The Elijah Interfaith Institute

CONVERSION TO FAITH AND GROWTH IN FAITH, AND APPRECIATING PLURALISM

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The Christian Tradition, from the New Testament on, draws a firm line of division between Christians and non-Christians. Neither the New Testament nor the Christian Tradition favor the notion, as widespread in antiquity as it is today, that the religious life is a matter of *natural* process, by which human beings turn "from luxury and self-indulgence and superstition . . . to a life of discipline and sometimes to a life of contemplation, scientific or mystic," thus actualizing their full human and religious potential.[1] Conversion and initiation mark a boundary between church community and "those outside"; present-day pluralism is assisting the catholic[2] world in reestablishing this ancient self-understanding.

At the same time, in the catholic tradition, "of frequent occurrence in patristic literature is the division of the spiritual life into three stages, according to the virtue predominant in each, [or] into three ways, *all three of which lead to salvation*, either by way of fear, or of hope, or of charity."[3]

So in the catholic Tradition we have a combination of **initial conversion**—the step across the clear boundary marking off Church and World (*i.e.,* culture) into the Church—and then, subsequently, *within* those boundaries, an urgent invitation to **continued conversion** along the broad yet recognizable path of phases of spiritual growth and development.

The *locus classicus* on this latter theme is found in the *Str_mateis* ("Miscellanies"), written by Clement of Alexandria, "the first Christian gentleman," around the turn of the third century. Clement, availing himself of elements of Platonic and Stoic philosophy, understands and

teaches the Christian faith as the true *gn_sis*. Accordingly, he recognizes three degrees of spiritual maturity.

"The first step . . . is instruction with **fear**, by which we keep away from wrongdoing; the second is **hope**, by which we come to strive for whatever is best; but what makes perfect is **love**, which, as is fitting, presently provides training in the gnostic way."[4]

Clement expresses the same idea a bit less neatly elsewhere in the work:

"A divine thing it is, therefore, such a great change: that out of **unbelief** someone should become a **believer**, and believe with **hope** and with **fear**. This is precisely how **faith** reveals itself to us as the **first move** to salvation; after it, fear and **hope** and **repentance**, developing along with **self-control** and **endurance**, lead us on to **love** as well as ***gn_sis***."[5]

On a larger scale, Clement's sequence of treatises *Protreptikos—Paidag_gos—Didaskalos* (Christ, the divine *Logos*, is, respectively, the "Admonisher," the "Tutor," and the "Master") conveys the same progression: starting with faith and conversion, we must be led through a demanding course of tutored progress in virtue, until we are at last taught without mediation, by the divine *Logos* present to us.[6]

The Tradition uses other images as well, witness the following explanation, frequently quoted in the later monastic tradition, taken from Basil the Great's preface to one of the versions of his *Rule*. The metaphors come straight out of the experience of the ancient homestead with its sundry classes of residents:

"All in all, I can see these three varieties of disposition toward that inexorable requirement: obedience [to the will of God]. For either we avoid evil because we **fear the penalties**, and then we are in the **servile** disposition. Or, in pursuit of the **rewards of profit**, we fulfill the commandments for the sake of **our own advantage**, and accordingly we are like **wage-earners**. Or [we do] what is **attractive** [*kalon*] **for its own sake, and for the love of the One** who has given us the law, **joyful** that we have been judged **worthy to serve such a glorious and good God**, and thus we are in the disposition of **children**."[7]

The three phases can also be used for the purpose of straightforward classification: in the Church, there are **beginners**, those who are **proficient**, and those who are **perfect**. The great seventh-century courtier-turned-monk Maximus "the Confessor" ties a number of traditional strands together when he writes:

"He used the words "**believers**" [*pistous*], "**virtue-seekers**" [*enaretous*], and "**gnostics**" [*gn_stikous*], to refer to those who are [just] **entering**, those who are **making progress**, and those who are **perfect**, or, alternatively, [those who are] **slaves**, **wage-earners**, and **children** [*hyioi:* "sons"]: the three classes of those who are being saved. For the slaves are the [simple] **believers**, who fulfill the master's commandments out of fear of impending threats, and who, in a well-disposed manner, act on what is believed. The **wage-earners** [are] those who, out of desire for the goods that have been promised, patiently bear the weight of the day and its heat—that is to say, the tribulation that has been implanted and forced upon this present life as a result of our ancestor's sin, and the trials [that befall us] in this life in the interest of [our acquiring] virtue; they are those who wisely, out of self-chosen conviction, trade in life for life—this present life for the life to come. Finally, the **children** [are] those who neither out of fear of impending threats, nor out of desire for the goods that have been promised, but by the way in

which their souls are habitually inclined and disposed, with conviction, to what is attractive,[8] are never separated from God—just like that son, to whom it was said, 'Child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours' [Lk 15, 31]. Thus they are, according to deification by grace (as far as this is possible), the very thing that God both is and is believed to be according to nature and causality."[9]

In the West, the tradition is first known through the *Collationes*, or "conferences," of John Cassian, an energetic monk of obscure origin, who entered a monastery near Bethlehem in the late fourth century, and went on to travel, via Egypt and Constantinople, to Rome; he ended up founding two influential monasteries near Marseilles, in the South of France, in the early fifth century. In a collation by the Abbot Chaeremon we read:

