

THEOLOGY AND GOD

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WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

Faith Seeking Understanding

According to the classical formula, theology is ‘faith seeking understanding’. One might also say that it is ‘the understanding of the faith’. True, one can believe without understanding. One can believe without knowing any theology and thus without any understanding of the faith. Some would even say that this is true faith. It would be blind faith (believing without seeing) which Christ lauded in his words to the apostle Thomas: ‘Blessed are they who have not seen and yet believe’ (Jn 20 :29). Others speak in similar manner in saying that faith concerns God and the divine, and we cannot understand God. All attempts at understanding the faith would be illusory, even a perversion of faith. And so some extoll the faith of simple people who believe spontaneously, without reflection, without questioning and without experiencing any doubts.

But what is to be done when questions begin to be asked and doubts begin to arise? Should one set them aside, repel them as temptations of the devil which endanger the faith and threaten to destroy it? Whence comes such questioning of the faith? From the outside, from sources hostile to the faith? Do they not rather come from the life, from the vitality of the faith itself? Does not growth in faith demand and call for a more adequate expression?

To clarify, it will be useful to distinguish on the one hand the content of the faith itself and on the other the differing expressions of this content. We might also speak of the divine mystery itself on the one hand and the human language in which this mystery is expressed on the other. It is one thing to close oneself to the revelation of the divine mystery; it is another to question one or other ex-

pressions of this mystery.

Saint Paul spoke of how, as he grew older, he had to abandon childish language in order to adopt the language of an adult (1 Cor. 13 :11). One can say the same about growing in faith: some expressions of the faith seem more and more inadequate. We cannot entertain them any longer.

An Interpretation of the Faith

What is to be done, then? Should one reject everything—‘throw out the baby with the bath water’? This is what many of our contemporaries have done: they were educated in the Christian faith but have subsequently rejected it entirely. They have come to realise the inadequacies of the faith (the formulas of faith) of their childhood. They have concluded that faith is something for children and that they must move on now that they have reached adulthood, the age of critical reasoning.

But it is possible to adopt another attitude, and this is where theology comes in. It is prompted by an intuition that there is something more than the formulas of faith, that there is something that is beyond the formulas. The formulas are no more than expressions of the content of the faith, of the mystery of the faith. They are symbols of the faith and like all symbols they point to things beyond themselves; they point to mystery, more or less adequately.

The task of theology, then, is to ‘understand’—not God, but the symbolic language of the faith, perceiving its deep significance. Evidently it will never be able to clarify the mystery itself and present it in its pure divine state, beyond all linguistic and symbolic expression. Rather we might say that the task of the theologian is to translate into another language that is more accessible today what Christian tradition has been expressing in the lan-

guage that belonged to former times. Thus the theologian is an interpreter. And like all interpreters, the theologian re-expresses in more familiar language what has already been said in a language that has become foreign and incomprehensible. Thus the language will be different, but the content signified must be the same. Such is both the task and the risk of all theology.

An Auto-interpretation of the Faith

One might think that we are speaking of something objective that comes to us from outside us and which we must examine attentively in order to recognise the mystery hidden under the expressions which convey it to us. Indeed, this is how we normally think. God reveals his mystery from on high through the mediation of messengers who express it in human language. Our part, then, is to receive the message and make it our own.

But we might interpret the process of revelation and faith in another way. I say advisedly 'interpret', for we are offering one possible theological interpretation among others. In this interpretation that I prefer, faith arises from the human consciousness, in the human consciousness, under the inspiration of God. That is to say that the transcendence of the faith (its supernatural character) consists in an auto- or self-transcendence of the human consciousness. For this consciousness is not purely human. It is also divine since there is in it an element of transcendence. In other words, there is in us more than ourselves.

All this considerably modifies our understanding of the interpretation of the faith. It is no longer simply an interpretation of a message that comes to us from on high. In this new perspective, to interpret the faith is to interpret oneself in one's transcendent, divine, dimension. It is to interpret one's own religious consciousness in the depths of oneself. This religious interpretation of oneself signifies a coming to awareness of one's own spiritual, divine, depth.

