

**His presence in the world**



# His presence in the world

A study of eucharistic worship  
and theology

Nicholas Lash

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to David Woodard  
parish priest  
from his curate



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# Foreword

To say that the celebration of the eucharist is central to the faith and life of the christian people is not to say anything very original. But neither is it the end of the matter. Precisely because the eucharist is so central, the many questions that are currently being raised about every aspect of our christian existence are all, in one way or another, questions which illuminate our search for a deeper understanding of the eucharist. In this book, therefore, I have tried to approach the problem of the eucharist from a number of different points of view, each of which should help to add depth to the others. If, by thus expressing some aspects of my own very limited understanding of the *mysterium fidei*, I shall have helped anybody else to deepen, and to express, their own understanding of the same mystery, I shall have done all that I set out to do.

I would like to express my gratitude to the editors of *The Clergy Review* and *New Blackfriars*, in which chapters 2 and 5 first appeared, and to the editor of *Tijdschrift voor Theologie*, in which chapter 6 first

appeared (in Dutch). In the first two cases, I have made a number of small alterations, mostly in the interests of clarity.

Nicholas Lash  
Slough, 23 September 1967

# 1

## What on earth is theology?

In a recent book Cardinal Heenan wrote that: 'The word dialogue has created barriers between people. To propose a dialogue is to assume that easy familiar conversation has become impossible.'<sup>1</sup> There is a measure of truth in this, but it is perhaps more accurate to say that the technical meaning which the word *dialogue* has recently acquired draws attention to the fact that the assumption of agreement between people, the assumption of a common viewpoint, is the best of all possible barriers to effective mutual communication. Because just such an assumption is prevalent amongst English catholics, the task of the theologian is made more than usually difficult. As theology probes, enquires, develops, rethinks its method and presuppositions as well as its terminology, the things that theologians say are often irreconcilable with this assumption of a common viewpoint, shared on all topics by all catholics. But, precisely

<sup>1</sup> *Council and Clergy* (London 1966) 101.

because the assumption persists, unexamined, the only possible reaction, very often, is to question the motives and 'catholic integrity' of the theologian.<sup>3</sup> It would therefore seem necessary, before particular doctrinal issues can be discussed with any serenity, to examine more fundamental questions concerning the nature, function, and method of theology. Here the theologian, at least in English-speaking lands, is up against another difficulty. Fundamental questions can usually only be formulated in rather abstract terms, and we English, who pride ourselves on a healthy anti-intellectualism, immediately suspect that the man who trades in abstractions is himself abstracted from the concrete agony of birth and death, peace and war, brotherhood and despair.

Much of this book is devoted to a discussion of the eucharist, and the celebration of the eucharist, a gathering of people in one place to do something quite specific, is clearly not at all an abstract affair. Any discussion of the eucharist, however, necessarily presupposes that certain basic questions concerning the nature of christian belief and commitment have already been examined. Much of the irrelevance and ineffectiveness of christianity in the modern world can be traced to a failure, on the part of christians, to ask the right questions about the relationship of their christian belief to this world in which they live. The reason, therefore, why this chapter is entitled: 'What on earth is theology?', is that if we have not grasped what theology is saying about this world, if we do not understand what theology is on *earth*, we shall

<sup>3</sup> The reader should, without difficulty, be able to illustrate this contention from his own experience.

not be likely to devote any of our limited time on earth to doing theology.

Even those people (and they do exist) who suspect that theology is irrelevant to the business of practical living could hardly deny that the 'problem of God' is not only felt by many people to be acutely real, but is currently taking on a sharply new form.<sup>3</sup> We can hardly afford to ignore the fact that much contemporary christian discussion is centred on the possibility of what is sometimes referred to as 'religionless christianity' and on the assertion that 'God is dead' (which may be either a lament or a cry of liberation), and that we have to construct a theology without him. There is no God, as one wag put it, and Jesus is his son. The problem of God is *man's* problem of God, and the contemporary form of the problem invites us to ask at least, in all seriousness, the question: 'Is christianity (and so theology, since christian theology is the articulation of christian belief) about God or about man?' The apparently easy answer to that question is that it is about both. The heart and centre of the christian message concerns the humanisation (or incarnation) of God, the purpose of which is, within the limits of the possible, the divinisation of man. Jesus Christ is, according to the Council of Chalcedon, *verus Deus et verus homo*. Both God and man; but, as we shall see, this does not solve the problem.

