Belief: The Contemporary Issue

Man's coming to know is a group enterprise. It is not the work of the isolated individual applying his senses, accumulating insights, weighing the evidence, forming his judgement. On the contrary, it is the work of many with each adding, as it were, to a common fund the fruits of his observations, the perspectives caught by his understanding, the supporting or contrary evidence from his reflection. Moreover, this division of labor in coming to know is possible just in so far as it is possible for men to believe one another. What you see with your eyes can be contributed to a common fund of knowledge only in the measure that you can be trusted to observe accurately, to speak truthfully, to select your words precisely. What holds for ocular vision, also holds for all other cognitional operations. One man can perform them and many can profit from his performance if he is trustworthy and they believe him.

Such in general is belief. It is the condition of the possibility of a division of labor in the acquisition and development of knowledge.

Now belief is very common. Most of what any of us knows depends to a greater or less extent on belief. There are some things that we have found out for ourselves, by our own observations, our own insights, our own reflection and judgement. But usually what we find out for ourselves is emmeshed in a context of other items that we came to know, not on our own, but by believing others. We know

the shape of the United States and the relative positions of its major cities because we have seen, examined, perhaps copied maps. But are the maps accurate? We do not know that. We believe it. Perhaps no one knows it, for in all probability the map of so large an area ~~best probably~~ is a compilation put together from the work of very many survey parties. Each part of the map would be known to be accurate but by a different party, so that the accuracy of the whole as a whole would be a matter only of belief.

Similarly for the rest of our commonsense knowledge. There is the narrow strip of space-time that each of us inhabits and with it we are familiar. But this narrow strip is inextricably bound up with its surroundings, with a neighborhood, a district, a city, a state, a country, a continent, a world, with a series of social groups and of ~~cultural levels. Moreover, our minds are not divided into two compartments with beliefs in one moreover that not~~ cultural levels. Such surroundings are much more a matter of belief than of personally acquired knowledge. Moreover, our minds are not divided into two compartments with ~~bele~~ beliefs in one and personally acquired knowledge in the other. The two intermingle. Together they form a single, ~~coherent~~ more or less coherent whole, with our knowledge checking and controlling beliefs and with beliefs filling out and completing and underpinning knowledge.

Now you may be ready to grant that commonsense knowledge is of this type but that scientific knowledge is quite different, that the scientist as scientist does not believe but knows. This I do not think is so. The

difference between commonsense and scientific knowledge is not a different ~~proposi~~ proportion of belief but a more effective control of belief.

There is not a different proportion of belief. When an engineer whips out his slide-rule and performs a rapid calculation, he knows precisely what he is doing and can explain why the thing works. None the less, his conclusion is largely dependent on belief. The slide-rule depends on ~~log~~ logarithmic and trigonometric tables, and the engineer never worked out such a set of tables. He does not know by his own knowledge that such tables are correct. He believes it. Again, since he has never checked the marks ~~distances~~ on his rule against a set of such tables, ~~He~~ he does not know that his rule corresponds to the tables. He believes that too.

More generally, in so far as a scientist makes an original contribution to his subject, to that extent he knows by personally acquired knowledge. In the measure that a scientist repeats another's experiments and works out for himself the theorems on which another's discovery rests, in that measure the scientist again knows by personally ~~acquired~~ acquired knowledge. But just as engineers do not waste their time making sure that logarithmic and trigonometric and other tables are correct, so too scientists do not fritter away their lives repeating and checking the experiments performed by other scientists. On the contrary, each is eagerly endeavoring to make his modest contribution to the total fund; and, to do so, each ~~mathema~~ solely draws upon the whole of the common fund not through personally acquired knowledge but also through belief, through taking another's word for it.

However, if there is as large a proportion of belief in science as in common sense, it remains that there is a notable difference in the control of beliefs. Common sense, of course, has its controls, subtle, flexible, dynamic. But we speak of them in proverbs. Live and learn. Once bitten, twice shy. You can't fool all the people all of the time. But scientific statement is precise. It has to bear the weight of all its logical presuppositions and consequences. It is vulnerable, not just at one point, but at a hundred. So it is that verification not only is direct but also indirect. So it is that the law of falling bodies was verified not merely by Galileo some four centuries ago but also on every occasion that that law was presupposed in successful experiments performed during the last four hundred years.

