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A Meditation on Radical Obedience to Conscience

LILY QUINTOS, R. C.

A new impetus to enter into fraternal dialogue with all men¹ is one of the openings which the Second Vatican Council has created. For Christians the question is now how they relate to people who have not explicitly heard God's Word, revealed in Christ, or who have heard that Word but do not belong to His Church. Are they total strangers? Or can it be that in the depth of their being they have heard the Word? Are they maybe in their most fundamental longings looking to His Church?

The question is intimately related to the question of salvation because the Christian believes that one must believe the revealed Word of God and belong to the Church in order to be saved. The axiom "Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus", with the modifications it has undergone, is an expression of this tenet. But the Christian also believes that God wills to save *all*.² This biblical reality has found expression in ancient times in the Logos Theology of Justin,³ while we find it in contemporary works of Paul Tillich and others.⁴

How can we reconcile this universal saving will with the necessity of believing the revealed Word and the belonging to the Church? The answer must be that *in some way* all men may hear that Word, and that all men can become members, can belong to the Church *in some way*.

¹ Contemporary theologians, writing after the second Vatican Council bring out this point consistently. see e.g. Eugene Hillman in "Wider Ecumenism", or P. Fransen in "Christian Revelation and World Religions", London 1967.

² I Tim. 2, 4.

³ Justin, Apologia, I, 10, 46.

⁴ See e.g. P. Tillich's "Missions and World History".

The Concept of the Anonymous Christian tries to give an answer to this problem and the key notion in this concept is the free acceptance of grace offered by God to all men. This could be expressed as "radical obedience" and therefore we believe that the fundamental ethical dimension is of central importance for the concept of the Anonymous Christian. It is precisely from this view point of fundamental moral theology that we would like to explore this notion leaving the questions of membership in the Church and its implications to the dogmatic theologians.

From this moral view point we can see that there is a saving significance, a certain directedness to God — even to God as manifested in Christ — in the radical obedience to the dictates of conscience. We see that this obedience is accompanied by a certain "knowledge" of God and his Word. In other words, a person who has this attitude of radical obedience is not a complete stranger to God. We see also that this "knowledge" may take *different explicit forms*. We find them for example in the great religious movements of the world, or even in the "religious" thought patterns of the modern secularized world,⁵ or they may go with an explicit recognition of a certain image of God.

We want to probe the question in our examination of this radical obedience and the human subject who thus obeys and we will have to raise the question of the explicit form this obedience takes, the ideas in which it is expressed. We want to search what their significance is in God's plan for salvation as it touches man and his activity.

THE TRANSCENDENCE OF MAN

Man cannot be understood in his innermost being except as *transcendence towards God*. Man has an openness to the freely acting living God. This openness is an a-priori condition of every spirit act of knowledge and will, so that in every such act this fundamental directedness to God is affirmed and realized. This does not mean that "God" is the *object* of each such act, as if God could be one object among the many possible ones of

⁵ Suggested by Robert Bellah and Thomas Luckmann.

human action and thought. Rather, God appears in each such spirit act as the "terminal point of direction", the "Woraufhin" of man's transcendence. Prior to any explicit naming of God in express concepts or categories, before any categorial affirmation of God, the very spirit act itself implies an affirmation of God.

This is especially clear in the area with which we are concerned here: the ethical area of life. Where an *absolute* moral obligation is affirmed, there is an implicit affirmation of God, even though the individual may not arrive at a thematic express affirmation of God. When an absolute obligation of the moral law is neither expressly recognized or willed, there can be no full morality as such. Human Behavior would then remain bound to passion, convention, utility, etc. and would never become truly moral in the full human sense.

There can be an *atheistic ethic*, since there are values and norms flowing from them which are different from God — such as the personal nature of man and all that corresponds to that nature. Such values and norms can be known and affirmed without express knowledge of God. An objectively given realm of human experience, thought and action exists which has its own proper self-sufficiency (*Eigenständigkeit*) and its own proper availability to human knowledge. For this reason a christian and a non-christian or even an atheist could discuss human ethics and reach genuine understanding with one another. But there remains the further question of the *absolute* validity, the absolute foundation of the binding quality of this ethic. This is founded upon the transcendence of man towards the absolute. These values can be grasped only as absolutely binding when man grasps them as implicitly affirmed in the affirmation of the absolute Being, who is at the same time the absolute value. This affirmation of the absolute Being and Value is made implicitly in the acceptance of openness to this absolute in transcendence. If the atheist, in his own affirmation of values, really accepts these values as absolutely binding upon him, he is implicitly affirming his transcendence towards the absolute, his transcendence towards God. It may well be that he will not affirm such a directedness to God explicitly or categorically, but

such an affirmation must be implicit in any genuine spiritual human choice. In the last analysis then there can be no truly atheistic ethic. This shows the importance of the ethical realm of human life for this whole question which we are discussing, the realm of the Anonymous Christian.