Much recent and contemporary atheism owes its dynamism to the conviction that to admit the existence of God is necessarily to restrict the possibility of human

<sup>3</sup> Cf John Courtney Murray, 'On the Structure of the Problem of God', in *Theological Studies* (Baltimore) xxiii (1962) 1-26.

freedom and fulfilment. If God exists, is not the genuine freedom of humanity reduced by the fact of God, and by the fact that he has, apparently, made certain claims upon man: 'Eat of this fruit and you shall most surely die.' An elderly and devout anglican lady once said to me that she sometimes feels like a butterfly stuck with a pin. Is she the only christian who has ever had that feeling? Incidentally, it is small consolation to say to the butterfly: 'It is in your own deepest interests to be stuck with a pin.'

Another illustration of this dilemma can be found in the rather glib way in which christians sometimes talk as if they had two distinct commandments to fulfil, the love of God and the love of the brethren, and that the fulfilling of each commandment occupied distinct areas of their time and energy. At our best, we talk as if these two loves could conflict (which, if it were true, would prove the atheist's point that the existence of God restricted human fulfilment). At our worst, we talk as if formal prayer was 'loving God', and sticking elastoplast on the knees of a screaming child was 'loving our brother'. Then we spend a great deal of time discussing how each of these two apparently contradictory commandments can be fulfilled without detriment to the other (we call this the 'prayer and good works' controversy). So far as I know, nobody has ever actually said: 'Excuse me, brother, I can't love you at the moment; I'm too busy loving God'; but, in the framework of the discussion, the seeds are sown of even this interesting possibility.

It therefore becomes clear that the real difficulty in saying that christianity, or theology, is about both God

and man, the real difficulty in *verus Deus et verus homo*, consists not in knowing what we mean by *God* or what we mean by *man* (though these are not small questions), but in the difficulty of knowing what we mean by *and*. There does not seem to be room for both of us. Either God exists, in which case man's space for living and developing freely is limited; or man is free, and God must go. If we are going to make any sense of our christian belief, a belief in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, then we have to be clear that the Council of Chalcedon was declaring our faith, affirming our problem, not solving it. The council was not saying that Jesus is God plus man; that he is partly God and partly man; but that he is totally divine and totally human. Christianity is not a new religion (loving God), from which flows a new morality (loving the brother). Christianity is unique precisely in its affirmation that, in Christ, the religious and the moral are identified; that, in Christ, human concern and human relationships are the disclosure of God; that, in Christ, God comes to be in humanity in the measure that humanity is opened to his limitless transcendence. The human possibility becomes, in Christ, the (human) possibility of God.<sup>4</sup> If in the past we have often understood the *et* of *verus Deus*

<sup>4</sup> After drafting this chapter, I came across Gabriel Moran's important book *The Theology of Revelation* (London 1967), in which all the things I have tried to say in this chapter are considerably better said. In the present context, Moran says: 'In a world seeking freedom by the establishment of private autonomy, Jesus is the unsurpassable testimony that not only is freedom not destroyed by proximity to God, but that man is free precisely insofar as he is present to God. Jesus is the living proof that man is freedom for God' (160).

*et verus homo* as additive, if we have made God into 'a' being, who can be set alongside other beings, who can compete with them for our attention, and so on, then this concept of God must go.

In primitive religion it seems that there does tend to be this conflict between God and man, between the demands of the divine and the demands of the human. In the old testament a moving example of this tension (an example that is moving precisely because it shows the first glimmer of light, the light that will dissolve the dark tension) is the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham, whose initial insights are those of his own religious culture, sorrowfully concludes that fidelity to God entails the betrayal of his son. In the act of betraying his son, the realisation explodes that the freedom of his son is the expression of his fidelity to God. The fathers of the church were not wrong to see in this incident the first tentative sketch of that definitive cancellation of 'God-as-a-rival-being' in which the human flourishing of the resurrection would spring, from the betrayal of the Son, as the achievement of fidelity to God. In this sense, as the exorcism of primitive religion, christianity is about the 'death' of God, the death of the 'gods', and christianity is a profoundly irreligious business. Let us say that christianity is about the liberating humanisation of God ('liberating humanisation', by the way, is an attempt to translate 'redemptive incarnation' into English). But in the enfleshment of God's word it is not God who is liberated, but man. God is eternal freedom; by plunging himself into the dark unfreedom of



our human misery, by exploding our death into his life, he has set us free. What Calvary, Easter, and the sending of the Spirit say is that now we can be human, now we can begin to breathe—with his Spirit—now we can love, now we can be brothers. The butterfly was on the pin before; now the butterfly has before it the possibility of spreading its wings and flying.