I have been characterizing belief. I have said it is a necessary condition if man's coming to know is to be a group enterprise, if it is to be increased and accelerated by a division of labor. I also have said that belief accounts for a major portion in the knowledge both of the man of common sense and of the individual scientist. I have submitted that the difference between science and common sense lies not in the proportion of belief but in the control of belief.

I have now to draw closer to my topic and I do so by noting that in times of little social or cultural change, beliefs are stable and little open to question, but in times of great social and cultural change, beliefs too are changing and, because they are only beliefs, because they are not personally acquired knowledge, such change leaves believers

at a loss. They are disorientated. They do not know which way to turn. They feel that all they have taken for granted is menaced. They may be tempted to unbelief as a liberation or, again, they may dread it as destructive of truly human living.

Such is a major premiss, and I have only to add a minor to conclude to the contemporary issue, the contemporary dis-ease, with regard to belief. The minor is that ours is a time of great social and cultural change and, further, that this is being experienced more particularly by Catholics.

~~First, ours is a time of great social change. For natural science, technology~~

~~First, then, ours is a time of great social change. The discoveries of natural science, the know-how of inventors, the~~

First, then, ours is a time of great social change. The relation of man to nature has been transformed by the discoveries of natural science, the flood of inventions, the know-how of technicians, the enterprise of industrialists, business men, ~~traders~~, financiers. Earlier ways of living have been disrupted by urbanism, increasing longevity, a population explosion, built-in obsolescence, mobility, detached and functional relations between persons, universal, prolonged and continuing education, instantaneous information, increasing leisure and travel, and perpetually available entertainment. There is a distinctive meaning conveyed by the phrase ~~modern life living~~ , modern living. It connotes a varying set of more or less established innovations in the family and in manners, in society and in education, in the state and in the law, in the economy and in technology, in the churches and the ~~later~~ sects. The older one is,

the more lively one's memory, the more easily will one recall the many manners in which our way of living has changed in the course of the present century.

But besides a way of living, the social, there is also the cultural, and by the "cultural" I would denote the meaning we find in our way of life, the value we place upon it or, again, the things we find meaningless, stupid, wicked, horrid, atrocious, disastrous. In its immediacy the cultural is the meaning already present in the dream before it is interpreted, the meaning in a work of art before it is articulated by the critic, the endless shades of meaning in everyday speech, the intersubjective meanings of smile and frown, tone and gesture, evasion and silence, the passionate meanings of love and hatred, of high achievement and wrathful destruction. But besides the meaning and value immediately intuited, felt, spoken, acted out, there is to any advanced culture a superstructure. To art and literature there are added criticism. To artisans and craftsmen there are added inventors and technicians. To common sense there is added science. To the proverbs of wise men there are added the reflections of philosophers.

~~Religion is complicated by theology~~

Industry and commerce are complicated by economics, togetherness by sociology, the state by political theory, the law by jurisprudence, man's body by medicine and his mind by psychiatry, schools by educational theories, and religions by theologies. Besides the meanings and values immanent in everyday living there is an enormous process ~~of more reflective, deliberate, critical elaboration of meanings and discernment of values~~

in which meanings are elaborated and values are discerned in a far more reflective, deliberate, critical fashion.

I have been presenting a notion of culture and, if I am to characterize contemporary cultural change, I must briefly compare modern culture with its classicist predecessor.

A basic difference, then, lies in the mere size of the superstructure. Our age is an age of specialization for other reasons, of course, but also out of sheer necessity. Modern mathematics, modern physics, modern chemistry are just too vast for any of them to be mastered entirely by a single mind. What holds of them, also holds to a greater or less extent in other fields. Today the Renaissance ideal of the uomo universale, master of every art and science, would be a mere figment of the imagination. But in the classicist period the modern sciences were in their infancy, and there existed a liberal education that enabled anyone so inclined to assimilate the substance of the cultural superstructure and to follow intelligently and critically the work of pioneers. We as a group are immeasurably richer but, as individuals, we have immeasurably more that we can know only by believing.

