

## **CHRISTIAN MYSTERY AND FAITH: MYTH, THEOLOGY AND PLURALISM**

### *(An Essay on the Role of Affectivity in Theology)*

During my seminary days -- the mid fifties -- when 'man' was defined essentially as rational, to be a 'man,' one had to subjugate his affective nature. One's spirituality comprised mainly of daily conquests of 'mind' over 'heart,' of spirit over flesh. For example, in every-day life, 'particular' friendship needed be generalized, and through weekly confession, 'sins of the flesh' needed be particularized. The heart, the epitomizing force that can penetrate to the very center of our being,<sup>1</sup> as Karl Rahner called it, was then perceived as the destabilizing demon that could jeopardize one's assumption into Heaven.

Life-experience, however, has taught me that the relationship between heart and mind is not one between damnation and redemption, one of opposition, but one between two dimensions of my being, one of wholeness. For affectivity relates to cognition as 'what I am (and become)' relates to 'what I know,' or as knowledge through connaturality relates to knowledge through representation, and as praxis relates to theory. On the one hand, affectivity speaks of "the unity of spirit and matter, soul and body, intellect and phantasm, will and passion, prior to these subsequent distinctions,"<sup>2</sup> for affectivity is the embodiment of my whole person, my heart. On the other, cognition speaks of intellect and will -- of reason and thought, and of freedom and choice, respectively --

---

<sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup>

for cognition is a function of my mind. Both approaches, heart and mind, disclose two correlative, yet autonomous, modes of internality and of metaphysical transcendence, and together, they allow for a corrective, healthy and humanizing dialectics between praxis and theory.

Notwithstanding, in churches of dogmatic persuasion, to this day, the theoretical process (that of cognition) foregoes often the practical process (that of affectivity) -- a habit which results inevitably not only in the discrediting of experience but also in the monopolizing of transcendence. Theory without praxis, mind without heart, or cognition without affectivity imposes a "mastery over matter, the soul and societies" and, respectively, machinates "a technique, a morality, [and] a politics . . . which [of course] assure the peace required for the pure exercise [of cognition]."<sup>3</sup> Consequently, cognition remains induratively unencumbered by life-experience. And there, in the heartless mind, not only in science but also in religion, dogmas are concocted.

This essay discusses first Christian mystery and our faith-response as well as the latter's expression in both mythic and theological formulations. It then suggests that pluralism, mythic and theological, protects religious formulations from dogmatic irrelevancy and idolatry. Throughout, the focus of the essay is on the affective and intentional structure of Christian consciousness as the latter is addressed by and responds to God's presence through Jesus Christ who is the all-encompassing horizon of Christian consciousness and the revelation of Christian mystery.

## Christian Mystery and Our Faith-Response

The old man always thought of the sea as *la mar* which is what people call her in Spanish when they love her . . . . Some of the younger fishermen, those who used buoys as floats for their lines and had motorboats, bought when the shark livers brought much money, spoke of her as *el mar* which is masculine. They spoke of her as a contestant or a place or even an enemy. But the old man always thought of her as feminine . . . .

Ernest Hemingway<sup>4</sup>

In *Stories of Faith*,<sup>5</sup> John Shea focuses on an important question: the existence and the intention of ultimate mystery. He argues that in the past, the question regarding mystery was about its existence, whereas today, the question is about its intention. Today, the question is not: does mystery exist? but does it care about me? As caring or uncaring, mystery is granted a different name. As partner, friend and home for the old man the mystery of the sea is *la mar*, and as contestant, enemy and place for the young fisherman it is *el mar*. Each person, in his or her own way, responds affectively to mystery and accordingly names it.

Similarly, Shea formulates the question of faith. Faith relates to the way we respond to mystery, and the contemporary question regarding faith is not about its existence but about its kind. The question is not: do you have faith? but *what* is your faith? There are not two worlds, on the one hand, the world of believers, the people of faith, the theists, and on the other, the world of unbelievers, the people of reason, the atheists. There is but one world, in which all must search for the reasons of their

---

4

5

faith. To distinguish between believers and unbelievers, Shea argues, "obscures the fact that all people work out of faith assumptions based on revelatory experiences," which are essentially affective experiences.<sup>6</sup>

That all people work out of faith assumptions does not imply that science's way of knowing (that of the mind) is faith's way of knowing (that of the heart). In a previous book, *Stories of God*,<sup>7</sup> Shea distinguishes between knowledge through observation (that of science, of cognition) and knowledge through participation (that of faith, of affectivity), which he calls 'feeling.' Feeling is the way we perceive the dimension of Mystery. For Shea, 'feeling' relates not only to affectivity but also to cognition, in the sense that affectivity -- as cognition -- is truly human knowledge. Knowledge through participation engages our whole person, and fidelity sustains it. Knowledge through observation rests in the mind, and conformity validates it. Leslie Dewart has described both conformity and fidelity. "Conformity," he wrote, "is a relation towards another which is owing to another by reason of the other's nature. Fidelity is a relation towards another which one owes to oneself by reason of one's nature. Conformity obligates from without. Fidelity, like nobility, obliges from within."<sup>8</sup> Conformity is a function of the mind whereas fidelity is a function of the heart.

