusal to reveal, to imply that an adequate definition of God is impossible, and that God “does not make himself man’s slave” as he would if he communicated a name which conveyed some power over himself.<sup>6</sup> A



second possibility is that the name was regarded as revealing God's unlimited existence as against the unreality of the gods of other peoples; this notion has in support of it the fact that "Yahweh" probably is related to the archaic form of the verb "to be."<sup>7</sup> A third possibility, considered by some most plausible, is that the name means "he causes to be"; perhaps it is a shortened form of a fuller expression meaning either "he who brings into being whatever comes into being" or "the divinity who brings the hosts into being."<sup>8</sup>

If the first hypothesis is correct, the purportedly revealed name was meant to indicate that God is wholly transcendent; the "name" is a simple reaffirmation of his absolute otherness. If the second hypothesis is correct, the purportedly revealed name was meant to indicate that God truly exists. If the third theory is correct, the purportedly revealed name was meant to indicate that the transcendent principle is the creator of other entities.

These interpretations could all be correct; if so, then the allegedly revealed name indicated that God is not reducible to anything given in experience, but that he really exists and is a cause of all other entities. In other words, the name sums up the conclusion of the argument to an uncaused cause. Even if it is held by some scholars that "Yahweh" is merely a name, which perhaps was not correctly understood even by the Israelites, their conclusion—that this name applied to a personal being whose attributes could be shared by no other being—indicates transcendence and independence.<sup>9</sup>

The reference in the passage in Exodus to the "God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" refers to an established religious context, assumed in the story of the revelation to Moses. However, this story itself is rather full; it can serve as a paradigm of revelation as understood in the Old Testament.

Moses observes a burning bush which is not consumed (Ex. 3:2-3); later at the theophany at Mount Sinai there are peals of thunder, lightening flashes, a dense cloud, and a trumpet blast (Ex. 19:16). In both cases he hears a voice which he is told is (Ex. 3:6) or recognizes as (Ex. 19:21-25) the voice "of God." In both cases the words which are heard are ordinary, recognizable words, but no normal cause of such sounds is experienced. Moses does not show himself credulous; rather the opposite is the case (Ex. 3:11-4:17). But the words refer to future events, and the events *prove* that the words are trustworthy, especially when the Israelites escape from the Egyptians (Ex. 14:15-31).

The events themselves recounted in Exodus were purportedly experienced. But they are recounted as unusual events. One need have no concept of a law of nature in order to regard a bush which burns but is not burned up as something out of the ordinary. The words which enter into the discourse are not special; the manner in which they are put together, to express a purported communication from God, is what is unusual. The events are taken to

be caused by God to show his concern, his favor, and to carry out his purposes. The hearing itself is unusual, especially because of the relationship it establishes; the "person" who is heard by Moses and through him by the Israelites identifies himself by means of ordinary words as God.

The words which Moses hears and the events which occur mutually sustain each other. If the words alone were heard, Moses might well assume that he is having an hallucination; if the events alone occurred, he might think that these are simply natural happenings which he cannot explain. But the words predict and promise the events, and the events verify and fulfill the promise of the words. The unusualness of both—the fact that no visible speaker utters the words and that no usual explanation would account for the events—requires that the words-events unity be accepted at its claimed value, as a message and intervention of God.<sup>10</sup>

This story, if true, recounts a miracle as defined in chapter twenty-two. Words and deeds together indicate a cause outside human experience. If one thinks that the words were not heard *or* that no events occurred which could not be explained by natural causes, then one excludes, at least in this case, the reality of the alleged divine revelation. In other words, if one supposes that Moses did not hear a voice from a burning bush and did not later hear a voice on the mountain; or if one supposes that the various plagues, the parting of the sea, the manna in the desert, and so on *all* are susceptible of naturalistic explanations, then one must take the story as an expression of something which, even if it has religious significance, does not reveal more than one could learn about the creator by considering any state of affairs whatsoever.

If one assumes the story to be substantially true—which I do for the sake of this inquiry—then one can notice that the various sorts of statements in the story form a pattern. Some statements express in ordinary words with their usual meanings unusual things heard and unusual events happening. Some statements express in a negative way what God as speaker and agent is not; he is not merely a natural principle, nor an illusion, nor a human speaker, nor an entity which can be represented by any image. The speaker and the agent who does the saving deeds identifies himself as God. The characterization of Yahweh thus becomes a combination of two sets of relational predicates. He is the creator of heaven and earth and all things; he is the one who chose this people, who redeemed it from slavery in Egypt, who sustained and protected the people's lives, who guided and directed them toward a land of their own, who made covenant with them and was faithful to this covenant, who defended them in battle against their enemies.

The revelation to Moses—assuming it occurred—is an example of how words take on new meanings from their use in a peculiar context. To hear words which express a divine revelation would be diverse from hearing

anything else. But the context which unites "hearing" and "God" is built up in such a way that the expressions are understandable. The manner in which both "hearing" and "God" are modified by their relationship in this peculiar context does not render either expression meaningless.

While one can say that God creates everything and that he is the cause of all caused causes, one cannot say that God utters all utterances or does all deeds. But the particular utterances and deeds which are attributed to God in Exodus can be appropriated to him to the extent that they do not seem to be utterances of anyone else or events explicable by created causes.

Once this peculiar order of divine words and deeds is initiated, many human acts and other events which fit into this order also can be appropriated to God. Thus, when Moses acts under God's direction, the words and deeds of Moses express the will of God. The fact that a great many entities which seem perfectly ordinary are thus integrated into this order—which may be called the "order of salvation"—provides an occasion for nonbelievers to explain away *all* of the order of salvation in terms of one or more of the other four orders. Such reductionism happens with regard to the four orders themselves, and for the same reason—namely, that the entities of each order also enter somehow into the others.

Of course, if acts and events which fit into the order of salvation also have their usual principles, there will be a tendency to suppose that these acts and events can be fully explained by their usual principles. The fact that they are enmeshed in the order of salvation makes them in a special way God's words or deeds; this fact need not exclude, nor even necessarily modify, the way in which they are human words and deeds, natural events, mere accidents, or whatever.

From the point of view of faith whatever pertains to the order of salvation is peculiar, whether or not it lacks its usual conditions, simply because it all occurs within the context of a special relationship. This special relationship is for the believer very much like his relationship to a human friend, father, ruler, or helper. But the relationship is odd in that it is to one who is not a human person, to one who identifies himself with the creator.

In all interpersonal relationships persons who accept another must proceed by faith. A rationality norm may indicate that one is reasonable to suppose that the experience one has is of the creator revealing himself, but both the acceptance of this judgment and a commitment to act on its truth are matters of free choice. Moreover, like any interpersonal relationship, this one cannot unfold unless one trusts the other party, accepts his statement of intent as sincere and his promises as authentic commitments. To the extent that the content of what is revealed provides information about the creator, his intent, and his promises, one who believes he is receiving a revelation and who trusts the one making it must believe this propositional content to be true, although



one has no independent means of verifying it. Of course, to suppose the propositional content to be true does not mean that one claims to know exactly what this content is. Even in strictly human interpersonal relationships one often is mystified by the statement of a most intimate friend about himself. Yet one can believe that one's friend is expressing *some* truth—even though one is not sure precisely *what* truth—about himself.

