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The Place of Feeling in Religious Awareness

The title of this paper inevitably suggests the approach to religious consciousness of the great nineteenth-century thinker, Friedrich Schleiermacher, who found the essence of religion in a feeling of absolute dependence. Like all key words, 'feeling' has to be given a precise connotation if confusion is to be avoided, and unfortunately Schleiermacher's use of the word was by no means free from ambiguity. According to one of his principal modern interpreters, he never clearly made up his mind whether it was a state of self-consciousness, implying a radical subjectivism in which the self was imprisoned within its own inwardness, or whether it was to be equated with what others have called 'intuition.' To quote H. R. Mackintosh: 'There can be little doubt, I think, that Schleiermacher *intended* "feeling" to be read in this second sense, and we must read it so wherever we can. But his argument often proceeds on the first sense.'[1] However that may be, I propose to use 'feeling' in the second sense, to denote a mode of awareness underlying and reaching beyond all our conceptual thinking and all our attempts at articulation.

If we are to understand 'feeling' in this way, the question arises whether it should be equated with sense experience, or, if not, how it should be related to the latter. We are at once faced with widespread disagreement, not to say sheer confusion, amongst philosophers in the empirical tradition, about the role of sentience in our knowledge of anything. At the reductionist extreme there are those who believe that all awareness is simply a physical response of the nervous system to external stimulus. But this view raises insuperable problems, not the least of which is that in our claim to perceive anything we go beyond whatever is immediately presented to the senses. Any attempt to isolate the physically given breaks down through the sheer necessity of apprehending it within a larger context, and this means that we cannot reduce knowledge to mere sentience. Once that has been conceded, we are driven to think of the senses as the *medium* through which we became aware of a world that is other than ourselves; and the inevitability of using such prepositions as 'through,' 'by,' or 'in' opens a door to metaphysics which many contemporary empiricists seem bent on keeping closed.

Sentience as such, therefore, can be nothing other than an immediate response to an immediate stimulus, and this falls far short of the most diffuse awareness we have of our environment. Until it becomes the vehicle of consciousness which reaches beyond the immediate sensation, sentience does not qualify to be regarded as a mode of awareness, except in a most embryonic fashion. Accordingly, if 'feeling' is to be recognized as having any significant

1. H. R. Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology* (London: Nisbet, 1937), p. 48.

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place in human knowledge, it must be given a wider connotation than mere sentience, and this is surely what Schleiermacher intended.

At the same time, 'feeling' is to be clearly distinguished from conceptual thinking, as a mode of apprehension which is more primitive both in terms of the biological evolution of the human race and also in terms of individual consciousness. In the evolutionary process living things became sensitive to their environment long before the capacity for conceptual thinking emerged, and it is not unreasonable to postulate a stage of awareness which was more than mere sentience and yet fell short of conceptual clarity. The process is reproduced in every human being. Our feeling of what is other than ourselves originates in the relationship of the foetus to its mother, is dominant in the early stages of infancy, and persists through every stage of development as the substratum of all knowledge that we subsequently acquire.

Therefore, to claim, as some do, that the only mode of knowledge is formal categorizing seems to me to be a cardinal error and an unwarranted limitation of human cognition. If there are thoughts too deep for words, there are feelings or apprehensions too deep for formal thinking, and surely this is psychologically self-evident to anyone who reflects upon his own experience. We are first of all aware of that which we have to struggle to conceptualize and express, and this process often involves a great deal of trial and error, not to speak of pain and labour, as every writer knows.

This point may be illustrated from our stumbling attempts to put our thoughts into words. When we want to explain a difficult and complicated idea to someone else, do we not frequently change the form of expression to convey our meaning? It is common to hear someone explain, 'No, you have misunderstood me. I did not mean to say X, but to say Y. Let me put it another way: suppose you think of Z. . . .' This form of speech clearly does not just indicate that there are different ways of saying the same thing, some more or less misleading than others; it suggests that there is something we know we want to communicate, but for which all language patterns that we can devise are relatively unsatisfactory. If this is the case with the translation of thought into speech, it is no less so with the attempt to conceptualize our diffuse apprehensions.