Furthermore, according to Shea, the human mind itself, whether in science or in religion, functions according to a revelation-faith structure, an affective structure, which is disclosed in the following experience: 1) the experience of being related to mystery 2) which communicates the

---

6

7

8

meaning of the relationship, 3) a meaning which is expressed in thoughts and language (more often in secular formulations rather than in religious ones) 4) but a meaning which is always related to our questions, interests, and conflicts.<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding, science has its own faith assumptions and its own kind of affective knowledge, a 'faith-way of knowing.' For example, there is the scientific belief that something of the universe can be known as well as the scientific construction of believable models, i.e., the belief that scientific models will work. There is also the recognition of the scientist's own subjectivity, a kind of faith-knowledge. "Science," writes Gloria Durka, "is a work of art, and like any work of art confers upon things traits and potentialities which did not previously belong to them"<sup>10</sup> such as the phenomenon of the eigenstate, that is, the particular value of an observed reality, which is 'disturbed' by the observer's attempts to measure it.<sup>11</sup> In *Sociology as and Art Form*,<sup>12</sup> Robert Nesbet supports the thesis that the affinities between art and science are more profound than their differences.

In faith's way of knowing (knowledge through participation, the affective way), however, we respond to mystery both as mediate and as ultimate (the former is my own category), that is, we respond to mystery *at any given moment* and *at every moment* (Shea's categories).<sup>13</sup> Ultimate mystery described as 'transcendence-at-every-moment' does not mean, I believe, ultimate mystery 'at-every-moment-for-all-moments in one's

---

9

10

11

12

13

life.' It means ultimate mystery 'at the `everyness` of the moment of any given moment,' which is the ultimate affective moment. "At one moment," writes Shea, "our lives appear as given from a source beyond ourselves and at the next they appear as threatened from a source beyond ourselves."<sup>14</sup>

To illustrate, I offer the following responses to the death of a loved one, which embody both revelatory dimensions of mystery, the mediate and the ultimate. "Life is short, it is precious, I must make the best of it," or "I am pained, angered and desperate at the fact that a loved one has departed." Although these responses relate to the precariousness and frustration of life and reveal mystery 'at any given moment' (mystery as mediate), they simultaneously raise the question about mystery 'at every moment' (mystery as ultimate). These questions raise the ultimate question: while face to face with the death of a loved one, do I experience mystery as *ultimately gracious or ungracious*?<sup>15</sup> In D. H. Lawrence's novel *Women in Love*,<sup>16</sup> Birkin looks at the corpse of his friend, Gerald, and when asked, "Need you despair over Gerald?" not for a moment does he hesitate to answer: "Yes" -- thoroughly a 'heart' answer, one that leaves the mind 'speechless.' For Birkin, 'the everyness of the moment' of that 'given moment of death' was ungracious, unsolicitous and non-caring.

Whether the answer to the question about ultimate mystery be that ultimate mystery is gracious or that it is ungracious, it reveals one's posture before transcendence-at-every-moment, and often those who, at

---

<sup>14</sup>

<sup>15</sup>

<sup>16</sup>

any given moment, grant it the name gracious also call it 'God.' On the one hand, God is the revelation of ultimate mystery as gracious, which surrounds and suffuses our life in the midst of frustration and despair, rejection and hatred, and suffering and death. (God is not the name for the ultimate 'rewarder' of graceful deeds nor the name for the ultimate 'punisher' of sinful acts.) On the other hand, religious faith is the human response to God as the ultimate gracing mystery, which according to Karl Rahner, reveals God's self at "the inmost center of the conscious subjects."<sup>17</sup> This is the level of affectivity, or for Rahner, that of the *Urwort*: "a total human primordial word, . . . the core of the human person . . . at which . . . man is originally and wholly related to other persons and above all also to God."<sup>18</sup>

How does the ultimate gracing mystery, which is God, reveal itself within the conscious subject? Rahner explains. "A revelation from God is . . . possible only if the subject to whom it is supposed to be addressed *in himself* presents an *a priori* horizon against which such a possible revelation can begin to present itself in the first place."<sup>19</sup>

