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Presuppositions in Christendom: Catholicism.

Dr. Michael Simpson, S.J., of the staff of Heythrop College represented Roman Catholicism at the recent VI Symposium on PRESUPPOSITIONS IN CHRISTENDOM. This is the gist of what he said.

Because we are born in a particular place in the world and at a particular time in history, we inevitably inherit a whole complex of presuppositions. As we grow up we all, to some extent at least, test them against experience. Gradually our unverified premises, previously accepted blindly, are converted into rational guide lines of behaviour.

One of the tasks of the philosopher is to examine presuppositions, not with a view to destroying or disposing of them, but rather with a view to enabling us to incorporate them into our thought life, so that they may help us exercise our freedom rather than impede it.

What we have said about presuppositions in general applies also to Christian presuppositions: these also we seek to integrate with experience. The *first* presupposition of Christianity indeed of any religious tradition, as I understand it, is this: that man by his very nature has the power or capacity to be aware of God. Like all awareness of others, awareness of God is concerned with the make up of our *psyche*, its development and integration.

To become aware of another person we must direct our consciousness towards him in such a way that in his bodily activity, his self-expression, we recognise him as a person – a personal self. Similarly in order to become aware of God we must direct our consciousness towards Him. It must always be possible to do this because God is the ultimate ground, the ultimate condition, of conscious experience. But unless

we play our part, He will not become present as the 'theme' of conscious attention and there will be no experienced awareness of Him.

To become conscious of God in this way may not always be easy because we are so preoccupied with the things around us. Mediating experiences are necessary to detach conscious attention from those objects and direct it, at least in part, towards God. Among such experiences we may cite the contemplation of nature, of art, moral awareness and the experience of inter-personal love.

Even so, God does not become an *object* of consciousness, any more than does another person. For this reason religious awareness, like awareness of others, is not easily described.

In trying to express their religious awareness, whether in worship or teaching, men are obliged to draw upon their cultural resources, which is why there is such wide variation in the practices and beliefs of different religions. These may even, at times, take forms which we find abhorrent, yet behind them all there lies the awareness of an Absolute Power and an Absolute Reality, upon which man recognises himself to be totally dependent. This Reality may be recognised in different ways, e.g. as Personal, a-Personal, a God of wrath and justice, or a God of love and peace. Not all the descriptions are necessarily compatible with Christianity, but non-Christian religions are no threat to our Christian consciousness. They are not to be 'explained away', but accepted and welcomed as at least partially fulfilling man's universal need for an awareness of the divine. The experiences of followers of other religious traditions have a certain continuity with Christian awareness, and may indeed serve as a possible source of enrichment to us.

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, awareness of the divine is mediated, in large measure through historical events and persons, both of which are formative in subsequent tradition. The prophet in particular makes God seem real to his fellow men. Because personalities are involved in the mediation, God Himself comes to be recognized as personal and, like persons, able to intervene freely in the lives and destiny of the people He has created and who depend upon Him.

This, then, is my *second* presupposition: the recognition of God as personal and as involved in human history.

The God who is revealed through the prophets is not a different God from the God mediated through the contemplation of nature and other 'general' modes of experience, nor from the God experienced in non-Christian traditions. It is the same God and this is why I speak of a continuity between the Christian and other modes of religious awareness.

Knowledge of others is necessarily partial on account of our limitations. We become aware of another self only to the extent that we can sympathize with and enter into his thoughts, feelings, creative work and aspirations. A similar situation arises in connection with our awareness of God which is incomplete both an account of our finite nature and because of our failure even to want to enter into the life of God.

The differences in the modes of man's religious awareness are caused not by any relativity in God's own Being, but by limitations in man's receptivity. This is why God may be revealed more adequately through certain modes of religious consciousness than through others. It is the Judaeo-Christian experience that God is revealed more fully to our consciousness through specific persons and events in Israel's history than by general revelation through nature and other forms of ordinary experience.