The specific relationship one has to the creator who reveals himself in believing in him is distinct from the relationship one has to the creator in being caused by him. However, for the believer whatever the creator does can be seen as somehow integrated into the intent and promises of the friend, father, ruler, or helper in whom one believes. As in any intimate interpersonal relationship, one does not relate to the creator revealing himself only insofar as he reveals himself. One relates to the person himself, not merely to an abstract role or an isolated function of the person.

This analysis makes clear why many human statements, activities, and performances as well as many natural events which have proportionate causes were differently regarded by believers and nonbelievers. A believer, for example, read the Bible as the word of God, while not excluding human authorship and the normal literary history of such a text. The nonbeliever attends only to the latter conditions, does not read this book as part of the order of salvation, and hence sees no reason to attribute these writings to God any more than either believers or nonbelievers would attribute the authorship of ordinary books to God.

However, if *all* experiences can be sufficiently accounted for by their ordinary, immanent principles together with ordinary, universal, creative causality, then there is no reason to admit an order of salvation in addition to the usual four orders. Fulfilled prophecies and miraculous events are essential because only in them could one find a special relationship, one not shared by all creatures, which would require the creator who reveals himself as its term. Miracles need not be the most important entities in the order of salvation, but they are epistemically vital inasmuch as they make that order an irreducible subject matter for faith. If miracles are impossible, so is divine revelation.

The identification in Hebrew thought of the creator who can be known by reason with a person who reveals himself in an existential relationship explains why the Hebrews emphasized Yahweh's transcendence, yet freely used anthropomorphic expressions in speaking of him.

The Hebrews believed that Yahweh is holy, superhuman in a unique way, unlike any of his creatures, wholly other than creation. Yahweh was believed to be living. He gives and sustains life. But no image was to be made of Yahweh. Nothing in the universe was believed to resemble Yahweh, and so nothing was to be worshipped as his representation (Ex. 20:4, Dt. 5:8). The thoughts of Yahweh, it was believed, are not the thoughts of man, nor his

ways like man's ways (Is. 55:8-9). Job's questions are not answered; in the end he is described as admitting his presumption: "I have dealt with great things that I do not understand; things too wonderful for me, which I cannot know" (Jb. 42:3).<sup>11</sup>

St. Paul carries on this aspect of the Old Testament tradition when he sums up early Christian belief in the transcendence of God:

How deep are the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How inscrutable his judgments, how unsearchable his ways! For "who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has given him anything so as to deserve return?" For from him and through him and for him all things are. To him be glory forever. (Rom. 11:33-36)

For Paul transcendence is proper to the creator, and the relationship of creature to creator is neither displaced nor rendered less mysterious within the perspective of faith. Rather, the relationship of creature to creator is a condition without which the mysterious phenomena connected with Jesus Christ could not be regarded as anything other than a set of inexplicable experiences.

At the same time the Old Testament freely characterized Yahweh in anthropomorphic language. He is spoken of as having human organs such as eyes and hands, as performing human acts such as talking and walking, and as feeling human emotions such as anger and compassion. However, his fidelity is claimed to be extraordinary, more than human (Nm. 23:19).<sup>12</sup>

In the New Testament anthropomorphic expressions are used more cautiously but not eliminated. The transcendent principle who is wholly unoriginated is called "Father"; he is purported to hear prayer, to make promises and to keep them faithfully, and to hate sin but be quick to forgive sinners who repent.

Such anthropomorphic predicables are indispensable to Jewish and to Christian faith, for the relationship which Jews and Christians believed was established by revelation and faith between God and the believer is similar from the believer's side to a relationship between one human person and another within the existential order.

In applying relational predicables to the creator revealing himself believers greatly extended the use of the model of the human person, which already is suggested by the mode of the creator's causality, as I explained in chapter seventeen (pages 269-270). Creative causality suggests that the uncaused cause acts freely, by knowledge, and playfully. Revelation adds that he speaks, for one hears him; that he is faithful, for his promises are fulfilled; that he redeems, for one finds oneself rescued. The believer's relationship to the creator revealing himself has a practical significance; the believer is prepared to act in certain ways and to expect certain outcomes. However, the

practical significance of what is believed does not mean that religious faith is nothing but an attitude toward the world of experience. One's belief in another in any interpersonal relationship always has a practical significance, but one does not *reduce* one's friends to the difference they make to oneself, to their involvement in one's own actions and sufferings.<sup>13</sup>

From the believer's point of view the vast extension of talk about God on the basis of revelation was a partial satisfaction of the desire to know the cause of the obtaining of the world of experience. From the nonbeliever's point of view the statements proper to faith inevitably seem a hopeless hodgepodge. But the believer supposed that each religious truth builds up the model of God as a person to whom man is related. The believer supposed that the explicit content of revelation—a precise set of words—controls the speculative extension of the model, while the lived relationship of the believing community with the God in whom it believes gives the relational predicables of religious discourse an irreducible descriptive content.

Relational predicables in expressions of faith still must meet conditions of predication concerning God clarified in chapters fifteen to seventeen. The way of negation limits the meaning of relational predicables such as "Father."

From the nonbeliever's point of view talk of God as a "Father" is meaningless. After all, one's father is one's male parent. With the descriptive content wholly removed by the way of negation nothing is left of the original metaphor. The believer accepted the negations; he knew that God is not a Father in any earthly sense. None of the descriptive language one uses to speak of human fatherhood can be applied *in the same sense* to the creator. The believer worked from the existential aspects of the relation of children to their father. Yet even this relationship was not applied to God *in the same sense*. The sense of "father" said of God was altered by the context of other expressions used in the formulation of the revealed message and in the lived relationship which believers supposed can develop from it.

Moreover, relational predicables known by reason to characterize the creator must be accepted as limits of any special relational predicables used by believers to express their faith. In the order of salvation acts and effects which are attributed to God cannot be thought of as rendering him dependent. God must remain wholly uncaused. This is one reason why believers maintained that everything which pertains to the order of salvation is a matter of God's wholly free gift. If one were to suppose that the acts of persons who receive revelation and who respond to it with faith in any way caused or required God to reveal himself, to grant something to mankind, or to keep his promises, then one would suppose that God is caused.

In short, the language of faith presupposed, built upon, and was conditioned by the language in which God can be spoken of by man even without faith. Yet the statements of believers were not wholly reducible to statements



which could be made without faith. Believers thought that there is an order of salvation which includes the order of creation—that is, the order of entities within experience to the creator. There can be no order of salvation unless at least some of the entities included in it are miraculous. Only in this manner could the order of salvation be distinguished from the four ordinary orders. In other words, the miraculous is required to establish the order of salvation as irreducible, somewhat as *arguments* for their proper principles—for example, for free choice in the case of the existential order—are required for each of the four orders.