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An Interpretation for the Community of Believers

What we have said concerning the auto-interpretation of the faith could give the impression that we do theology only for ourselves, in order to understand more ourselves in our religious dimension. Theology could then be seen as something of a psychoanalysis of the faith.

But theology is much more important than that. It is not something engaged in for itself alone, it is for the whole community of believers. Theologians carry out a significant function in the Christian community; they have a pastoral responsibility to perform in this community. Which means that not only do they take responsibility for giving answers to their own questions; they must also take up those of the community and try to respond to them as well as they can, even though they may be able to do no more than indicate some possible paths to a solution.

This has always been true, but it is especially so today. For we are living in a time of religious crisis. The more pessimistic commentators claim that religion is on the way out. Churches are becoming more and more empty; prayer and even any thought of God is less and less a part of people's lives.

If we are to find a remedy we must first enquire into the causes of the illness, what has provoked the crisis. In the West it is clearly a striving for liberation from the domination exercised by the Church in times past over the lives of people. This negative reaction to the

Church has been intensified recently by the scandals that have damaged the Church. All that is quite true. It is to be noted, however, that what is understood as ‘Church’ here are the upper levels of the Church hierarchy, the clergy. When people speak of ‘the Church’ they usually mean the hierarchy, those who govern the Church.

But the Church is also and above all the Christian community. That is the true basis of the Church. If there is to be a renewal, a happy resolution of the crisis, it is from this community that it will come. Special attention needs to be paid to the spiritual situation of the Christian community. For that is where the fundamental problem is located. And that problem is, in short, the problem of a community of faith in a context of modernity.

The modern world has gained its autonomy in diverse sectors of human life: science, art, morality, law, the economy, politics. All these spheres of human life have become independent, removed from all religious influence. That is to say that people now live in a non-religious world, a secular world. The immediate consequence of this situation is what we might term religious and spiritual anemia. In short, people gradually lose all religious sense, all religious awareness. They have nothing against religion, they are simply indifferent to it. Religion has no significance for them any more, no importance, no place in their lives. Religion is not what they rely on to find the meaning of their lives.

What happens with theology, then? We can reply to this question in two ways. We might anticipate that theology itself will be carried along on the wave of secularisation. We note, indeed, that not just churches and major seminaries are closing—the same is occurring with faculties and departments of theology around us in Québec.

This negative trend is not the only one possible. We might hope for a resurgence of religious consciousness in new forms. In this eventuality the role of theology becomes primor-

dial. I am making a plea now for a new relevance, a new urgent need for theology. Theology would take upon itself a two-fold task, a critical and a positive task. The critical task, that of discernment, would consist in showing that there is a religious language that is obsolete and must be abandoned because it conceals rather than clarifies the true spiritual content of faith. The positive task would then be that of enabling the religious consciousness to rediscover the sources of inspiration, which for us Christians are the Gospel and the living tradition that flows from it.

An Interpretation in the Believing Community

We have mentioned a necessary interpretation of the faith. Interpretation is called for each time that the Christian message is to be communicated in a culture that is different from those of the Christian origins. Such is the case in all the different epochs of the history of the Church. It needs to be done again today, in our modern period, all the more so as modernity constitutes a cultural change that is quite radical. Indeed, the move to modernity entails among other things a move into a secular, non-religious, culture. Interpretation of the Christian message thus needs to be more radical than it has been in the past in order to maintain what is essential to the faith in another form of cultural expression. Some people have even gone so far as to advocate a Christianity without religion.

Faced with the great variety of interpretations of Christianity today—and the great diversity of theologies—the question arises concerning the criteria of interpretation: what are the criteria for discerning valid interpretations from those that are not such? By ‘valid interpretations’ I mean those that truly transmit the content of the faith, as opposed to those which point us in a direction that conflicts with the Gospel. I will offer three criteria in response to this question.

