

Updating Faith, Hope and Charity

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The Decay of the Christian Vision

Christians are people who share a particular kind of consciousness, which St Paul characterized as having faith, hope and charity, adding, in a famous phrase, that the greatest of these is charity (1 Cor. 13:13). All three of these key words have changed their meanings over the years, in a process well known to linguists as semantic drift. Almost all words change their meanings imperceptibly over time. The word *hectic*, for instance, once meant tubercular, thus feverish, and *naughty*, once meant worth nought (so that the Authorized Version of the bible can have Jeremiah talking of “naughty figs”) but is now used only to describe ill-behaved small children. In two thousand years the three words on which Christianity has built have also changed their meanings, so much so that they no longer serve to describe the experience which inspired Paul and which he was trying to communicate.

Charity for Paul was a newly discovered kind of love between God and humankind which manifests itself most obviously in the love we show for our fellow humans. Now it largely refers to making donations to worthy causes, and the element of love has so far disappeared that we talk of something or someone being “as cold as charity”. Faith has changed its meaning more subtly, embracing both belief in God in the widest sense and a sectarian narrowness, so that Catholics can talk of allegiance to their church as the faith, while for many Protestants the same word “faith” identifies those who believe in the literal truth of the Bible, despite its many unbelievable episodes. If faith refers to something common across the churches, it is probably acceptance of a particular theory of sin and redemption and the articles of the trinitarian creed.

It is the word *hope*, however, which has suffered most from misunderstanding, for it had a very vague denotation to begin with, meaning almost lack of faith. “I hope the train will come” indicates not a sense of certainty but of doubt. Most newer translations of the bible talk of trust, rather than hope, and this seemingly small shift has radical implications for spiritual development, for while hope implies that one has doubts as well as belief, trust in the religious sense implies reliance, a sort of gamble that a personal God is active in the world and will intervene in our lives. We put something at stake in trusting God, just as we put something at stake when we trust that a bridge will bear our weight. The analogy is, however, rather misleading, insofar as when a bridge collapses we do not trust it again, whereas it would seem that when God does not deliver in answer to our prayers, we are called upon to find some reason why he has failed to do so. In such a situation of disappointment many feel that simple honesty demands they reject the hypothesis of trust, especially when it concerns the life or health of a loved one. Sometimes, and paradoxically, after great bereavement people will say they hate the God in which they no longer believe.

Trust - Passive and Active

What then do Christians trust will happen when they deliberately practice trust, and do members of other religions feel that trust is a necessary element in their theology and way of life? There is no easy answer to either of these questions, but, as regards the latter, it can be argued that those who trust constitute a meta-religious group. That is to say, they have a spiritual consciousness which transcends the detailed theology, myths and rituals of their particular religion. Where trust is religiously central we may be said to have what Karl Rahner called “anonymous Christians”, on the grounds that the element of trust is so primary in the message of Jesus that all who trust are in different degrees Christlike - with all that that entails. Trust in God is a fundamental virtue in the Old Testament - indeed, there is no more piercing analysis of it than in the Book of Job - but is absent in non-theistic religions, such as Buddhism, Confucianism or Taoism, for it is irrelevant. It is not prominent in Islam, though by no means absent, for the Koran emphasizes submission and acceptance of God’s will (the literal meaning of “Islam”) but unthinking resignation in the face of events risks turning complete passivity into a virtue. This is quite the opposite of trust, which is often described in the Christian tradition as “active passivity”. That oxymoron is a kind of Zen koan which takes understanding to a higher level, to a new type of consciousness, in fact, which could be described with scientific precision as super-natural in an evolutionary sense, for it is above normal human experience.

What Paul was attempting to communicate by the word trust was a nexus of attitudes and responses which together define a dynamic new relationship between God and man. It was the relationship which had been exemplified and taught by Jesus, but it is significant that Paul had never met Jesus personally. He had met Christians, those who had been infected, as it were, by the consciousness of Jesus, and at first had reacted to them as a threat, and he had met what he describes as the resurrected Christ (1 Cor 15:8) on the road to Damascus. It is unfortunate for our time that Paul employed several different theologies to communicate the new awareness that had transformed him, emphasizing for the benefit of his pagan hearers, the quasi-magical and sacrificial aspect of Jesus’s life, but also talking of him as a new kind of human being. Had he lived in post-Darwinian times, he would have described Jesus as an evolutionary holotype, the first example of a new species, differing from the normal *Homo sapiens* by having a new kind of consciousness. It is obviously difficult, if not impossible, to describe the consciousness of anyone, let alone a higher kind of human, but there is no doubt that an extraordinary trust in God was an essential factor in the make-up of Jesus and contributed to the charisma which he radiated.