Feeling, then, in the sense in which I am using the word, is that diffused awareness of a reality which ultimately defies conceptualization, breaking through all our categories of thought and shattering them by the very richness of its content. At the same time it is amenable to limited comprehension. For the most part, however, we are not wrestling with conceptual clarification – not even if we are philosophers. Our awareness of that which is other than ourselves is blurred and confused, and it is only by selective concentration that we make any progress in understanding. To put the point another way, this diffused awareness of reality is the womb out of which reflective consciousness develops. It underlies and pervades the whole of human experience.

If this is true of man's general awareness of what is other than himself, it is no less true of his awareness of God. The latter is basically a diffused

recognition of transcendent mystery – the sense of the numinous, as Otto called it – which both precedes and underlies all attempts at theological clarification and discourse. Such a claim will, of course, provoke the rejoinder that this alleged awareness is illusory: we are imagining that we are conscious of transcendent mystery, whereas in fact we are simply projecting our own feelings of finitude onto an environment which is explicable in naturalistic terms. In other words, we are mistaken in supposing that there is anything to intuit, in Schleiermacher's second sense of the word 'feeling,' and we are after all imprisoned within our own subjectivity.

I do not see that the question can be resolved at this level by any amount of argument. The issue at stake is whether the religious man's feeling of assurance ('feeling' in Schleiermacher's first sense) is a reflection of an authentic feeling, in the second sense, of that which is other than himself. Without what I have called 'the feeling of assurance' we would not be convinced that we are aware of anything, and therefore what are commonly recognized as the emotional overtones of knowledge are a necessary concomitant of any diffused apprehension. But the emotional overtones do not of themselves guarantee the authenticity of any alleged intuition. In a certain advanced alcoholic state we may have an inward assurance about seeing pink elephants in the bedroom, but the mere feeling does not guarantee that such strange creatures exist. The problem is to know how we can be sure of our feelings in the intuitive sense.

Is the problem essentially any different from that of justifying our certainty of the existence of a world external to ourselves? Solipsism is a theoretical possibility, but we reject it on the ground that we cannot begin to account for our experience apart from the conviction that we are aware of a world that is not of our making, which dictates the kind of experience we have. Similarly, those who claim to be aware of the transcendent impinging upon them are maintaining that this experience is inexplicable on the presumption that it is self-induced. To argue that it is a by-product of our rapport with our natural environment seems to be to explain away something that demands recognition in its own right and evokes a strength of assurance which cannot be gainsaid.

Only when the fundamental issue has been settled is it appropriate to ask whether the concepts and language we use in elucidating religious experience are logically coherent or not. Even if they are logically incoherent, as Antony Flew and others maintain,[2] that would not decide the question whether there is a basic experience which demands conceptual and linguistic clarification. If Flew is right, then theists, and Christian theologians in particular, are faced with a formidable agenda requiring the most radical rethinking; but that fact does not of itself call in question the basic awareness to which I have referred.

This consideration leads me to ask how far contemporary Christian thought, language, and ritual are related to fundamental religious feeling, understood either as intuitive awareness or as the accompanying assurance of any intuition that is authentic. Have we to admit that they are in no small degree abstract

2. Cf. Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (London: Hutchinson, 1966).

and divorced from experience? Unless thought, language, and ritual elucidate the basic awareness of which I have been speaking and awaken the appropriate emotional response, they have no real anchorage. This is the dilemma confronting all those who wrestle with the problem of how to present the Christian faith in terms that are relevant to modern man. It is not a question, as is still commonly supposed, of translating the faith into language which is more intelligible to ordinary people. The problem is much more complex than that. It is how to relate the gospel to human feeling, to that all-pervasive substratum of awareness to which I have drawn attention. Until we realize that all attempts to speak to the intellect which do not grapple with underlying feelings will fail, we shall not make any real progress.