A person may explicitly interpret his values in terms of a different "religion".⁶ This expression of value and the detailed elaboration of the corresponding norms of behavior could well take a form which appears quite strange to someone not familiar with the "religion" involved. It could even be that the values of such a man are experienced as quite false or harmful by the christian, living in a different culture. But, if such a person, in his explicit affirmation of his own values, affirms an absolutely binding quality, and absolute obligation of the value, he is implicitly affirming *the* absolute value, which is to say, he is implicitly affirming God.

TRANSCENDENCE IN GRACE

Man's transcendence towards the absolute is, in the concrete order, founded upon grace. His very essence as man becomes a projection towards the life of God Himself. The nature or essence of man is never "pure nature". It is nature in the supernatural order from which man can never escape, be he even a sinner or an unbeliever. His nature is "superformed" by the supernatural saving grace offered to it.⁷ This existential fact of his historical nature is not just an accident of his being; it forms his very concrete essence. In this situation man is constituted and transcendently differentiated from the rest of mundane creation, precisely in his *freely given capacity for grace* as God's

⁶In Buddhism e.g. we find certain concepts like re-birth, sin, evil etc. which appear rather strange to a Westerner, more especially so because the terminology used in Western literature brings to mind a different set of values. This point has been elaborated by the author in "The Moral System of Buddhism according to the Milinda Panha with Christian Theological Reflection" ch. 7. Louvain, 1972.

⁷cf. P. Fransen "Towards a Theology of the Supernatural" Louvain, 1972.

self-communication. As Paul Tillich wrote: "Man is man because he is able to receive a word from the dimension of the eternal."

It is important to insist here that man's nature is "superformed" by this capacity for grace, but not as automatically *justified*. The real *offer* of self-communication on the part of God (founded on his universal saving will) changes the very situation of man's concrete existence, his transcendence as man becomes now transcendence towards God who freely offers himself. This means that man's concrete nature is endowed with a "supernatural existential", his essence is openness to the living God. But this openness does not mean of itself that man is justified automatically, he must yet *accept that offer*.

It should be stressed also that this grace is not to be considered as a merely objectively given availability (as "actual or habitual grace") which remains altogether beyond consciousness. When we stress the difference between the *offer* and the *acceptance* we do not mean to make a distinction between grace which is altogether beyond consciousness — i.e. merely offered in a purely objective way — and grace which is known. We must realize that the offer itself, which determines man's concrete essence, itself enters consciousness; grace is a conscious spiritual personal reality which could be called a "horizon" in which he thinks, experiences, and suffers, even when he does not reflect upon this horizon or grasp it as freely given grace to which he has no claim. This horizon could be expressed as *the absolute depth and radicality of the questionability* of man as a spirit person. In other words, in the radical experience of himself — in his questions, implicit or explicit — why do I exist?, why am I here?, man becomes conscious of a dynamic "reaching out to the absolute mystery" which is God. The presupposition and the call of grace is therefore identical with the questionability of man.

This conscious or known reality, present to man's mind, may exist in the mode of free acceptance or free rejection, since man is a being who is not merely intellectually knowing, but also freely willing. An Anonymous Christian, then, is a person who engages the whole of his humanity — knowledge and free will — in

his acceptance of his transcendence towards God. Furthermore, grace, as the a-priori horizon of all his spiritual acts, accompanies his consciousness subjectively, even when it is not known objectively. The revelation which comes to him from without is, in this case, not the proclamation of something as yet *absolutely unknown*. It is the expression in objective concepts of something which is already attained or could already be attained in the depth of his rational existence. This certain un-thematic non-categorical awareness could be called "revelation" and is referred to by Rahner as "fides implicita". It can properly be called "faith" only when the transcendence towards God is accepted.

