

Foundations of Christian Faith

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TRANSLATED BY WILLIAM V. DYCH
New York: The Seabury Press, 1978.

Introduction

1. General Preliminary Reflections

This book will try to give an “introduction to the idea of Christianity.” It is meant, first of all, to be merely an *introduction* and no more. It is self-evident that an undertaking of this kind has more to do with a personal decision to believe than do other scientific or theological publications or academic presentations. Nevertheless, it is meant to be an introduction within the framework of intellectual reflection, and is not intended directly and immediately for religious edification, although it is clear that the relationship of a theology of the spirit and of the intellect to a theology of the heart, of decision, and of religious life poses a very difficult problem. Secondly, it is intended to be an introduction to the idea of *Christianity*. We are presupposing here the existence of our own personal Christian faith in its normal ecclesial form, and we are trying, thirdly, to reach an *idea* of this. This word “idea” is added in order to make it clear that we are dealing here with an idea and all that this demands in the sense of Hegel’s “*Anstrengung des Begriffs*.” Anyone who is just looking for religious inspiration and shies away from the demands of patient, laborious, and at times tedious reflection should not enter into this investigation.

By the very nature of the case this introduction is an experiment. One does not know in advance whether the experiment will succeed even to a limited extent, or whether it can succeed. For this also depends on the reader of these pages. In the subject matter of this book we are not dealing with this or that particular theological question, but for one who is a Christian and wants to be a Christian, we are dealing with the totality of his own existence. Of course we shall have to show, and this motif is present throughout, that a person can be a Christian without having examined the totality of his Christian existence in a scientifically adequate way. Since, moreover, this cannot and therefore need not be done, he does not thereby become intellectually dishonest.

For a Christian, his Christian existence is ultimately the totality of his existence. This totality opens out into the dark abysses of the wilderness which we call God. When one undertakes something like this, he stands before the great thinkers, the saints, and finally Jesus Christ. The abyss of existence opens up in front of him. He knows that he has not thought enough, has not loved enough, and has not suffered enough.

There have always been attempts like this to express the structure of Christianity, of Christian faith and of Christian life, as a single whole, even if only in theoretical reflection. Every profession of faith, beginning with the Apostles’ Creed and continuing down to Paul VI’s Creed of the People of God, is such an attempt at a summary expression of Christian faith and of Christian self-understanding, and hence, although very brief, is an introduction to Christianity or to the idea of Christianity. St. Augustine’s *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Charity*, St. Bonaventure’s *Breviloquium* or St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Compendium of Theology to Brother Reginald* are also basically such attempts to give a relatively brief overview of the whole and of the essentials of Christianity.

But there must always be new attempts at such reflection upon the single whole of Christianity. They are always conditioned, since it is obvious that reflection in general, and all the more so scientific theological reflection, does not capture and cannot capture the whole of this reality which we realize in faith, hope, love, and prayer. It is precisely this permanent and insurmountable difference between the original Christian actualization of existence and reflection upon it which will occupy us throughout. The insight into this difference is a key insight which represents a necessary presupposition for an introduction to the idea of Christianity.

Ultimately what we want to do is merely reflect upon the simple question: “What is a Christian, and why can one live this Christian existence today with intellectual honesty?” The question begins with the fact of Christian existence, although this existence looks very different today in individual Christians. This difference is conditioned by personal levels of maturity, by very different kinds of social situations and hence also of religious situations, by psychological differences, and so on. But we also want to reflect here upon this fact of our Christian existence, and we want to justify it before the demands of conscience and of truth by giving an “account of our hope” (1 Pet. 3:15).

The second part of the introduction is intentionally omitted.

3. Some Basic Epistemological Problems

THE RELATION BETWEEN REALITY AND CONCEPT, BETWEEN ORIGINAL SELF-POSSESSION AND REFLECTION

We are calling this essay an introduction to the *idea* of Christianity in order to indicate that our concern here cannot be a mystagogical initiation into Christianity, but is an inquiry on the level of conceptual thought in theology and in the philosophy of religion on the first level of reflection. We are dealing with the idea, not with the reality immediately; here as nowhere else idea and reality are incommensurate with each other, although, on the other hand, nowhere does the idea require turning to the reality itself in order to be understood as much as it does here. Even if *our* attempt should founder, it must be possible

in principle according to the claim of Christianity. For, on the one hand, Christianity exists in the individual person in his concrete, historically conditioned finiteness only if this person accepts it with at least a minimum of knowledge that he has personally acquired and that is encompassed by faith, and, on the other hand, this knowledge is what is understood of Christianity as something that is in principle accessible to everyone and can be grasped by everyone.

