

# MAGISTERIUM OF THE CHURCH, FAITH, MORALITY

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## I. Survey of the Problem

The crisis of faith, which is making itself increasingly felt in Christendom, is more and more clearly seen to be also a crisis in awareness of the fundamental values of human life. On the one hand it is nourished by the moral crisis of mankind and on the other hand it has repercussions on the latter, making it more acute. When the attempt is made to survey the panorama of the present discussions on this matter, strange contradictions are met with, which, however, are closely connected with one another. On the one hand, particularly since the meeting of the World Council of Churches at Uppsala, there is an increasingly clear tendency to define Christianity primarily as "orthopraxis" and not as "orthodoxy." There are various reasons for this. Reference should perhaps be made to the seriousness of the racial problem for American Christian communities. Their religion has not succeeded in breaking down the barriers of separation and therefore the validity of faith itself seems to be questioned, since it has not been able to bring to life the love that is the root of the Gospel. In this way a practical question becomes the touchstone of the intrinsic value of doctrine, the proof of what is Christian: where "orthopraxis" is so glaringly absent, "orthodoxy" seems questionable.

Another origin of the trend towards "praxis" lies in the various movements of "political theology," which on their side have different motives. Common to them all is great perplexity due to the questions raised by Marxism. The concept of "truth" is regarded here with suspicion or at least as being without value. To this extent this theory is identified with the fundamental feeling that gives rise to positivism. Truth is considered unattainable and its proclamation only an alibi for group interests, which are thus consolidated. Only praxis can decide (still according to this view) the value or lack of value of theories. So if Christianity wishes to

make some contribution to the construction of a better world, it should create a better praxis—not seek truth as a theory, but reestablish it as a reality.

The claim that Christianity should become "orthopraxis" of joint activities for a more human future and leave orthodoxy aside as unfruitful or harmful, takes on here a far more fundamental character than in the case of the pragmatic standpoint described above. It is clear at the same time that both positions tend to unite and strengthen each other. In both cases there remains little room for a magisterium, although if these principles were applied consistently it should appear again in a different form. Certainly, a magisterium that wished to formulate a preconstituted truth with regard to correct human praxis and wished to measure praxis by this truth, would fall on the negative side of reality as an obstacle to creative, forward-looking praxis. It would appear as the expression of interests concealed under the label of "orthodoxy" and opposed to the advance of the history of freedom. On the other hand it is admitted that praxis needs reflection and well thought out tactics, for which reason the tie between Marxist practice and the "magisterium" of the party is perfectly logical.

The movement that would like to define and realize Christianity as orthopraxis is opposed at the other end (and in fact often passes into it suddenly) by the position that maintains there is no specific Christian morality: on the contrary Christianity must take its norms of behavior every time from the anthropological knowledge of its own age. Faith does not offer any independent principle of moral norms but on this point refers strictly to reason; anything that is not guaranteed by reason would not be supported by faith. This assertion is justified with the statement that, even in its historical sources, the faith did not develop any morality of its own but followed the practical reason of contemporaries in the different periods. This can be seen already in the Old Testament, where value concepts from the time of the patriarchs to sapiential literature were in continual change, conditioned by contact with the development of the moral concepts of collateral cultures. Nowhere can there be found, they say, a moral sentence limited only to the Old Testament, of which it could be said that it is the result exclusively of faith in Jehovah; in the moral field everything was borrowed elsewhere. According to this theory, this applies also to the New Testament: the virtues and vices listed in the Pauline epistles reflect Stoic morality and in this way are the acceptance of the rational canons of human behavior at that time. For this reason their value lies not in the content, but in their structure: as a reference to reason as the only source of moral norms.

It need hardly be said that also with this point of departure there is no room for an ecclesiastical Magisterium in the moral field. For norms essentially based on the tradition of faith would, according to this thesis, spring from the misunderstanding that the teachings of the Bible are absolute and perennial indications while they are only a reference to the positions reached at different moments by the knowledge attained by reason.