The preceding argument is not an attempt to show that there *has been* any divine revelation. Any attempt to argue this issue must deal with historical and literary critical questions which are beyond philosophical competence. The preceding argument is intended to show only one thing: the concept of divine revelation is coherent. In other words, Christian doctrines ought not to be rejected on the ground that divine revelation as such is logically impossible. Of course, the nonabsurdity of the *concept* of divine revelation does not imply that everything which is regarded by anyone as a divine revelation is coherent.

Christians, of course, not only believed that there could be a divine revelation; they believed that there is one. They also believed that it includes certain truths about God otherwise inaccessible to human inquiry. Leading examples of such purported truths are the so-called mysteries of Christian faith, including the Incarnation, the Trinity, and the bodily presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In what follows I propose to do two things: first, to state what Christians believed in each of these matters; second, to show against some arguments to the contrary that what Christians believed is not logically incoherent. Any argument for coherence can be extended indefinitely. I propose only an initial sketch.

The reader must bear in mind throughout that reference to documents displaying Christian faith is not made as an assertion of the *truth* of what was believed, but as evidence of the fact that this *content* was believed.

## The Incarnation

Christians believed that a certain man, Jesus of Nazareth, began acting and speaking in a manner which was altogether unique, that he performed many miracles, that he was accused of claiming divinity for himself and did not deny it, that he was crucified for blasphemy, and that he rose from the dead.

Christians believed that Jesus's first followers accepted his words and deeds, sealed by his resurrection from the dead, as evidence of his divinity. Thus, they believed that John was a disciple of Jesus, and that John wrote the

Gospel attributed to him, introducing the story of Jesus with a statement of his divinity and his humanity:

In the beginning was the Word; the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things came to be, not one thing had its being but through him. . . . He was in the world that had its being through him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own domain and his own people did not accept him. . . . [He] was born not out of human stock or urge of the flesh or will of man but of God himself. The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. (Jn. 1:1-3, 10-11, 13-14)

John represents Jesus as revealing to his followers at the Last Supper that he and the Father are mutually in one another and are one (Jn. 15:17).

Christians also accepted Paul's summary of the Incarnation, passion, death, resurrection, and glorification of Jesus Christ as expressing equality between Jesus *as divine* and the Father, inferiority of Jesus *as man* to the Father (Phil. 2:6-11).

The very complexity of this notion naturally gave rise to many opinions regarding the makeup of Jesus Christ. Some believed him truly God but only apparently or incompletely human. Some believed him genuinely human, but only specially related to God or somehow partially God, not truly and fully God. To hold Jesus either fully human or fully divine seemed to many to require the denial of the other, since the creator-creature distinction seemed to them to be violated by the Christian belief that this man, Jesus, also is the Word through whom all things are created.

Several centuries were required for questions about Jesus Christ to be resolved to the satisfaction of the main body of Christian believers. The resolutions were hammered out in a series of general church councils held during the fourth and fifth centuries, when Christianity had spread widely and persecution of Christians had ceased. The clearest summary of Christian faith which emerged from this process is the profession of the Council of Chalcedon (451):

We declare that he [Jesus Christ] is perfect both in his divinity and in his humanity, truly God and truly man composed of body and rational soul; that he is consubstantial with the Father in his divinity, consubstantial with us in his humanity, like us in every respect except for sin (see Heb. 4:15). We declare that in his divinity he was begotten of the Father before time, and in his humanity he was begotten in this last age of Mary the Virgin, the Mother of God, for us and for our salvation. We declare that the one selfsame Christ, only-begotten Son and Lord, must be acknowledged in two natures without any commingling or change or division or

separation; that the distinction between the natures is in no way removed by their union but rather that the specific character of each nature is preserved and they are united in one person and one hypostasis. We declare that he is not split or divided into two persons, but that there is one selfsame only-begotten Son, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup>

This summary includes what is necessary to discuss the logical coherence of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation.

First, if the doctrine of the Incarnation is taken to mean that Jesus is not truly man, then the doctrine is incompatible with its own datum: Jesus was a certain man from Nazareth.

Second, if the Incarnation is taken to mean that Jesus is not truly divine, the position contained in the introduction to St. John's Gospel is contradicted.

Third, if any attempt is made to suggest that "man" and "God" are partly true of Jesus, partly not, the attempt runs into the absurdity of supposing that what Jesus is—that is, his being such-and-such, man and/or God—could be divided. (Nothing is partly or somewhat the kind of entity it is in itself. Such concepts are all-or-none predicables.) Chalcedon excludes all these suppositions by affirming that Jesus Christ is perfect both in divinity and in humanity, truly God and truly man.

Fourth, if it is supposed that the Incarnation means that God is changed into man or that man is changed into God, the distinction between what is uncaused and what is caused is denied. Chalcedon excludes this supposition by affirming Jesus's distinct origin according to his divinity and according to his humanity. "Consubstantial" means that the same predicable, expressing what something primarily is in itself, can be said in precisely the same sense of two subjects. Thus, Chalcedon affirms that Jesus Christ and the Father are God in precisely the same sense; and that Jesus Christ and we are human in precisely the same sense. As God, he is "begotten" of the Father—a relationship which must be considered in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity. As man, he is born of the Virgin Mary.

Fifth, if it is supposed that what characterizes Jesus Christ as man affects or alters his divinity or vice versa, then predicables properly applicable to a creature—this particular man—would have to be applied to the creator, and vice versa. One would have to say that God the creator was created, that a certain man was uncaused, and so on. Chalcedon excludes such absurdities by affirming that Jesus Christ is both human and divine without any commingling or change in either nature.

Sixth, if it is supposed that the exclusion of commingling or change in Jesus Christ's divinity and humanity implies that he is two entities, existing separately, this division contradicts the datum of the problem: he is one



person. Chalcedon excludes this incoherence by affirming that Jesus Christ is one person, not split or divided into separate entities, that his divinity and humanity are not separated from each other.

According to this doctrine "the Word was made flesh" does not indicate an intrinsic change in God. This predication is relational and the dependence is one-sided. This man, conceived of the Virgin Mary, is the same person as a divine person, the Word; therefore the Word was made flesh. The first statement expresses the being of Jesus as man, and says that this being is related to God not only as dependent upon the creator but as personally one with the creator. The second statement expresses the converse relation, but relational predications about God do not indicate mutual dependence, not even in this case.

If one were to assume that the unity of the divine and human in the single person of Christ were *unity* in the same sense as anything else is a unity, then absurdity could not be avoided. If the unity is the same as that of anything within one of the four orders, then the divine is reduced to one of these orders. If the unity is the same as that which can be said of God apart from the consideration of the Incarnation, then the human is reduced to the divine. This unity must be regarded as unique if contradictions are to be avoided. The precise point of the declaration of Chalcedon is to distinguish the unity of the person of Christ from any other unity, and to preserve the complexity of his makeup precisely by insisting upon the uniqueness of his unity.

No Christian would claim to understand or to explain this doctrine. The main point of theological arguments about it is to try to show that the concept of Incarnation is not logically incoherent. Therefore, the following points must not be taken as an attempt at explanation, but as indications of the coherence of the doctrine.