"So you see that there are different degrees of perfection. We are called, by the Lord, from high places to higher places yet. Thus the man who has become blessed and perfect in the fear of God, will walk, as it is written, 'from virtue to virtue' [Ps 84, 7], and, as he ascends with alacrity from perfection to new perfection—that is, from fear to hope—he is invited to a yet more blessed state, which is charity: the man who has been a 'faithful and prudent slave' [Mt 24, 45] passes over into the intimacy of friendship and the 'adoption as children' [Gal 4, 5]. This is, too, how my words have to be understood. I am not saying that the contemplation of that eternal punishment or of that most blessed reward is unimportant. No, it is useful, for it introduces those who pursue it to the initial stages of bliss. But charity inspires a fuller trust and a first taste of the joy that never ends, and it will take a hold of them and transport them from servile fear and hope of reward to the love of God and the adoption as children. Thus, in a way, it makes more perfect people out of perfect people."[10]

Why can we learn from these texts?

Answer: because the early Christian church, *while insisting on being* ***one*** *far-flung network of* ***local ecclesial communities*** *of worship, shared conduct, and authoritative teaching,* was living in what we might call a "culturally and religiously pluralistic world." The step into Christianity ("conversion") was as necessary as the perseverance in it (by being catechized and allowed to participate, by being encouraged to contribute talent and gifts, and by being encouraged to life for God by "putting nothing ahead of Christ," in the Holy Spirit), which would prevent Christian from becoming self-righteous and thus, mindlessly sectarian.

Put differently, Christians understand virtue as a moral obligation, yet they believe that it takes the free gift of divine grace to practice it. This makes for realism and discriminating openness toward the surrounding culture. In many passages the New Testament gives evidence of this. It commends respect for human institutions, and what is more, it shows clear signs of having incorporated into the community ethic, not only some of the principal Old Testament ethical traditions, but also common wisdom traditions as well as many naturally virtuous practices readily available in Hellenistic culture.[11]

The great Tradition, in the main, has been faithful to this. Ever since Justin Martyr's

Apologies, the fulfillment of all that is positive in the world. This must enable the Church to recognize and welcome, with discriminating love, Christ in the features of the great souls of all times and to admire their wisdom and even to adopt it. This must also encourage the Church to return the favor, by taking economic, social, political, as well as artistic and literary responsibility, and to make its appeal to all men and women of good will, with the intention of sharing its moral wisdom with society at large.

Yet throughout, the Christian sense of fulfillment must incorporate an abiding determination to be different. The second-century *Letter to Diognetus* is an instructive example; it combines fundamental openness to the world with the New Testament teaching against conformity with the world (*e.g.,* Rom 12, 2; Gal 1, 4; Eph 5, 15–17; 1 Jn 2, 15) with great realism and clarity:

"Christians are distinguished from the rest of people neither by country, nor by language, nor by customs. For nowhere do they live in cities of their own, nor do they use some different form of speech, nor do they practice a peculiar way of life. . . . They do not champion, like others, a human philosophy of life. Yet . . . they make no secret of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their citizenship. . . . They marry like everybody and beget children; but they do not expose their newly-born. The table they provide is common, but not the bed. *They obey the established laws, and in their own lives they surpass the laws."*[12]

In accordance with this basic understanding, Aquinas was to develop his teaching on the relationship between nature and grace. It is also consonant with this to argue that the Church's witness to the world must *integrate* grace and nature—that is to say, it must *freely combine* its own specific profession of faith with the demonstration, by means of an appropriate apologetic, that its confessional beliefs and practices are also naturally attractive and imbued with reason. The Christian apologists of the second and early third centuries never tired of pointing this out.

Wherever some form of freedom of public religious self-expression is available, the Church can also agree to live with a public moral order that it finds less than entirely moral, especially (but by no means exclusively) in a pluralistic society. This applies especially (but again, not exclusively) in the United States, where the tradition of religious freedom goes back to the Catholic co-founders of the Maryland colony in 1632.[13] Ever since bishop John Carroll in the late eighteenth century, American Catholics have learned to appreciate civil liberties, even if it means living with some public policies that are imperfect, and even sinful from a Catholic point of view. The contribution of John Courtney Murray to this true doctrinal development has been recognized by the Second Council of the Vatican, in its Declaration on Religious Freedom, which includes a special paragraph on public morality (DH 8).

What can we learn from these texts?

The first thing to note is the fact that those least advanced in faith live substantially on **fear**, mostly inspired by a desire to find assurance of salvation **for themselves** (and those they associate with); they live in dread of (everlasting) punishment. Unsurprisingly, the Protestant Reformers made a point of denouncing this stance *as* selfish and hypocritical. It is undeniable

that they had a point, but *only if the "pistic" stance is encouraged as the ideal form of faith*. For, at its best, the Christian community's willingness of accept the *relatively* unmotivated pistics *as part of their community* is a gesture of love of the poor. The second-century Christian community in Rome had an elaborate and well-endowed welfare system—small wonder, in 257 C.E., the powers that be had an interest in the archdeacon Lawrence, who administered the food and the money. In fact, in 262 C.E., Julian the Apostate recognized what the Christians had done and ordered publicly funded welfare programs.[14] In and of itself, there is nothing wrong with the idea of "rice-Christians" or "rice-anything" for that matter. The problem starts when that's were conversion ends; some form of critical self-awareness—«*Know Thyself*» —has to set in, sooner or later, especially in the world we live in, where fewer and fewer people can afford the luxury of living without having to encounter cultures other than their own.

