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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

# The Evangelical Quarterly

OCTOBER 15th, 1937

## PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION IN THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES OF ERNESTO BONAIUTI

### I

THE last great intellectual movement, risen in the bosom of the Church of Rome and well-known under the name of Modernism, finds to-day in Ernesto Bonaiuti<sup>1</sup> one of its most outstanding interpreters and leaders. It is indeed worth while studying closely and analysing the philosophical-religious experience of this thinker, not only in itself, but in its fundamental motive, and in the conclusions to which it leads. Ernesto Bonaiuti, in fact, is not the man of cold speculation, who delights in analysing, and comes to his final results through a calm scientific method. He is a spirit tormented by an ideal that burns within him, and constrains him to proclaim boldly his fiery passion. His calling is that of an apostle, and greater than he, is the spur that makes him speak. The preface to one of his last writings, "L'EVANGELO ED IL MONDO", assumes as its text Isaiah's words, "Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet" (lviii. 1). Moulded into a

<sup>1</sup> Ernesto Bonaiuti was born in Rome on the 25th of June, 1881. He is a Roman Catholic priest, and the director of "Religio", also the late professor of History of Christianity in the University of Rome.

Bonaiuti is an extremely suggestive writer and teacher, and his intellectual output is vast and varied. Here is his bibliography:—

Lo gnosticismo. Storia di antiche lotte religiose, 1907—Saggi di filologia e storia del Nuovo Testamento, 1910—L'isola di smeraldo (in collaborazione con N. Turchi), 1914—Il cristianesimo medioevale, 1916—Sant' Agostino, 1923—San Girolamo, 1923—Sant' Ambrogio, 1923—Tommaso d'Aquino, 1924—San Paolo, 1925—Escursioni Spirituali, 1922—Voci Cristiane, 1923—Saggi sul cristianesimo primitivo, 1923—Apologia del Cristianesimo, 1925—Verso la Luce. Saggio di apologetica religiosa, 1924—Una fede e una disciplina, 1925—Gesù il Cristo, 1925—Francesco d'Assisi, 1925—Lutero e la Riforma in Germania, 1929—Pagine scelte di Paolo Sarpi, 1920—Il Misticismo medioevale, 1928—Le origini dell'ascetismo cristiano, 1928—Il Cristianesimo nell'Africa romana, 1928—La Chiesa Romana, 1933—Il messaggio di Paolo, 1934.

mystical character, he looks, as it were, bound to unsteadiness and even contradiction. His inner intellectual life has wavered to and fro for a long time, driven to opposite streams of culture. From Blondel he was taking refuge in Thomas Aquinas, and from this divine, who seems to yield too much to the power of the human mind, to Cornelius Jansenius. But, if we look closely, there is brewing in the depth of his nature something unaltered, which bestows strength and expression upon his manifold experience. It is his pains, his fixed idea, pressing on him, to which all his conclusions converge at last. That gives consequently a one-sided aspect to his vision, but at the same time, I should say, reveals all the charm and force of this spirit, yearning after the high ideals of truth and light. Like the one who goes straight on to his goal, no other object or end seems to hold sway over him. If beyond this something has a value, it is because of its fitness to this end. Purely for a methodical reason, his spiritual and cultural activity can be divided into two phases. These, though at first apparently contradictory, in the last analysis are nothing but the logical development of the same principle, under the fire of the same passion.

His first attempt, indeed, consists of conciliating the modern culture with the religious Christian experience in the scheme of Pragmatism. Brought up in a Roman Ecclesiastical atmosphere for his philosophical and theological training, he must have experienced within himself, as soon as a vision of a new world came breaking out in his mind, a tremendous clash. Two worlds stood one against the other; the modern world, with its alluring philosophy, and the mediæval world in which he had lived, under the shadow of the Seminaries and of the monotonous forms of the "PHILOSOPHIA PERENNIS". He tries to conciliate these two worlds, and, feeling around himself a growing indifference of the modern culture to the Gospel message and its cardinal values, he believes he has a special calling for rescuing the pure message of Christ. Blondel's philosophy of action, James's Pragmatism, Newman's theory of development, Durkheim and Loisy melt into one in his experience. In the light of Biblical criticism, of the new historical inquiries, Christianity had to be looked upon as possessing quite different features from those in which orthodoxy had

enclosed it. Certainly, owing to a saturation of doctrinal and disciplinary elements, Roman Catholicism had sensibly altered the nature of Christianity, and, what is worse, had hindered its full efficiency.