Not everyone can be an expert in theology in the strict sense. But if, nevertheless, Christianity is to be able to be something which can be grasped personally by everyone, then in principle there must be an introduction to Christianity on a first level of reflection. In other sciences it might be the case that the more specialized something becomes, the more inaccessible it is for the non-specialist, and the more it becomes important and becomes precisely the real truth of this science. This cannot be the case in theology, because in its scientific pursuits theology does not just turn its attention subsequently to a knowledge which is salvific for all, but it intends to be this salvific knowledge which is for everybody. For reflection upon one's prior understanding of existence belongs in some form and to some degree to this very understanding of existence, and is not merely a supplementary luxury for specialists.

There is in man an inescapable *unity in difference between one's original self-possession and reflection*. This is disputed in different ways by theological rationalism on the one hand, and on the other by the philosophy of religion of so-called classical "modernism." For basically every rationalism is based upon the conviction that a reality is present for man in spiritual and free self-possession only through the objectifying concept, and this becomes genuinely and fully real in scientific knowledge. Conversely, what is called "modernism" in the classical understanding lives by the conviction that the concept or reflection is something *absolutely* secondary in relation to the original self-possession of existence in self-consciousness and freedom, so that reflection could also be dispensed with.

But there is not just the purely objective "in itself" of a reality on the one hand, and the "clear and distinct idea" of it on the other, but there is also a more original unity, not indeed for everything and anything, but certainly for the actualization of human existence, and this is a unity of reality and its "self-presence" which is more, and is more original, than the unity of this reality and the concept which objectifies it. When I love, when I am tormented by questions, when I am sad, when I am faithful, when

I feel longing, this human and existentiell* reality is a unity, an original unity of reality and its own self-presence which is not *totally* mediated by the concept which objectifies it in scientific knowledge. This unity of reality and the original self-presence of this reality in the person is already present in man's free self-realization. That is one side of the question.

Nevertheless it must be added that a moment of reflection, and consequently of universality and spiritual communicability, belongs even to this original knowledge itself, although this moment of reflection does not capture this unity and transpose it integrally into objectifying concepts. This original unity which we are driving at between reality and its knowledge of itself always exists in man only with and in and through what we can call language, and thus also reflection and communicability. At that moment when this element of reflection would no longer be present, this original self-possession would also cease to exist.

The tension between original knowledge and its concept, which moments belong together and yet are not one, is not something static. It has a history in two directions. The original self-presence of the subject in the actual realization of his existence strives to translate itself more and more into the conceptual, into the objectified, into language, into communication with another. Everyone strives to tell another, especially someone he loves, what he is suffering. Consequently in this tension between original knowledge and the concept which always accompanies it there is a tendency towards greater conceptualization, towards language, towards communication, and also towards theoretical knowledge of itself.

But there is also movement in the opposite direction within this tension. One who has been formed by a common language, and educated and indoctrinated from without, experiences clearly perhaps only very slowly what he has been talking about for a long time. It is precisely we theologians who are always in danger of talking about heaven and earth, about God and man with an arsenal of religious and theological concepts which is almost limitless in its size and proportions. We can acquire in theology a very great skill in talking and perhaps not have really understood from the depths of our existence what we are really talking about. To that extent reflection,

*The two spellings, "existential" and "existentiell," follow the German usage. "Existential," as in Rahner's phrase "supernatural existential," refers to an element in man's ontological constitution precisely as human being, an element which is constitutive of his existence as man prior to his exercise of freedom. It is an aspect of concrete human nature precisely as human. "Existentiell," as in Rahner's phrase "existentiell Christology," refers to the free, personal and subjective appropriation and actualization of something which can also be spoken of in abstract theory or objective concepts without such a subjective and personal realization. —Trans.

conceptualization and language have a necessary orientation to that original knowledge, to that original experience in which what is meant and the experience of what is meant are still one.

