

THE THEOLOGY OF RENEWAL

CONVERSION AND THEOLOGY

By RICHARD ROACH

LATE IN the summer of 1968, BBC Television showed a film clip from the Biafran war in which a young Biafran was summarily executed. Nigerian troops had apprehended him as he searched through a war-ravaged Biafran town for traces of his family. The Nigerian officer questioned him curtly and briefly. The point of the questioning was to determine whether or not the lad was a civilian or a soldier. But the interrogating officer had no desire to find out whether or not he was a civilian; he wanted to make out that the lad was a soldier so that he could shoot him. (I am not saying that if the boy had been a soldier he was handled properly. The pretext was meant only to serve the Nigerian as an excuse.) The answers he gave to the questions put to him were making it quite clear that he was a civilian. Abruptly, the officer stopped the questioning and called the lad to attention. On receiving a prompt reply, the officer cynically remarked to those about him that obviously a boy who knew how to come to attention was a soldier. In a flash the boy could see what was going to happen, for the officer drew his revolver. The lad appeared to cry out: 'Jesus, save me; Jesus, save me'. He was shot dead.

Not very long ago a young girl in Chicago – I believe she was fourteen – had the pleasant job of babysitting for a neighbour's infant one afternoon. She took the child out in his perambulator and was pushing him down a quiet residential sidewalk. When they arrived at the intersection at the end of the block, the girl took the normal precautions for crossing – she looked to the left and to the right – then, pushing the perambulator before her, she stepped off the curb. Suddenly a car, travelling many miles over the speed limit, careered down the residential street. The girl could have jumped back, leaving the pram in the path of the car; instead with all her might she pushed the pram across the street where it bumped against the curb, spilling the infant on the sidewalk. The baby

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suffered bruises and scratches; the car killed the young girl instantly.

In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl remarks quite simply that those who entered the Nazi gas chambers reciting the *Our Father* or the *Shema Israel* defeated Hitler. Only a man with specific horizon, with a certain world-view, can make such a statement. That view is the result of religious conversion.

Through that conversion a man or a woman finds the ability to affirm that mankind (self and others), the world, and God – no matter how named – are good. He or she finds this affirmation possible even in the face of death. In the ordinary course of daily living, the converted person finds a deep motive in love to respond to values which do not fit into his schedule of interests and satisfactions; which may even require heroic self-sacrifice. The values are affirmed and chosen not because they bring pleasure and fulfilment: they may or may not do that in their relatively immediate consequences. Rather, they are reasonably affirmed and responsibly chosen because they are worthwhile in themselves; they are values. But the matter does not end there. Such a person is able intelligently to grasp and reasonably affirm those values, is able responsibly to choose them, because he or she is in love with Someone. The deepest source of action, the hidden spring that may rise up to heroic self-sacrifice, reveals itself as 'being in love'. This love is so unlimited that the self affirms this love and its consequences beyond any recognisable limit, even at the cost of one's life.

In our permissive society there are many opportunities for a full sex gratification which meets a deep human hunger for satisfaction. Many people reject these opportunities: some, certainly, from a neurotic fear that leads to a negative repression of certain of life's possibilities. But others, many others, do so because they cannot justify the using of another person, even the mutual using, on the basis of their own need for satisfaction. The texture of reality as they perceive it must mean more than the meeting of needs for satisfaction. This grasp of reality can be so strong and specific for some that they set aside the quest for certain satisfactions in order to affirm and choose more clearly the ontic values other persons constitute in the light of their unlimited love for an Ultimate Someone.

From the same motives and through the same love, some mothers bear with tedium and routine for the sake of their families, becoming not less but more human. Some fathers work hard to support their families; they remain faithful to one woman in spite of natural limits which such fidelity sets in terms of certain gratifications, and

in the face of many opportunities to obtain these gratifications elsewhere. Even children are known to obey and remain loyal to the family unit in spite of its obvious limitations and the many opportunities for leaving it. They do so not compulsively, but lovingly. In all these achievements there is some cost with respect to individual satisfactions; in sustaining the effort egoism dies. But for these persons the 'dying' leads not to cynicism over the limited satisfactions of life, or even to despair. Rather these persons grow in love and loving. Their characters are rich; they are deep and peaceful persons. Their living shows a loving response to a life greater than their individual existence. And that loving response is the effect of religious conversion.

The personal religious event which we call conversion is, of course, no new phenomenon: there have been many, through the ages, who have accounted it illusion. From this point of view, the Biafran lad facing his death makes a few obscure and futile sounds, signifying nothing more than wishful thinking concerning the memory of the well-known story of a Semitic religious figure – of whom little is really known, except that he became the central figure in an astoundingly successful resurrection myth, which still survives in our day. On a charitable interpretation, the success of the myth would appear in some part due to the exalted ethical teachings ascribed to the leading figure, Jesus. But on balance, that boy's last cries can hardly be said to signify anything.