Again, classicist culture contrasted itself with barbarism. It was Culture with a capital "C". Others might participate it to a greater or less extent and, in the measure they did so, they ceased to be barbarians. In other words culture was conceived normatively. It was a matter of good manners and good taste, of grace and style, of virtue and character, of models and ideals, of eternal verities and inviolable laws. But the modern notion of culture is not normative but

empirical. Culture is a general notion. It denotes something found in every people, for in every people there is some apprehension of meaning and value in their way of life. So it is that modern culture is the culture that knows about other cultures, that relates them to one another genetically, that knows all of them to be man-made. Far more open than classicist culture, far better informed, far more discerning, it lacks the convictions of its predecessor, its clear-cut norms, its elemental strength.

Classicist culture was stable. It took its stand on what ought to be, and what ought to be is not to be refuted by what is. It legislated with its eye on the substance of things, on the unchanging essence of human living and, while it never doubted either that circumstances alter cases or that circumstances change, still it also was quite sure that essences did not change, that change affected only the accidental details that were of no great account. So its philosophy was perennial philosophy, its classics were immortal works of art, its religion and ethics enshrined the wisdom of the ages, its laws and its tribunals the prudence of mankind. Classicist culture, by conceiving itself normatively and universally, also had to think of itself as the one and only culture for all time. But modern culture is culture on the move. It is historicist. Because human cultures are man-made, they can be changed by man. Not only can they but also they should be changed. Modern man is not concerned simply to perpetuate the wisdom of his ancestors. For him the past is just the spring-board to the future and the future, if it is to be ~~good, if man is to be intelligent, reasonable, responsible,~~

good, will improve on all that is good in the past and it will liquidate all that is evil. The classicist was aware that men individually are responsible for the lives they lead. Modern man is aware that men collectively are responsible for the world in which they lead them.

So a contemporary humanism is dynamic. It holds forth not an ideal of fixity but a programme of change. ~~It is the~~ It was or is the automatic progress of the liberal, the dialectical materialism of the Marxist, the identification of cosmogenesis and Christo genesis by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. ~~It is a time that looks forward to Utopia, that preaches an ideology, that criticizes and debunks~~ Chardin. Ours is a time that criticizes and debunks the past, that preaches an ideology, that looks forward to an utopia. It also is a time of confusion, for there are many voices, many of them shrill, and most of them contradictory.

Such a time of confusion, as I have said, calls beliefs into question and, because they are just beliefs, because they are not personally generated knowledge, answers are hard to come by. So to confusion easily there are ~~there is~~ added disorientation, disillusionment, crisis, surrender, unbelief. But, as I also said, from the present situation Catholics are suffering more keenly than others, not indeed because their plight is worse, but because up to Vatican II they were sheltered against the modern world and since Vatican II they have been exposed more and more to the chill winds of modernity. Let me briefly explain why this is so.

Always in the past it had been the Catholic tradition to ~~enter~~ penetrate and to Christianize the social fabric and the culture of the age. So it entered into the Hellenistic

world of the patristic period. So it was one of the principal architects of medieval society and medieval thought. So too it was almost scandalously involved in the Renaissance. But only belatedly has it come to acknowledge that the world of the classicist no longer exists and that the only world in which it can function is the modern world.

To a great extent this failure is to be explained by the fact that modern developments were covered over with a large amount of wickedness. Since the beginning of the eighteenth century Christianity has been under attack. Agnostic and atheistic philosophies have been developed and propagated. The development of the natural and of the human sciences was such that they appeared and often were said to support such movements. The emergence of the modern languages with their new literary forms was not easily acclaimed when they contributed so little to devotion and so much, it seemed, to worldliness and irreligion. The new industry spawned slums, the new politics revolutions, the new discoveries unbelief. One may lament it but one can hardly be surprised that at the beginning of this century, when churchmen were greeted with a heresy that logically entailed all possible heresies, they named the new monster modernism.

If their opposition to wickedness made churchmen unsympathetic to modern ways, their classicism blocked their vision. They were unaware that modern science involved quite a different notion of science from that entertained by Aristotle. When they praised science and affirmed the Church's support for science, what they meant to praise and

support was true and certain knowledge of things through their causes. But modern science is not true and certain; it is just probable. It is not fully knowledge; it is hypothesis, theory, system, the best available opinion. It regards not things but data, phenomena. While it still speaks of causes, what it means is not end, agent, matter, form, but correlation.