What is there unique about *Christian* religious experience? In the case of the prophets a clear distinction was made between the prophet himself, who was an ordinary mortal, and the divine Reality revealed through him. He inspired others, not to veneration of himself, but to faith and trust in and repentance towards his God. With Jesus however, it was otherwise. Gradually, in however ill-defined a way, the religious awareness of the disciples mediated by Jesus through His words and actions, began to be directed towards the person of Jesus Himself. He became in some manner identified with the 'Reality' towards which their consciousness was directed.

The disciples could not formulate this awareness in clear terms – it took centuries for the church to develop a Christological doctrine and this is still a task for theologians

today. But the words of the Fourth Gospel, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" and "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me" although written at a later time and attributed by the evangelist to Jesus Himself, must represent a growing awareness which was gradually being formed in the minds of the disciples through their day to day contact with Jesus.

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The conviction that there is some kind of identity between the person of Jesus and the divine Reality He mediated is the *third* of my Christian presuppositions. Because of this identity the unique content of Christian revelation is the person of Christ Himself. And the most significant characteristic of Christ's person as portrayed in the Gospels is His unconditional love for His Father and for men, a love which led to His sharing to the fullest extent the suffering and pain of the human condition. Through Christ God is revealed as perfect and unconditional love and through Christ's resurrection God is revealed as the One who draws man to a destiny which transcends the destruction of his present life at death.

We Christians of today have not known Christ in the flesh, nor witnessed His death and resurrection. Does this mean that we must simply rely on the reports of the early disciples without at least some first hand experience of God's revelation? If so, we might well find ourselves unable to understand early Christian writings, or to recognize them as being a divine revelation of a unique kind. But the writings of the New Testament and the customs of worship and belief of the Christian community have a value insofar as they arouse in us a religious awareness, a religious response, continuous with that of the early disciples who had earthly contact with Jesus.

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At this point I wish to make a distinction of some importance, as failure to recognise its existence has, in my view, been contributory to much of the worst kind of dogmatism which has divided Christians in the past.

The reality towards which the religious awareness of the early disciples and of ourselves is directed is the *person* of Christ. Now a person expresses himself in and through his bodily activity, his words and actions. His body is the medium through which we become aware of him. And this was true in the case of Christ: it was through His words and actions that the disciples came to know Him as a Person and recognize His deity.

But we can also regard the body of another from a purely objective or scientific point of view: It becomes then just one object among other objects in the world and is open to scientific study. Thus when a surgeon performs an operation the body upon which he operates is not at that moment for him the expression of a personal self but is simply a biological organism.

His attitude is in contrast to the attitude of the man and woman in love, who love one another's bodies only insofar as they are the expressions of their personal selves.

Now it is the *person* of Christ who arouses religious awareness. The recorded bodily activity of Christ, His words and actions, are the medium of unique revelation when they are recognized as the medium of Christ's personal self-expression. But for someone who does not experience this religious response, for example the sceptic in Jesus's time or the purely secular historian of today, the words and actions of Christ will not assume their unique revelatory significance. The divinity of Christ is not an abstract dogma but one which can only be recognized *from within*. And the same may be said of the belief and worship of the Christian Community. These also have a unique value for us insofar as they serve to make us aware of the *person* of Christ and enable us to identify Him with the divine Reality towards which our religious awareness is directed.

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The New Testament and Christian faith, ritual and worship can be studied from other standpoints – from those of the psychologist, the sociologist and so on – and from these standpoints they do not assume a unique religious significance.

The unique value of the New Testament and of Christian worship can only be recognized from *within* by those whom they serve to arouse and sustain. This is the *fourth* of my Christian presuppositions and is one which the Christian community itself, I think, has not always been sufficiently ready to recognize.

We must not take the New Testament writings or other early expressions of Christian belief as a source of doctrinal and moral truths in isolation from the religious consciousness of the present community. These writings and expressions do of course make us aware of God — that is their function — but it is through its contact with God that the Christian community must reach doctrinal and moral understanding. To give an absolute significance to particular expressions of doctrinal understanding and moral insight and to impose these without regard to the historical development of Christian consciousness and to different cultural situations in which it exists, is to attach a false value to the writings of the past because it views these from a standpoint outside the particular consciousness of the community at the present time. All past experience of faith and worship must be appropriated by the individual and not imposed upon him in an authoritarian way from outside. Only in this way can a man's religion become the free expression of himself — and this surely is the basic value which any religion, including Christianity, must be most concerned to secure.

