

# FAITH AND MORALS

By PETER HARRIS

IMPLICIT IN THE faith and education we have received as catholics, there is often a latent assumption that divine revelation affords us a knowledge of two kinds of truth: truths about unknown divine 'facts' on the one hand, and truths of the moral order or divine 'laws' or 'precepts' on the other. Truths of the first kind would include the Trinity: that God is Father, Son and holy Spirit, yet still one God; the Incarnation: that the Son became man and therefore unites in one divine person two natures, divine and human; that men will one day be judged and, according to their merits, will live for ever either in heaven or hell. Truths of the second kind would be moral ones, affecting human behaviour: that God forbids killing, adultery, theft and so on; and that Jesus further defined such divine laws so that their reference is not only to actions but also to the intention of doing them, even where such intention never proceeds beyond private thoughts.

This twofold division of revealed truth has been made explicit in much that is said about the scope of the teaching authority of the Church. For example, it has generally been taught that papal infallibility has to do with matters of 'faith or morals'.<sup>1</sup> This division of truth into what might be called revealed 'facts' and revealed 'laws' is an important and recurring theme in the history of christian thinking about revelation; nor do I wish to underrate its theological significance or utility. But this division is dangerous in that it leads to a dualism in living as well as in categories of thought.

Most of us are worried at times by the enormous gap in our lives between the great 'truths' that we profess to believe, and our impoverished attempts to 'do something about it'. A somewhat misguided non-believer once remarked of catholics that if we really *believed* the doctrine of the Real Presence we should crawl on our bellies before the blessed Sacrament (misguided, because the image

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<sup>1</sup> The theological discussion of what was meant by the expression '*fides et mores*' in various conciliar contexts is a good deal more complex than popular teaching has suggested. For a good modern study of this question, the reader might consult Bévenot, M.: 'Faith and Morals' in the Councils of Trent and Vatican I, in the *Heythrop Journal* 3 (1962), pp 15-30.

of God he must have had in his mind was hardly that of the christian God). But he had a point, none the less: this great truth seemed to have no proportionate counterpart in christian behaviour.

It is reasonable to conclude that if the distinction between faith and morals conceals from us the intimate relationship between the nature of God (object of faith) and what he requires of us or how we should respond to him (the moral content of belief), it will be all too easy to believe correctly, yet respond minimally. In a very distorted form, this dualism can give rise to the strange attitude of paying great attention to orthodoxy of belief, while maintaining a style of life which is really 'worldly' in the pejorative sense: a style which can accept notions about power, privilege, class, wealth and so on, which are entirely out of harmony with the real 'truth' of the gospel, yet finds its justification in assiduous fulfilment of 'religious duties'.

A further danger is that it becomes possible for us to disregard or blind ourselves to the real meaning of important truths of faith and their implications. An obvious example would be the doctrine of the Trinity. We have a notional understanding of its importance; we call it a 'truth necessary for salvation' and look askance at anyone calling himself christian who questions it. Yet for many it is a divine conundrum whose primary importance is that it states something about God which we do not understand, yet count it important and meritorious to believe. The reason may simply be that God has revealed it and we cannot make any headway at all in understanding it; which is, of course, to accept divine 'mysteries' in a purely negative sense of 'what cannot be understood'. It is to ignore the aspect of revelation as 'saving truth', as having a vital and important positive content.

This is not the place to try to give an account of the positive content and significance of the doctrine of the Trinity. I merely call attention to the fact that when faith and morals are understood as two *different kinds* of revealed truth, we do not feel that the doctrine of the Trinity impels us to respond to God in any particular way beyond believing that it is true. The real danger here is that to accept the separation of what God *is* from what he *requires of us* is already to have an image of God which sets him at a distance from us. It is to have an image of God which can be separated out from the immediacy of our own experience. His presence to us is being mediated through truths *about* him and *about* his will or commands for us. It is as though the veil of the temple has been patched together again and rehung. The holiness and transcendence of God are re-

vealed in the New Testament as pressing upon us with immediate urgency. Our list of facts and precepts enables us to put him away again beyond the firmament of heaven. A specious clarity has been obtained by distance; and we are saved from the closeness of his presence.

What I am trying to get at here may be at least partially illustrated by reflecting on our own deep personal relationships. It is not possible to conceive of a deep friendship in which we would be able to dissociate what a friend wants of us from what he is for us. The relationship could not be described adequately by drawing up a descriptive list of his character traits and an entirely separate list of the things he asks one to do or to be. Clearly our relationship with God is not adequately described even in the terms of human relationship, yet the analogy may serve to underline the problem about dissociating description and response.

