

Freedom of Conscience in Theological Perspective

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Bishop G. Emmett Carter observed in his comments on the Declaration on Christian Education that the theme of personal responsibility dominated many of the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council (Carter, 1966, p. 640, footnote). One such example is found in the opening lines of the Declaration on Religious Freedom which reads as follows:

A sense of the dignity of the human person has been impressing itself more and more deeply on the consciousness of contemporary man. And the demand is increasingly made that men should act on their own judgment, enjoying and making use of a responsible freedom, not driven by coercion but motivated by a sense of duty [Vatican Council II, 1966, n. 1, p. 675].

What is important to note here is that the document places this theme of personal responsibility within the context of a recent historical development of philosophical and theological understanding concerning the role that freedom must play in man's life. Certainly, one can use the suggestive negative wording of an *America* editorial to say of the Church's doctrine in this respect:

No one can account to God for his talents simply by pleading that he acted as an agent for Peter. The abdication of personal moral responsibility has never been a doctrine of the Church [*America*, 1968, p. 94].

The Council fathers, however, see this increasing awareness of the dignity of the human person as a sign of the times and as a definite positive step in the progress of civilization. This progress carries with it a parallel need for the Church to stress positively the right and duty of every individual to arrive at a greater freedom of conscience:

. . . every man has the duty, and therefore the right, to seek the truth in matters religious, in order that he may with prudence form for himself right and true judgments of conscience. . . . The inquiry is to be free, carried on with aid of teaching or instruction, communication, and dialogue [Vatican Council II, 1966, n. 3. pp. 680-681].

In practically the same words as the opening statement quoted above we read in Louis Monden's work *Sin, liberty and law*:

The self-discovery experienced by man in the past century has given rise in him to an urgent need for mature autonomy in his existence, for a freedom from all bonds of dependence. There is a general feeling that for the first time in history man is being offered the chance to become fully himself [Monden, 1965, p. 75].

Monden sees a radically new historical context in which we must reconsider the relation that should exist between personal freedom and all forms of authority, including the authority exercised within the Church. He speaks of a universal phenomenon that sets modern man against all constraints on his personal moral decisions on the part of any outside agency whatsoever: “Before the sanctuary of his personal decisions of conscience every influence from without must come to a halt. Only his inner freedom decides what is good and what is bad” (Monden, 1965, p. 99).

Monden is inclined to see in this new spirit a call to man to achieve a new moral maturity. He speaks of the new morality as a reflection in the consciousness of believers of a crisis of growth through which mankind’s collective consciousness is now passing.

With all its exaggerations, it [the new morality] might represent an attempt, both human and Christian, to break out of the shelter of exterior safeguards and to coincide in a renewed and more complete self-possession with the deepest roots of one’s own being and vocation. Then, all those exaggerations would only be the unavoidable ransom that youth must pay in breaking through to adulthood, not a phenomenon of decadence, but a sign of spring [Monden, 1965, p. 111].

Perhaps the single most important statement on conscience in the documents of Vatican II occurs in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World:

. . . man has in his heart a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals and from social relationships [Vatican Council II, 1966, n. 16, pp. 213-214].

Practically every major theme which will be treated in this paper can be found in this statement. Conscience is described here as the voice of God speaking to man immediately from within his own consciousness without the necessary aid of an external mediation. Man's freedom to follow his conscience is seen as the source of his true dignity. And this freedom is understood not as an anarchic principle but, on the contrary, as the only true foundation for real community and as the only valid ground for a solution to social problems.

Another example of the persistent theme of personal freedom and responsibility is to be found in the Declaration on Christian Education where it is applied to the formation of the conscience of the young: ". . . children and young people have a right to be encouraged to weigh moral values with an upright conscience, and to embrace them by personal choice." (Vatican Council II, 1966, n. 1, pp. 639-640). The Council thus indicates a corresponding obligation on the part of educators to lead young people to a true and responsible freedom of conscience.

Again, the same theme is to be found throughout the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, where it is stressed that the layman is not to exaggerate authority, but to take personal responsibility for his choices and actions:

Laymen should also know that it is generally the function of their well-formed Christian conscience to see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city. From priests they may look for spiritual light and nourishment. Let the layman not imagine that his pastors are always such experts, that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can readily give him a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission. Rather, enlightened by Christian wisdom and giving close attention to the teaching authority of the Church, let the layman take on his own distinctive role [Vatican Council II, 1966, n. 43 p. 244].

According to this document the layman's role is to be that of mediator between the Church and the world, having the responsibility and the corresponding right to determine how the message of the Gospel applies to the complicated problems in the field of his competence.