The *a priori* horizon—an antecedent self-communication of God which graces us prior to the use of our free will and which is the condition that allows us freely to respond to God's self revelation—constitutes an *existential* or an ontological determination of each person's concrete existence, one's affective existence. The existential is *supernatural* in the sense that it is consciousness' transcendental intentionalizing determination towards God, which is itself sustained by

---

17

18

19

God's gift of self. In the words of Rahner, the supernatural existential is described as:

. . . the spirit's transcendental movement in knowledge and love towards the absolute mystery [which] is borne by God himself in his self-communication in such a way that this movement has its term and its source not in the holy mystery as eternally distant and as a goal which can only be reached asymptotically, but rather in the God of absolute closeness and immediacy.<sup>20</sup>

By analogy with the literal meaning of horizon—the line at which earth and sky appear to meet and which is the limit of the field of vision—the grace-horizon of consciousness is the juncture where finiteness and the infinite meet. There the self experiences both its solipsistic condemnation and its liberating thrust toward the ultimate gracing mystery.

Where God's infinity calls forth our humanity affectively, there the ultimate gracing mystery, which is God, can be *with-and-for-consciousness* affectively, and this is where grace occurs. Rahner explains:

The radical gracing of reality may seem rather abstract but there is no way to talk about what enables man to surrender to the unutterable mystery. Still we must stress one thing: this grace is not a particular phenomenon occurring parallel to the rest of human life but simply the ultimate depth of everything the spiritual creature does when he realizes himself.<sup>21</sup>

Rahner offers examples of self-realizations, and consequently, of human instances of graced-moments, which are undoubtedly affective moments: when we laugh and cry, when we accept responsibility, when

---

<sup>20</sup>

<sup>21</sup>



we love, live and die, when we stand up for truth, when we break out of self-preoccupation to help the neighbor, when we hope against hope, when we cheerfully refuse to be embittered by the stupidity of daily life, when we keep silent so that evil festers not in our heart but dies there, when in a word, we catch ourselves living as we would like to live, that is, in opposition to our selfishness and to the despair that always assails us. Rahner concludes: "This is where grace occurs, because all this leads us into the infinity and victory that is God."<sup>22</sup>

The horizons of consciousness, "the sweep of our interests" and the "webs of meanings"<sup>23</sup> (mediate transcendence) are expanded by the *grace-horizon*, which is the *horizon of horizons* (ultimate transcendence). Through the grace-horizon, the world, i.e., our multiple relationships to our earth and society is thereby perceived and felt as really fallen and really redeemed. These horizons of consciousness (mediate transcendence) thereby reveal the modality of God's infinity and victory (ultimate transcendence). Thus all of life can be experienced as God's mystery of grace, and where life is experienced as God's mystery of grace through Jesus Christ, it is called Christian life. Thus, where he refers to grace as self-realization, as affective moments, Rahner adds:

Something else must be said about this grace which is the depth and mystery of everyday life. It attained its clearest manifestation in Jesus of Nazareth, and precisely in the kind of life in which he became like us in all things, in a life full of ordinariness -- birth, hardships, courage, hope, failure and death . . . . The person who accepts the human life, death and resurrection of Jesus as God's irrevocable promise of his own personal victory and thus [as] God's last word, affirms .

---

22

23

. . the traditional Christology.<sup>24</sup>

What is traditional Christology? It consists in the process of a systematic reflection upon the Christian faith-experience (an affective experience) that Jesus as the Christ is God's self-revelation in human flesh -- the incarnation of God's infinite and inexpressible mystery of graciousness. To Christian consciousness, Jesus is the grace-horizon, *the* horizon of its horizons and ultimate mystery of graciousness. As affectively 'intentionalized' by consciousness, Jesus, the Christ, is the ultimate ground and goal of the search for Christian truth -- a search which the heart alone is empowered to undertake. Thus, Jesus, the Christ, is both the anchor of Christian transcendental truth and the *summoner* of Christian consciousness' fidelity to being-as-graced-by-God.

Edward M. MacKinnon has explained truth as it relates to transcendent reality. The latter refers to "the ultimate ground and goal of the search for truth . . . a ground which can only be explicated and a goal which can be only approximated by the slow piecemeal process of presenting propositions which we take to be true and hope to be not too inadequate."<sup>25</sup> Thus truth reveals itself on two levels: *transcendental*, the realm of affectivity, and *propositional*, the realm of cognition.