Insofar as religious knowledge also manifests this tension between an original self-knowledge acquired through what we do and what we suffer, and its conceptualization, there is also within theology this dual movement in its irreducible unity and difference. This tension is a fluid relationship and not simply something static. Although this movement reaches its goal only asymptotically, we should be coming to know better and better in a conceptual way what we have already experienced and lived through prior to such conceptualization, although not entirely without it. Conversely, we should show again and again that all these theological concepts do not make the reality itself present to man from outside of him, but they are rather the expression of what has already been experienced and lived through more originally in the depths of existence. We can to some extent become present to ourselves on a conceptual level, and we can try again and again to relate our theological concepts back to their original experience. Hence what we are trying to do here is both justified and necessary. Should we fail, this failure could only be understood by Christians as the mandate and the task to try again and harder.

THE SELF-PRESENCE OF THE SUBJECT IN KNOWLEDGE

We often imagine the essential nature of knowledge after the model of a tablet on which an object is inscribed, whereby the object comes from outside, as it were, and appears on the tablet. We imagine knowledge in the likeness of a mirror in which some object or other is reflected. It is only such paradigms of knowledge that make intelligible the famous problem how the "in itself" (*An-sich*) of something can enter into knowledge, how an object can get into knowledge as it were. These paradigms are always present in epistemology as an a priori, especially in the defense of so-called realism, the "image" or "copy" theory of knowledge or the doctrine of truth as the correspondence between a statement and an object. They are presupposed there as something to be taken for granted. In all of these models of knowledge the known is something which comes from outside, is the other which presents itself from outside according to its own law, and informs the receptive faculty of knowledge.

But in reality knowledge has a much more complex structure. At least the spiritual knowledge of a personal subject is not of such a nature that the object presents itself from outside and is "possessed" as known in this way. It is rather a knowledge in which the knowing subject possesses in

knowledge both itself and its knowledge. This occurs not only when in a second and subsequent act the subject reflects upon its own self-presence in its knowledge, that is to say, when it reflects upon the fact that it knew something in the first act and now makes this earlier knowledge itself the object of its knowledge. The knowing possession of knowledge as such, as distinguished from its objectified object, and the knowing possession of self are characteristics of all knowledge. In knowledge not only is something known, but the subject's knowing is always co-known.

In the simple and original act of knowledge, whose attention is focused upon some object which encounters it, the knowing that is co-known and the knowing subject that is co-known are not the *objects* of the knowledge. Rather the consciousness of the act of knowing something and the subject's consciousness of itself, that is, the subject's presence to itself, are situated so to speak at the other pole of the single relationship between the knowing subject and the known object. This latter pole refers to the luminous realm, as it were, within which the individual object upon which attention is focused in a particular primary act of knowledge can become manifest. This subjective consciousness of the knower always remains unthematic in the primary knowledge of an object presenting itself from without. It is something which goes on, so to speak, behind the back of the knower, who is looking away from himself and at the object. Moreover, even if this knower in an act of reflection explicitly makes the co-known self-presence of the subject and his knowing the object of a new act of knowledge, the same thing happens again. This new act itself, which makes the subjective co-consciousness the object of the subsequent act in a conceptual way, also includes once again such an original self-presence of the subject and his knowledge of this second, reflexive act as the condition of its possibility, as its subjective pole.

This reflexive act does not make the original self-presence of the knower and his knowing superfluous. In fact its object is basically only this original, luminous self-presence of the subject. But this conceptualized and thematized self-presence of the subject and its knowing is never identical with the original self-presence and never recaptures its content completely. Just as in the case of the relationship between immediately experienced joy, anxiety, love, or suffering and the content of a reflexive concept of joy, anxiety, love, or suffering, so too exactly, but in a much more original way, is the relationship between the necessary self-presence of the subject and his knowledge of what is objectively known, a self-presence at the subjective pole of the knowledge relationship, and the reflexive objectification of this

self-presence. The reflexive self-presence always refers back to this original self-presence of the subject, even in an act whose attention is upon something quite different, and it never recaptures this original, subjective self-presence completely. Nor can the tension and polarity between the two poles of "subject" and "object" be resolved when the subject makes himself his own object. For then the object is the conceptually objectified subject, and the knowledge of this concept includes once again on the subjective pole of this tension and polarity the original, unthematic self-knowledge of the subject as its original condition.