The fact that, in that last paragraph, I was forced into metaphor indicates that, once one has accepted that christianity is indeed about both God and man, but that one is using *and* in a rather queer way, then it becomes very difficult to talk about christianity. With the realisation of what christianity is about (and what it is not about), theology, as the articulation of belief in human brotherhood made newly possible in a love and freedom that is of God, itself becomes possible—but not easy. Later in this chapter, I shall try to suggest in rather more detail what is involved in a profession of faith in the divinity of the man Jesus. Before doing so, however, there is one rather different question that must be raised.

I am not quite sure how this next question should be formulated. It could go: Is theology an individual or a collective project?; or, Is theology a personal or a public project?; or, Is theology a subjective or an objective project? Now although I am no philosopher, it is obvious, even to me, that those are the sorts of question which no well-educated man would ask, any more than he would ask: 'Have you stopped beating your wife?' However, it is sometimes true that the best way of getting at the right question is to ask the wrong one, especially when, as is the case with catholic theology,

the wrong question has so often been presumed to be not only correct but obviously correct.<sup>5</sup>

In recent catholic tradition, theology, the articulation of belief, has for a long time been handled as an almost exclusively collective or public project. The good news of Jesus Christ, as it reaches most of us, takes the form of an immensely complex system of abstract propositions, which system is called theology. I am not, I think, being simply anachronistic or troublesome if I say that I cannot imagine St Peter, in answer to the crowd's question at Pentecost: 'What must we do brothers?', saying: 'I have a book in my pocket; go away and study it'. And yet we have come to regard theology as something already available, out there on the table, which people must learn. The pupil in a catholic school learns a simplified, skeletal version of the 'thing', in rather the same way as he learns the twelve-times table, or the principal natural resources of the Indian sub-continent. The trainee teacher learns a somewhat fuller version, and the poor student priest has to assimilate the entire conceptual juggernaut. This is a caricature, of course, especially in these days of catechetical and seminary reform, but it is sufficiently close to the truth to raise some rather awkward questions about the way in which, at least until very recently, we understood the process of transmission and reception of God's revelation.

<sup>5</sup> 'The history of theories of revelation is not the history of subjectivists and objectivists, but the history of those who tried to steer a middle course, and much to their dismay found themselves accused of one or the other. It might be that this has continually happened not because the middle way was not carefully steered, but because the middle way does not exist . . . "there is no mean between two errors"' (Moran, 172).

Under these conditions, it is hardly surprising that the verbal witness to Christ on the part of the ordinary catholic is often muted. He is nervous about discussing his faith with his friends, because he is acutely aware of the fact that theology is 'above his head', and he does not want to let the side down. While such a person's belief is often both unified and profound, it is a little dangerous to assume, as is sometimes done by those in positions of ecclesiastical authority, that 'simplicity' of faith increases in direct proportion to a man's inability to articulate his belief.<sup>6</sup>

It is not, however, only the lay person's witness which is adversely affected by this state of affairs. If 'learning theology' is conceived of as a process similar to learning the data in a geography text-book, teaching theology is conceived of on the same pattern. The *traditio fidei* becomes, not 'sharing faith', but something known as 'handing on *the* faith' (there it is, out there on the table, in the book), and, at least until the second Vatican Council, the apostolic teaching office of a bishop often seemed to consist not so much in bearing effective witness to belief in concrete situations as in the repetition of ready-made propositions.<sup>7</sup> The principal danger in

<sup>6</sup> Certainty and understanding are, however closely related, distinct mental states (or, to use Bernard Lonergan's terminology, judgement and insight are distinct mental acts). Those who try to exalt the virtue of faith (which, intellectually, is in the order of certainty) by depreciating the importance of the search for understanding (the *fides quaerens intellectum*), have confused the two (cf Bernard Lonergan *Insight* London 1958).

<sup>7</sup> 'Revelation is not a thing, an object that can be placed somewhere and kept intact. Revelation is what happens between persons and exists only as a personal reality. If there is revelation

conceiving of theology in this way is that it ceases to be a witness to belief on anybody's part (and so a bishop can say that if, on a crucial issue, the pope suddenly changes his mind, then the bishop will, without any difficulty, immediately change his mind too). The propositions have become divorced from the minds of men, and the test of orthodoxy is no longer what a man believes, but what he says.

To put the point slightly differently, theology, as divorced from belief, becomes talking about somebody else's idea of God. Teaching theology means getting one person to accept another person's understanding of God. Since very often it is not, for either teacher or pupil, their own understanding of God that is involved, theology ceases to be discourse about God, the living God, at all.<sup>8</sup>

Now, still accepting the wrong question with which I began, the wife-beating question, let us see what happens if we opt for the alternative: for an individual, or personal, or subjective notion of theology. Each human being is not only unique, in a unique situation calling for a unique response, but there is, at the heart of each one of us, a loneliness, the overcoming of which is the work of our redemption, but which can only be completely overcome where it takes its origin, in death.