One example of the free moral responsibility which, the Council insists, belongs to the conscience of the individual layman is to be found in the teaching of the Council on modern warfare, where the right of the layman to reach the moral decision to be a conscientious objector is stressed, and the corresponding duty of the state to enact laws respecting that right is noted (Vatican Council II, 1966, n. 79, p. 292). The council stresses further that each individual soldier can no longer justify his actions in time of war in terms of blind obedience to authority, but must bear personal responsibility for the morality of his actions.

The Council throws light on the moral freedom and responsibility of the individual both by what it says and by what it fails to say. As Daniel Maguire observes in his article, *Morality and the Magisterium*, the consistent refusal of the Church to use its prerogative of infallibility in the past (and most recently in the birth-control issue) is “theologically instructive”:

It seems to me that in practice, despite its firm grasp of the moral vision of the Gospel, the Church seems to realize . . . that it does not enjoy an infallibly guaranteed competence to apply that moral vision of the Gospel to complex natural law questions such as medical ethics, genetics, business ethics, international law, social reconstruction and war and peace [Maguire, 1968, p. 41].

It is precisely by determining how the moral vision of the Gospel is to be incarnated in concrete decisions in these areas of his competence that the layman “plays his own decisive role.”

In so acting, the Council and the magisterium acted in the spirit of the moral message of the New Testament. As Charles Curran points out in his article, *The Ethical Teaching of Jesus*, that message is a constant reminder of the absolute claim which the presence of the reign of God makes on the follower of Jesus (Curran, 1967). Jesus does not proclaim universal norms of conduct which are obligatory on all Christians under all circumstances. Rather, He indicates the goal and the direction that should characterize the life and the actions of His followers. “Give to everyone who asks” would be an impossible command, if it were understood as an absolute ethical imperative. Rather, such a demand indicates the thrust that should characterize the life of the Christian. How such an imperative is to be implemented in his situation is left to the free judgment of each individual. Christ does promise, however, the help of the Spirit, who will enlighten and strengthen each individual who sincerely seeks out the divine will in his situation.

MORAL FREEDOM IN THE THOUGHT OF MAURICE BLONDEL

As the texts quoted above from Vatican II indicate, a new and stronger emphasis was placed by the Council Fathers on freedom of conscience, and that emphasis was understood as a response by the Council to an historical development within philosophy and theology concerning the role that freedom of conscience must play in man’s life. The same insistence on freedom in moral life in practically the same terms is one of the most fundamental themes in the writings of a recent Catholic moral philosopher, Maurice Blondel, whose thoughts, perhaps more than that of any other single man, influenced the thinking of the fathers of the Council (*Le Monde* reported that Blondel's name was mentioned in the debates on the Council floor more than sixty times).

If there is anything new in the moral philosophy of Maurice Blondel, it is because that philosophy is based on a newer and deeper understanding, both

psychological and metaphysical, of the nature and importance of human freedom.

There is no being where there is only constraint. If I am not that which I will to be, I am not. At the very core of my being there is a will and a love of being, or there is nothing. If man's freedom is real, it is necessary that one have at present, or at least in the future, a knowledge and a will sufficient never to suffer any tyranny whatsoever [Blondel, 1893, p. vii].

The Nature of Human Freedom

For the objectifying intellect, man first is; then he acts: *agere sequitur esse*. This scholastic axiom is frequently misunderstood as implying that the existence of the subject is reduced to the passive being of an object. The only subject acknowledged in such a reduction is the logical subject understood as a center of attribution. In such an understanding the statement "I am free" can be reduced to the abstract statement "The category man to which I belong possesses the attribute of freedom." From this viewpoint, substance is understood as a static, unchanging reality. All actions are considered as functions which can only influence that unchanging reality on the phenomenal or accidental level of being. Thus, freedom is understood as limited to a choice of actions consequent on substantial determination.

The statement "I am free" means something radically different to Blondel. It implies that, for man, to be is to act, and in acting to mold freely his substantial reality. Man alone is capable of saying "I am," because in his actions he immediately seizes himself as free action. As a result, man is not totally or authentically human unless in the depths of his being and action he seizes himself as free source, *Ursprung*, action itself, a constant self-positing. Human freedom, then, cannot be adequately understood as a mode of action posterior to being. Man's freedom must be understood beyond all particular actions as the radical self-positing of his own reality. Man must exist at every moment as a consequence of his freedom. If in the depths of his own subjective being man meets with any determinism whatsoever --- whether that be understood as biological, psychological, social, or even a determinism springing from the divine will, a determinism which lies radically outside the sphere of his free ability to determine himself --- then, according to Blondel, one would be forced to accept Spinoza's conclusion that the existence of the free individual human person as such is an illusion (Somerville, 1968, pp. 43-53).