"Identical with itself" has various meanings. The self-identity of anything depends upon the sort of entity concerned. God could be called self-identical by an affirmative predication of the type discussed in chapter sixteen. But "self-identical" said of God could not mean exactly the same as the same expression in any other case, for said of God, this predicable, like all other affirmative and relational predicables, is conditioned by the whole way of negation. Identity of the person of the Word with the person who is Jesus of Nazareth therefore cannot be excluded as impossible from God's side, since we do not comprehend "self-identity" said of God any more than we comprehend "person" said of him.

From the human side the difficulty might seem more serious, for we do, after all, know what it is to be human. However, the difficulty is not overwhelming. We know that the human as such is created, but the doctrine of the Incarnation does not exclude that Jesus's human nature as such is

created. As to the human person, I argued in the preceding chapter that the unity of the human person in any case is inevitably perplexing. The perplexity arises because a human self joins several distinct and irreducible orders of entity into one undivided reality. The ordinary human person is not several things, but one entity having several aspects which must be neither confused nor divided.

The unity of the divine/human makeup of Jesus Christ—as conceived in the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation—seems nearer to the unity of a human person than to any other unity we know of. The theological problems about his makeup are analogous to the philosophical problems, reviewed in the previous chapter, about the makeup of any human person. In one's own experience of one's self one's unity as a human person is immediately given, yet it is not reducible to a system, since the four orders of reality which are embraced in the complex unity of a human self do not form a single rational system. Thus it follows that while man's self-experience provides no reason to extrapolate the concept of human person to include identification with God, the concept of *person* one applies to one's self cannot exclude such extrapolation. Thus, from the human side, too, the doctrine of the Incarnation cannot be incoherent, for the concept of *person* as applicable to the human is necessarily open-textured enough to allow extension beyond intelligibilities which would be the basis for any argument demonstrating incoherence.

My point is not that Jesus Christ is merely a human person. To say that would be to deny the traditional Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, and while I am not asserting this doctrine here, I am not denying it either. What I am saying is that Chalcedon's declaration that Jesus Christ is both God and man, but a single person, the person of the Word, is incoherent neither with what one can intelligibly say of God nor with what one can intelligibly say of a person *who is* human.

A Christian who wished to speculate theologically by making use of the doctrine on the human person outlined in the preceding chapter would note that the ultimate principle of the unity of the human person is one's selfhood, a principle which is not restricted to one of the orders, but which underlies the unity of the person embracing the complex reality of all four orders. One's selfhood is not identical with, although it includes, the bodily *in itself*, the knowing subject, the self-determining agent, and the executive *ego*.

A Christian could say that Christ is truly man inasmuch as he like any man includes all the complexity of a human person, including everything which a human person has in all four orders and the unity he has in virtue of the mutual inclusion of those orders in one another, but that Jesus is not a human person just to the extent that the ultimate principle of unity—the selfhood of the created person—is absent in his case, replaced by the selfhood of the Word of God, through whom all things were created.

## The Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity derives from the same New Testament materials from which Christians developed the doctrine of the Incarnation. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity was never stated more clearly and completely than in the Decree for the Jacobites of the Council of Florence (1438-1445 in 1442):

There is one true God, all-powerful, unchangeable, and eternal, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one in essence, but three in persons. The Father is not begotten; the Son is begotten of the Father; the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. The Father is not the Son or the Holy Spirit; the Son is not the Father or the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is not the Father or the Son. Rather, the Father is only the Father; the Son is only the Son; and the Holy Spirit is only the Holy Spirit. The Father alone has, of his own substance, begotten the Son; the Son alone has been begotten of the Father alone; the Holy Spirit alone proceeds both from the Father and equally from the Son. These three persons are one God, not three gods; for the three persons have one substance, one essence, one nature, one divinity, one immensity, one eternity. And everything is one where there is no distinction by relative opposition.

“Because of this unity, the Father is entirely in the Son and entirely in the Holy Spirit; the Son is entirely in the Father and entirely in the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is entirely in the Father and entirely in the Son. None of the persons precedes any of the others in eternity, nor does any have greater immensity or greater power. From eternity, without beginning, the Son is from the Father; and from eternity and without beginning, the Holy Spirit has proceeded from the Father and the Son.” [note omitted] All that the Father is, and all that he has, he does not have from another, but of himself; he is the principle that has no principle. All that the Son is, and all that he has, he has from the Father; he is a principle from a principle. All that the Holy Spirit is and all that he has, he has from the Father and equally from the Son. Yet the Father and the Son are not two principles of the Holy Spirit, but one principle, just as the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are not three principles of creation, but one principle.<sup>15</sup>

This formulation undoubtedly goes beyond the explicit content of the New Testament; it might be regarded by some Christians as excessively theological. However, it represents an orthodox expression of Christian faith; it is still regarded as normative by Roman Catholics.

Florence's decree clearly excludes any differentiation between Father, Son, and Spirit which would conflict with what must be said of the creator as such. The limitations set by human knowledge of the creator are not contradicted. Thus, Florence does not say that God is divided into several beings, or



that there is more than one creative principle. It does not say that he is numerically one or numerically many *in the sense in which* those expressions can be predicated of any entities within experience.

The point of departure for the doctrine of the Trinity was the identification of Jesus as God, along with the distinction of him from another, identified as Father. "Son" and "Father" obviously cannot apply to the same. Also, in the New Testament Father and Son are distinguished from a third—the Spirit—who is "sent" by both, yet to whom is attributed unity with both and all the common divine predicables.

From this point of departure the doctrine of the Trinity unfolded. The difficulty in the doctrine is that it seems to violate the axiom that realities identical with something one and the same must be identical with one another. The Christian sought to avoid outright contradiction by saying that there is only one *God*, but that Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct *persons*.

This language, however, can conceal the difficulty and even lead to understandings of the doctrine unacceptable to Christians. If one supposes that divinity is analogous to humanity, and that just as there are many men having the same nature, although they are distinct persons, so there are many distinct divine persons, the doctrine of the Trinity might seem simple. However, in this case one denies what Christians believed, for this interpretation would mean that there are three divine entities, similar in nature but diverse in being. If one supposes that personality attributed to Father, Son, and Spirit is analogous to the various psychological personalities some human individuals display—the three faces of Eve—one again seems to have an easy solution to the problem of the Trinity. But, again, one denies what Christians believed, for this interpretation would mean that there are three roles played by God, perhaps corresponding to three distinct ways in which creatures are related to him, but no real distinction in God between Father, Son, and Spirit.

The latter approach might seem especially attractive on the theory of predication concerning God developed in earlier chapters of this work. However, the manner in which the doctrine of the Trinity is expressed in the New Testament does not admit such a solution. The distinction between the Son as God, on the one hand, and, on the other, the Father and Holy Spirit, is not established by different relations which believers have or should have toward the three persons, but rather by the *content* of revelation: many sayings attributed to Jesus himself, early Christian statements such as those found in the introduction to the Gospel of St. John, and the formula for baptism (Mt. 28:19). The way in which such statements are built up presents no great difficulty if one begins from the doctrine of the Incarnation. One need only add that there are two others, not identical with Jesus Christ nor with each other, who are God in the same sense he is.