A reformation was necessary; for the formulæ of old proved unequal to the new religious experience. Only on different ground could the contemporary mind be met with the Christian message. The whole of the doctrinal system, especially as to the shape in which it has been moulded from the Council of Trent downward, cannot, in his judgement, have solid foundation to stand upon. Dogmas, being religious experience translated into intellectual expressions, possess but a pragmatism and symbolical value. Therefore, being relative, they are to be harmonized with the requirements of the new experience. The needs of our time do demand new forms, and above all a definite return to the pure Evangelical principles whose essence is the universal brotherhood of the spirits. This end has to be reached by the overcoming of those pagan instincts, which so badly defile the corporate life—"LA VITA ASSOCIATA". According to Bonaiuti, primitive Christianity is to be essentially individualized in that vast movement of religious hope, which, by proclaiming the Kingdom of God on earth, realizes its ideals under the unceasing impulse of an enthusiasm always pressing toward the future. He writes an apology of Christianity and Catholicism, but the arguments to which he resorts are no more the traditional ones, viz., the miracles and the prophecies.

The only one unshakeable proof of the divine origin of Christianity, lies in its ability to overthrow the pagan instincts of life; the antithesis of which instincts has been proclaimed by Christ Himself in the Beatitudes. From these, hope and trust in the triumph of good may always be drawn, for life, if it is life, is indeed nothing but self-abnegation. "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose (*ἀπολέσει*) his life for My sake, the same shall save it." Christianity is a living paradox and all its strength lies in its very antithesis. In fact it is through it that the Gospel makes of the individual a perfect social member, giving birth in such a way to an ideal society. By the very fact of keeping the individual apart from society, and by exacting from him the renunciation of all worldly goods, Christianity educates for

society a being, ready to give up everything for a higher standard of life. Hence the excellency of Christianity as a religion, and its absolute, everlasting peerlessness. Bonaiuti, with the condemnation of Modernism, submitted himself, but later on he was excommunicated by the "Santo Uffizio (1926)", which was afraid of the increasing success of his propaganda.

## II

The excommunication may be considered as the principle of a new spiritual development. In this new stage, the attempt undertaken to harmonize the modern culture with the religious Christian experience appeared to him vain and absurd. For vain and absurd it is to harmonize with the Gospel what is its most striking opposition. Modern philosophy is essentially immanentistic and atheistic. It leads, in the theories of its best representatives, to the negation of a transcendental God, and to the idolization of the State. Following the first intuitions that flashed upon his mind, and with the help of the historical criticism, by catching the inmost meaning of the old Christian texts and especially of the Pauline Epistles, he realized at last, that the very essence of Christianity is all in that quotation from Luke (ix. 24) to which I have referred above. Only he who, as Luke affirms, loses his soul, and who, as Saint Paul says (Romans xii. 15-16, etc.), "rejoices with them that do rejoice, and weeps with them that weep," and, in the sublime spirit of self abnegation, spends his life for his brethren, shall save his soul. Renunciation of self and lavish dissemination of it in other people's lives, a spirit of humility and love, self-sacrifice for the community—these must be the focus to which all Christian life, in its very essence, has to converge. Hence the consciousness of the many that they are one spirit through brotherly communion in the revelations of grace. From this seed of brotherhood which Christianity realizes in the individual, a new life springs up and develops itself, breaking down all the barriers that the sons of men have been raising by hatred and nationalism. It is thus that the kingdom of God, proclaimed by Christ, enlarges itself and strikes its roots deeply into the soul of humanity. The categories of time and space disappear, and, the very causes which make "homo homini lupus" being cut off in their beginnings, the mystical organism that is the body of Christ in history, fulfils the highest vocation

to which human spirituality has ever been called. That is the central point in Bonaiuti's speculation, his well beloved thesis, his passion, if I may say so.