The gospels themselves show some ambiguity about trust, for while Jesus taught his hearers to trust like the lilies in the field and the sparrows (Matt 6:28) - a striking simile, which stays in our memory - they do not give much practical advice about putting it into practice in real life. It is all very well to have “no thought for the morrow” but the ordinary family has a mortgage to pay, the manager of even a small business must think a year ahead, and a responsible politician must think a generation ahead. Trust in God is by no means so simple a thing as it might at first seem, and the more one reflects on it, the more one

becomes aware of two critical factors that neither Paul nor Jesus (at least as his words are recorded in the Gospels) make explicit.

God-beyond-God, Me-beyond-Me

In the first place, it is clear that although trust depends on prior belief, it goes beyond faith, for it entails believing not only that there is a creating power, but that we are in a reciprocal relationship with it, that it can act to change us and to change circumstances for its purposes and for ours. The imperative of religious trust is a call to live in such a way that we identify the purpose of our life with the purposes of this hypothesized power. Through trust we aim to become two-in-one. This state is nothing more or less than non-dualism, the *advaita* of Vedic Hinduism, Islamic Sufism and of mystics in the Christian tradition. It is the highest form of all religions. All this presupposes, of course, a theological belief - rather perhaps an intuition or conviction - that the creating power has attributes which can be accurately called personal. Belief in a God who knows and cares is the great leap of faith, for to believe simply in the existence of a creating power requires no great faith even today, when science accepts the existence of a primal energy as a working hypothesis. To believe, by contrast, in a personal God means taking science and theology a step further, in effect to posit two kinds of creating power, the first being an infinite and eternal power quite outside our comprehension, timeless and ineffable. This is what theologians often call "the deity" or "the Godhead" and what Eckhart called "God-beyond-God". The second kind of divinity is this infinite God manifested finitely in time. If we regard the Holy Spirit as God-in-time, then trust in God is really trust in the Spirit. Thus trust can be seen to drive religion and human evolution forward, taking us beyond our present horizon to faith in a God-beyond-God and the experience of a me-beyond-me.

Faith-beyond-Faith

Belief in God is a defining aspect of all religions, but trust in God is not so universal. In fact, active or dynamic trust is central only in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and sometimes missing altogether even in other theistic religions which have a strong belief in the reality of a creating divinity. In Islam the most strongly monotheistic of religions, there is no real equivalent of the God the Holy Spirit at work in the world and the action in time of the one infinite God, Allah, is instead performed by angels and jinns. In Hinduism, the other great theism, the perception of God-in-time is expressed in the distinction between Atman, the divine breath in all creation, and Brahman, which is, so to speak, the power that breathes, but in practice trust is expressed through petition to one or other of the many sub-divinities that have multiplied in popular Hinduism. These brief remarks are made to illustrate the point that while science is compatible with belief in the existence of a transcendent creating power - indeed, Big Bang theory may be said to demand it as a tacit hypothesis - belief in this same power immanent in the universe is a purely religious concern. Science, in fact, gains its justification, its revelatory power and its moral integrity from defining itself as a God-free zone. (We would not think much of a garage mechanic who diagnosed the knocking in our car engine as God at work.) Trust in the immanent God is at the heart of a living religion, that is to say, any religion which goes beyond the

repetitive behaviour of ritual or recitation of creeds. To reduce religion to articles of belief in the legendary or the logically impossible is not only to reduce it ultimately to the level of superstition, but to squeeze out of it both the intellectual and spiritual challenge and the transforming power that justifies its existence. A religion that is oblivious to the importance of trust deprives its followers of the chance of a new kind of happiness that comes from sharing the life of the creating power.

The Dynamics of Trust

With trust there comes an unwillingness to let the natural self continue to dominate our life, a diffuse and fitful emotional need which grows until it becomes what Jesus describes in himself as a positive hunger to have a higher self take over (John 4:34). Since our species has taken hundreds of generations to attain self-consciousness in its present form, it would not be surprising if the initial faint call to abandon self is resisted. Self-reliance is a genuine virtue and a necessary element in human maturity. Without a proper valuation of self, its independence and its rights, society must revert to a herd mentality. Hence we cannot, and should not, give up our self-centredness easily.