This insight into the nature of human freedom carries with it as a necessary consequence a radical change in the method of moral philosophy. All objectivized systems, especially the traditional idea of an ethics based on natural law, depend on the presupposition that man possesses a static, unchanging substantial nature as source of his actions. Such an idea has the

advantage of rendering possible a moral philosophy of necessary, universal, and absolute principles. However, an overemphasis on these qualities of an objective system can lead and has led to a systematic misunderstanding of the existent person as such, and tends to deliver man from the ultimate risk of his freedom, which is his grandeur.

The entire movement of modern philosophy in Blondel's opinion has been a continual movement toward a deeper understanding of the role which the subject as such plays in human understanding and willing (McNeill, 1966). That movement began with the *Cogito* of Descartes, which found ultimate certitude in subjective self-awareness. The next step was the restructuring of ethics on the subjective a priori forms of knowledge and will in the *Critique of practical reason* of Kant. Fichte's effort to establish morality on the insight that the human subject is a pure act which cannot be object for itself followed. Hegel uncovered the dialectical laws which govern the dynamic development of the human subject. Schelling applied the dialectic to the human will. Kierkegaard threw a powerful light on human choice as a creative power of self-actualization. According to Blondel, this movement has led to the conclusion that there is only one possible manner in which to attain the existing subject as such in its unique freedom in a legitimate philosophical manner: we must renounce all attempts to make the singular existing subject into an objective content of knowledge, and be content to seize it in our immediate experiential awareness of self in the deployment of our free activity.

If one accepts this insight into the nature of human freedom and the human subject, then one must accept a radically different understanding of the role that truth and value play in human life. According to the traditional concept, truth and value represent objective norms of action which impose their necessary clarity on the judgment. Classical realist philosophy conceived of its task as a search for abstract truth, an *adaequatio speculativa rei et intellectus*. For the contemporary philosopher of freedom, the human spirit in order to be true to itself cannot be totally passive before truth or value and totally determined by its object. Every affirmation, especially if it is closely linked with the problem of human destiny, must be an activity which has its source in man's radical freedom, in that self-positing which is the proper characteristic of a free being. It is necessary, then, in place of the problem of the harmony of thought with objective reality to substitute the equivalent but radically different problem of the adequation of ourselves with ourselves. To be true means to become that which one really is. It represents a search for all the necessary conditions of interior self-adequation, a search from within self-consciousness for the meaning and direction of man's freely willed activity. In this context, the moral self-fulfillment of man is understood as intrinsically connected with his ontological self-realization, rather than with his affective relation to reality understood as an object set off from himself.

Further, if freedom is at the source of all man's activities, my vision of the world can never be the result of a pure observation; it is necessarily also a commitment. Any discovery of meaning or absurdity is necessarily to some

extent a simultaneous construction of that same meaning or absurdity. The point of view in which I am situated becomes my situation-that is, I make it my own, by the free attitude which I assume in regard to it. Nothing could be more hypocritical than to make believe that truths or values are imposed on me from without which are in fact to some extent at least the products of my own freedom.

The Principle of Immanence

It is this insight into the radical nature of human freedom that led Blondel to posit his “principle of immanence” as the primary principle governing his moral philosophy of human action. Blondel thus formulates this principle of immanence: “Nothing can impose itself on a man; nothing can demand the assent of his intellect or the consent of his will which does not in some way find its source in man himself” (Blondel, 1964, pp. 60-61). All acknowledgment of value must in some sense also be an active and free valorization. To acknowledge truth or value remains an authentic human act only if at the same time there is a free, active construction of that same truth or value:

That necessity which appears to me as a tyrannous constraint, that obligation which at first appears despotic, in the last analysis it is necessary that I understand it as manifesting and activating the most profound reality of my own will; otherwise it will be my destruction (Blondel, 1893, p. xxiii].

Blondel does not hesitate to apply this methodological principle of immanence to manifestations of the divine will. Although the divine will must manifest itself as in some way distinct from our finite will, yet that revelation, if it is not to destroy our freedom and integrity, must be made in some way from within our consciousness of self and prove capable of being assimilated into our free self-positing.

If it is necessary to consider revelation itself as something which arrives completely from without as an entirely empirical given, then the very idea of a revealed dogma or precept would be totally unintelligible (Blondel, 1893, p. 394].

If God were to manifest His will exclusively from without man himself by means of extrinsic authority, He would involve Himself in the contradiction of creating man free and redeeming him in a way which would necessarily negate his freedom.