The proclamation of the Gospel, then, does not simply turn someone who is absolutely abandoned by God and Christ into a christian; rather, it turns an anonymous christian into someone who now also knows about his christian belief in the depths of his grace-endowed being by objective reflection and in the profession of faith which is given a social form in the Church.⁸

To clarify these issues Rahner suggests a schematic outline of some possibilities. This appears somewhat abstract and artificial and does not cover all conceivable possibilities, but it helps to clarify the ideas he is expressing.

1. Man's transcendence is open to God; he is present in man's transcendence. The transcendence is freely accepted in a fundamental moral act and it is objectified in a categorial way — i.e. in explicit reflected thought — and it is correct. This means that the person has the true notion of God's nature, of God's plan for him etc. This is the condition of the justified Christian and includes both *transcendental theism* i.e. the acceptance of his transcendence towards God, and *categorial theism*, i.e. the person explicitly affirms God in the proper categorial concepts.

2. The person objectifies his transcendence correctly (as above) but freely rejects that knowledge, i.e. he *denies* God in the traditional understanding of atheism. He rejects the true idea of God.

3. The person freely accepts his transcendence towards God,

⁸ K. Rahner "Theological Investigations" vol. V, p. 132.

but objectifies it incorrectly or interprets it falsely. He does not interpret it as transcendence towards God but inculpably misinterprets it. This would be an "innocent atheism", which at the same time is a "categorical atheism" in the sense that the person in explicit terms does not affirm God.

4. The transcendence towards God is both incorrectly objectified and freely rejected. Rahner calls this "transcendental atheism". It is "culpable atheism" and excludes the possibility of salvation.

Although this schema does not answer all questions a moral theologian would like to ask — e.g. what are the moral implications of rejecting the "true idea" of God? or, does the person in question know it is true? or, if he knows it to be true, does his rejection of a known truth imply also a rejection of his basic unobjectified transcendence towards God? — the elements of the problem are sufficiently clear for the purposes of this article:

1. Man's concrete nature as openness in transcendence towards the living God, constituted by the real offer of saving grace on the part of the freely acting God.

2. Man's free acceptance of that offer, by which he affirms his transcendence towards God.

3. The explicit categorial explicitation of that acceptance which may or may not be carried through correctly.

We can affirm that a person may be in fact freely committed, in the depth of his being, to God while, for some reason, he lacks the correct and proper objective expression of that commitment.⁹

Thus, we have the possibility of an anonymous christian. Rahner has further clarified this term when he called the person in the situation which we have described an "*implicit christian*" which has the same meaning but expresses the state of that person for other people: by reason of his free acceptance of this transcendence towards the saving God, he is implicitly a christian. But for other people he is not by name a christian nor does he

⁹P. Fransen "Intelligent Theology" London 1968. Fransen has been treating this matter in many of his writings. see also F. de Graeve: "Theology of non-Christian Religions" Louvain 1972.

name himself one since he does not affirm his acceptance of the offer in explicit christian terms and categories.

The question can legitimately be asked how the acceptance of transcendence towards God implies a real reference to Christ which can explain why we speak of an anonymous *christian*.

TRANSCENDENCE IN THE ECONOMY OF CHRIST

The concrete offer of salvation takes the actual form of the Father sending his Son into the world and into man's history. Thus we cannot speak of an offer of grace as if it were an abstract timeless attitude on the part of a distant God. The concrete situation in which man exists is a christ-determined situation. Rahner developed this theme in his theology of the Incarnation. In faith, we know that the saving economy is in fact an economy centered on Christ. We can understand what we mean by man only when we understand him within this economy. (This point could be taken as a further clarification of what we said above, that the concrete nature of man is constituted by the free offer of grace: we see now that this concrete nature is constituted not merely by the offer of grace, but precisely by the offer *and* the fullness of life in the incarnate Christ). Rahner can speak of man as the "possibility for the Incarnation" as he explains in a beautiful passage "if one takes seriously that God has become man, then it must be said that man is that which happens when God expresses himself and divests himself. Man is accordingly in the most basic definition that which God becomes if he sets out to show himself in the region of the extra-divine. And conversely ... man is he who realizes himself when he gives himself away in the incomprehensible mystery of God."¹⁰ Seen in this way, the Incarnation of God is the uniquely supreme case of the actualization of man's nature in general.

When a person confirms his concrete transcendence towards

¹⁰ K. Rahner "Theological Investigations" vol. VI, p. 393 and W. N. Pettinger "The Christian Understanding of Human Nature" Nisbet Herts. 1964.