Putting the matter this way, however, only sharpens the paradox. The resolution—not an explanation of the mystery, which Christians believed impossible, but a removal of the paradox—depends in the first place upon a rejection both of the supposition that God is one being in the same sense in which any entity within experience is one, and also of the supposition that divine persons are distinct in the same manner as human persons are distinct. Once these suppositions are rejected, the contradiction dissolves. Christians deny multiple divine entities in a set of perfectly ordinary senses, and they deny a unitary divine person in a straightforward sense. What is left to be affirmed is not clear, but for that very reason it cannot be clearly contradictory.

The resolution in the second place depends upon making a distinction between various sorts of distinction. The divine persons are said to be distinct relative to one another; they are one God apart from their mutual opposition. The Council of Florence makes use of this conception. Theologians developed it by suggesting that the divine persons precisely consist in opposed relations, relations not of anything other than themselves, but identical with the nonrelational divine reality itself.<sup>16</sup>

According to this view God as creator can be called “one” in the senses indicated in chapters sixteen and seventeen; thus “God” functions as a proper name. However, in the context of New Testament revelation “God” as a predicable is not a name—proper or common—except insofar as it is used in the same sense as “Father.”

This approach can be clarified by referring back to what was said in the preceding chapter about reflexivity. In human knowledge and choice there is perfect reflexivity with respect to part of the content of knowing and choosing—namely, with respect to that which is knowing and choosing itself. To the extent that propositional knowledge is reflexive, the same is a knowing and a known.

God’s knowledge and love do not depend upon anything other than himself; if they did, he would not be uncaused. Hence, in him knowledge and love were thought of as perfectly reflexive not only in some instance but with respect to their totality. Such knowledge and love need not lack content, because God is his own power to create as well as his own acts of knowing and loving. Yet, one can suppose, the distinctions between God knowing and God known, between God loving and God loved, hold. God knowing and God known, God loving and God loved, *is and are not* the same: divine unity with distinct persons.

Another conception which mitigates the paradox of the Trinity is that of community as experienced or approached even among human persons. There, as explained in the preceding chapter, greater unity and more perfect individuality can go together, though they seem opposed. Similarly, unity and

distinction in the Trinity can be regarded as a community in which a higher form of unity is combined with more perfect distinctness.

### The Eucharist

The last of the Christian doctrines to be commented upon here is that of the bodily presence of Christ in the Eucharist. This doctrine presents a different problem from the Incarnation and the Trinity. The doctrine of the Eucharist is drawn from some explicit New Testament texts (Mt. 26:26-29; Mk. 14:22-25; Lk. 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-25; Jn. 6:51-58). Christians believed that Jesus meant that bread and wine blessed as he commanded no longer was what it still appeared to be, but became his own body and blood. This doctrine was not taken to mean that Christ's body was divided, cramped in a small space, and subjected to chewing and digestion. It was taken to mean, however, that bodily contact with Jesus was accomplished by receiving the Eucharist, and that the multiplicity of Christians by sharing in the Eucharist were formed into one body of Christ, somewhat as mankind naturally forms one community by sharing the same human flesh and blood.

The difficulty with the doctrine is obvious. It seems to be falsified by experienced facts. Christians agreed less completely upon the details of this doctrine than they did upon the details of the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity. I only propose some considerations which might point to a resolution of the paradox ("resolution" in the sense explained above).

One thing to notice is that normally one thinks of various entities according to their placement in one of the four orders. This way of looking at things causes a great many philosophical problems, not least the problem of the person discussed in the preceding chapter. If one supposes that what ultimately defines bread and wine, on the one hand, and the body and blood of Christ, on the other, is confined to the physical order, then the mystery of the Eucharist becomes an absurdity. For the consecrated bread and wine remain, from the point of view of natural science, just what they had been, and no Christian ever denied this fact.

A second point to notice is that when one considers subhuman entities, one can define them multiply; *what* one regards something as being, in many cases, depends upon the order in which one is considering it. For example, it would seem odd to take a great painting and to analyze it by saying that it really is only a piece of fabric bonded to certain complex, chemical substances in a certain spatial arrangement—"just so much paint smeared on a piece of canvas." Still, one can consider a painting in this way.

Human persons can be both regarded as *physical objects* and considered as subjects in the intentional order, in the existential order, and in the cultural order. Socrates serves as an example in innumerable logic books; an aborted



child is treated as a mere blob; a functionary can be reduced to the status of a cog in the machine. In cases such as these something could be going wrong. If the manner in which the person is regarded as an object is not subordinated to selfhood of the person, something is wrong.

A third point to notice is that there are difficulties in determining just where a person's body begins and ends. Usually one supposes that the boundaries are obvious. However, in sexual reproduction part of the father's body is separated from him, perhaps by a considerable distance, at the precise time he comes to be a father—fertilization. One's senses extend one's body outward into the environment, to be affected by it; one's capacities for action also extend one's body to the point at which the effect is achieved. If this were not the case—I am taking for granted the outlook expressed in ordinary language—people would not see one another but only images on the retina.

A fourth point to notice is that communication normally means giving something of oneself. Perhaps the paradigmatic case is parenthood. A special aspect of parenthood is a mother breast-feeding her infants; they live from her very body by actually consuming not merely a substance which she "manufactures" but something of what she physically is. (A modern and artificial, but no less valid, example is giving a blood transfusion.) In verbal communication—the giving of a human word—one who receives the communication, even at a distance and perhaps by electronic means, in some real sense hears *the voice* of the person communicating with him.

These considerations together should not be taken as explaining what Christians meant by the doctrine of the Eucharist. Christians meant that the consecrated bread and wine brought about bodily unity with Christ in some way which cannot be explained. The key word, again, is "unity." The unity accomplished by the Eucharist must be of a unique sort, just as the unity of God and man in the Incarnation is of a unique sort, and the unity of the Trinity and of each divine person must be of a unique sort.

However, the considerations outlined suggest that one might think along the following lines. When one receives a telephone call from a friend, one hears *the voice* of one's friend, but one also hears sound waves electrically produced. One receives something of one's friend, but not his whole person; the medium remains as a vehicle. If one receives a blood transfusion, one receives part of another's very body, and there is no medium apart from the living substance itself which is received. But in this case the reality of the other is received only in part, and that part is alienated from the other person and turned into oneself.

If one supposes—which Christians believed—that the Eucharist communicated Christ himself, then the Eucharist must be regarded as combining various features which are separated in ordinary experience. The bodily presence is similar to biological cases of communication, cases such as sex,

breast-feeding, and the blood transfusion. But there is no alienation from Christ of any part of himself; this aspect is rather like verbal communication. The classification of what appears to be bread and wine as *really* the body and blood of Christ is somewhat similar to what one does when one regards something in a particular order as *really* what it most significantly is—for example, one accepts a bunch of flowers as a token of friendship rather than as dying vegetation of a certain biological species.