It is clear that, in both cases, it is a question of fundamental problems of Christianity, which cannot be dealt with sufficiently in a few pages. In the first case, when the interpretation of Christianity as "orthopraxis" is made not only on the pragmatic plane but also on the plane of principles, the problem in discussion is truth and above all the fundamental question of what reality is. With the problem of being it is a question, in the last analysis, of the first article of the faith, even though people are not always specifically aware of the fact and positions are seldom pushed to their radical extremes. In the second case it seems to be a question above all of a particular historical problem, the historical origin of certain biblical teaching. A closer examination shows that the problem is a more fundamental one, namely how to determine what is specifically Christian in view of the changing historical forms of Christianity. At the same time there is at stake the problem of the interpretation of the relationships between faith and reason and between faith and man in general; and finally, in particular, the question of the possibility and limits of reason as compared with faith.

## 2. First Counter-Deductions

Let us begin with the most obvious and simplest things and then go on to the specific question, that is, the problem of the historical origin of biblical teaching in the moral field. In the first place it is necessary to examine a general methodological question. The hypothesis that what is received can never become one's own, is quite simply false. We know this from our own life. The theological principle "What hast thou that thou hast not received?" (1 Cor. 4, 7) is evident even on the purely human plane; but we know it also from the whole history of culture: the dimension of a culture is shown by its capacity of communication, its capacity to give and take, yes, take, receive and assimilate. The originality of Christianity in the moral field does not lie in the sum of principles which have no parallels elsewhere (if there are any such principles, which is very problematic). It is not possible to distill what is specifically Christian in this field by taking away everything that was borrowed from others. Christian originality consists rather in the new overall conception into which man's quest and aspiration was directed by faith in the God of Abraham, in the God of Jesus Christ. The reference of morality to pure reason is in no way proved by the fact that the moral teaching of the Bible has its origin in other cultures or philosophical thought. Such an assertion would represent a short circuit of thought that can no longer be tolerated. What is decisive is not the fact that these principles can be found elsewhere, but only the problem of the place they do or do not occupy in the spiritual structure of Christianity. It is this point, therefore, that must be studied next.

Here, too, let us begin with a very simple observation. It is incorrect from the historical point of view to say that Christianity took over at all periods the morality of its contemporary environment, that is, the degree of moral knowledge reached by reason. For "the environment" as such and a unitarian "morality" all ready to be taken over, did not exist. We see rather that, amid tensions that were often highly dramatic, the elements of the juridico-moral tradition of the surrounding world were

divided into those which, corresponding to the figure of Jahweh, could be assimilated by Israel and those which, on the basis of its representation of God, had to be rejected. The battle of the prophets is in the last analysis connected with this problem. Whether we think of Nathan, who forbids David to take on the form of a despotic Oriental potentate, free to take his neighbor's wife if he likes; or of Elijah, who, defending Naboth's right, defends the right guaranteed by the God of Israel, against the absolutism of kings; or of Amos, who in his battle for fair wages for workers and dependents, is mainly defending the image of the God of Israel—it is the same thing. Even the whole conflict between Jahweh and Baal cannot be reduced to a pure "dogmatic" question but is connected with the inseparable unity of faith and life, which is at stake here: the option for one God or for the gods is in every case a life decision.