APRIORITY AND ESSENTIAL OPENNESS

But it is not the case that this co-known, unthematic self-presence of the subject and its self-knowledge is merely an accompanying phenomenon in every act of knowledge which grasps an object, so that the knowledge of this object in its structure and content would be completely independent of the structure of the subjective self-presence. Rather the structure of the subject itself is an a priori, that is, it forms an antecedent law governing what and how something can become manifest to the knowing subject. The ears, for example, constitute an a priori law; a screen, as it were, which determines that only sounds can register in the ears. The same is true of the eyes and all the other organs of sense knowledge. They select according to their own law from the fullness of the possibilities of the world impinging upon them, and according to their own law they give these realities the possibility of approaching and presenting themselves, or they exclude them.

This in no way implies that the realities which present themselves cannot manifest themselves as they actually are. A keyhole forms an a priori law governing what key fits in, but it thereby discloses something about the key itself. The a priori structure of a faculty of knowledge is disclosed most simply by the fact that it is constant in every individual act of knowledge of an object that is given to it, and indeed even when the object of this act is, or rather would be, the denial or the impugning of these a priori structures. For the sake of brevity we cannot illustrate this point in our sense knowledge of the manifold of immediate events in time and space. Instead we shall turn immediately to the totality of man's spiritual knowledge in which this knowing, subjective self-possession, the *reditio completa*, the complete return of the subject to itself, as Thomas Aquinas calls it, really takes place.

If we ask what the a priori structures of this self-possession are, then we must say that, without prejudice to the mediation of this self-possession by

the experience of sense objects in time and space, this subject is fundamentally and by its very nature pure openness for absolutely everything, for being as such. This is shown by the fact that the denial of such an unlimited openness of the spirit to absolutely everything implicitly posits and affirms such an openness. For a subject which knows itself to be finite, and in its knowledge is not just unknowing with regard to the limited nature of the possibility of its objects, has already transcended its finiteness. It has differentiated itself as finite from a subjectively and unthematically given horizon of possible objects that is of infinite breadth. Anyone who says objectively and thematically that there is no truth affirms this statement as true, otherwise the statement would make no sense. By the fact that in such an act and on its subjective pole the subject necessarily affirms the existence of truth, although he does this in unthematic knowledge, he already experiences himself in possession of such a knowledge. The same is also true in the experience of the subjective, unlimited openness of the subject. Insofar as he experiences himself as conditioned and limited by sense experience, and all too much conditioned and limited, he has nevertheless already transcended this sense experience. He has posited himself as the subject of a pre-apprehension (*Vorgriff*) which has no intrinsic limit, because even the suspicion of such an intrinsic limitation of the subject posits this pre-apprehension itself as going beyond the suspicion.

TRANSCENDENTAL EXPERIENCE

We shall call *transcendental experience* the subjective, unthematic, necessary and unfailing consciousness of the knowing subject that is co-present in every spiritual act of knowledge, and the subject's openness to the unlimited expanse of all possible reality. It is an *experience* because this knowledge, unthematic but ever-present, is a moment within and a condition of possibility for every concrete experience of any and every object. This experience is called *transcendental* experience because it belongs to the necessary and inalienable structures of the knowing subject itself, and because it consists precisely in the transcendence beyond any particular group of possible objects or of categories. Transcendental experience is the experience of *transcendence*, in which experience the structure of the subject and therefore also the ultimate structure of every conceivable object of knowledge are present together and in identity. This transcendental experience, of course, is not merely an experience of pure knowledge, but also of the will and of freedom. The same character of transcendentality belongs to them, so that basically one can ask about the source and the

destiny of the subject as a knowing being and as a free being together.

If the specific nature of this transcendental experience is clear, an experience which as such can never be objectively represented in its own self, but only by an abstract concept of it; if it is clear that this transcendental experience is not constituted by the fact that one speaks of it; if it is clear that one must speak of it because it is always there, but for this reason it can also be constantly overlooked; if it is clear that by its very nature it can never have the novel attraction of an object that is unexpectedly encountered, if all of this is clear then one understands the difficulty of the task we are undertaking: we can also speak of the term of this transcendental experience only indirectly.

