

HORIZONS AND TRANSPOSITIONS

John Henry Newman's Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine naturally enough led theologians to speak of the development, as opposed to the evolution, of dogmas. But if one seeks an understanding of the actual historical process, I think it important to take advantage of the distinction in Vincent of Lerins' Commonitorium, cited in the first Vatican council (DS 3020), and treat separately the ongoing advance of religious understanding, knowledge, and wisdom and, on the other hand, the unchanging meaning, dogma, pronouncement. To understand the advance, one distinguishes horizons, notes similarities and differences, observes consequent borrowing and oppositions, and acknowledges the traps into which borrowing may lead. To grasp the continuity one discerns in successive formulations how Christians at different times — to take an example — held constantly to an intermediate position between the polytheism of pagans and the solitary monotheism of the Hebrews.

Such then is the general area to which my paper would be relevant. But my precise topic is to indicate and illustrate the notions of horizon and transposition. A horizon is a boundary. Within it are the objects of the interests and beliefs of an individual or group. Beyond it are the objects of unbelief, dislike, revulsion, hatred. And above the horizontal plane of "within" and "beyond" there is the field of the unknown: of it thought is fancy and for it affect is ineffective.

Horizons may be rigid or flexible. Rigidity excludes change. Flexibility is open to positive or negative transpositions. A positive transposition rests on affinity. But the extent of the affinity may be misjudged, so that borrowing may lead to successive corrections. A negative transposition rests on a difference: it may imply an opposition, and the opposition may sink into enmity or incomprehension.

Such are the general notions, and we proceed to illustrate them from such various instances as (1) Jerusalem and Athens, (2) God the Creator and the Unknown God, (3) the New Testament and the Greek councils, (4) earlier and later Scholasticism, and (5) the revival of Thomism in 1879 and its present plight.

Jerusalem and Athens

Two recent studies (Hengel, Sanders) find in St. Paul a bridge between Jerusalem and Athens, while an existential locus has been assigned it by Eric Voegelin.

In his inaugural lecture at the University of Tübingen in 1973, Martin Hengel maintained that Paul's great epistles (Galatians, I and II Corinthians, and Romans)

- (1) are the earliest, certainly authentic Christian documents we possess,
- (2) teach a high christology, and
- (3) do so in language of Palestinian origin.

Since Prof. Hengel's scholarship would only be impoverished by any summary, I must be content to refer to his contention that, if a high christology emerged under the dominance of a Hellenistic milieu, then more happened in the first two decades of Christian history than in the subsequent seven centuries (Hengel 2).

A more general view is expressed in E. P. Sanders' Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion.

It has been regarded as "a major work which ought to make a great impact upon all future studies of Paul and Palestinian Judaism" (Dahl 157) and as worthy of unstinted praise (Sandmel 159). Sanders himself admits that there are common elements to Palestinian Judaism and Pauline Christianity; but he contends that the two differ as patterns of religion. He conceived Palestinian Judaism as a "covenantal nomism" but Pauline Christianity as a "participationist eschatology" (Dahl 157). Such identity in content [^] a diversity in context suggest a transposition. It recalls from an earlier age the adage that the New Testament is hidden in the Old, but the Old is manifest in the New.

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A fuller consideration is possible when we turn to Eric Voegelin's affirmation of an affinity between classical Greek philosophy and the teaching of the gospels. But we have to begin by clearing out of our minds the anachronism of reading fourteenth-century Scholasticism, seventeenth-century rationalism, nineteenth-century idealism into the meaning of mind and reason entertained by the classical Greek philosophers. The basic concern of these "lovers of wisdom" was their resistance to the personal and social disorder of their age. For them mind (nous) came to light as the cognitively luminous force that enabled men to recognize the phenomena of disorder and inspired them to resist it (Voegelin 1974, 237). We are invited then to envisage (in an age of plague, defeat, foreign domination) the personal and social concern of a Socrates

as the root, the dialogical communication of Plato as the trunk, the treatises of Aristotle as the spreading branches. But for Voegelin what was important was not primarily the spoken discourse, the written dialogues, the succinct treatises, but an event in the history of mankind, an emergence and unfolding of existential concern).