*The truth revealed by Jesus*

'For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice'.<sup>2</sup> It could be argued that this reply of Jesus to Pilate's interrogation is the central statement of the fourth gospel, situated as it is at the dramatic centre of Jesus's final confrontation with the established and entrenched powers of 'this world'. Faith is precisely to 'hear the voice' of Jesus: that is, to 'receive him',<sup>3</sup> to accept him for all that he is. About such an acceptance there is a fundamental unity, which is immensely more important than distinguishing between what we believe about him and all that is implicit in hearing him. He makes demands upon us precisely by what he *is* and by what he *is for us*.

The New Testament call to faith is never a call simply to give one's assent to the truth of a description of God, or the heavenly world, or to a compendium of divine laws and precepts. The idea that the only obvious relationship between this world and the world to come is that this world sets the scene for a human testing, and that the divine commandments are like the questions in a kind of obedience test, the result of which either qualifies us, or fails us, for transfer to another and better world, is entirely out of harmony with the teaching of the New Testament. There is scarcely an instance in the New Testament where the words that we translate as 'faith' refer

<sup>2</sup> Jn 18, 37.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 1, 12.

simply to an intellectual assent to revealed statements of truth. Faith is always a call to an attitude of the whole person, an attitude of trust, obedience and discipleship. It is therefore wholly personal both in its source and in the kind of response which is appropriate. Jesus could never be imagined as saying: 'Now that is what God is; next I will tell you what he wants you to do'. The revelation of God in Jesus is primarily and above all the revelation of how man is and should be related to God. This implies both a revealing of the divine 'nature' and a revealing to man of his own 'nature'; but neither is in any way separable from the relationship that obtains between them, a relationship which cannot be described because it has to be made and lived, as any personal relationship must be.

The basic assertions about truth and faith are: 'God is true to you; be true to him!' If we are to understand what 'true' means in *this* context, we have to think about what is involved in being true to another human being. It is only when we look for a meaning of truth along such lines as these that the mysteriousness and richness of God's being, his transcendence and holiness, can be preserved intact. The danger in any other approach is that the immediacy of our contact with God is liable to be lost; so that God is then reduced to some kind of idol, over which, through knowledge, we have gained some kind of control.<sup>4</sup> Again, we may refer to our experience of human relationships and the ways in which we are able to depersonalize others, attempt to control them and use them for our purposes, and so destroy the possibility of any true personal relationship.

Nevertheless, there can be discerned in the New Testament (especially in the gospel of John) an idea of truth which is something more than the meaning of 'true', as it is expressed, for example, in the phrase 'true love'. Revelation for John is the disclosure of the 'real state of affairs', of how things are between God and man; it is, therefore, a revelation of the nature of man and his world. So much we can learn simply by an etymological study of the fourth gospel and the way in which it uses words. The correction that the word of God offers is not simply the correction of false vision, like the adjustment of an optical defect. Nor does it correct man's understanding

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<sup>4</sup> The story of Adam's test with regard to the tree of knowledge is not, as might appear on the face of it, an anthropomorphism about a 'jealous' God who fears man becoming his equal: it is rather a warning against that idolatry which consists in presuming we can know the mystery of life and so bring it under our control. The loser in this situation is obviously man, who has thereby depersonalized his God and so inevitably broken with any life-giving contact with him.

by supplying some hitherto unknown knowledge about another world and the conditions upon which man may successfully negotiate the passage from one to the other. If we want to try to get at John's meaning in modern terms we might find ourselves saying something like this. Jesus does not simply reveal the existence of another separate world, where God lives and where man may also live one day, if he fulfills the conditions of entry. In a way, there is no question of the existence of a second, separate world at all; rather we are offered an entirely new vision of our world and of the possibility of its transformation into the 'world to come'.

The point may be better understood if we consider the different ways in which we use the word 'world'. This is important and not simply juggling with words, because the New Testament can be distorted and impoverished by a failure to understand the full richness and significance of the language it uses. Sometimes by 'world' we refer simply to the physical universe and its contents, including ourselves, of course; but note that this only becomes a 'world', in the sense that we are trying to uncover, through the way we choose to understand our place in it, what we are to do with it, what are our accepted values and attitudes in it. So, from the different choices that we make, the one 'cosmos' can be several different 'worlds'. 'Worlds' are of man's making: they are human constructions. We need only to refer to instances in which we recognize people as distorting things by 'shaping their own world around themselves and their own selfish interests'. We are capable of obliterating from our worlds things which we do not face up to, which we do not want to have anything to do with. In fact, most of the time, in one way or another, we reduce the world to a particular order by means of significant omissions. So, for example, the description of the murder of the civilian population of a village in Vietnam can become 'neutralization' for the military mind, which is involved in a campaign and is therefore forced to reduce the people who occupy the field of strategy to 'elements' in a military puzzle or problem. It would be too distracting from the successful conduct of a war to listen to the screams, to look into the terror-stricken eyes. So, for military purposes, that human world has to be re-described as a military objective which has to be 'neutralized'.