The young girl from Chicago said nothing anyone heard as she died. But her apparently instinctive response, whereby she saved the life of her charge and surrendered her own, embodies forth in a final act a character formed on values that pointed to self-sacrifice through love. A brother Jesuit priest recounted the story to me at the time of his ordination, in order to explain a modest but beautiful chalice he was using. The chalice was a gift of the girl's parents, a memorial of the values she lived out. On the other hand, one may claim to interpret the authenticity of this young girl's choice without perceiving any grounds for such unselfishness except her own decision, or that of her parents, to determine herself in this fashion. One may claim that it has no meaning beyond the admiration one may or may not feel for such self-sacrifice. One may claim that it points to no reality beyond the tragic absurdity of much human living and dying, and a statistical law which assesses the probability of an irresponsible driver speeding in a residential district and killing a pedestrian. The statistics are available from the Chicago police.

Certainly it is an admirable gesture of the human spirit to show that it is not crushed by tyranny, even when faced with death in a gas chamber. But the references to God in the prayer formulae appear to many as so much wishful thinking. Some even feel that hate-filled, violent defiance, no matter how futile, would have been more meaningful.

As far as I know, there is no self-evident premiss from which I could start a logical-deductive argument to refute the opinions sketched in the preceding paragraphs. Nor could I build a similar argument for the contrary view. If by demonstration one means an argument that proceeds from premisses to conclusions under the control of logic, there is no clear demonstration of the error of those who do not see any reality beyond the horizon of this world: in the ways of humanly dying that we have recounted, they must eventually see only meaninglessness. For the contrary view, I may appeal to arguments for the existence of God. I may hold that these arguments are valid, and I do; but in fact they are not convincing without a personal event that transforms the individual's way of looking at things. I may appeal to revelation, and that revelation may be true and from God, as I believe that it is; but it does not mean anything to anyone without the personal transformation called conversion.

In another culture, the logical-deductive arguments that proved the existence of God or clarified the meaning of revelation rested on what the educated majority took for granted as plausible or proven or evident. Aristotle was the model for science. Appeals to data as warrants for conclusions took second place to appeals to authority or necessary first principles. That day has passed. Now we theologize in a different world, a world in which science is hypothetical and eminently successful; a world in which appeals to data are the necessary warrants for conclusions.

For some, theology's efforts wholeheartedly to enter this new world inevitably lead to subjectivism, relativism, the loss of faith. For persons with such convictions, the sure foundations of faith were expressed in the older world now passed; yet unless they are retained as expressed in the old order, the faith itself will be jeopardized. The record of many sad attempts of theology to be contemporary lends credence to this reactionary stand.

Still, reaction in the long run is no stand at all. It is for this reason that theology requires in our new world a foundation in the data of lived religion in order to construct a method of reflection different from the logical-deductivist model that served an earlier age.

Religious conversion supplies theology with that foundation. The turning from the religious event as lived conversion to a systematic explication of the event's structure and content, launches a creative theology capable of working in the present for the future.

Nor does this concentration on the understanding of conversion demand that theology abandon reflection upon the objective character of God and his revelation and lose it in a subjectivism or psychologism. To treat the authentic subjectivity achieved in religious conversion without its objective correlative would be to treat the human acts of the Biafran lad, the Chicago teenager, the victims of Hitler's gas chambers, as expressive of unreality.

God's love is real, and God is really other than the psychological, subjective states of his creatures. A study, therefore, of his love in its effect of transforming persons fails if it cannot find his reality in his most intimate effects. Religious conversion is the transformation of a human being through God's love. To know this love through being transformed into a lover is to know God, as St. John affirmed when he wrote his well-known exhortation: 'Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and *knows God*. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love'.¹

I have chosen these examples and designed these reflections in the light of a remark of a modern theologian, that a renewed theology will find its foundation in conversion.² Religious conversion is a lived event; theology is a specialized intellectual activity. They belong to two different orders of human activity, but as part to whole. Theology is a part related to the whole of human living. Conversion transforms the whole of human living. Through conversion, the human subject, in a private though not solipsistic fashion, comes to ask the questions and get the answers which put him in touch with the realities, now explicitly known, upon which theology reflects.

In addition to the realities attained by all in conversion, no matter how they may be explained and leading to faith articulated in no matter what tradition – perhaps leading only to the life of the sincere at heart, there is the public revelation of God. Only the converted can comprehend this revelation; to the rest it is meaningless. 'The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for

¹ 1 Jn 4, 7-8.

² Fr. Bernard S. F. Lonergan S. J., in a paper read at the Congress on The Theology of Renewal, at Toronto in the summer of 1967. Cf 'Theology in its New Context', in *Theology of Renewal*, Vol 1, ed. Shook, L. K. (Montreal, 1968), pp 34-46.

they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned'.¹ Further, if this public revelation in Christ Jesus is correct, normative, and definitive – and I believe it is, then the interior activity of the same God dynamically points to its acceptance, though it seems in his providence that the vast majority live through this life without grasping the connection explicitly. Nevertheless, the love that transforms all who do not reject it is the love incarnated in Jesus Christ and shown forth in his Passion, Death and Resurrection for all time.