Such was the conviction that enabled Voegelin in an earlier paper to ask how Christianity could come to dominate the decaying ecumenic empire of Rome and the subsequent history of Europe, while in the modern world it experiences an inability to gain a hearing (Voegelin 1971, 51). His answer came out of Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho. Successively Justin had tried to live the life prescribed by a series of philosophers, but he set them all aside when in Christianity he discovered not something opposed to philosophy but philosophy brought to perfection. It remains that what Justin could discern our age cannot, for if the answer is still available, still the question has been lost. We ask indeed about the meaning that is to be given to existence, but existence is not some simple datum; it is a disturbing movement in the In-Between of ignorance and knowledge, of imperfection and perfection, of hope and fulfilment, and ultimately of life and death (62f).

On the ultimate, life and death, Voegelin stressed the disturbing ambiguity repeated by Euripides ("Who knows if to live is to be dead and to be dead to live"), by Jesus ("Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it"), by Paul ("If you live according to the flesh, you are bound to die; but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live").

In brief,

There is a direction in existence; and as we follow it or not, life can be death, and death be life eternal... The question expressed by the double meaning of life and death is the question of every man's existence, not only of the philosopher's ... It is a question buttressed by the representative death suffered by Socrates for its truth. Plato's Apology concludes with the ironic departing words to the judges: "But now the time has come to go. I go to die, and you to live. But who goes to the better lot is unknown to anyone but the god" (67f).

In the gospel of John, when a group of Greeks approached the apostles with the Greek names, Philip and Andrew, in the hope of speaking with Jesus, the symbolic meaning of life and death is applied to the divine sacrifice. "Most solemnly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit. Who loves his life, loses it, but who hates his life in this world, keeps it for life eternal. If anyone serves me, he must follow me, and wherever I am my servant will be too." And some verses later: "And I when I am lifted up from this earth, will draw all men to myself" (68f).

Voegelin considered this double meaning of life and death as the symbolism engendered by man's experience of being pulled in various directions and by his need to choose between them. He refers to Plato in the Phaedrus (238A) where we learn that, when opinion through reason leads to the best and prevails, its power is self-restraint; but when desire drags us towards pleasures and rules within us, its rule is called excess. The

pulls are in conflict, lifting us up or dragging us down.

A young man may be drawn to philosophy (Republic 494E) but social pressure may divert him towards a life of pleasure or towards success in politics. If he follows the second pull, however, the question of meaning is not settled for him, for the first pull continues to be experienced as part of his existence. By following the second pull he does not transform his life into a question-free fact but into a recognizably questionable course of life. He will sense the life he leads as not his own true life (495C) but will live in a state of alienation. The play of the pulls thus is luminous with truth. By following the wrong course he does not make it into the right one but slides into existence-in-untruth. This luminosity of existence with the truth-of-reason precedes all opinions and decisions about the pull to be followed. Moreover it remains alive as the judgment of truth-in-existence whatever opinions about it we may actually form (71).

For Voegelin such "... seeking and drawing do not denote two different movements but symbolize the dynamics of the tension of existence between its divine and human poles. In the one movement there is experienced at once a seeking from the human pole and a drawing from the divine pole." Such experience is prior to what we call Classical Philosophy. "Only from the travail of this movement there emerges man the questioner, Aristotle's aporōn and thaumazōn (Met 982b18) and God as the mover who attracts or draws man to himself, as in Plato's Laws X or Aristotle's Metaphysics" (71).