## 3. Three Examples of the Union of Faith and Morality

### a) The Ten Commandments

With these arguments we have now reached the heart of the matter, which we will now try to clarify with three characteristic examples. Let us cast a glance first of all at the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20, 1-17; Dt. 5, 6-21), one of the central formulations of Jahweh's will regarding Israel, by which the morality of Israel and of the Church has always been renewed. It can be shown without any doubt that these Commandments have models both in the Egyptian lists of crimes that must not be committed and in the lists of questions of Babylonian exorcism. Even the introductory formula: "I am the Lord thy God," is not completely new. Yet it gives the "ten laws" a new significance: they are connected with faith in the God of Israel, the God of the Covenant and his will. The "Ten Commandments" indicate what is the essence of faith in God, of acceptance of the covenant with Jahweh. At the same time they define the image of God himself, whose essence is manifested in his will. This fact connects the Ten Commandments with the fundamental revelation of God in Exodus 3, since here, too, the manifestation of God is expressed concretely in the manifestation of his will in ethical matters. He has heard the groans of the oppressed and has come to liberate them. With these words the introduction to the Ten Commandments is connected both with the version in Exodus 20 and with its repetition in Deuteronomy. Jahweh presents himself as the God who has brought Israel out of Egypt, the house of bondage. This means that the Ten Commandments are, in Israel, part of the very conception of God. They do not take their place alongside the faith, alongside the alliance; they show who the God is with whom Israel is in alliance.

Connected with this is the particular development of the conception of "holy" in biblical religion. From the standpoint of the history of religion, "holy" indicates in the first place the "being-quite-different" of divinity, its specific atmosphere, from which the particular rules for relations with divinity are drawn. In Israel, too, this was so to begin with as a large number of biblical passages show. But when Jahweh presents his particularity, his "being-quite-different," in the Ten Com-

mandments, it becomes clear (and the prophets make people more and more aware of it) that the "being-quite-different" of Jahweh, his holiness, is a moral greatness to which man's moral action must correspond, according to the Ten Commandments. The conception of holiness, as the specific category of the divine, merges, even in those ancient strata of tradition to which the Ten Commandments belong, with the conception of morality, and this is precisely the novelty, the singularity of this God and his holiness. But here, too, lies the new value that morality acquires, which determines the criterion of choice in the dialogue with the ethics of peoples, until there arises that lofty concept of holiness which, in the Old Testament anticipates the divine figure of Jesus: "I will not execute my fierce anger . . . for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst . . ." (Hosea, 11, 9). "There can be no doubt that with the proclamation of the Ten Commandments in Israel, there takes place the election of Israel, says Gerhard v. Rad in his *Theology of the Old Testament*. He also presents the consequences of this correlation on the liturgical life of Israel. All this does not mean, of course, that right from the beginning the Ten Commandments were understood in all their deep significance and that mere enunciation at once brings with it essential moral knowledge. The history of the interpretation of the Ten Commandments from the earliest times to their reformulation in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, shows rather that they could and were obliged to bring about an even deeper understanding of the divine will and thereby also of God and man himself. What has been said makes it clear that though individual parts of the Ten Commandments come from an environment outside Israel, this does not prove that they do not belong to the faith of the covenant. After all, this assertion could be made only by starting from the premise that the reason of peoples and the revelation of God are paradoxical, unconnected by any analogy, that is, starting out from a precise position about the relationship between revelation and reason, which the biblical texts do not show to be true, but on the contrary clearly show to be false.

b) The name "Christian"

Let us choose a second example, this time in the field of early Christianity, in which it is again a question, as for Israel in the Ten Commandments, of a central issue: the meaning of the words "Christian" and "Christianity" at the time when the Church was coming into being. From Acts 11, 26 we know that this name was given to the community of believers in Antioch for the first time. Although the origin and initial meaning of the denomination are still debatable in the present state of the sources, it is nevertheless clear that it at once took on an ironical meaning and that it became in Roman law the designation of a crime liable to punishment: Christians are members of Christ's conspiring sect. From Hadrian onwards, therefore, to bear the name "Christian" is expressly declared a penal offense. Peterson has shown that the accusations against the Christians, as found in Suetonius and Tacitus, are part of the political propaganda "carried on against real or presumed conspirators." Yet already in the time of Ignatius of Antioch we see the Christians taking over this dangerous word to designate themselves, proud to bear it and to prove themselves worthy of it. What happens

when this insulting name, liable to penal penalties, is consciously assumed and borne?

