

## II. Christian Experience

Are there Christian experiences? Is the object of Christian faith ever presented to us directly, in one of the many forms of perceiving that occur in the experience of the world? Could Christian faith be founded on someone's perception? In our natural experience there are a variety of kinds of perception, and different kinds of things are presented in each. We can distinguish among visual, auditory, and tactile experiences; we can distinguish among political, aesthetic, moral, and religious experiences; we can distinguish among the experiences of music, of drama, and of paintings. Each experience is correlated to its kind of object; there are differences not only in the ways of experiencing but in the objects made available in them. And there can be overlaps; a political experience may involve visual and auditory elements, and a religious experience may also involve an aesthetic perception. In such cases the thing presented has different aspects in what it presents to us.

Is there one kind among the many kinds of experiencing that is specifically Christian? Is there a special perception of the Christian God? Do we enjoy an experience in which the Christian God is "given" or made present? In the strict sense is there a theophany of the Christian God? There are, of course, some experiences that seem obviously to be Christian, like taking part in the sacraments; addressing in prayer God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; bringing the events of the New Testament to mind; expressing faith, hope, and charity; acting in the imitation of Christ; or being engaged in an action of the church. But if the Christian God is not a part of the world,

there is a sense in which we cannot hope to perceive or experience him, because he would have to be presented as one of the kinds of things in the world, differentiated from other kinds, and the experience that presents him would have to be differentiated from our other perceptions. Some writers have appealed to extraordinary experiences, like moments of great suffering or great happiness, of ecstasy or of a basic reappraisal of our lives, as special perceptions that make us aware of the divine. Are such experiences, which may call into question the very "world" in which we have lived, to be considered presentations of the Christian God, and can faith be founded on them?

As a setting for the discussion of this problem, we must examine natural human experience. Although there are different kinds of perceptions giving us different kinds of objects, there are no absolutely raw, uninterpreted, unarticulated givens in experience. Any givenness involves some interpretative performance on the part of the "dative" to whom the object is given. We always must do things in making the object present. Even on the simple level of perceiving objects by vision or by touch we must move around in certain ways to perceive anything as an independent object. Even feelings require a sense of anticipation and recognition, a continuous process of identifying, and an articulation in which both things outside us and we ourselves are distinguished from our sensibility. More complex perceptions require more complex interpretation. To recognize a tree as a tree involves memory, language, and perceptual identification; to make a tool present to us as a tool requires becoming able to use tools. Still more complex linguistic and thoughtful interpretation is needed to perceive such things as political, moral, aesthetic, or administrative objects, like seeing the inauguration of the president, watching someone outfox someone else, or being present when a judicial decision is made. We must involve a lot of language to "have" such objects "given" to us.

The involvement of language does not deprive what is given of its objectivity: there still remains the difference between actually seeing the inauguration and merely hearing about it;

between seeing the inauguration and seeing a picture of it; between seeing the true inauguration and seeing a deceptive facsimile; between seeing it with adequate appreciation of what is going on and seeing it confusedly. The presence of language does not turn everything into convention or subjectivity, and it does not turn everything into language. The fact that language permeates experience simply means that some objects — and most objects that are of importance to us — are complex and require articulation in order to be presented.

The interpretative dimension of our experience, both the linguistic and the nonlinguistic, comes almost entirely from the community in which we live. We assimilate from others our vocabulary and syntax, our skills and habits, and even the shape that our mobility assumes; we become ourselves first by drawing on others. Thus even the disclosures based on mobility and the use of tools come from our community; all the more do our linguistic abilities arise from it. And as we take in our language, we breathe in and out along with it the current and dominant opinions about things. Such linguistic assimilation underlies any original thinking and speaking we may be able to achieve. Written texts are only a part of this process of shaping our articulation of things; speech is more basic, and actions and behavior more basic still.

What then is to be said about Christian experience? To what extent is it articulated by language? To what extent is it the result of an interpretation of what we live through? Of course, no such thing as an unarticulated Christian "given" exists because there are no raw, unarticulated givens of any sort. All experience involves some anticipation and articulation, and if the experience is at all complex, it involves language.