Now this experience of being at a loss and wondering is not some peculiarity of a few fourth-century Greeks. Nor does

it fit into the conceptualist distinction and separation of the natural and supernatural, so that we can speak of Plato and Aristotle as merely pagans and so banish their thinking from the Christian religion pure and undefiled. On the contrary, the ascetical and mystical tradition of Christian thought and practice has a millennial familiarity with the pulls and counter-pulls that constitute the tension of Christian experience, its ambiguities, the need for discernment, and even for different tactics under existentially different conditions.¹

There is evidence then for the claim of Justin Martyr that Christianity is philosophy in its state of perfection. But primarily this is true only of philosophy in its basic meaning, namely, the love of wisdom. And if Voegelin himself would claim no more, at least he draws attention to the beginning of a process that in the course of a millennium gradually led Christianity to the use of metaphysical discourse.

God the creator and the unknown God

In a collection of Ancient Near Eastern Texts (Pritchard 1950) there is included the translation of excerpts from a long hymn to "Amon as the Sole God." It is understood monotheistically by Voegelin (1971): Amon is the god above the national and the cosmic gods, the source of their dignity and power, but unknown not only to men but even to ^{these} known gods (84f).

But if in nineteenth-dynasty Egypt the cosmic gods were acknowledged to derive dignity and power from the unknown god, in deuterio-Isaiah seven centuries later they were denounced as man-made idols (40:12-25). Moreover, in the same passage the God who revealed himself in creation (40:21) also, like

Amon, was alone with himself and his ruach from the beginning (40:12-14). Moreover, this identification continues in the New Testament and in Christian tradition: the unknown God worshipped by the Athenians also was the one proclaimed by St. Paul (Acts 17:23); and Irenaeus quoted with approval a work of Justin's against Marcion in which [^] claimed that he would not have believed the Lord himself if he announced some other God than the one who created and sustains us (Haer IV 6 2).

^ the author

^1 Still this identification was opposed by Gnostic writers, and the oppositon became virulent in the Apocryphon of John. In a summary by Hans Jonas "... Ialdabaoth... became inflamed with the virgin Eve, ravished her and begot with her two sons: Javē the bear-faced and Eloim the cat-faced, among men called Cain and Abel to this day..." (Jonas 205). The creator God of the Hebrews had no place in the Gnostic plerōma but was just another of the cosmic gods.

It will help complete the picture if we add that John A. Wilson, who translated the Amon hymns, questioned the monotheistic interpretation and urged that the ancient Egyptians hardly acknowledged any difference of substance among men, gods, and other elements of the universe. "With relation to gods and men the Egyptians were monophysites: many men and many gods, but all ultimately of one nature" (Frankfurt 66).

It may seem that to complete the picture in this manner only adds to confusion. In fact, it facilitates clarification. For it directs our attention, not to a supposed multiplicity of gods, not to a diversity in what was meant, but to a diversity in acts of meaning.

John Wilson is correct in so far as he attributes to the ancient Egyptians a very familiar oversight of mythical thought:

it does not advert to the possibility that negative comparative judgments may express real distinctions; and where real distinctions are overlooked, there follow the consubstantiality and the monophysitism of which Wilson speaks.

As Wilson provides evidence for mythical consciousness, Voegelin points towards a serious intention in the myth. Amon was unknown: his appellation lay beyond the usual designations of divinity. He was not the god of a place, of Bethel or Memphis; he was not the god of a person, of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Laban; he was not the god of human affect or activity, as were Venus and Mars; he was not the god of tribal or national worship, not even the Platonic demiurge as distinct from the subsistent idea of Goodness itself. His characteristic was simply his being "beyond," and it was not only negative but also positive, for he was the source of the dignity and power of the lesser deities.

With deutero-Isaiah the lesser deities were reduced to man-made idols. With the Law, the Prophets, and Hebrew historiography, there was clearly proclaimed Justin's "one who created and sustains us." With the remission of sins through Christ Jesus, we meet our Father who not only created and sustains us but also restores to dignity and power the repentent human conscience.