The fact is that most people do not *feel* that the church really meets them in either its teaching or its ritual. They have a sense of a great hiatus which is at a far deeper level than that of the intellect; it is at the very wellsprings of human life where emotion rules to a degree that most of us simply have not measured. For if emotional response is not evoked by the way in which the faith is articulated, we can be sure that the latter is not being related to any profound intuitive awareness. What is a commonplace in psychology has hardly come to the surface in ecclesiastical circles. By and large, church leaders have been frightened of facing the emotional basis of religion, lest they should be engulfed in the extravagances which have characterized the revivalist movements. So Christianity has become intellectualized, and it is therefore not surprising that the church has generally appeared cold and aloof.

This reluctance to come to terms with the emotional depths of man's nature is compounded by the distrust shown by those of British extraction towards any display of feeling. To keep a stiff upper lip, to hide behind the façade of casual play-acting, to preserve the appearance of nonchalance at all costs – these have been associated with the image of respectability. 'Thou shalt not expose thyself to other people' has been the unwritten first commandment of many in the western world. And in many places the church has not unnaturally led the way in conforming to this standard.

But the Christian gospel is not addressed to the surface of life, to its conventionalities and its pretences. It is relevant to the whole man in the very depths of his being, and unless it breaks through to the inner springs of human nature and awakens the profoundest emotional response, it will obviously appear to be a hollow sham. One of the most significant phenomena in the contemporary religious scene is the spectacular growth of the Pentecostalist movement in almost every part of the world.[3] Whatever its theological deficiencies and uncontrolled enthusiasm, it does seem to have rung a bell in the hearts of a host of people to whom traditional churchmanship has made no appeal. This is a fact which it is sheer folly to ignore or to dismiss with superior indifference. It constitutes a challenge of the very first importance to any Christian thinking about renewal.

3. Cf. Douglas Webster, *Pentecostalism and Speaking with Tongues* (London: Highway Press, 1964).

A typical illustration of my contention may be taken from a report in *The Sunday Times* following the publication of the findings of the tribunal set up to enquire into the disaster in the Welsh mining village of Aberfan.[4] One of those named as culpable was quoted as follows: 'I've never said this to my wife, but there wasn't a night I didn't pray for help and somehow I was given it. I'm not religious, although I was baptized, but I was desperate sometimes and I've just tried to be a good Christian.' What did he mean by saying that he wasn't religious? Did he mean that religion meant nothing to him until after the slide of the coal tip at Aberfan? Or was he really implying that, as far as he was concerned, 'religion' was associated with the institutional church and that this had never had any relevance for him? I believe that the second interpretation is in all probability the correct one, and that in any case it represents the attitude of a large proportion of the population, including a surprising number of those who do have some formal church allegiance. They do have a religious sense, however inarticulate or even dormant it may often be. The problem is how to relate the faith as it is taught and practised by the church to this kind of awareness, from which it appears to be so remote.

This was essentially the question that Schleiermacher was asking, and he thought that he had found the key to answering it in what he called the feeling of dependence. No doubt he is open to the criticism that he has surrendered all objectivity when he claims that 'all attributes which we ascribe to God are to be taken as denoting not something specific in God, but only something specific in the manner in which the feeling of absolute dependence is to be related to Him.'[5] As H. R. Mackintosh says, this can be taken to imply 'that we merely pore over our own inward state and excogitate the idea of God which best answers to it.'[6] But to go to the opposite extreme and claim that we have to start with the givenness of revelation means that all too easily we ignore the crucially important point that Schleiermacher was making. Unless revelation is related to the depths of human experience, it will not be revelation at all. It will be an abstraction.

What this means for theology, and not least for liturgical and pastoral studies, is another matter. We need another Schleiermacher who will wrestle with the problems of the twentieth century in the light of the new insights provided by modern psychology and sociology. In this paper I have been able to do no more than suggest a subject urgently requiring exploration. If the main thesis which I have been advancing is correct, obviously we have to pay far more serious attention than we commonly do to the nature of human feeling, and, in particular, we have to get rid of our reluctance to associate the emotions with the intellect in genuine religion.

4. *The Sunday Times*, 6 August 1967.

5. F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), p. 194.

6. Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology*, p. 66.