There are two possible answers. In the first place there is in St. Ignatius a marked theology of martyrdom, which leads to assumption of the name which itself involves martyrdom. Communion with Jesus Christ, in which for him is faith, means in the eyes of the world participation in a conspiracy for which the punishment is death. This is for the bishop of Antioch an outside view, which gets a glimpse of what there is inside, but in a form completely different from the reality: communion with Jesus is, in fact, participation in his death and only in this way also in his life (*Magnesiensians*, 5, 1 f.). This means: the conception of the common conspiracy of Christians with Christ contains this element of truth, that Christians do not take over just a theory from Jesus, but participate in his choice of life and death and repeat it in their own way. "Since we have become his disciples, we must learn to live in a Christian way" (*Magn.* 10, 1). In this sense, for the Syrian martyr bishop Christianity is completely "orthopraxis," it means imitating Jesus' way of life. But what is this way of life? This question leads to a second consideration. For the pagan the word "Christian" means a conspirator, who is represented according to the patterns of political propaganda as guilty of terrible crimes ("flagitia"), in particular, "hated of mankind" and dissoluteness ("stuprum"). Against this view Ignatius uses a play on words which was used for a long time in Christian apologetics. In Greek phonetics the word "chrestos" (good) was (and is) pronounced with the "r": *christos*. Ignatius takes advantage of this when he precedes the sentence "let us learn to live in accordance with Christianity" with the words "let us not be insensitive to its goodness (Chrestotes, pronounced *christotes*)" (*Magn.* 10, 1). The conspiracy of the Christian is a conspiracy to be "chrestos," a conspiracy to do good. One hundred years later Tertullian still says: "The word Christian is taken from the expression to be good" (*Apol.* III, 5; *Ad Nat.* 1, 3). The connection between conception of God and moral idea, which we found in the Ten Commandments, is repeated here in Christianity in a highly sublime and demanding way. The name "Christian" means communion with Christ, but for that very reason, the willingness to accept the martyrdom of good. Christianity is a conspiracy to do good. The theological and moral qualities are inseparably bound up with the name and, even deeper, with the essential concepts of Christianity.

c) Apostolic teaching

But with this Ignatius and the early Christian theology that follows him are strictly on the plane of apostolic preaching, which we will now take as our third example. The close connection between faith and "imitation" of the Apostle, which is "imitation" of Jesus Christ, is characteristic of St. Paul's preaching. The first Epistle to the Thessalonians is particularly precise in this respect: ". . . we gave you a pattern of how you ought to live . . . live by that pattern. You have not forgotten the instructions we gave you by the command of the Lord Jesus" (1 Thess. 4: 1 ff.). The "live" belongs to tradition, the order does not come from just anywhere, but from the Lord Jesus; the specifications that

follow are taken from the Ten Commandments and explain them in a Christian way, adapted to the special situation of the Thessalonians.

At this point it might be objected that here the main question concerns only the formal intention of "good," which is beyond all doubt characteristic of Christianity. But the essential problem: "in what does this good consist?" is not answered by theological sources, but decided on each occasion by reason and time. And then reference can be made to a text that seems to confirm this, such as Phil 4, 8: "Finally, brothers, fill your minds with everything that is true, everything that is noble, everything that is good and pure, everything that we love and honor, and everything that can be thought virtuous or worthy of praise." These, it is said, are concepts of popular philosophy, in which accepted standards of good are clearly proposed to Christians as their standards. But it could at once be answered that the text goes on to say: "Keep doing all the things that you learnt from me and have been taught by me and have heard or seen that I do" (4, 9). It could be added that after all this passage is a commentary on 2, 5: "In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus" where we find the same necessary connection between Jesus' way of thinking and Christian existence as we came across it in Ignatius.