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Having said this, however, I wish to emphasize the importance of the community for the religious response of the individual. The recognition of this importance is what in my view, is particularly characteristic of Catholic tradition. We are of course dependent in all kinds of ways upon the society of our fellow men, and it is no threat to our personal freedom to recognize this. It is true of our artistic appreciation, it is true of our family life and of the way we show our respect and love for others. It is also true of our religion. Within the Christian community we are brought into contact with past and present expressions of faith and worship, which serve to awaken and sustain our religious response.

Catholic tradition has always placed great value upon this sense of community. It is the community as a whole which keeps alive the revelatory experience derived from the historical Christ which draws the individual in each generation to share in that experience. It is the coherence of the community as a whole which helps to safeguard the fulness and richness of Christian inspiration, so that membership of the community has always been seen as necessary for personal Christian consciousness of the individual. This membership of the community is my *fifth* presupposition.

However, there are dangers in overstressing the coherence of the community and it must be admitted that the Roman Catholic Church has not always withstood them successfully. All too easily doctrinal and moral teaching may be and has been imposed on individuals in such a way as to endanger their personal freedom. When doctrinal differences have caused bitterness and separation between Christians the priorities have been put the wrong way round. In dealing with others it is right that we hold fast to our own convictions, but we must remain humble and refrain from over-dogmatic expression. There is no truth which is worth affirming at the cost of love. We must bear in mind that the Church in thought and in practice is a Church *in via*, a Church which, based upon its real experience of God's presence in the person of Christ, is nevertheless always seeking to give fuller and deeper expression to its basic inspiration. In pursuing this task it cannot afford to reject or neglect any awareness of God's presence in the world where ever this might be found, whether inside or outside of Christianity.

This is why my vision of the Catholic Church is identical with my vision of Christianity which I believe should be 'catholic' in the widest sense of that term as being open to and able to embrace every manifestation of God's presence in the world. This it can do without abandoning its awareness of the unique reality of the person of Christ.

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The presuppositions I have mentioned will doubtless be acceptable to other Christians. There are however, a few points which, as a Catholic, one ought perhaps to add.

In his lecture Dr. Simpson then spoke about the importance of the resurrection and the presence of the divine Spirit within the Church and concluded:

Finally I wish to make brief mention of the sacramental nature of the Church's worship which, I feel, is often misunderstood by those who reject 'sacramental' forms of Christianity.

In everyday life we reveal our personalities by what we say and do. In particular, bodily expressions of love between persons serve, sacramentally, to express and deepen that love.

The same is true of man in relationship with God. Words or gestures performed by individual or community can express sacramentally our love of God and in so doing deepen that love. Sacramental expression is bodily expression: Christianity, unlike religions in the East sanctifies and respects our bodily nature.

EDITORIAL NOTE. With the author's kind permission this paper, originally two or three times the present length, has been edited. Unfortunately however, owing to illness, Dr. Simpson did not have opportunity to check the final version which should not, therefore, be quoted as his work without prior consultation with him.

Mr. H. L. Ellison writes: Few orthodox Christians will wish to challenge Dr Simpson's main presuppositions. However, the manner in which he has described the Church's relationship to the Bible seems to leave much to be desired. It is true that the Bible is not a relic of the past to be handed over to the philologist, historian and sharp-witted exegete, but equally it cannot be controlled by the on-going life and thought of the Church. These have constantly to be brought under the judgment of the Scriptures.

Where Dr Simpson's view seems to be really inadequate is in his estimate of nature religions. It may be seriously questioned whether they ever rise to the concept of God in contrast to gods. They recognize powers above and beyond us but never *one* such power. Whenever and wherever they have reached such a unifying principle it has been by invoking one or other of the forms of pantheism. These all, in varying measure, deny the personality of God and the reality of experience. (This does not apply to Islam, which is not a nature religion.)