Further, this new notion of science introduced radically new problems in philosophy. In Aristotelian physics one ascended from the earth to the heavens and beyond the heavens to the first mover. There was no logical break between knowledge of this world and knowledge of ultimate causes. But modern science is specialized. It is knowledge of this world and only of this world. It proceeds from data and to data it adds only verifiable hypotheses. But God is not ~~a datum of human experience. And there is no hypothetical relationship between this world and God~~ a datum of human experience for, in this life, we do not know God face to face. Again, between this world and God there is no relationship that can be verified, for verification can occur only between data, only with regard to objects that lie within ~~the~~ this world and so can present us with data. Now no one will be surprised that modern science, precisely because it is methodically geared to knowledge of this world, cannot yield knowledge of God. But we come to the catch when we ask the further questions, How do we know about God? What do we mean by God? Anything else we know ~~about or talk about, is given in someone's experience, understood to some extent, and the understanding is checked or verified as well as can be managed~~

or talk about, is known or meant through experience, understanding, and judgement, where judgement rests on some type of verification. Knowledge of God, then, is a singular case. It is not immediate knowledge: there are no data on the divine itself. It is not verifiable knowledge: for there are no verifiable hypotheses or principles without data. What, then, kind of knowledge is it?

Now I believe that question can be answered and I attempted to do so in a book, Insight. But I wish to draw your attention to the nature of the question. It is not a question about metaphysics but about knowledge. It is not a question that could be asked about knowledge at any time or place; on the contrary it is a question that arises only after modern science has been developed. So, if one wishes to meet that question, one will not talk metaphysics and, much less, will one talk medieval metaphysics. But the classicist did not advert to the real novelty of modern science, and so he could not conclude to the real novelty in modern philosophic problems and, particularly, in the problems concerning God.

There was a further blindspot. I have already noted that the classicist conceives culture not empirically but normatively and that this approach leads him to exaggerate the stability and the universality of his culture. Now this exaggeration had the gravest consequences for theology, for it precluded any proper sense of history and, indeed, it did so precisely when historical studies of religion and theology were undergoing their greatest development. Since the beginning of the century theologians have been incorporating more and more historical study into their theology. The structures of the previous theology, designed by classicist

~~mentality, quietly were stretched, strained, broken, abandoned~~

mentality, here were quietly stretched and strained, there had to be broken and abandoned. But mere history is not theology, and the task of doing genuine history and on that basis proceeding to theology confronts contemporary Catholic theologians with the most basic and far-reaching of problems, the problem of method in theology. Once some progress is made there, we can begin methodically to pick up the pieces and ~~some~~ construct a contemporary theology.

I have been attempting to outline the contemporary issue. I spoke of belief in its relation to personally acquired knowledge, of belief in tranquil times and of belief in times of great social and cultural change, of the social changes that have occurred in this ~~t~~ century, ~~[illegible]~~ of the transition from classicist to modern culture, of the belated acknowledgement by churchmen of this ~~t~~ transition, ~~and of the enormous problems thrust upon theologians by this incomprehension. and of the sudd enormous~~ and of the enormous problems suddenly thrust upon theologians and, more generally, upon all carriers of ~~Christian~~ Catholic culture. I must now attempt, upon this background, to treat the issue somewhat more concretely and practically.

First, then, I have spoken very generally of human belief. ~~[illegible]~~ But religious faith goes beyond human belief. It includes it, for the living tradition of the ~~Chx~~ Church down the centuries was the handing on from generation to generation of the word first spoken in Palestine. But faith is not in man's word but in God. It is admitting the possibility and acknowledging the fact that God could and did enter into the division of ~~labor in the coming to be of man's~~

labor by which men come to know, that his contribution was one that could not be replaced by human effort, that in accepting the truths of faith we are believing not just man but ultimately God.

Secondly, religion is one thing, and theology is another. Most saints were not theologians, and most theologians were not saints. Theology stands to religion, as economics does to business, as biology to ~~health~~ health, as chemistry to Du Pont industries. To revert to a distinction drawn earlier, theology pertains to the cultural superstructure, while religion pertains to its day-to-day substance. Because of this difference Cardinal Newman was quite right in saying that ten thousand difficulties do not make a doubt: the ten thousand difficulties are in the superstructure, but ~~doubt~~ doubt is in one's personal life. By this, of course, I do not mean that theology and religion are totally independent of each other. Each does depend on the other, but before this dependence can function, they must be acknowledged as distinct, as each possessing its own proper features and modes of operation. To say that ten thousand difficulties in theology do not make one doubt in religion is like saying that ten thousand difficulties in economic theory are no reason for business firms immediately declaring bankruptcy.