If one combines these various aspects, a model for thinking about the Eucharist along the following lines emerges. Christ himself is communicated; the Word of divine conversation absorbs the medium into the message. But this communication occurs without physical division, unlike the biological examples. A medium is taken over, very much as a gift takes over the physical elements of what is given and transforms their meaning. However, since the medium communicates a person—and particularly since this person is one who ultimately cannot be subordinated to any created entity—what was antecedently the medium is displaced by the one who communicates. In other words, not only is the meaning of the bread and wine changed—though that certainly happens—but its appropriate ultimate definition is changed. However, this displacement does not mean that the bread and wine ceases to be physically—for the natural scientist—what they were. It simply means that the Eucharist is not defined by these physical characteristics; the use of this food and drink *demand*s appraisal in other terms.

These sketches of ways in which I think one might go about trying to show that Christian doctrines need not be logically absurd are not altogether satisfactory. Each of these problems by itself would be suitable subject matter for a whole book. Still, these sketches will indicate the strategy I think is available to believers. Those who see contradictions in doctrines of faith must make some limiting assumptions regarding the meaning of the mysteries. My view is that such assumptions, if they lead to contradictions, must be denied. One need not thereby deny all positive meaning to the doctrines. Rather, one sets out to find a possible meaning which is really peculiar to the subject matter of the doctrine. If Christianity is true, perhaps such a quest for the true meaning of what is revealed is *all* that God expects of the intellects of those to whom he communicates.

## 25: Why Christian Doctrine. If True. Is Important

### Eliminating the negative

As I explained at the beginning of chapter twenty-two, a judgment whether Christian doctrine is true involves considerations beyond philosophical competence. However, there remains one question which can be considered philosophically. That question is, What difference would it make if Christian doctrine were true? The question must be answered from within the perspective of Christian faith itself. However, this fact does not mean that the question lies outside philosophy. If consideration of what Christians believed suggests that even if Christian doctrine were true, it would be irrelevant to human concerns, then a philosopher might reasonably suggest that inquiry be directed toward questions of greater existential significance. But if the content of Christian doctrine is such that it is important *if* true, a philosopher may reasonably commend to historians and to other scholars the inquiries which need to be conducted in their fields.

An analogy will clarify the point. If someone were to announce that the story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs is not necessarily absurd, that it might actually be true, one might reasonably react to this information with little enthusiasm. What difference would it make if this fairy story actually were a reasonably accurate chronicle?

Today many people feel that even if Christian doctrine were true, it would make little difference to anyone. What if Jesus Christ is God? What if God is a Trinity? What if Jesus is bodily present in the Eucharist? The world seems to go on pretty much as it always has. If Christian doctrine is true, it does not seem to make much difference. The first Christians had great expectations of



an imminent revolutionary transformation of the world. Two thousand years later the world remains untransformed. If Jesus was raised from the dead, other people still die unjustly and nobody is raising them from the dead. To many people the Christian story seems an irrelevant tale from long ago.

Everyone recognizes that there is a great deal of evil in the world. There is poverty and pollution. There is ignorance and stupidity. There is disease and natural disaster. There is war, exploitation, and unjust institutions. There is meanness, cruelty, and addiction. There is duplicity. The innocent suffer while the wicked thrive.

There are many analyses and prescriptions for remedying evil. Some see the problem as one of lack of knowledge and control; they put their hope in research, science, and education. Some see the problem in terms of exploitation and unjust institutions; they put their hope in reform and revolution. Some see the problem in terms of sickness, including especially psychological illness; they put their hope in therapy. Some see the problem as inevitable, as something built into the human condition; they despair.

Christians believed that all the factors mentioned have a role in the unsatisfactoriness of the human condition. They believed that men should do what is humanly possible to overcome evil. But Christians also believed that all other forms of evil are symptomatic of the most fundamental evil. The most fundamental evil, according to Christians, was that the human race, created with a capacity to form an open community oriented toward friendship with God, failed to take advantage of the opportunity. This turning away on the part of mankind as a whole from an opportunity to somehow share in a special association with God was original sin. All other human evils, Christians believed, followed upon original sin, in the sense that human life and society would and could have been different and far better than it is if mankind had accepted its opportunity for intimate community with God.

Why should a failure at the beginning of human existence have affected the whole human race? Christians believed in the natural community of mankind. A favorable situation could and should have existed into which individuals, when born, would have entered naturally. Since it was not established, human persons are born as aliens rather than as citizens of a community oriented toward friendship with God.

Christians believed that the significance of the Incarnation is that by this means God grants each human person an individual opportunity to enter into a community of friendship with him. Jesus, because he is God, is not separated from divine friendship. He is capable of making other men friends of God by becoming friends with them himself.

The process of building up a human community of friendship with God was what Christians called "building the Kingdom of God," "building up the Body of Christ," and "building the church." The conception of "church" in

Christianity is that of gathering together of those who have accepted the offer of friendship extended by God to each human person through Jesus Christ.

The redemptive life, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus was regarded by Christians as a mystery. A popular distortion of Christian doctrine was that God wished to take revenge for damage done him by sinful mankind, that he could not exact satisfying revenge on ordinary human beings, so he made his own Son suffer to restore his wounded dignity. A more accurate conception of what Christians believed is that God wished to make available to each individual human person the opportunity which had been available to the human race as a whole, that to do this he sent his own Son to be the leader of the new community, but that this project required as its first step the overcoming of existing alienation and evil.<sup>1</sup>

If the Christian idea of redemption was that of liberation of mankind from its self-imposed limits, one still wonders what the point of the passion and death of Jesus could have been. Why did God not simply restore the condition of mankind to what it had been before and allow each individual to make his own personal choice for or against divine friendship? A Christian could answer that such a procedure would have involved less human cooperation. Christians believed that Jesus is a man and that in this *man* mankind is saved. This conception agrees with the principle of divine inefficiency explained in chapter twenty-one.

Still, why should Jesus have had to suffer and die? Christians did not offer a single coherent response to this question. I think that they might have proposed a number of points.

Christians believed that Jesus's human love of the Father and of his own fellowmen was central to his community-forming project. One cannot love in any true, human sense without undertaking and doing something which is loving, for love is realized in a performance in which the whole person is engaged, not merely in a choice or disposition of one's freedom. From this point of view one might suppose that Jesus willingly suffered and died for the sake of the love which was necessary to do so.

Another factor to consider is that Jesus would not have been fully human had he not shared everything belonging to the human condition compatible with his divine personality. To commit sin was precluded. But the human condition, so far as it concerned him, was a condition of subjection to sin and its consequences. Full sharing in this condition required Jesus to become a victim of sin, a subject of suffering; he applied to himself the prophecy regarding the suffering servant: "And he was reckoned among the wicked" (Is. 53:12; Lk. 22:37). His Incarnation was complete, Christians believed, only when he was humanly forsaken by God.

Another factor is that Jesus's project was to overcome sin and evil. To overcome it he had to undergo it. St. Paul expressed this idea: "For our sakes

God made him who did not know sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the very holiness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

Finally, if the work of redemption was to be left, insofar as possible, to mankind itself, then Jesus, as the first of many brothers and sisters to be united in friendship with God, had to establish the pattern and mark out the way which was to be followed by others. Their liberation would have to depend upon their giving up of self-imposed limitations—a seeming sacrifice of identity and autonomy. Christians believed that Jesus provided a demonstration that one must lose his life in order to achieve it: "He died for all so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who for their sakes died and was raised up" (2 Cor. 5:15).