(1) The first criterion is that of conformity with the biblical sources of Christian faith. An

interpretation will be authentic if it conforms to the Gospel, which allows us to engage with the Gospel as the life-giving source of faith. In short, one may declare authentic an interpretation that provides access to the Gospel, by contrast with one that distances us from the Gospel. For example, to advocate violence or vengeance is certainly not in conformity with the Sermon on the Mount. Likewise, to present Christ Jesus as nothing more than a prophet does not take account of the fact that according to the faith Christ lives in us by his Spirit. He does not only communicate his word, his message, to us, but his divine life itself.

(2) The second criterion is the faith of the Christian community in our time, that of our community in which we speak as theologians. We used to say in the Introit of the Mass for Doctors of the Church *‘In medio Ecclesiae aperuit os suum’* (‘He opened his mouth in the midst of the Church’). The same applies today. We do not speak from outside the community to critique its beliefs, but from within this same community. That means that we share its faith which is ours too, and that we work in the midst of this community to give it life, to enable it to meet today’s challenges. Thus the faith of the community is the criterion for our interpretations: the ones that support that faith are those that are authentic and legitimate.

(3) Finally we make mention of the criterion that often is presented in the first place, that of the Magisterium of the Church, especially the Magisterium of Rome. It is true that the Magisterium has the responsibility for safeguarding the ‘deposit of faith’. But we need to heed it as a pastoral magisterium, to be of service to the faith of the Christian community. In short, it is not so much over the deposit of faith that it needs to keep guard (in order to avoid any deformation) as over the faith of the believers, to ensure that they receive the nourishment needed for their spiritual life and growth. In actual fact, it will not be the authority of Rome that will judge the authenticity of our preaching and catechesis. Rather, we must see to it that it occurs at the level of our own

communities. Hence it is much to be desired that in the meetings of our pastoral teams some time be set aside for speaking of faith questions that arise in our communities and of the responses that we offer in our teaching.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BELIEVE IN GOD?

Beyond Theism and Atheism

With regard to belief in God, the first question that arises is that of the existence of God. The question is still raised and argued about today, especially in the United States, where it has become the accepted thing despite the motto *‘In God we trust’*. There are several apostles of atheism (e.g. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*) mostly from the ranks of the scientists. They show easily enough that science can adequately explain natural phenomena. And so we do not need that First Cause called ‘God’ in order to explain anything—we can do without it.

At the present time there is another type of atheism which this time comes from philosophy. I am thinking particularly of two French philosophers, Luc Ferry et André Comte-Sponville. For them the question is not whether we can explain (scientifically) the world without God, but whether human life has any meaning without God. They call themselves atheists without trying to show that God does not exist. God and religion do not mean anything to them; they go their way without God. But they do not deny all meaning of life. Further, they do not deny the spiritual dimension of life. They aim, however, to establish this spirituality, this meaning of life on a purely philosophical foundation, not a religious one.

Faced with this resurgence of atheism in our time—one might equally say, faced with this retreat of belief in God—we need to consider again the problematic of theism and atheism. This debate of belief and unbelief can no longer be seen as a battle for or against God, as if the atheists were the agents of Satan, enemies of God. It is clear that we need to get

beyond this overly simplistic problematic. We will do so if we look for the element of truth in atheism, what gives atheists grounds for rejecting belief in God—which is not the same thing as to oppose God as such. At the same time we need to ask ourselves what is the element of error, the element of illusion in belief in God, or what is often considered to be belief in God. We should then reach a position beyond theism and atheism. Which does not mean that we will reach a consensus between believers and unbelievers. The aim would be rather to establish a common ground which will allow dialogue and discussion.

God is not a Being Among Others

Let us take the first type of atheism. It obliges us to deepen our thinking about God and to go beyond the idea of God that we usually entertain. We have to admit that the idea of a God who is First Cause of the world does not stand up, at least if one understands the First Cause as a cause that is above the others, to be numbered among the others, in addition to the others, as the first link in the chain of causes. This is a notion that we must obviously abandon.