God, i.e. when he affirms his concrete essence, he affirms at the same time his directedness to the concrete person of Jesus Christ who is the total and supreme actualization of all that the essence of man means. Thus, in the concrete economy a "transcendental theist" i.e. one who affirms his transcendence towards God, is "christian", in the sense that he cannot affirm his own fundamental meaning without affirming in some way that final fulfillment of all that his own being means i.e. without affirming his radical directedness to Christ.

This gives us the clue to another rather difficult problem. Why is it necessary that the radical acceptance of God should find its expression in the explicit categorial forms of the christian revelation? If a man is justified as an anonymous christian, why then is he bound to seek to become an explicit christian at all?

The fundamental answer is that the transcendence which affirms itself, looks necessarily to its full and adequate expression in the Word, and the detailed words which articulate the meaning of that Word. It looks to this Word since it is *in its own intrinsic meaning Christ oriented*. While it remains deprived of this full categorial expression it remains less than that which its own intrinsic thrust demands. We could put this another way by saying that the life given by God is life in Christ, and never attains the full dimension of its living power until it becomes in the full sense life *in Christ*, i.e. expressed and embodied in his word. However, it is possible for a person to attain salvation without attaining to this full explicit expression in the christian word. The question rises what the significance is of such an inadequate, incorrect, and imperfect expression of the radical affirmation.

So far we have discussed the radical affirmation and the acceptance of the offer of God's grace without explicit reference to history: it will be necessary to consider now the other religions.

THE OTHER RELIGIONS

The key statement of the role of the "other religions" is: "If man can always have a saving positive relationship with God

and if he has always had to have it, then he has had it *precisely* within the religion actually at his disposal as a moment of his existential milieu".¹¹ The divinely intended means of salvation for the individual meet him within the concrete religion of his actual existential milieu and historic contingency, according to God's will and forbearance (which so intermingle that they are no longer clearly separable). Rahner then speaks of a "legitimate" religion by which he means "... an institutional religion whose "use" by man at a given time can be considered on the whole as a positive medium of the proper relation to God and thus of obtaining salvation in as much as it is positively taken into account in God's saving plan."¹²

This does not mean, of course, that all religions are equally valid, nor does it mean that religions are not mixed with distortion and even with positive error. But the patience of God takes this into account. The weeds and wheat are permitted to grow together until the end. Every religion (not only those which are extrabiblical) is impure in its concrete historical embodiment. All socio-religious forms and structures belong to fallen humanity and are marked by sin, by the frailty and shame of man. Every religion needs purification of itself through the repentance of its most faithful followers.

However, this does not mean that the religions, even the extra-biblical ones, are composed merely of "errors" which God tolerates for the time being until final judgment. There is truth as well as error, wheat as well as weeds. This "wheat" is those elements which can really be a "positive medium of the proper relationship to God". But if we concede that there are erroneous elements and valid elements in these other religions, the important question becomes: "Is there a way to discern them?" And further "if the other religions can, in their totality, be a positive medium of salvation, what is the meaning of the saying that the christian religion is the only true religion?"

¹¹ K. Rahner "The Church: Readings in Theology" p. 128. Innsbruck 1965.

¹² *ibid.* p. 124.

RELIGION IN SALVATION HISTORY

Rahner maintains positively that "... as regards *destination*, christianity is the absolute religion and hence the only religion for all men." But he adds: "We leave it, however, an open question (at least in principle) at what point in time the absolute obligation of the christian religion has in fact come into effect for every man and culture, even in the sense of objective obligation of such demand."¹³

What gives rise to the concrete obligation to accept christianity is the sufficient historical encounter with it which would have sufficient historical power to render the christian religion really present in the pagan society. Until the gospel enters into the historical situation of the individual, a non-christian religion (even outside the Mosaic tradition) does not just contain elements of a natural knowledge of God which are mixed with human depravity as a result of sin and later aberrations. It contains also supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to man as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ. Therefore, while admitting that errors are present, we can recognize these religions as lawful, although in different degrees.

The Church is the criterion by which these errors can be discerned, because only in the church of Christ is to be found the *permanent norm of differentiation* between what is right (willed by God) and what is wrong. In the church there is a "permanent, continuing and institutional court of appeal" which differentiates authoritatively and with certainty between right and wrong, between what is willed by God and what is the consequence of human corruption. We do not undervalue the critical discerning function of the prophets in the Old Testament, but they provided no institutionalized permanent court of appeal, their word is not final in the sense that the full revelation of the New Testament is final; their judgment is not definitive as is the judgment of the Church which rests it upon this revelation and on the definitive status conferred upon it by

¹³ K. Rahner "Theological Investigations" vol. V, p. 120.