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anywhere in the Church today, it can only be in the conscious experience of people' (Moran, 120).

<sup>8</sup> 'It is a regrettable but undeniable fact that indolent teachers and pastors have thought that they had automatically transmitted revelation because they had taught Christian doctrine and had had the creed memorised. But this is the fault neither of creed nor of doctrinal formulas, but of human beings' (Moran, 143).

Therefore, in the concrete, I can only believe what *I* believe. The articulation of my belief, which is my theology, cannot be identical, at all points, with anybody else's. If it is, then one of us is lying. Ultimately it is less important, surely, that a man talk according to the book than that he declare, with an honesty of which few of us are capable, the truth that is in him. The fact that a man is prepared to say all the right things does not adequately demonstrate that he is an orthodox believer; it does not in fact demonstrate that he believes anything at all.<sup>9</sup>

If this insistence that, since faith is an intensely personal thing, therefore theology must be an intensely personal thing, constituted all that there was to be said, then there would be no such thing as theology. A state of affairs in which the theological project broke down into the discordant babbling of individual believers incapable of mutual communication would be no more satisfactory than the state of affairs in which the whole well-drilled army dutifully repeated its uncomprehended catalogue of propositions concerning a God in whom few of them believed.

In the first section of this chapter it was suggested that christianity, and so theology, is only about God and man in the sense that it is about being human in a new

<sup>9</sup> 'If Christ is not understood to be *now* revealing God to man, faith is bound to become (despite our protests to the contrary) the rational acceptance of past facts and present teachings which are extrinsic to the sanctifying-worshipping activity now taking place. But belief is not directed to a message but to God raising up Christ, and this is not a past event but an ever present, continuing occurrence' (Moran, 116; that final phrase is not particularly happy, but the point he is making is, I think, clear).

way. It is about the recovery, and the discovery, of human brotherhood that springs from the love God has for us, poured into our hearts through Christ Jesus our Lord. Though we may necessarily objectify our ideas about God, it is of fundamental importance to affirm that God is not an object. We do not love God plus man: we love man with a love which is of God, we love our brother in God. We do not talk about God plus man: we talk about man with a knowledge which is of God, we know our brother in God.

In the next section we saw how hopeless it was to accept either horn of the proffered dilemma. Our discourse about God cannot only be the passing on, from hand to hand, of somebody else's belief in God. It cannot only be a matter of keeping our hands clean, so far as propositional orthodoxy is concerned. Equally, our discourse about God cannot only be the incommunicable articulation of our unique belief in God, as unique individuals. Not the least of the reasons for this is that God's revelation, his intelligible (if wholly mysterious) self-disclosure in human history, anticipates the encounter with it, and faithful acceptance of it, on the part of the individual.<sup>10</sup> To escape the dilemma, and to link

<sup>10</sup> On the part of all individuals other than the man Jesus. Cf Moran's chapter, 'Christ as Revelatory Communion', the programme for which he sets out as follows: 'In this chapter I wish rather to assert: (1) that God's revelation not only reaches a high point in Christ but is recapitulated in him; (2) that the participating subject who first receives the Christ-revelation is not the apostolic community but Christ himself; (3) that the fullness of revelation reached at the resurrection cannot perdure in books or institutions but only in the consciousness of the glorified Lord' (58).

these two sections together, I now propose to say something about the structure of christian belief.

*Christian belief is born in the context of brotherhood.* The truth of this assertion, although it should be obvious to any student of the new testament, cannot by any means be taken for granted. For many people, 'belief in Jesus Christ' is taken to refer to a private compartment of their personal existence, although they would agree that the authenticity of this belief is to be measured by the love of the brother that should flow from it. But to say that christian belief is born in the context of brotherhood is to say something more than: 'I believe in Jesus, and I will love other people because he told us to.' It is to say that belief in Jesus is, directly and formally, a commitment to brotherhood.

This becomes a little clearer if we remember that the sacrament of baptism, the sealing of christian faith by that symbolic washing which denotes and achieves an involvement in the death of Jesus, is itself the rite by which a man is incorporated into the brotherhood of believers. It becomes clearer still if we glance at the content of our Lord's preaching.

By his preaching, Jesus was concerned to provoke in his hearers an immediate response to fundamental questions concerning their personal identity and integrity. Through his parables, especially, he was trying to force a decision by the listener as to where he stood, now, in regard to God's future kingdom.<sup>11</sup> God's future kingdom

<sup>11</sup> '... the parables are weapons of warfare. Everyone of them calls for an immediate response' (Joachim Jeremias *The Parables of Jesus* London 1963, 21).