Among the articulated human experiences one form can be called religious experience. There is not only a perception of places, events, and actions that can be called sacred; there is also a sense of something that is divine: a sense of the awesome, the overwhelming, that which calls for total dedication, that to which sacrifice is required, that which seems to be the origin of goodness and the discrimination of what is evil, that which is more powerful than anything human and has to do

with the origins of the human and the origins of the order we experience, that from which we cannot run away, that which comes and goes as it will. This is a special kind of experience, and it presents a special kind of being, one differentiated from the other kinds that are not divine. Even if the divine is thought to pervade other things, it must be distinguished from them; the divine appears as a part of what is, even though the highest and most powerful part. Wherever the divine is to be placed, whether in a plethora of gods, in a living force in nature, in a self-thinking mind, or in something within the human spirit, there is a religious experience and a religious perception that makes it present; such experience must be differentiated from the aesthetic, moral, political, and other sorts of human presentation.

The Christian sense of the divine is not simply equivalent to what is made present in such religious perception. Christian belief involves a natural sense of the divine, but it goes beyond "the gods" and the human experience of them. God as creator is not a part of the world, and he therefore cannot be experienced as part of it. Language is especially important in establishing this sense of the divine; we believe in God because we have heard of him, from the church, from the Bible, and ultimately from Christ. Our faith and understanding of God are not simply based on religious experience. Because of the unperceivability of God the teaching and the speech of the church take on an importance greater than the interpretative importance of language and tradition in all human experience. We could not expect human experience, for example, to "work out" Christianity and the Christian distinction between God and the world. There is a facticity, a necessary historical element in having the church somehow there to transmit the words, message, and actions of Christ, together with the sense of God that they imply.

This is why the church as a teacher is so important in Christianity and why "dogmas" play so much a part in Christian tradition. The mystery of the church and the nature of its teaching authority are related to the understanding of God and the world reached in Christianity. There is no natural human

experience or perception, no achievement of philosophers or thoughtful persons, no artistic achievement, and no accomplishment of holy men, that could bring about the Christian life and the Christian distinction that is the articulation at the core of that life. The disclosures that occurred in the words and actions of Christ, and that were recorded as disclosures in the scriptures, were necessary to bring the Christian faith about. The need for revelation and for the church to preserve it stems not from sectarian claims of special enlightenment; it is based on what is proposed as the object of belief. Furthermore, Christianity is not just one more cultural form adopted by the religious instinct (although it is indeed also that). Christianity questions the world and understands God and his involvement in the world in such a way as to go beyond what the religious sense could present. It is not simply another articulation of the world or the whole, not simply one among many identifications of what we experience as divine.

Our reaction to Christian realities involves the natural religious instinct and the "object" that this instinct presents, but the Christian divinity surpasses such natural presences. As an example, in his commentary on Psalm 127 St. Hilary discusses natural human fear and says, "This fear then is not taught but comes from natural weakness. We do not learn what ought to be feared; rather, the things we fear themselves instill their own dread in us." But in contrast to this spontaneous fear, he says, "The fear of God is something to be learned, because it is taught. It is found not in fright, but in the way of teaching."<sup>1</sup> Analogously, the structures of natural religious experience do not, without "teaching," present Christian divinity; but they are allowed to remain intact, though purified, by the sense of the divine reached in Christianity. The object of Christian reverence does not exercise a special kind of impact on the passions and sensibility that would be comparable to, and differentiated from, the impression made by objects presented in wordly experience; there is no special Christian feeling. But Christian life does exercise the natural attitudes and sentiments in the light of Christian belief and in response to the God proclaimed in such faith.

It is necessary to maintain a judicious balance between the natural instinct and the Christian interpretation. Thus, one of the human concerns that is involved in religion is the concern with health and with the continuation of life. We pray for the healing of the sick, and Jesus accepted this aspect of religion during his life when he answered the prayers of many who were sick and crippled, blind and mute. And in the present, prayers for the sick, and prayers by the sick, are a part of the Christian life. But it is also possible to lose one's balance here and, either in the case of an individual or in the case of a sect, to turn Christianity into a kind of support for good health. Structures and behavior may develop in such a way that no context beyond that of good health — or perhaps security in life or financial success or military victory — is recognized. This constitutes a shift from Christian belief to the reverence of the necessities of life. We should be neither amused nor scandalized if such things happen. The natural necessities are always there with their insistence, and as human beings we are always quite inclined to bow, even religiously, before them. It requires careful attention to the integrity of doctrine to keep the Christian distinction intact and alive and in control of the natural religious instinct, not in the service of it.