Thirdly, the changes going forward primarily are social and cultural. They call for adjustment and adaptation in theology and in religion. But such adjustment and adaptation ~~are something quite different matters of forms and structures rather than content~~ are in forms and structures much more than in content. Theology has to operate within a different context; it will have to operate differently; but it will not

therefore be a different theology. As medieval theology differed from the theology of the patristic period, as renaissance theology differed from both patristic and medieval, so modern theology will differ from its predecessors as much but perhaps no more than they did from theirs.

Fourthly, the analysis I am offering of our contemporary situation differs notably from simpler views that are more frequently heard. It is said that the Church had become a ghetto, that it had ~~now~~ gone to excess in ~~defish~~ defensiveness and in rigidity, that it has to break away from its Byzantine and medieval trappings, that it has to learn to speak to the people of today, and so forth. Now I do not think that these views are simply false, but I do think the truth they contain is expressed more politely, more ~~accurately~~ accurately, and more helpfully, by noting that the Church, if it is to operate in the ~~work~~ world, has to operate on the basis of the social order and cultural achievements of each time and place, that consequently its operation has to change with changes in its social and cultural context, that at present we have the task of a disengagement from classicist thought-forms and viewpoints and, simultaneously, of a new involvement in modern culture. In brief, the contemporary issue is, not a new religion, not a new faith, not a substantially new theology, but a belated social and cultural transition.

Fifthly, my own endeavors in this matter are of an extremely technical nature and I shall not go into them here. But I would like to say that the contrast I have drawn between classicist and modern is not based on some a priori typology or periodization. It is a summary of a whole set of

conclusions concerning the defects of our theological inheritance and the remedies that can be brought to bear. I did not think things wrong because they were classicist; on the contrary, I found a number of things that I thought wrong and, on putting them together, I found what I have named classicism. Again, I do not think things are right because they are modern, but I did find a number of things I thought right and they are modern at least in the sense that they were overlooked in the nineteenth-century Catholic theological tradition.

Here I should like to stress that our disengagement from classicism and our involvement in modernity must be open-eyed, critical, ~~coherent, sure-footed. To fail in that will lead, almost inevitably, to throwing out what is good in classicism and replacing it with contemporary trash~~ coherent, sure-footed. If we are not just to throw out what is good in classicism and replace it with contemporary trash, then we have to take the trouble, and it is enormous, to grasp the strength and the weaknesses, the power and the limitations, the good points and the short-comings of both classicism and modernity. Nor is knowledge enough. One has to be creative. ~~One has to strive to put together again what has been broken, to restore what has been destroyed, to replace~~ Modernity lacks roots. Its values lack balance and depth. Much of its science is ~~dehumanizing~~ destructive of man. Catholics in the twentieth century are faced with a problem similar to that met by Aquinas in the thirteenth century. Then Greek and Arabic culture were pouring into Western Europe and, if it was not to destroy Christendom, it had to be known, assimilated, transformed. Today modern culture, in many ways more stupendous than any that ever existed,

is surging round us. It too has to be known, assimilated, transformed. That is the contemporary issue.

The contemporary issue, then, is a tremendous challenge. Nor should one opt out on the speciously modest plea that one is not another Aquinas. There could have been no Aquinas without the preceding development of Scholasticism. There would have been no Aquinas if there had not been the students to whom he lectured and for whom he wrote. Finally, there would have been a far more successful Aquinas, if human beings were less given to superficial opinions backed by passion, for in that case the work of Aquinas would not have been so promptly buried under the avalanche of the Augustinian-Aristotelian conflict that marked the close of the thirteenth century.

To grasp the contemporary issue and to meet its challenge calls, then, for a collective effort. It is not the individual but the group that transforms a culture. The group does so by its concern for excellence, by its ability to wait and let issues mature, by its persevering efforts to understand, by its discernment for what is at once simple and profound, by its demand for the first-rate and its horror of mere destructiveness.