God.¹⁴ In the same way we do not want to undervalue the critical discernment of the great religious innovators in extra-biblical religions. But in the same way we must also say of them that their judgment is not final, does not constitute a definitive court of appeal, even while we should recognize that their discernment contains much truth which the christian religion could approve without any reservation. Therefore, at a given period in a certain historical and social milieu a non-christian religion can be accepted as lawful in its theoretical and practical norms. However, this does not mean that it is lawful in *all* its aspects.

This brings us to the question whether it is possible to determine at which precise historical period a religion was valid, and when it ceased to be so. Can we say that the Old Testament religion was valid until the gospel was sufficiently preached to the peoples? Can we say that at that moment it ceased to be valid and all peoples were obliged to accept the christian religion? Can we say the same for extra-biblical religions? Should we consider them now as simple errors because the gospel has been preached to the peoples? It seems obvious that this cannot be true. The precise point in history at which the "obligation" to accept the christian religion arises can only be determined in the way we described: i.e. it comes into real, social historical contact with the person and with his culture.

However, this question cannot be discussed as if the religion in question were an entity, or simply a complex of theoretical and practical "doctrines" which could be declared valid or invalid by comparing them to the christian religion. The "salvation-significance" of any religion lies in its being an expression of the fundamental relation between the person and God, or better, between a community of persons and God.

GENERAL AND SPECIAL SALVATION HISTORY

By reason of the incarnational-social nature of salvation (by

¹⁴We are not treating here the more detailed question of the authority of the Church nor questions on specific judgments on the particular form in which this authority is exercised. We limit ourselves here to dogmatic principles.

reason of the being of man) the fundamental acceptance of the offer of grace must be expressed in concrete social forms. All decisions of man through history have found expression in such a concrete, external way and are embodied in a social cultural complex of forms. Since the fundamental decision is either for or against the acceptance of grace, it has an intrinsically saving significance. Thus, we see emerging the underlying aspect of salvation in the external domain of human thought and action. The elements which we refer to when we speak of human history are fundamentally the expression of decisions with *significance for salvation*.

There are certain areas within this whole realm of human socio-cultural objectification of decision which do not admit of any clear and definite judgment of their significance for salvation (or damnation). We are dealing with real human decisions but the objective forms which they take do not always allow us to interpret their significance for salvation. Rahner calls these areas "profane history". For example, we can observe the historical phenomena of industrialization, war, or even the more ordinary events of human existence, and we may indeed speculate that people's salvation is at stake in these events, but we cannot interpret this significance because we have no criterion for judgment.

However, since man's salvation is at stake here, we can call these events "salvation history", or, in Rahner's terminology, "general salvation history". This is materially co-extensive with profane history, but formally distinct from it in so far as it is saving or damning. We can call it a history of salvation and revelation because it is a matter of real decision and free acts both on the part of God and on the part of man: it is a matter of mutual personal communication which is performed concretely in and on the material of profane history. But we can apply the term "history" only in a wider sense. Strictly speaking and because of its a-priori transcendental tendency, it does not yet appear in those objectifications in word and objective cultural values which make it possible to have direct communication between men, and to have reflexively apprehensible knowl-

edge about the relation to empirically and communicable realities. Only then would we speak of history in the fullest sense of the word.

However, this general salvation does not remain meta-empirical. It will be expressed in various ways, in cult, religious associations, etc., in certain forms of affirmation of value. Since some of the decisions in question here may be taken to be saving decisions (expressions and articulations of that fundamental decision to accept grace), and since these decisions take a concrete expression, we see here the broad area in history in which we can situate the "anonymous christian." How we are to differentiate between the various expressions, and thus differentiate between anonymous and explicit christians is a further question which we will answer shortly.

God has "interpreted" a particular part of this general saving history by his Word: by his definitive Word he has declared what aspects in this general history are indeed his will. This interpretative Word is basically Jesus, the Word of God, and the self-revelation of this Word in human words. The area of general salvation, thus interpreted, is called "special salvation history". The Word and the human words and events of Jesus' life which express the saving significance of Christ are the definitive expression of what is being enacted by the saving will of God in the world. In other words, we have, in the full, concrete event of Christ's life, summed up in his death, the full and definitive expression of that whole work of self-communication of God. Since each fundamental decision of man is an acceptance or rejection of that self communication, it looks to the Christ-event in its totality as its full and finally genuine objectification in salvation history. We see in the Christ event what this process of saving call and acceptance in the depth of our own spirit *really means*.