Similarly, a person may express the conviction that "God wants me to be here, where I am now, to do what I can with and for those who are with me." This kind of sentiment need not, in itself, be Christian, and the experience or feeling it expresses is not a kind of perception of the divine will. It can be a religious recognition of that strange necessity that seems to bind us in our being to the place and time, family and society, context and history, in which we actually are. It can be a religious appreciation of a natural necessity. This sentiment of the necessity of our placement can of course be absorbed into the Christian belief in creation and into the understanding of God's providence implied by creation, but the Christian elements are not a further sensibility or feeling. They interpret the experience and purify it, but they are themselves acquired as beliefs by hearing the word of God and not by a perception. But they do shed light on the natural perceptions we have and

bring out the full truth that is in them. Christian belief not only leaves intact abstract truths about the natural; it also enhances our experience of the necessity of things.

The blend between a natural perception and Christian interpretation can also occur in regard to more theoretical discourse or writing. There can be blends between intellectual fascination and Christian religious reverence, and it is always possible for us to mistake the intellectual experience for the Christian reaction. For example, in Christian writings we may be deeply impressed by the verbal structures or by the analysis of some natural pattern, like temporality, friendship, hope and futurity, or change and permanence, and we may suppose that our admiration is a kind of sense of the divine. But the impression made by such things when they are articulated can again be the religious reverence for things brought out and recognized as ultimate necessities in the world. We may be moved by Augustine's articulation of memory and think we are responding to something specifically Christian. Such reverent recognitions can, by themselves, simply be intellectual insight; if they are to be blended into the life of Christian belief, they must be made in the light of the Christian distinction between God and the world and with the faith, hope, and charity associated with that distinction.

Writers like Augustine succeed in exercising the disclosure of necessities within the context of faith; they bring out the natural, but they do so within Christian belief. If some other writers fail in this theological enterprise, their failure consists in allowing the disclosure of the natural necessity to stand simply on its own and to govern the way we interpret Christian faith and the Christian sense of God. They interpret the Christian in terms of the natural, instead of the natural in terms of the Christian. One example of this reversal would be the interpretation of eschatology as the expression of human futurity and progress; another would be the interpretation of creation as the living center of time, the origin of meaning and order in the world we experience. Still others might be the interpretation of God as the sum of the ideals that human beings project for themselves, and the interpretation of Christian faith as human authenticity.

In contrast to such reversals the successful theologian brings out natural necessities in the special light that Christian faith provides: a light that stems, not from one more intellectual intuition, similar in kind to philosophical or scientific insight, but from the Christian distinction between God and the world, with the particular blend of faith, action, and reason that this distinction requires.

The blend of intellect and faith has a parallel in the balance required between music and Christian prayer. A beautiful hymn may fill us with religious reverence; this is appropriate if the beauty of the song is in the service of our worship of God and if our reverence is directed toward the creator and redeemer. But it may be the melodic experience that really moves us, the aesthetic perception of a necessity of form, something analogous to our intellectual understanding of a natural necessity. Sometimes, indeed, the aesthetic attraction may be so great that the inappropriateness of the music or of the words of the song is not noticed, and the incongruity of singing it in a Christian church may not be perceived. *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, that song to a modern version of Ares, is a good example of this; its bloodthirsty wrath, sword, and trumpet in the service of a particular army are quite out of place in a Christian setting, but its melody is so stirring and its phonemic patterns so attractive that the people who sing it most probably do not appreciate the meaning of the words they pronounce.