Certainly the idea of the Church, understood as the progressive realization of Christ's incarnation, is utterly Pauline. Through the work of the Church, all institutions, races, and individuals are to be gradually brought into the light of Christ. He develops himself as the second Adam, realizing the capacities of humanity by bringing it all, age by age, race by race, individual by individual, into relation to Himself till He comes again. Pauline, too, is the conception of sacraments as social ceremonies in the baptismal rite, and also in the Eucharist, in order that Christ might attach men to Himself, not as individuals but as members of a brotherhood. But Bonaiuti strips it of every theological frame. His theology, if he has any, is a theology entirely social for which he is ready to sacrifice everything. In the heat of his passion he sees in Christianity nothing, as I have hinted, but an immense spiritual movement, unceasingly quickened by the hope of the coming Lord, and realized in the brotherly communion of the spirits. Thus, religion has to be looked upon as essentially connected with society. Therefore, the Church is but the materialized communion of the spirits, bound together in Christ's faith and message. Its logical consequence is the "corporate ecclesiastical life", "Il corporativismo ecclesiastico". Hence his bitter invectives against the Church of Rome and the utter dismay he feels at her schismatic attitude and curial bureaucracy. He feels indignant at her insensibility to the new needs of the modern world, and to the voice of her sister Churches for the fulfilment of a higher life in the Evangelical ideals. Hence his deep consternation and anxiety for a world growing more and more indifferent to the Gospel message, and for the Churches unable to awake from their heavy sleep.

According to Bonaiuti's judgement, there has been but one real reformation, and that smothered in its original spirit, by the Roman Church. That is the Apocalyptic preaching of Gioacchino da Fiore (Joachim of Flores) and the rising again of the Evangelical life in the Franciscan movement. The Protestant Reformation is called by him "LA RIFORMA SENZA RIFORMA". Hence his struggling against Scholastic philosophy and traditional theology, and the exasperated sense

of anti-intellectualism which leads him to overestimate the non-rational element in religion. And he proceeds even to charge Scholastic philosophy as being the remote but true cause of modern philosophy, all permeated with rationalism and atheism. He sets, therefore, faith above reason. The latter indeed proves a failure when, in its foolish attempt, it seeks to absorb the whole of the universe into the Ego, whereas Religion impels us to disseminate the Ego in the universe of things and men. For reason divides men, whereas religion unites them.

### III

Bonaiuti's conception of Christianity is certainly one-sided, but his works show a vastness and profundity of erudition which enables him to look at history with a powerful insight. He has followed the development of Christianity from its very outset down to our age, and his accurate study about the Church of Rome "LA CHIESA DI ROMA" evidently shows us how powerfully able he is in analysing the manifold elements which have transmitted the Gospel message down the ages, and, which for lack of due equilibrium have led the Church to schism and misunderstanding—the pitiful spectacle of our days! But we must not forget that E. Bonaiuti is a mystic, and that his very nature pushes him on to that ground which the German Rudolf Otto called the non-rational element of Religion. Bonaiuti has undoubtedly been influenced by Otto, whose principle he embodies in the thesis, so dear to him, of the corporate religion. In Otto's *Idea of the Holy—an inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*, a real reversion of standpoints, in the study of the religious phenomenon, has been promoted. As John W. Harvey says in his foreword to the English edition, "Dr. Otto is concerned to examine the nature of those elements in the religions which lie outside and beyond the scope of reason, which cannot be comprised in an ethical or rational conception, but which, none the less, as feelings cannot be disregarded by an honest enquiry". The book withstands the modern philosophical conceptions which so boldly make man the "terminus a quo *and* ad quem" of the whole religious process, God being nothing but