The New Testament is thus the final and definitive setting and interpretation of the whole of human history, the final, adequate expression and objectification of the whole vast complex of human saving decision. The New Testament interprets the Old Testament discerning those elements which are really

expressions of God's will, and those which are human interpretations and distortions. Furthermore, the whole revealed word of God interprets the whole of human salvation history, distinguishing among all the expressions (religion, cult, etc.) those elements which are according to the will of God and those which are not.

In this way we have in broad principle a basis of discernment of the validity of the objectifications of the fundamental decision of man — and of the various religions — in their social historical extension. This enables us to understand how the expressions which the obedience of the anonymous christian assumes are referred to the final definitive expression in the word of God. But this broad sweep cannot capture the more personal aspect of the question.

THE PERSON IN HISTORY

We must remember that the theoretical and ritualistic factors in good and evil are a very inadequate expression of what man actually accomplishes in practice. We must remember that the same transcendence of man (even the transcendence elevated and liberated by grace) can be exercised in many different ways and under the most varied labels. We must take into consideration that, whenever the religious person acts religiously, he omits, or makes use of the manifold forms of religious institutions and practical norms which go with them. He makes a consciously critical choice among them. We must consider the immeasurable difference between what is objectively wrong in moral life and the extent to which this is realized with subjective grave guilt. This is true even in the christian sphere. When we take all this into consideration we will not hold it impossible that grace is at work, is even accepted in the spiritual, personal life of the individual, no matter how primitive, unenlightened, apathetic and earthbound such a life may at first appear. We can say quite simply that, whenever, and in as far as the individual makes a moral decision in his life, this decision can be thought of as measuring up to the character of a supernaturally elevated

believing act. This is also a saving act and hence, it is more than merely natural morality.¹⁵

It will therefore be possible to discern a genuine "anonymous christian" even when the actual expression of his real "christianity" takes on a very inadequate form. This means that we must raise the question of the expression of the fundamental option in a new way. We have already dealt with the problem of why it is necessary for this fundamental option to look to the christian religion as its final and only fully adequate expression. We showed the relationship between the claim of the christian religion to be the only genuine and ultimately valid religion, and the "lawfulness" of other religions. The question here is slightly different. If we think not only of the christian religion in a global way, but of a definitively correct *morality*, we must think of the various moral expressions which may emerge in the concrete life of the genuine anonymous christian. We have said that in a certain socio-cultural-historical situation a religion may indeed be the lawful religion for a person since it is a valid expression of his saving relationship to God. This can be so even if the religion is mixed with distortions.¹⁶ But we insisted that there is a definite, finally valid religion, in the light of which this other religion must be judged inadequate. The question then is: Is there a final *ultimately valid morality* in the light of which other moral expressions must be judged wanting?¹⁷ We would only have to think of certain norms of warfare, of marriage laws, etc. We would make a similar judgment concerning the values and moral norms of people living within non-christian religions, or within a milieu governed by atheism. Yet, if we assume that there are anonymous christians among these peoples, we must also assume that they can express their fundamental decision even in these inadequate or (apparently) wrong ways in good conscience. Just as we dealt previously with the given religion of a people or culture, we are now faced with the

¹⁵ K. Rahner "Theological Investigations" vol. V p. 124-125.

¹⁶ cf. P. Fransen in "Indian Ecclesiastical Studies" vol. IV p. 263.

¹⁷ cf. Anita Roper "Objektiv und Subjektiv Moral. Ein Gespräch mit K. Rahner." Freiburg 1971.

problem of the given morality of a people or a social milieu. What is the role of such a morality?

THE PERSON, THE COMMUNITY, AND MORALITY

The moral aspect has of course been implied throughout this article because the fundamental decision to accept the offer of grace is a moral option. We want to deal with this question more explicitly. The individual lives within a given social, cultural milieu and the socially given morality of this milieu must be taken into account when we reflect upon the individual. This morality is not pure: it is mixed with corruption in some way as Jesus confirmed even for the Old Testament morality. It can be disputed and corrected by the individual in accordance with his conscience. Yet, if we take it in its totality, it is the way in which the individual encounters the natural divine law according to God's will and it is the way in which the natural law is given real, actual power in the life of the individual. He cannot be expected to reconstruct the natural law norms on his own initiative and with his own limited insights. Therefore, the morality of a people and of an age, taken in its totality, is the legitimate and concrete form of the divine law, even though it can and may have to be corrected. It is only with the New Testament that the institution guaranteeing the purity of the divine law is present, that a definitive expression of that law is available. It will be available to a specific community only when it makes real historical contact with that community.