How then do we learn to trust? The answer comes in the process of learning, so that life becomes rather like building a plane as it is in flight - always intriguing, often urgent, sometimes scary. We learn more about what trust entails as we attempt to practice it, and much of that means learning to live with paradox, and resist the easy answer. We must have the simplicity of the dove, yet, as Jesus said, the wisdom of the serpent, a traditional symbol in ancient cultures of both cunning and healing power. A naturally trusting person may be at a disadvantage here compared to a natural sceptic, for what passes for childlike trust may be little more than lack of imagination, or thinly disguised fatalism. The ability to trust actively and spiritually, as an essential factor in our human development, may be compared to the musical ability which all of us have in greater or lesser degree. Great innate musicality is a gift which may prove less valuable than limited musicality coupled with the gift of perseverance. It is more a *potential* for development than a fixed endowment. As with our musical potential, so too with our natural willingness to trust in the divine, we must either use it or lose it.

Given the importance of trust, it is surely remarkable how little it is emphasized in the teaching of institutional Christianity, and rarely explained or encouraged from the pulpit. Once we start to suspect that it may be important, we are therefore thrown back to a large extent on our own explorations and on the small group of recognized teachers who have urged upon us its importance. Of these, Brother Lawrence and Julian of Norwich are perhaps best known today. Jean-Pierre de Caussade's classic *L'Abandon* (in English, *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence*) has been universally recognized as exceptional for its single-minded development of the theme of trust, playing on it like a musical fugue. The development of trust plays a large part in Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life* and in William Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. Eckhart's sermons may be included in this brief list, although the significance of trust is sometimes obscured by the metaphysical fireworks that he uses to light up the unitary state of consciousness towards which it leads. The common

element in all these stands in relief when compared with other religious classics such as Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* or Pascal's *Pensées*, which treat the spiritual life in a notably more legalistic sort of way. Pascal is enjoying something of a revival today in religious circles, but while his religious writing was (as his biographer in the *Britannica* says) "stamped with the passionate conviction of a man in love with the absolute the mysterious relations of the person with God are treated as if they were a geometrical problem." All devotional books, from whatever religious tradition, are ships which presumably seek the same port, but those which set their compass-bearing on trust are blown by a different, gentler wind. To emphasize trust is to de-emphasize guilt and make us see our human weaknesses as a gift, something given for a purpose.

However, of all the spiritual masters just mentioned the most recent is two or three centuries old, and there is not much modern spiritual literature of any stature that emphasizes the centrality of trust. One partial exception that comes to mind is Abbot John Chapman's *Spiritual Letters*, written in the early part of the twentieth century, but it is significant that he describes how the discovery in middle age of de Caussade's work came to him as a revelation. There is a pressing need as we move into the twenty first century for spiritual writers who can integrate the doctrine of trust with our world view, as the old spiritual masters integrated it naturally with the world view of the Middle Ages and the Bible, but we shall have to wait until inspiration is given. As we cannot create a Mozart or Bach to order, we cannot create a spiritual genius.

Trust as a Virtue, a State and a Process

There is perhaps a hidden problem here in that trust is not only a virtue to be practiced or the state of mind to which it leads, but rather a mixture of the two categories, a way of life or process which leads to a change in habitual consciousness. This might explain why even so inspirational a spiritual guide as the late John V. Taylor says relatively little about trust, seeming almost to skip over it in order to reach the psychological state to which it leads. In his small classic *A Matter of Life and Death* trust is, so to speak, the theological dog which didn't bark, for while Bishop Taylor asks, "Why is it such a commonplace that little children are more vividly alive than their parents?", he concentrates on their ability to see creation through fresh eyes, not mentioning how their "aliveness" is rooted in the taken-for-granted sense of security that comes from trust in the "higher power" of their parents. He does, however, see clearly that being fully alive follows from a making a religious choice, quoting in illustration the famous passage in Deuteronomy (Chap 30), where Moses, in his dying speech, confronts the Israelites with their destiny, the decision to accept or reject obedience to the revealed laws of God - "Today I offer you the choice of life and death, blessing or curse. Choose life."

Over and over in the New Testament Jesus is presented as "he who has led the way to life" (Acts 3:15), and the point I wish to make particularly is that escape from what Taylor calls "the sad simulations of life" that the world accepts as normal can be made most effectively through choosing to trust God. To make this decision is as momentous in the spiritual seeker's life as is the alcoholic's decision to give up drinking, and it is not without importance that the success of Alcoholics Anonymous depends precisely on those who are addicted making "a

decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understand Him*" (Step Three of *The Twelve Steps*, emphasis in the original). I have imagined Paul preaching Jesus today as the future of human evolution made present. A latter day Moses, addressing not a ragbag of semitic tribes in process of becoming a nation but a planet in process of becoming a global family of nations, would offer life as an equally stark choice: continue down the path of mindless materialism and die or choose the self-identification with God that comes from trust, and live.