Even if such reflections of Christians could remove something of the scandal and foolishness of the cross, however, there remains the scandal of the existing condition of this world and the foolishness of any optimistic religious formula for altering the human condition in a radical and favorable way.

I think it beyond question that Christians often built up false hopes and such false hopes generated disappointment. The false hopes were for immediate and effortless salvation from all human ills. When this salvation was not forthcoming, otherworldliness sapped efforts to deal with human evils by human efforts. These matters have been considered in chapter twenty. Christians would have been more faithful to their own beliefs, I think, had they considered the redemption as a work in which they were called to share to the full extent of their capabilities. In this case the practical difference Christian faith could make would be to sustain hope despite all difficulties, frustrations, and setbacks. It could demand the maximum contribution from each individual, including creativity in dealing with human problems by all humanly available means. If true, Christian doctrine would provide the assurance that such creative efforts would not come to the melancholy end of mankind's extinction without a memory.

But to look at the significance of Christianity solely in terms of redemption, even if this redemption is seen as a liberation and overcoming of human evil, and as a task in which humanity itself is called to participate in every way possible, is still to regard Christian faith primarily from a negative point of view. The positive side of the picture, as Christians understood it, also must be sketched if one is to grasp the whole significance of what Christians believed.

If one were to ask Christians, "Why is your faith so important to you?" one would receive many answers, some rather negative, but others more positive.

Some Christians have said that their faith enables them to face evil without despair. Many believers who suffer serious losses, such as the death of a loved



one, claim that their faith permits them to accept the reality of evil and yet to hope that good will prevail. Believers who take this attitude often contrast their outlook with that of nonbelievers, who seem either naively optimistic about the prospects of various human panaceas—education, technical development, psychoanalysis, revolutionary transformation of society, and the like—or cynically pessimistic about man's nature and condition.

Christians also believed that their faith enabled them to face existential evil—their personal sinfulness—without despair. One experiences one's self as divided, as subject to an alien power which one cannot succeed in mastering. With faith Christians experienced a sense of acceptance by God which they felt made it possible for them to accept themselves, although imperfect (cf. Rom. 7:15-8:11). Many Christians believed that without faith they would have been driven either to complete inauthenticity in an attempt to rationalize their own sinfulness or to complete self-hatred in an attempt to disown it.

### Accenting the positive

Christians also believed that their faith gave them an identity; by faith they thought that they belonged to something great and lasting: "In Christ the fullness of deity resides in bodily form. Yours is a share of this fullness . . ." (Col. 2:9). The concept of the Church, the Kingdom of God, the Body of Christ, is basic to all Christian thought. A believer felt his place in reality secured; it was to make his personal contribution to the work of the redemption by which all creation would be perfected and united in Christ.

Dogmatism in the bad sense and fanaticism have not been absent from christendom. However, many Christians prized the sense of liberty which their secure identity brought with it. When role-playing is no longer felt to be necessary, one can play roles playfully. Moral earnestness and rational lucidity were not condemned by such Christians, yet they often prized equally levity, fantasy, and fleshliness. One who becomes a child by abiding faith in divine providence is relieved of the unbearable burden of upholding all value and all meaning; relieved of this burden, one can feel at ease even at the brink of hell and the margin of absurdity.

Christians believed that the universality of the reality in which their identity was secured embraced everything true, everything good, everything becoming (cf. Phil. 4:8). Only evil was to be excluded from the Body of Christ, but evil itself was to be excluded, not by destroying the good which suffered from it, but by loving that good, overcoming its evil by love, redeeming it, and restoring it to honor. Thus Christians believed that their faith permitted them to be tolerant without compromise, to be liberal without relativism, and to be creative of the new without infidelity to the old.

Christians valued security; they thought that their faith had freed them from radical anxiety. But this liberty was not to be used as an excuse for laxity. Rather, it was to make possible feats of trust which would be heroic. The martyr could die for his faith, secure in the belief that he died with Christ and would rise again with him. Encouraged by faith, Christians felt that they could venture out upon the thin ice of interpersonal relationships constituted by the commitments of weak and sinful persons. A couple in love, for example, could commit themselves, for better or for worse until death, in the indissoluble compact of Christian marriage.

Apart from such moral values many Christians felt that their faith was important to them because they found in it other personal values. One of these was the esthetic delight of the Christian way of life, made concrete in forms of worship, in the material culture of religious places and objects, in the language of faith and prayer, and in the customs of Christian life. This esthetic delight merged with the satisfaction which many Christians experienced in acts of public and private devotion—a deep sense of peace and joy in private prayer and meditation, a sense of rapture and exaltation in communal celebration of magnificent liturgical rites.

Certain Christians emphasized the transcendence of their faith to reason; they said that they believed because of the absurdity of faith. But many other Christians found intellectual satisfaction in their faith. The source of contingent being, which is indicated by reason, is only a theoretical entity, a possible explanatory principle which can be speculated about on the model of human agency, until one finds a more direct access to the inner reality of the uncaused cause. Christians believed that faith supplied further information about that which all men by nature desire to know. Things hidden from the wise were made known to mere children (cf. Mt. 11:25-27). Moreover, faith in what God has revealed of himself was not thought by Christians to be the end, but rather the beginning, of intellectual satisfaction:

Now we see indistinctly, as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. My knowledge is imperfect now; then I shall know even as I am known. (1 Cor. 13:12)

Thus, according to Thomas Aquinas, the goal to which faith was a means is the perfect knowledge of God.<sup>2</sup> And, in general, Christians believed that faith would lead to everlasting life with God, a life in which intellectual satisfaction at least would play an important role.

If "everlasting life" is taken to mean no more than endless existence, not much different from human life as it is, one might well wonder whether there is not more reason to fear than to hope that life might go on forever. Even if one adds golden harps and the like, one wonders whether endless life would not become boring. Perhaps eventually one would wish he could die but find he could not.

In chapter eighteen (pages 283-284) I sketched two worlds. In one a person might do as he pleased, but he would lack human companionship and opportunity for creative self-fulfillment. In the other each person would share a common life and therefore be limited by the desires and interests of others, while in a genuine community to which each would contribute according to his own abilities. Christians seldom considered what sort of human life they might expect after the promised resurrection of the body. They did picture a community free of misery and death, free of hatred and war, and free of ignorance and want. They might have added a positive vision of a human community sharing together in the forms of activity which are possible to human persons and valuable for their own sake.

So far as I can see, nothing which Christians believed prevented them from envisioning a life in which human persons would continue forever to engage in conversation, to know each other more and more intimately, to better understand the world in the light of acquaintance with its creator, to make beautiful things, and to enjoy them. Human abilities, Christians believed, will at least remain what they are. If the purpose of creation is to express the creator's reality, then everlasting life, if there is such a thing, would seem to imply continuous expansion of human achievements. If this conception is in accord with what Christians believed, then Christians also could propose that their efforts in human activities and in building up the human community here and now are beginnings of the everlasting life to which they look forward.<sup>3</sup>

Such a vision of mankind's future, if implied by Christian belief, shows that this belief, if true, is important.