I have chosen an example of rather blatant and obvious 'world re-definition' in order to get at the kind of 'untruth' about this world which, in less obvious but equally distorting ways, is normally woven into the fabric of our ways of understanding. It is this darkness

which the truth of God aims to dispel. The fourth gospel understands that it is Jesus in his person who challenges the 'world' we have constructed for ourselves. (The absolutely fundamental importance of the doctrine of 'original sin' lies in this, that it describes what happened 'in the beginning' in order to contrast the worlds of human construction, and their inexorable blindness, with the possibility of a 'paradise': it is this web of blindness and lies that is challenged by the 'truth' of Jesus's person.)

Faith, then, begins as a willingness to call into question the world of our own constructing: a world whose very definition and description (ours) already includes, by implication, the reactions and responses which we consider appropriate. The moral teaching of Jesus constantly aims to question these in-built presumptions and definitions. The world of God is not physically another one, but the same world as it might be but for our own unwillingness to discover a new meaning in it, to be open to a 'new creation'. If we say that the idea of truth in John's gospel is the disclosure of the 'real state of affairs', we understand that Jesus discloses the world of our making as open to the judgment, and thereby to the healing, of God. It is not a new map of previously unvisited territories, but a call to lay our own world open to this scrutiny and judgment of God in order that we may discover what it is for, and what it might become. The weight of Jesus's teaching about calling one's brother 'fool' is not a condemnation of bad language, nor even simply a warning against anger. It is a warning that once we have defined or situated any human being in our own world as 'fool', we have already made our presumptions about appropriate responses of an inhuman kind, and are therefore irretrievably lost in a false world with regard to him.

The psalm which Matthew represents as in Jesus's mind during his passion (Matthew is not afraid to hear from the lips of Jesus the psalmist's cry of dereliction) offered to Jesus some vivid descriptions of his executioners: 'a pack of dogs', 'a gang of villains', 'a herd of bulls'.<sup>5</sup> Yet when he looked at them (he who 'knew what was in man'), he said only, 'Father, forgive them; they know not what they do'.<sup>6</sup> Even at this moment of incredible pain he will not set them at a distance from himself by such a definition; his gaze is still entirely personal and immediate. Such is the 'truth' of Jesus.

In such a way of looking at the world there is no possibility of escape from the 'immediacy' of human experience into dual cate-

<sup>5</sup> Ps 21.

<sup>6</sup> Lk 23, 34.

gories of descriptions of fact and assessment of obligation. Yet the problem still presents itself to us, who simply do not know how to love in this way. Even when we have become disciples in principle, we still find ourselves divided. There remains an enormous gap between our 'will to what is good' and the 'law in our members'. We simply find ourselves incapable of that leap into the immediacy of response which we recognize in Jesus. Faith does not preclude but in fact demands our acceptance of such a realism about ourselves. But in this situation it demands that we learn to describe the world in a new way (the area of 'faith' in the sense of doctrine, dogmatic truth etc.), and to learn painfully the kind of response that this re-description calls for (the area of 'moral' truth). We have to accept that there exists a real gap between understanding and action, between knowing and doing; and that in this gap exists the dualism of our 'being'. We have to admit that what separates 'this world' from the 'world to come' is not physical space, nor even simply temporal distance, but 'human' space and 'human' time. Mind and will, understanding and loving, knowing and doing express the dualism in our being which forces us, in christian language, to talk about 'faith *and* morals'.

### *Conclusion*

If there is any truth in these thoughts, we need to see that the function of credal and doctrinal activity is not simply description of another 'invisible' world, but a learning how to describe our world properly and with a view to its reconstruction. It is interesting and significant that those who find formal religion somewhat irrelevant are normally not interested in doctrine and dogma, which they see as a mixture of myth and fantasy, yet often remain interested in christian moral debate. It indicates a failure in our understanding of the nature and purpose of such doctrine that the christian 'description' of the world apparently remains disconnected from our understanding of 'what is to be done'. The duality in ourselves, which we are compelled to accept if we are realists, has become the acceptance of a radical dualism in which there is no vital link between the area of 'faith' and the area of 'morals'; whereas talk about either is meaningless without the other and to be properly understood the one must be seen as flowing from the other.

The greatest disrespect we can pay to the doctrinal heritage of the christian centuries is to isolate it in sacred vessels, to set it at a distance from ourselves and venerate and worship it, as in a mon-

strance, and not to be asking of it continually how it helps us to re-describe our world, our lives in it, our relation to one another in Christ to God, and so to 'the world to come'. Unless our dogmatic formulas, our precious creeds and articles of faith, disclose to us something of the 'true state of affairs' (in John's sense of truth), then they can only serve to set us at a distance from the God who would urgently speak to us in the whole fabric of our lives in the world.