The modern philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer has developed the idea of the "hermeneutical circle." Only by attempting to understand the unfamiliar “other” (he has argued) can we, familiar with ourselves but always to a degree prejudiced as well, also come to a refreshingly authentic self-discovery; *painstaking discovery of the other is the royal road to self-awareness.*[15] This fits in well with the long-standing catholic tradition which holds that only those who allow themselves to be purified by long-suffering engagement with otherness have a chance of becoming serene and fair judges *in all things human*, on account of their tested faith and ultimately, of their contemplative familiarity with God. In each religious community there has to be a critical mass of charismatics and especially mystics—those who understand the dynamics of both religious conversion and religious tolerance, otherwise we will fall a prey to the ineluctable shortsightedness of the pistic stance, which will cause "ortho-anything" to degenerate into religious violence.

The (Stoic and) Christian tradition of the three forms of faith-commitment enables Christian communities to learn how to overcome the dynamics of power in a pluralistic world. It may help us, religious scholars, to view ourselves as interpreters and teachers, not so much of our own religion, but also of the others, and thus, indirectly, as unmaskers of unnecessary, inappropriate, and downright damaging prejudice in our own religious traditions.

Open Questions

1. Is anybody familiar with early medieval (= pre-Crusades, or at least pre-thirteenth-century) mutual interpretations and appreciations among the three great monotheistic religions?

2. Could the various medieval Hindu taxonomies of other great religions be helpful here?

Notes

1. Cf. A. D. Nock, *Conversion*, esp. pp. 164–86; quotation p. 179.
2. For the range of meanings of "catholic," cf. Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, p. 185. To prevent misunderstandings, "Catholic," in this paper, is synonymous with "Roman Catholic"; "catholic" means "characterized by catholicity."
3. *DictSpir* II, 535 (italics added).
4. *Strom.*, IV, 7 (*PG* 8, 1264C–1265A). For references to related passages in Clement's works, cf. *DictSpir* II, 535. P. Smulders quotes W. V?lker to the effect that knowledge of the gnostic kind is "obviously not mere knowledge, but the full transparency of the pure heart" ("Dogmengeschichtliche und lehramtliche Entfaltung der Christologie," p. 417); hence, Gk. *gn_stikos* is perhaps better rendered by "mystic." Note the words "fitting" (Gk. *pros_ikon*), which suggests that love properly "fits" the reality of God, and "presently" (Gk. *_d_*), connoting a sense of arrival in a world where the knowledge of God in love is at last fully actualized.
5. *Strom.* II, 6, 31 (*SC* 38, p. 57; *PG* 8, 965B).
6. We can here prescind from the question whether the *Str_mateis* are, in whole or in part, identical with the (lost) *Didaskalos*.
7. *Prooemium in Regulas fusius tractatas*, 3 (*PG* 31, 896B). Cf. Dorotheus of Gaza, *Instructions*, IV, §48; cf. XIV, §157 (*SC* 92, pp. 222–23, 440–41). For a similar passage, cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Hom. in Cant.*, I (*PG* 44, 765BC; Jaeger VI, pp. 15–16).
8. Lit.: "by matter and habit of inclination as well as disposition of soul towards the attractive by conviction" *(trop_i kai hexei t_s pros to kalon kata gn_m_n t_s psych_s rop_s te kai diathese_s)*.
9. *Myst.* XXIV (*PG* 91, 709D–712A).
10. *Coll.* XI, 12 (*SC* 54, p. 114).
11. Cf. Pheme Perkins, *Love Commands in the New Testament*, p. 1.
12. The Epistle to Diognetus, V, 1–4. 6–7. 10 (*SC* 33, pp. 62–65; italics added).
13. James Hennesey, *American Catholics*, pp. 38–41.
14. In fact, in 361 A.D., in a letter to Arsacius, High Priest of Galatia, Julian "the Apostate" could complain that his efforts to reinstate the old state religion, while successful beyond anything anyone could have prayed for, were still hampered by "the atheists'" (= Christians') habits: hospitality to strangers, piety toward the graves of the dead, and outward shows of holiness of life. He added that the officials of the state religion should be compelled to imitate the Christians' virtues; they should stop employing atheists as servants, frequenting theaters and taverns, and running businesses unworthy of their office. He finally gives instructions to make large amounts of corn and wine available for public distribution to travelers and poor people, and reminds Arsacius that Christians are taking care not only of "their own poor, but ours as well." Cf. *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, 3 vols., Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923; vol. III, pp. 66–73.
15. Cf. "Man of a Century: Hans-Georg Gadamer," *Pacifica* 13(2000): 84–89.