Yet this vision of mankind's future falls short of what Christians did believe and hope for. Their belief was that God intended human persons to share his own intimate life. Christians regarded themselves as adopted children of God, as coheirs with Christ to what belongs to him as Son of the Father (Rom. 8:14-17). They believed that through Jesus and in him they were invited to become one with the Father and the Spirit as these three are one with each other (cf. Jn. 14:9-21; 17:20-24).

In other words, Christians believed that human persons are invited to become members of the divine family itself. They believed that human persons are asked to love one another as the divine persons love one another, with a mutual love which is the divine community. Christians believed that such love is not merely sentiment or merely human benevolence and altruism, but is entry into divine life. "Everlasting life" was understood by Christians not to express unending continuation of life much like the present life, even improved, but to express a life truly divine. The "beatific vision" for which Christians hoped was not passive gazing upon God, but knowing him even as one is known.<sup>4</sup>



Christian philosophers and theologians unduly narrowed the hope of their faith. Intellectuals are thrilled at the prospect of doing for all eternity what *they* enjoy. Most people have other tastes and other interests. The knowledge of God for which Christians hoped cannot be limited to a very restricted, highly refined experience of human intellectual knowledge.

The Christian doctrines of the Incarnation, of the Trinity, and of the bodily presence of Christ in the Eucharist—if these doctrines are true—have their importance only in the context of the hope of Christians to share fully in the life of God himself.

The Christian conception of the Trinity was that God's life is not that of a self-enclosed entity like Aristotle's unmoved mover. Christians believed that God is a community of persons and that the community of uncreated persons, the Trinity-creator, is not an exclusive circle closed to others. The doctrine of the Trinity meant to Christians that divinity is capable of being communicated. Christians believed that they were already "sharers of the divine nature" (2 Pt. 1:4), and that everlasting life meant the full development of this sharing.

The Christian conception of the Incarnation was that divinity and humanity can be united in a single person. Christians believed that Jesus is both God and man. Jesus they considered a divine person, but they regarded his makeup as a model of the way in which human persons were intended by God to be made into members of the divine family. Human persons would share in the divine nature while remaining human, without losing anything of their humanity, as the Word of God shared human nature while remaining divine, without losing anything of his divinity (cf. Jn. 1:13, 3:3-6; Eph. 1:3-14). Through and in Christ all things were to be restored to God. Creation was to become an embodiment of divine life (cf. Col. 1:15-28, 2:9-12).

The Christian conception of the bodily presence of Christ in the Eucharist was that this divine person who shares humanity is united with human persons who share divinity in a community *both* human *and* divine (cf. 1 Cor. 10:16-17). Christians believed that in receiving the Eucharist they receive the body and blood of Jesus, enter into his passion and death, overcome sin and evil with him, become one with his glorious resurrection (cf. Jn. 6:25-58; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). Christians believed that bodily unity with Jesus is important because a human being is bodily; they did not consider the bodiliness of human community to be an accident or something evil.

Christians often found their hope so difficult to believe that they reduced its grandeur. They thought of living *with* God, while remaining merely human. They thought of receiving grace from God, but living a life supernatural only in being beyond unaided human abilities.<sup>5</sup>

Christians in the beginning had high hopes, not merely great expectations. But as the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation were

hammered out, the Christian doctrine of life everlasting was allowed to atrophy.<sup>6</sup> Partaking of divine life, being one with the persons of the Trinity as they are with each other, being adopted into the divine family, and knowing God even as one is known—concepts all found in the New Testament—became for many Christians little more than metaphors. Christian life became more a matter of avoiding sin than of living the life of God.

I think that if the first Christians had been able to make use of the later concepts in which Christian doctrines developed, they might have said something like the following, which I propose as a hypothesis to be investigated.

Divinity is communicable. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are God, uncreated and creating. Human persons who are adopted into divine life also are God, created not creating.<sup>7</sup> A human person who participates in divine life does not receive *part* of it—God cannot be divided—but the divinity itself, the very same reality which the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are.<sup>8</sup> The human person to whom divinity is communicated has it as his own and has it whole. By his divinity a human person, being a creature, cannot create. However, whatever is not incompatible with one's also being a creature—the reality of divine life which would be enjoyed by the divine persons even if they did not create—is possible for the human person who becomes one with the Father, the Son, and the Spirit as they are one with each other.

As Jesus is both God and man, so human persons who are his brothers by adoption are truly and fully both man and God. Just as the two natures of the Word Incarnate neither mingle nor are separate entities, so the two natures of a human person who becomes God do not mingle and yet are not separate entities. The difference nevertheless remains according to Christian belief, for Jesus is God by nature, Christians God by adoption. The unity of the two natures in his case is in his person; his personal being is that of creator, not that of creature. In those who become God by adoption the unity of the two natures is in their acts of love and knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Thus, even now human persons can love the Father, Son, Spirit, and human persons who share in divine life with a love which is truly divine as well as truly human. "Life everlasting" means the fulfillment of this love, the perfection of this community, in a complete life which is beyond human imagining:

See what love the Father has bestowed on us  
In letting us be called children of God!  
Yet that is what we are.

The reason the world does not recognize us  
is that it never recognized the Son.  
Dearly beloved, we are God's children now;  
what we shall later be has not yet come to light.

We know that when it comes to light we shall be like him,  
for we shall see him as he is. (1 Jn. 3:1-2)

\* \* \*

In the first chapter of this book I set out as a philosopher but made my personal profession of faith. It seems to me appropriate that I end as I began, speaking as a believer.

When the Word of God became man, he was a light in the darkness of the world. Yet to worldly eyes his life in the midst of the blazing glory of the Roman empire was insignificant. Faith rejoiced that the darkness of the world's light did not overcome the brightness of the divine light.

The Roman empire collapsed; its glory was eclipsed in the cultural barbarism which later humanists called "the dark ages." But in those centuries the light of faith spread throughout Europe. Renaissance humanism led to the Enlightenment; worldly brilliance reached an altogether new intensity. The age of faith was past; the beliefs of Christians were admitted only as myths, to be demythologized again and again.

Today the bright vision of the Enlightenment is gone. Worldly humanism stumbles uncertainly in a night of problems too large for merely human wisdom. A believer may hope, must hope, that the darkness of today's world portends a new dawn of the life which is the light of man.

In our time there was a man sent from God whose name was John—Pope John XXIII. Unlike the brilliant intellectuals of the world, John made no claim to possess the light the world so desperately needs. He was a humble servant of the light; he called for an *aggiornamento* of the Church of Christ, so that the Incarnate Word himself might once more send forth his Holy Spirit to enlighten human minds and to enkindle love in human hearts.

A philosopher must revere human reason and must never concede anything to obscurantism. I do not believe a Christian philosopher detracts from the honor due to human wisdom when he admits how dim it is in comparison with divine wisdom. Therefore, I hope nothing other for this book than that it be some contribution to the preparation John undertook to make.

"The One who gives this testimony says, 'Yes, I am coming soon!' Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20).