UNTHEMATIC KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

We shall be concerned later with showing that there is present in this transcendental experience an unthematic and anonymous, as it were, knowledge of God. Hence the original knowledge of God is not the kind of knowledge in which one grasps an object which happens to present itself directly or indirectly from outside. It has rather the character of a transcendental experience. Insofar as this subjective, non-objective luminosity of the subject in its transcendence is always orientated towards the holy mystery, the knowledge of God is always present unthematically and without name, and not just when we begin to speak of it. All talk about it, which necessarily goes on, always only points to this transcendental experience as such, an experience in which he whom we call "God" encounters man in silence, encounters him as the absolute and the incomprehensible, as the term of his transcendence which cannot really be incorporated into any system of coordinates. When this transcendence is the transcendence of *love*, it also experiences this term as the *holy* mystery.

We shall be going into this in detail later, but one thing which should be mentioned here in order to clarify what transcendence means is that if man is a being of transcendence towards the holy and absolutely real mystery, and if the term and source of the transcendence in and through which man as such exists, and which constitutes his original essence as subject and as person, is this absolute and holy mystery, then strangely enough we can and must say: mystery in its incomprehensibility is what is *self-evident* in human life. If transcendence is not something which we practice on the side as a metaphysical luxury of our intellectual existence, but if this transcendence is rather the plainest, most obvious and most necessary condition of possibility for *all* spiritual understanding and com-

prehension, then the holy mystery really is the one thing that is self-evident, the one thing which is grounded in itself even from our point of view. For all other understanding, however clear it might appear, is grounded in this transcendence. All clear understanding is grounded in the darkness of God.

Hence upon close examination the mysteriousness of this term of transcendence is not simply the contrary of the notion of the self-evident. In our knowledge only that is self-evident for us which is self-evident in itself. But everything we understand becomes intelligible, but not really self-evident, only by the fact that it is derived from something else and thus resolved: into axioms on the one hand, and on the other into the elementary data of sense experience. But it is thereby derived and made intelligible either in the mute opaqueness of sense data, or in the half-light of ontology, and hence in the absolute and holy mystery.

What is made intelligible is grounded ultimately in the one thing that is self-evident, in mystery. Mystery is something with which we are always familiar, something which we love, even when we are terrified by it or perhaps even annoyed and angered, and want to be done with it. For the person who has touched his own spiritual depths, what is more familiar, thematically or unthematically, and what is more self-evident than the silent question which goes beyond everything which has already been mastered and controlled, than the unanswered question accepted in humble love, which alone brings wisdom? In the ultimate depths of his being man knows nothing more surely than that his knowledge, that is, what is called knowledge in everyday parlance, is only a small island in a vast sea that has not been traveled. It is a floating island, and it might be more familiar to us than the sea, but ultimately it is borne by the sea and only because it is can we be borne by it. Hence the existentiell question for the knower is this: Which does he love more, the small island of his so-called knowledge or the sea of infinite mystery? Is the little light with which he illuminates this island—we call it science and scholarship—to be an eternal light which will shine forever for him? That would surely be hell.

If a person wants, of course, in the concrete decisions of his life he can always choose to accept this infinite question only as a thorn in the side of his knowledge and his mastery and control. He can refuse to have anything to do with the absolute question except insofar as this question drives him to more and more individual questions and individual answers. But only when one begins to ask about asking itself, and to think about thinking itself, only when one turns his attention to the scope of knowledge and not only to the objects of knowledge, to transcendence and not only

to what is understood categorically in time and space within this transcendence, only then is one just on the threshold of becoming a religious person. From this perspective it is easier to understand that not many are, that maybe they are not capable of being, that they feel that it demands too much. But anyone who has once raised the question about his transcendence and about its term can no longer let it go unanswered. For even if he were to say that it is a question which cannot be answered, which should not be answered, and which, because it demands too much, should be left alone, even then he would have already given an answer to this question, whether the right one or the wrong one is here beside the point.