Because the Christian sense of the divine does not provide a natural perception appropriate to itself, all Christian experience must blend natural feeling, sentiment, and insight with what is believed in faith. The natural experiences are given a tone and an illumination by what is appreciated as necessarily absent to the wayfarer. Even the apostles needed faith in their experience of Christ. In writing about St. Thomas the Apostle and his encounter with the risen Christ, Gregory the Great says, "He saw one thing, he believed another. The divinity could not have been seen by a mortal man. So he saw a man but acknowledged God by saying, 'My Lord and my God.' By seeing he believed, and in recognizing the true man he cried out that he was God, the God he could not see."<sup>2</sup> All the natural experi-

ences, with the various presentations they involve, are read and appreciated and felt in the light of what has to be absent, and, moreover, not in the light of just any sort of absence, but only of this singular kind which is appropriate to the God who could be all that he is, in undiminished goodness and greatness, even if there had been no world. This absence is not like that of things in the world, and the light it sheds is not like that of anything else.

But have we not overemphasized absence and the nonexperienced? Have we not drained the Christian sense of God of its affective importance in human life? Certainly there are the gifts of the Holy Spirit, Christian joy and delectation in God, the consolations of prayer, the sense mystics have of the Christian God, the Christian comfort that can come to those who are suffering, and the strength that fills martyrs. Are not such things experienced by believers? And is not God somehow present in them? Such things are experienced, but the experience of them is precisely the involvement of human feelings, sentiments, and insight in the act of faith, in the appreciation of the God who created and redeemed us. He is presented to us and addressed by us as the one who is absent in the way only he can be absent; as the one who therefore affects us in the way only he can affect us. In Christianity both God and the being of the world become mysteries and objects of contemplation in a way that does not occur in other religions. It may be this that Louis Bouyer has in mind when he writes that "mysticism properly so called is a purely Christian experience" and "the very notion of mysticism is one which appeared only in Christianity."<sup>3</sup> The categoriality of the Christian faith, its kerygma and statement, can indeed settle into the less articulated state of "religious experience" or "simple contemplation," but it never completely lets go. It must remain sufficiently there for us to be referred to God, in some minimal degree at least, and not simply to be lost in him. To be lost in him is the privilege of the beatific vision, not of our present state; we are always in need of someone to indicate God to us. Thus even St. John of the Cross, who claims that in true mystical experience "it is God himself who is perceived and tasted,"<sup>4</sup> says that the

access we have to God in faith is more reliable than that given in religious perception: "It behaves [the soul] to keep the faith, even though the truths already revealed to it be revealed again; and to believe them, not because they are now revealed anew, but because they have already been sufficiently revealed to the Church; rather it must close its understanding to them, holding simply to the doctrine of the Church and to its faith, which, as Saint Paul says, enters through hearing."<sup>5</sup>

To live the Christian distinction between God and the world is not merely to grasp a theoretical distinction. It is not just the achievement of categoriality. It is more like living the distinction between husband and wife or child and parent. It engages our affections and takes place in our actions. It permits us to define ourselves in a way that could not occur without this distinction. It orders our dispositions and sentiments, including our religious sensibility, in a way in which it alone can order them. The world and the sacred have a Christian tone for us because of the Christian distinction in whose light we experience them, and the tone can become more pronounced for those who live the Christian life with greater dedication and love. But such experiencing insists precisely on a unique absence, on a term that must prompt faith and hope but not direct vision: "*Intra me et circa me es, et non te sentio*; you are within me and around me, and I feel you not" (*Prosligion*, ch. 17).<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

1. St. Hilary of Poitiers, *Tractatus super psalmos*, edited by Anthony Zingerle *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum*, vol. 22. (Vienna: Tempusky, 1891), p. 629; *Tractatus in psalmum CXXVII*, §§1-2.
2. St. Gregory the Great, *Homilia XXVI in Evangelia*, §8, in *Migne, Patrologia Latina*, vol. 76, col. 1202.
3. Louis Bouyer, *Introduction to Spirituality*, translated by Mary Perkins Ryan (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1961), p. 301.
4. St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II, XXXVI, §5, from

*The Complete Works of Saint John of the Cross*, vol. 1, translated by E. Allison Peers (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1934).

5. *Ibid.*, II, XXVII, §4.

6. On the relationship between Christian belief and political life see Appendix III, "Revelation and Political Philosophy."