When this is understood we are led to a still more radical conclusion. Namely that God is not ‘a being’ in addition to the others, a being that is to be numbered with the others. Peter, James and I, we make three; but Peter, James, I and God do not make four. In this very precise sense God does not exist, that is to say God is not an existing individual being in addition to all others.

When one thinks about it, one clearly sees that it cannot be so. God is, by definition, the infinite. God would not be such if God were no more than a being over and above all others. As infinite, God is not a being among others, superior to the others. In other words, God is not in this sense the ‘Supreme Being’, God is ‘the entirety of being’, or ‘being itself’.

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The Reality of God: the Self-transcendence of our Being

We have said that God does not exist in the strict and precise meaning of the term ‘exist’, since God is not, strictly speaking, and ‘existing being’, an individual being to be numbered with the others. That does not mean, however, that God is not real—on the contrary. And this is what we must consider now: what is the reality of God?

We have given some indication of it already when speaking of faith as the self-transcendence of the human consciousness. We said that there is in us more than ourselves. This ‘more’ than ourselves that we are, this transcendence that we are conscious of in our inner selves, is the divine in us, that which is the origin of the thought of God. We see thus that God is not a being other than us; God is one with us. But God does not reduce himself to us, that is, to the natural and rational part of our being, of which we have mastery. God identifies himself rather with the transcendent dimension of our being, what in us is from above and which gives itself to us.

Our language conveys something of this when we speak of ‘the voice of conscience’. That interior voice is not the voice of a being other than ourselves. Yet it imposes itself on us, we do not control it. It often commands things that we do not like. It reproaches us for things that we have done willingly. It is interesting to note then that this voice of conscience is often called ‘the voice of God in us’. It is indeed the voice of our own conscience, but it is precisely the transcendent dimension of our being, of what in us is beyond us and what is in us that imposes itself on us.

God as Objectivisation of Human Self-transcendence

Here we have the origin of the thought of God in us. It is an objectivisation (a personification) of that transcendent dimension that we perceive in ourselves.

This is a normal process of our spirit, to

distinguish, to separate things that are in fact indissolubly united. For example, when I speak of the brown colour of the table where I am writing, I objectivise in my thought this colour, I speak of it as if it were an object different from the table. And yet the two, the colour and the table, are one. They are never separated: the colour is always the colour of something, and every visible thing has a colour. If we distinguish in this way things that in reality are one, it is in order to be more aware of them, to clarify the awareness that we have of them.

And so it is with our religious awareness, our awareness of God. We have a confused awareness of a transcendent dimension, of a certain transcendence within ourselves. We have a confused awareness that there is in us ‘more than ourselves’, or again, as André Gounelle likes to say, that there is in us ‘other than ourselves’. But this is no more than a confused, implicit awareness that is not yet actualised, made explicit. One might then say that this is an awareness that is not yet aware of itself. This awareness becomes explicit and actual as religious awareness when the thought of God arises.

In this way we objectify, we place before ourselves (*ob-jectum*), we represent (make present) what is nothing more, in essence, than an aspect of ourselves, the transcendent aspect of our being. God is thus conceived of as a representation of the religious awareness. The thought of God is thus a human projection, a projection of human self-transcendence. This is what atheism, especially with Feuerbach, has perceived, and it is what the believer must also take into account. The difference between the two positions consists in this: the atheist thinks that belief in God is pure projection, pure illusion, pure invention of human desire (wishful thinking); while the believer is conscious of the real foundation at the base of this projection (or representation), the foundation which is precisely human self-transcendence.

Thus we pass beyond the opposition between believers and unbelievers. More exactly,

we adopt a position beyond theism and atheism as we recognise the element of truth in each of these two positions. The atheist recognises the projections that all thought of God entails; he fails, however, to recognise the transcendent foundation at the basis of this projection. The believer, on his part, is well aware of this transcendent foundation, of the transcendence which is expressed in the thought of God; he is mistaken, however, when he takes literally the representation of God, as if God were a particular being located somewhere (or nowhere) beyond the world.