Otto, on the contrary, can write without scruple: "If there be any single domain of human experience that presents us with something unmistakably specific, unique, peculiar to itself, assuredly it is that of the religious life." (Chapter I. *The Idea of the Holy*.) Thus, he discovers in Religion an experience "sui generis", striking its inmost roots into the subconscious stratum of our soul, distinct from the theoretical and practical reason, in a kind of feeling that cannot be rationally interpreted. It is called the "numinous element". It is something paradoxical and yet deeply felt: a sense of a being which transcends personality and knowledge, and yet lives in the communion and knowledge of man. It is a reality which overwhelms and frightens us with the weight of its might, and which, at the same time, attracts and charms us even to such an extent as to awaken within our hearts raptures and mystical deliriums. In the sight of a being felt in such a way, even a faultless creature becomes aware of its nothing-ness, of being dust and shadow, and therefore in need of expiation and redemption.

Bonaiuti fully acknowledges Otto's theory, but, at the same time, is working it out, bringing it into a more complete and vaster design: from the individual to society, to his corporate life. He finds the reason of the element called "Tremendum" by Otto, in a catastrophic fall of man, in an original sin, throwing men to the evil power of egotism and individuality. Hence the need of redemption and Grace, and the awful struggle in the inner man of an incurable dualism between flesh and spirit, nature and grace. Hence the proof of the divine origin of Christianity, standing against the strongest claim of instinct and nature. Only along this line can the message of the universal brotherhood be proclaimed, and the unity, that sin unceasingly attacks and breaks, be re-established.

#### IV

I said that Bonaiuti completes Otto's doctrine. Objections to Otto have been raised by critics. These find fault with him because his analysis of religious experience is limited to the individual, and because some typical figures of numinous experience, such as Saint Francis, and that of some Evangelical strata, cannot be framed in the scheme of the religious experience which he traces. According to these critics, we should look in vain for the "Tremendum" in the meekness of the



smiling Franciscan piety, or in the joyous and peace-bearing message of Saint Luke's Gospel. Undoubtedly Dr. Otto has been inspired by Luther's theology, over-emphasizing the non-rational elements of the Christian idea of the Divinity. His inquiries into those mystical Indian forms, clothed in terrifying and monstrous shapes, inspired him also. Job has endowed his doctrine with the most eloquent expression of non-rational religion. But nothing has been found by Otto in connexion with the "Tremendum" in the New Testament, except Gethsemane's agony. Here Bonaiuti brings forth his theory of the corporate process.

"Ma il processo formativo del sacro è un processo associato non individuale. E la religione perfetta è quella nella quale i momenti della religiosità sono più esaurientemente senza residui trasfusi nel fuoco della moralità aggregata." He does not of course stop here, and owing to his great insight into the psychological analysis of the New Testament texts, he finds out, though hidden, in this book the "Tremendum element" which he points out to us as the highest of religious tragicness. Jesus says: "And call no man your father upon the earth, for one is your father which is in heaven" (Matt. xxiii. 9), and such is his comment on these words: "It means therefore that we must look for no other genuine paternity even of all counterfeitings, of all deformations, of all moral ugliness, and of all monstrosities which men bear and show, than that depending on God. Is there not in this, a much more repugnant non-rational element, than that with which we feel struck in Job's behemoth?"

And Bonaiuti, going on the same line, elaborates a further demonstration, namely that the mediation of "the corporate life" is absolutely necessary, in order that our perception of the Holy or Sacred might frame itself, and be shaped into a scheme: "indispensabile la mediazione della vita associata al costituirsi ed allo schematizzarsi della nostra percezione del sacro." He draws his conclusion from the words with which Christ, in his typical prayer, teaches us how to commune with God. "In this prayer the first person singular finds no place; Ours is the Father whom we invoke; ours is the sin for which we ask forgiveness; and ours is the obligation by which we are bound to forgive our enemies. Therefore, if religion in general strikes its roots into the consciousness of the evil, and into the

hope of a liberation, the very roots of Christianity lie in the consciousness of the corporate and charismatic unity of men.