Does this mean that we have to accept a given value as automatically authentic? We would not wish to do that: we do insist on the need to correct such values, the need of criticism by the individual in the light of his conscience. However, we have so far only juxtaposed the two factors of the acceptance of the given morality and the need for critical correction. We need to understand the relation between the two.

MORALITY AND HISTORY

It must be presumed at the outset that the socially given

morality will be influenced by the decisions of the individual, and that the individual in turn will be influenced by the given morality. There is no point here in entering into the irresolvable question of which element has priority. It is more a question of trying to understand how a given morality can be valid and yet can be seen (from a later or different point of view) as not valid. The usual explanation would be that there are always permanent values and norms established once and for all. Actions in accord with these are said to be "objectively" good and moral. But it has always been recognized that a person may be in inculpable error about these values and norms and fail to act according to them. If he acts according to his conscience, he acts subjectively correctly, even though objectively his acts are immoral and wrong. The problem centers upon his ignorance of these values and norms.

If we return to our general question we face a new problem. The person in his historical, social milieu is faced with the choice of accepting the given morality as it is, or of criticizing it selectively. (Basically the same problem comes up when the person is faced with accepting the given religious system of his culture, since this choice too has its ethical dimensions). On what basis can he accept it? Simply because it is there and can therefore be presumed to be in some way the will of God? This would hardly do. And if we presume he must critically evaluate both the given morality and the given religion, we must ask what the basis of such a valuation can be.

If we return to the fundamental position of this study we can gain some insight. We have spoken of the "essence of man" as being transcendence towards God. In his study Rahner suggests that, corresponding to this essence, there are enduring ever valid moral values, which are consciously known (*be-wusst*) but not expressly grasped (*ge-wusst*). Just as the transcendence towards God is known but not expressed in a categorial way, — it seeks to express itself in categorial expressions — so these transcendental values are expressed and embodied in "categorial objective values". Without this expression the transcendental values cannot be realized in the historical life of man.

In a certain cultural situation a certain categorial value may be experienced as the valid expression of this transcendental value, and it then acquires the binding quality of the fundamental categorial value. But it may well happen that in another historical situation this particular categorial value may not yet be experienced as a valid expression of the transcendental value or it may be that it no longer be experienced as such. We see that there is a real *becoming* of values in human history. Values are not given once and for all, they have a history. The person, then, will experience his own self understanding differently in different historical situations and in that sense we can say that the concrete essence of man has a history. What is permanent about the nature of man is that it is a "goal-directed-program". We are speaking of the essence of man in a more concrete way than in the earlier part of this article where we said that it is the "essence of man superformed by grace". Here the actual historical dimension is given much more stress and we come to the concrete historical ethical plane. There can therefore be at a given historical point, a value perceived and experienced as such by a person, which may not be seen as a value in another period. In other words, it is possible to assert a genuine moral decision directed to a value at a given period, while the same decision in another period might be found wanting. In this we have a basis for criticism of a given morality, namely the perception of the valid expression of the transcendental value in a given period.

In this article we intended to provide a basis for a valid moral theological discussion in a time when objective norms are criticized for being too inflexible and unrealistic.

We can see now how ethical norms can be understood not just as an imposition from above. Part of the hesitancy shown by many moral theologians to enter with an open mind into a discussion on the problems surrounding natural law seem to be based on fear. There seems to be fear that, unless ethical norms are imposed from above and are objectively valid standards for human behavior, the end of ethical life is in sight and we will fall into a miasma of subjectivism. Only the explicit acceptance of God and the acceptance of a natural law which God placed in

man's heart can provide a solid basis for human ethical life.

We can see now that valid moral norms can arise from the inner exigencies of the person without being completely subjective, because they are directed *intrinsically* to an objective value and an objective God. Such a norm can have an absolute binding quality without being universal and valid for all time. Moral norms do not have to be forced into the dilemma which Paul Lehman posed "they are either absolute but removed from reality and useless, or they are relevant to reality but cannot be absolute and thus become rather useless."