To Believe in God

Now we can express more clearly what ‘To believe in God’ signifies. To put it negatively, we must say that to believe in God does not signify believing that there exists beyond the world a being who is at the origin of all things and rules over all things. Positively, we must see the two aspects of this belief, or faith, in God: the more fundamental aspect of awareness of transcendence, and the more formal aspect of religious language.

(1) To believe in God involves first of all the awareness, the recognition of a transcendence. It is the recognition of a reality superior *to us*, about which we have spoken in terms of self-transcendence, of a reality superior *in us*.

We spoke about it then as something which is interior to us and imposes itself on us. This is how we habitually interpret the voice of conscience within us, a voice that makes demands, a voice that commands. But there are also other aspects of this voice of conscience. It is also a reassuring voice, a loving voice that assures us that we are loved in spite of all. To believe in God is fundamentally, then, to recognise and to have confidence in this voice of conscience within us. It is to recognise its demands and not to believe that we are the sole masters who have the right to distinguish good and evil according to our good pleasure. It is also to have confidence, to recognise that we are accepted, loved, despite all that is detestable and unacceptable in us. It is, as Paul

Tillich says, 'to accept being accepted despite all that is unacceptable in us'.

Returning now to the second type of atheism that we spoke about earlier, we can indeed, with Luc Ferry, speak of all this in terms of the 'meaning of life'. It is to recognise an aspect of transcendence in such a meaning of life. We are not the sole masters of the meaning of our life, as if we were the ones who give the total meaning to our life. Rather, the believer thinks that this superior reality in us that we have called 'the voice of conscience' is itself the principle of meaning, since it assures us that there is a meaning, and that we are 'called' to make actual that meaning in our life and in the world. This is what we call 'our vocation'. Each is called in this way by his own conscience. It does not signify that the meaning comes down to us from on high already predetermined, complete. In its transcendent dimension our conscience is simply the principle of meaning. It is our task then to make explicit and actual the meaning in our life.

(2) That is the most fundamental aspect of believing in God, what we have called conscience, the recognition of transcendence. Let us now turn to the other aspect, the more formal aspect, the religious expression (religious language) of this transcendence.

It is the objectivisation of the self-transcendent conscience. This objectivisation of the sense of transcendence becomes real in religious language. Instead of objectivisation, we might speak of personification of the awareness of transcendence, for religious language is personalist language in which the di-

vine transcendence is represented with a personal face, the face of 'God'.

We can see why it should be so. For thinking of God in a representation of a person is not just to think of God in Godself. It is to represent God in relation to us, in a personal relation with us. The voice of conscience thus expresses itself under the form of a God who gives commandments. But it is also, and above all, the voice of a loving God who offers to make a covenant with humankind. The decalogue is written in the context of the Covenant. Hence the importance of the Word of God in the religious language, which is for us the biblical language. The God of the Bible, the Judeo-Christian God, is a God who speaks to express his love and his will, to reveal his purposes for the world and our lives, to give meaning to history and to each of our lives.

In view of this second aspect of belief in God the question becomes: does religious language still have any significance for us? It is not a question of knowing whether the things it refers to really exist or not, but whether this language signifies, represents for us what it ought to express, our sense of transcendence. For many of our contemporaries the language of religion has become totally foreign and so they do not make use of it any more. Others reject it because they interpret it literally as though we were speaking of imaginary things floating somewhere above our heads. But for the believer, this language is always significant, nourishing, dynamising, since it gives access to the vitalising tide of transcendence which lives in us.

Dear friends, our meeting confirms in a meaningful way how much the Church needs the competent and faithful reflection of theologians on the Mystery of the God of Jesus Christ and of his Church. Without healthy and vigorous theological reflection the Church runs the risk of not fully expressing the harmony between faith and reason. At the same time, without the faithful experience of communion with the Church and adherence to her Magisterium, which is the vital space of her existence, theology would not succeed in explaining the gift of faith adequately.

—Benedict XVI to members of the International Pontifical Theological Commission, Friday, 2 December 2011.