Dr. Otto, after having come to the conclusion that Religion has its birth in a non-rational element, brings out how the great religions develop on a line that carries them into contact with rational and moral elements. In that way the complex elements of religion are harmonized. On the dark background of the numinous, reason and morals throw their light, through which the non-rational element becomes more accessible to knowledge, bestowing in its turn mysterious power on the postulates of reason and morality. Then the "numinous" becomes to us "the sacred". According to Dr. Otto it is necessary for a great religion to be imbued with rational and ethical elements. But he holds that it is equally necessary that its non-rational elements should prevail. These, as its background, are to be dominant and felt inaccessible, lest religion should degenerate into pure morals deprived of any religious power. Here, too, Otto and Bonaiuti are agreed. Here we find the reason for the latter's antagonism to the Church of Rome, which he thinks has degenerated, in its official form, into mere dogmatics, casuistry and bureaucracy. In his judgement, the Church must be but liturgical discipline and charismatic society, as the means of a deeper consciousness of the divine fraternity in the ideal of the Kingdom of God. Historic Christianity means for him the active working out of the realization of the "unum sint" of Christ, that is, "the one heart and one soul" "*Trasfigurazione carismatica dei molti nell' uno*". Every departure from this ecumenical spirit is a guilty betrayal of the Evangelical Ideals, and the feeding ground of schisms where we break Christ into pieces, and defile his sacred name with our loathsome, ethical, religious and political hatreds. Nationalism constitutes the greatest plague of our world-wide troubles, and only the church, super-empirical society of the Eternal Ideals, will be able, if true to her original mission, to bring back men to the Christian Brotherhood. The Church of Rome, he thinks, has nearly lost the consciousness of this mission that was the vital principle of her expansion in the world. Her interference with politics and the world, casts a shadow on her eyes and hinders her true movement towards this universal brotherhood. The modern catholic orthodoxy is but the inert survival of the Mediæval Church. He charges his Church

with being unequal to the times, shut up in the old schemes, and hesitating before the tremendous events which move the world. Bonaiuti's mystical temper has caught all the awful tragicalness of the human soul. Sometimes you seem to hear Jansenius speaking through him. Corruption, sin, egotism, death are holding such a sway over Man that he seems unable to redeem himself. He depends on a mighty salvation from above; a flint-stone is man, from which only God is able to raise up a new creation. The sense of an awful dualism is very much alive in Bonaiuti.

Modern philosophy has proved a miserable failure, because by rejecting this dualism it has vainly attempted to absorb the universe in its monistic conception. Only Christianity can give an answer to our deepest needs. His very conception pushes Bonaiuti towards absolute transcendence. On this line he will always, with more consciousness and definiteness, be able to give modern generations the social Gospel message as it has been understood by St. Paul. He has been excommunicated by the Church of Rome, and the reading of his books forbidden. Bonaiuti does not feel discouraged: the bitter experience through which he is going seems to have hardened his character. Stronger than ever he feels his calling to proclaim openly his message, despite the curial condemnation and the Romish ostracism. "Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet." This is his motto, his task that, though difficult and repugnant, does not cease to press mightily on his conscience. And Bonaiuti indeed feels called to re-assert the cardinal values of the Christian message against the manifold claims of the science of our days, and the technicalities which cast such a spell on us, as to make us think that we are self-sufficient. He raises his voice against the great majority of the Churches, who, though supposed heirs and depositaries of the Revelation, have so badly lost the living meaning of their very being. He is bound to the Church of his fathers by a deep feeling of loyalty. Sometimes his voice resounds with a prophetic ring; sometimes he seems a dreamer who, like Dante, looks forward for the *Veltro* that shall at last put to flight the she-wolf

"whose gorge ingluts more prey  
than every beast beside. . . ."

(Dante, *Purg.*, XX—10)