Because of this love, I think it is reasonable to suspect that the Biafran lad called out to Jesus because his hopes for personal meaning and existence rested on God's known love poured into his heart. In the clear example of Christ he knew that suffering and death did not separate from this love. In this love was his life that no execution could terminate.

Because of this love, I think it is reasonable to believe that the young girl from Chicago found through her death the fulfilment that she could have missed in a long life.

Because of this love, I believe that Hitler's victims triumphed over their oppressor.

Here, I suggest, are people who can make sense out of a host of statements and symbols related to religion. In terms of these statements and symbols they affirm or indicate reality. A theologian who is striving to do more than investigate in an accurate and scholarly manner the product of past theological endeavour must be able to do as much as the people of our 'conversion examples'. Through his explicit and reflective grasp of the lived event, conversion, he must find a firm foundation from which to theologize in the present for the future.

As a lived event, conversion, its structure and contents, is data. Even the public revelation in its lived and living context is data from the point of view of a non-deductive theological project. It is in this sense that Fr Lonergan uses the adjective 'empirical' for such a new theology. But the lived event need not remain merely a constellation of data. It is the transformation of a conscious subject. Through the heightening of consciousness and careful reflection, this event can become explicit knowledge. Since as a lived event it gives the subject the possibility of understanding anything in the area of 'God-talk', its explicitation through methodical reflection generates

¹ 1 Cor 2, 14.

an explanation of the dimensions in which, and a set of categories with which, the theologian may express a deepening understanding of religious expression and symbolism, including the expression of public revelation. The theologian facing so great a task needs not only explanatory dimensions and fundamental categories; he needs also, and pre-eminently, a clear reflective understanding of the lived event that makes his own religious understanding possible. St. Paul could count off the fruits of the Spirit and expect the Galatians to understand: 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control: against such there is no law'.¹ It is not too much to ask theologians methodically to clarify the transformation effected by the gift of the same Spirit, so that the theological project has a sound foundation. We may ask our theologians to understand the event even better than did the Galatians.

When Lonergan says that '... if the empirical theology of today is reflection, it follows that theology will be reflection on conversion',² the term 'empirical' in its context clearly does not imply empiricism; rather it is meant to convey the judgment that a renewed theology – a theology in a new context – is no longer deductivist, proceeding from premisses to conclusions under the control of logic, but rather a matter of proceeding from a methodical inquiry into data through understanding to the sort of affirmations a reflective grasp of the preceding operations and their content would justify. Therefore, theology requires a foundation different from premisses 'excerpted' from Sacred Scripture and Tradition or furnished by 'self-evident' truths. Reflection on conversion provides that foundation.³

Lonergan describes conversion as '... a radical transformation on which follows, on all levels of living, an interlocking series of changes and developments. What hitherto was unnoticed becomes vivid and present. What had been of no concern becomes a matter of high import'.⁴ So great is the transformation of one's values and apprehensions that there results a change in one's self. This in turn begins to transform one's personal relations, one's attitude towards living and the world, and one's relationship with the ultimate, no matter how one objectifies or names this reality. It is this transformation we have tried to indicate through examples. So Fr. Lonergan

¹ Gal 5, 22.

² *Op. cit.*, p 45.

³ On this matter Fr. Lonergan has spoken and written clearly and at length. His new book *Method in Theology*, now in the final stages of preparation, sets out in detail the process of a renewed theology.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p 44.

rounds off his reference to conversion with the observation that assigns conversion its role in theology: 'Just as reflection on the operations of the scientist brings to light the real foundation of the science, so too reflection on the ongoing process of conversion may bring to light the real foundation of renewed theology'.¹

One needs, of course, to insist repeatedly on what this suggested approach does *not* mean. Many pre-suppose that attention to the human subject as such leads to subjectivism, in which all that is objective vanishes in a relativistic haze. I contend, rather, with Lonergan that accurate and thorough attention to the human subject as such leads to an authentic subjectivity: one that is correlative to an accurate objectivity. What the authentic subject knows is located in the universe of being; what he chooses is the truly good, a constellation of authentic values. With such a view of the subject, one does not oppose reflection on conversion to reflection on revealed religious truth. Rather, as we have seen, the religious conversion provides the context in which these truths have meaning.

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.²

'This grace in which we stand' names the religious event we have called conversion. It precedes theological reflection and grounds the meaning of that reflection. It can hardly be claimed that Paul held a subjectivistic view of grace and its effect. 'The Holy Spirit which has been given to us' is the transcendent and wholly other, completely real, God. The conversion produces tremendous changes in the individual. He rejoices in suffering; he hopes. The ground of this hope is 'God's love . . . poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us'. The ground of a renewed theology is an explicit grasp of that 'love poured into our hearts'.

¹ *Ibid.*

² Rom 5, 1-5.