We cannot acquire the life of trust by considering theory, only by trusting, and the uncomfortable fact is that developing the kind of consciousness that we call "trust in God" demands that we be put into situations where we *must* trust. Such situations, distressing as they may be at the time, are a genuine grace and blessing. They fall into two kinds - situations where we must make a deliberate decision to trust and those where we have no choice but to trust. The first kind of situation is almost continual in the average person's life, involving major and minor crises in which we can either stand back and, as it were, let God take charge or rely on our purely human efforts or give way to fear - often the last two together. The second situation, when the decision to trust is almost taken out of our hands, is when we have exhausted all our resources and come to a point where we have no choice but to fall back on trusting God, where there is a fine line between trust and desperation. A very great deal of the answer to prayer seems to come in response to such cries for help, and this surely is the lesson of the gospel writer who put the words of the psalmist into the mouth of Jesus *in extremis*, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" That is the cry of someone pushed to the limit and beyond.

But what about the minor crises, when we are not desperate but feel the urge to ask God to arrange things to suit our needs, to pass an exam or have a loved one recover from illness, to find a job, to meet a life partner or have our marriage blessed with children? This is a very practical question, and there is almost no practical guidance - do this or do that - available from devotional books or from the pulpit on how to approach it realistically and constructively. We cannot just sit back like a lily in the field, but must put the maximum of our effort into the situation and in so doing we seem to go against the rather fragile imperative of trusting in God. We cannot expect God to intervene to find us a job if we do not peruse the job adverts and "get on our bike". St Augustine's advice was to act as if everything depended on us but pray as if everything depended on God, which is certainly a good start, and something we can hang onto when the storm of doubt starts blowing. Most situations require that we repeatedly bring our minds back to the mysterious dualism, acting and accepting, desiring and not desiring, that is at the heart of the life of trust. The gospels drive home this point dramatically in the highly stylized story of Jesus in Gethsemane - Take away this bitter cup, but Thy will be done.

The Mystery at the Heart of Trust

More often in real life it is not one great dramatic event that provides the challenge, but repeated small attempts to find this balance between natural feelings and super-natural aspirations. Eventually Eckhart assures us we shall "learn to break through things and seize God in them." Repeated acts of trust add

up to a process of continuous conversion, leading to a point where it feels no longer unnatural to “let go and let God” and, in Emerson’s words, “trust the current that knows the way.” Rather, it will start to feel unnatural if we do not trust. Through trust we become co-creators with God, for what is now to happen to our species (and increasingly to the planet) must come through our vision and our actions. The mystery of creation is then seen to be that we have the choice to go with or against the force that drives evolution, indeed the force which IS evolution. In this context, true religion can be seen as the coming together of those who have chosen to go with that force, seek its intentions and cooperate with them. It is a staggering thought, and our first reaction may well be to say, “Who? Me?”, and then step smartly back, so that the only human beings who are left volunteering to accept the challenge, like the naive recruit on the parade ground, are Jesus and a few outstanding spiritual leaders from a bygone age.

What will hold us back if we do volunteer will probably be the feeling that we are not worthy, and that being a co-creator is not the real me. As we pursue the path of trust, we can hardly avoid becoming schizophrenic, wavering between the familiar self we have known and the one we would like to be. Because the new “me” is still to come, we must at first discipline ourselves in a dedicated hypocrisy, acting as if we were that which we only hope to become - being patient when we know we are “naturally” impatient, generous when we know we are “really” rather mean, loving when we know how unloving we can be and, above all, unselfish when we know how skilful we are at looking after “number one”. That the new unselfish self is an attainable goal is itself an act of trust, an act almost of blind trust in the slow growth of the early period of transition, when our inner voice whispers, “This is not you. Give up. Stop pretending. Avoid more disappointment.” We start the spiritual search like hunters pursuing God, but only enter upon it properly when, having used up all our arrows, find that we are being pursued. Robbed of our sharpest intellectual weapons, no longer in control, what began, inevitably, as a selfish urge to grasp the ultimate turns into a quite different kind of adventure, not so much a search as a waiting to be discovered. Waiting is of the essence, and if it is done in trust, waiting is perhaps the highest form of worship.

One talks conventionally of the “virtue of trust”, but this diminishes our understanding of its significance, for it is not so much a desirable quality that we acquire as a new state of awareness which is given. Trust in the deepest sense, as a habitual relationship with the divine is a gift for which we can only ask and prepare. It is about as far from hope as usually understood as it can be, for it entails a whole new way of *feeling* about divinity and is the entry point into the great mystery of religion. How can this self which we feel unthinkingly as the centre of reality identify with the unknowable deity which is its true centre, how can it submit to the infinite power from which it has been spun without being annihilated in the process? Or to look at the mystery from the other side, how does the infinite, creating power become human and take on flesh in each one of us?