But on the historical and objective plane it is necessary to go deeper. It is certainly true that Paul, here as elsewhere, refers to that moral knowledge that awakened the conscience of the pagans, and it is true that he identifies this knowledge with God's true law, according to the principles set forth in Rom. 2, 15. But that does not mean that the *Kerygma* is reduced here to a generic exhortation to adhere to what is considered good by reason in each individual case. Two facts contradict this view: 1) historically speaking, this "reason of time" has never existed and never will. What Paul found was not a precise position of research on good, which he could just take over, but a confusion of contradictory positions of which Epicurus and Seneca are only two examples. This being so, it was not possible to proceed by accepting these positions. It was necessary, on the contrary, to make a decisive and critical separation, in which the Christian faith formed its new options in accordance with the Old Testament standards and with the "way of thinking of Jesus Christ." These options were condemned by the outside world as "conspiracy," but were only all the more resolutely considered as the real "good" by Christians themselves.

Contrary to the above-mentioned opinion is, secondly, the fact that for Paul conscience and reason are not two changeable standards, which say one thing today and another tomorrow. Conscience probes, it is what it is precisely by saying the same things as God said in the covenant with the Jews, as conscience. It reveals what is abiding and thus leads necessarily to the way of thinking of Jesus Christ. The real thought of the apostle Paul is seen most clearly, perhaps, in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, where that connection of morality with the conception of God, which we found to be a characteristic of the Old Testament, is repeated. Lack of the notion of God brings about the moral deficiency of the pagan world; conversion to God in Jesus Christ coincides with conversion to imitation of Jesus Christ. Paul had already

developed the same thought in 1 Thessalonians: the non-holliness of pagans is due to the fact that they do not know God. God's will is "sanctification," which is received in the moral sense, directly in the message of grace. Anyone who reads Paul's epistles carefully will easily see that apostolic preaching is not a moralizing appendage the contents of which could be changed, but is the concrete designation of what faith is and is therefore linked indissolubly with its central point. In this the Apostle is only following the example of Jesus who, in the introduction and conclusion of his teaching on the Kingdom of God had connected indissolubly this central subject of his preaching with the fundamental moral decisions that come from the image of God and are closely linked with him.

#### 4. Faith—Morality—Magisterium

The reference to apostolic teaching with the connection between faith and morality brings up the matter of the Magisterium. For the apostolic epistles are an exercise of the teaching authority. In them Paul takes up a position "magisterially" also on the moral aspect of faith. The same applies to all the epistles in the New Testament and to the Apocalypse. In his teaching, Paul does not theorize about human rationality, but sets forth the inner necessity of grace, as H. Schlier has pointed out forcibly in his fine article on the originality of Christian teaching (*Besinnung auf das Neue Testament*, 1964, pp. 340-357). Actually, although the apostle is convinced he has the authority (2 Cor. 8, 8), he does not use the form of explicit command too often (1 Thess. 4, 10 f.; other texts in Schlier, p. 342). He does not want to correct the Christian communities with re-proofs and the rod, as teachers corrected children in ancient times—he prefers fatherly persuasion in the Christian family. But precisely by doing so he makes it clearly understood that behind his words is the mercy of God himself calling. In his exhortation it is grace that exhorts, it is God that exhorts; it is not a variable accessory to the Gospel, but is guaranteed by the authority of the Lord, even when it is not presented in the form of a command or doctrinal decision. The same can be said when the central themes of his doctrine are considered: salvation in Christ, baptism, the communion of the Body of Christ, the last judgment. The line of demarcation drawn by grace in regard to the life of those who do not know God is quite clear: it is abstention from wantonness, greed, envy and quarrelsomeness; inclination to obedience, patience, truth, trust and joy; in these attitudes the fundamental command of love is unfolded.

What we see in Paul is continued in the writings of the successors of the apostles, in which the apostolic doctrine is explained in a way suited to the situation (Schlier, 343). This means that, for the New Testament, the ecclesiastical Magisterium does not end with the time of the Apostles. The Church therefore remains apostolic also in the post-apostolic era, and it is her permanent task to see to it that the legitimate successors of the apostles defend the unchangeability of the apostolic doctrine. Luke sets this forth expressly in the crisis of transition, taking as the model of the Church of all times the original community of Jeru-