Both as the grace-horizon of consciousness and as the ultimate ground and search for truth, Jesus, the Christ, is a ground which can only be explicated and a goal which can only be approximated by the slow piecemeal process of presenting propositions which we take to be true and hope to be not too inadequate. Although expressed in the myths of

---

<sup>24</sup>

<sup>25</sup>

Scriptures and of one's daily life-experience (the primary language of affective knowledge) and in the statements of theological reflection (the secondary language of cognitive knowledge), these propositions can only direct one to the 'true,' which is expressed in the explications and approximations regarding Jesus, God's revelation of ultimate mystery. Here, the 'true' can exist only *to the extent* that this ultimate mystery is explicated and approximated. These 'propositions' can only be considered as a *not too inadequate* explication and approximation of ultimate mystery. They can only be appraised as an actual embodiment of consciousness' fidelity to itself and can only be affirmed as a relative expression of truth.

The process itself, which leads from consciousness' participation in ultimate mystery to its 'propositional' explication and approximation—that is, the process that leads from affective knowledge to cognitive knowledge—is described by Rahner as part of historical revelation.

God's self revelation in the depths of the spiritual person is a certain "state of mind" . . . inarticulate . . . a consciousness. But this gracious, unobjective [and] non-reflective self revelation of God must be translated into objective propositions if it is to become the principle of man's concrete behavior in his objective reflective consciousness. Now this *translation* has a history of its own, which God governs and which is therefore another divine revelation, and this history of reflexion forms an intrinsic part of the historical process of God's self-disclosure in grace.<sup>26</sup>

It is myth and theology, as the languages of the heart and of the mind respectively, that 'propositionalize' consciousness' participation in ultimate mystery.

## Myth and Theology

Myth is the primary language that 'propositionalizes' consciousness' participation in ultimate mystery (the language of the heart), and theology, the secondary language (the language of the mind). Russell Barta explains. "Theology and faith like their languages, represent quite diverse, but equally valid modes of raising religious questions and of apprehending the real. In theology . . . we are dealing with the language of theoretical construction whereas faith speaks in the pretheoretical language of symbols and myth . . . . Theology is the creation of human thought, whereas the Christian myth grows out of an experiential encounter. What is primary is the myth as it is lived, experienced and handed down. Theology . . . is a second-order reflection on first-order formulations."<sup>27</sup>

As the primary language, which expresses faith, religious myth speaks of the affective bond that exists between persons and what they experience as holy. It is a story made out of imageries and symbols. Myth unifies the paradoxes of human religious experience, provides patterns for human action, and is enacted in rituals. Such are the primeval stories of creation and of the fall, the covenantal stories of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and our own stories of faith, celebrated in word and sacrament. Religious myths neither affirm or deny the historical existence of their heroes. They merely express first-hand the participation of consciousness in ultimate mystery and, for Christian consciousness, they express its 'intentionalized' grace-horizon, Jesus, the Christ, the incarnational revelation of the Ultimate Mystery, which is God.

Gilkey explains that the silent, unheralded and uncommented upon consciousness of being-as-graced (i.e. consciousness' participation in ultimate mystery) in order to be maintained in culture's life must reach a second level, that is, one of symbolic thematization. He writes: "Just as theological symbols are empty without existential apprehension, so no 'meaning' is or can be apprehended within experience as a whole without symbolic forms through which that totality and our place in it is structured and thematized." Human experience and, most importantly, the experience of faith, is itself an "incipient story," a myth. Human experience is not a series of disconnected flashes, which occurs in timelessness, but a web of events, which is patterned in and through time.<sup>28</sup>

Theology (the secondary language of faith), however, is, the systematic and theoretical reflection upon as well as the interpretation and explanation of, religious myth, not its substitute. "The relationship between theology and faith is similar to that between any systematic, rationalizing theory about experience and the experience itself," writes Barta,<sup>29</sup> that between the affective and the cognitive, between *what I am (and become)* and *what I know*.

Historically, theology has been defined as wisdom (a superior knowledge of the Scriptures),<sup>30</sup> as mysticism (a spirituality expressing a doctrinal attitude),<sup>31</sup> as rational knowledge (an intellectual discipline)<sup>32</sup> and, more recently in liberation theology, as practical knowledge (re-

---

28

29

30

31

32

flection on 'performative faith').<sup>33</sup> I suggest that liberation theology offers a paradigm of theological reflection, interpretation and explanation that takes seriously into account one's total sphere of faith as a function of affectivity, personal and social. Where the Christian myths of Scripture and of Christian life are reflected upon, interpreted and explained for praxis critically and dialogically—as in liberation theology—then, theo-logy becomes the critical reflection *on praxis in light of God's Word* (past and present) and the critical reflection *on God's Word* (past and present) *in light of praxis*.