Having accepted the principle of immanence, Blondel was immediately aware of a dilemma to which that principle gives rise. Man in order to remain free must refuse any purely external and objective norm imposed on his actions. Yet, at the same time, unless one is willing to accept a totally irrational and

amoral world of absurd and meaningless freedom, one must admit that freedom is dependent on a transcendent truth to which it must conform, that freedom is directed to values which, far from being man's exclusive creation, serve him as guide, norm, and sanction. The two most extreme positions have already been formulated into inadequate philosophical systems. Spinoza constructed a monism of deterministic rationalism in which the human subject and his freedom were completely absorbed. Sartre attempted to place truth totally in human hands, and proclaimed a totally irrational world. The problem that remains posed for our reflection is precisely that of understanding how one can maintain the unity in an act of affirmation, whether it be of truth or value, of the two necessary elements of free engagement and necessary adhesion.

Further, if a true moral science of right and wrong free human actions is possible, it is necessary that real, concrete facts be capable of receiving an absolute qualification. One must be able to establish an absolute difference between right and wrong, true and false. Yet, if we are to discover these truths and values without being unfaithful to man's freedom and existential subjectivity, then we must discover the universality of truth and value from within our consciousness of our own existence. Thus, it is necessary to discern the absolute in the relative, the transcendent from within the immanent at the root itself of man's free action and existential subjectivity. As a result, the central problem posed for a philosopher of freedom is: Is it possible without going outside the subject and without being unfaithful to his freedom and existential uniqueness to discover within the subject an opening by means of which a transcendent can enter, a transcendent which perfects man's freedom without in any way negating it?

A Philosophy of Action

In Blondel's opinion only a philosophy of action can effectively respond to these problems, because only a philosophy of action, by revealing the dialectic of moral life itself, is capable of uncovering the necessary structures within human freedom without ceasing at the same time to recognize that life as a free and personal enterprise. Thus, only a philosophy of action permits one to discover the rational and determinate structures of life in reflection without in any way refusing to recognize the reciprocal transcendence of existence and freedom over thought.

Action, Blondel held, has its own a priori structure from which the whole of thought derives its meaning and direction. For this reason Blondel proposed his counter-Copernican revolution toward an even greater degree of subjectivity: Instead of assuming that it is thought which determines action, let us assume that it is action which determines thought. The center of perspective in philosophy should be transposed from the analytical element of thought into the synthetic element of action. What Blondel proposed was a study of ideogenesis --- the process by which thought is derived from human action.

This study would result in an understanding of the a priori structure implicit in the human will itself. Blondel's search for moral principles took the form of a search for the all-embracing dialectical law which governs immanently the evolution of human life. Underneath the most aberrant projects, beneath the strangest deviations of the human will, there always remains the necessary élan of the will-willing from which it is impossible to deviate. There is a necessary logic of freedom. Human actions can be illogical; they can never be alogical. Either one conforms freely to the law which one carries within oneself or one opposes it freely; one never escapes it.

The basic distinction underlying Blondel's understanding of the dialectic of evolving moral life is the distinction within thought itself between the plane of action or existence and the plane of thought or reflection. As act, thought participates in the spontaneity of the subject; it is commitment and freedom. As knowledge, thought reflects the given and ascertains its necessary relations. A necessary truth or value is, as a consequence, never purely passively acknowledged, but always freely recognized.

The first step in the moral dialectic of life, a step on the plane of action or existence, necessarily involves a direct or practical method of experimentation. For this step represents the pre-reflective unity of thought with existence. At this step the will aspect, the element of action, must take precedence over the intellectual element, the element of knowledge. The key presupposition of this step is an attitude of openness, of trust in life. One acts to achieve self-fulfillment; one must believe that by means of commitment one can achieve that self-fulfillment. One must be prepared never to accept a self-contradiction within the élan of one's will.

Natural Conscience

The criterion of certitude in the first step is to be found in the effects of the action undertaken on the individual's self-consciousness, the feeling of congruity or incongruity which the object of choice has with one's fundamental experience of self in consciousness. This feeling cannot become conscious until the will responds to a call from within itself. In this manner, freedom becomes interior to the most primitive stage of moral self-development.

At this stage one can speak of a natural conscience. Moral evil represents the refusal to be oneself; moral good, a sincere seeking of self-fulfillment. If this were the only step in moral life, one would be necessarily limited to a self-centered seeking of personal fulfillment on the part of an isolated and alienated existent. If one is faithful to the élan of life, however, the individual must move on. The initial pre-reflective unity of man must pass through the disjunction of thought and existence in order to find total fulfillment.

The Role of Thought

The second step of the moral dialectic occurs on the plane of thought or reflection. Here intellect takes precedence over will. It is on this level that one attempts an abstract, rational, universal, and, therefore, communicable understanding before one acts or commits oneself. In contrast to the trust presupposed in the first step, Blondel on this plane makes use of a method of total doubt. He systematically searches out all possible escapes from meaning or structure in freedom with the methodological assumption that the only means of proving necessity is to prove impossibility.

If in the process one discovers a necessity which governs man's free actions from within, one has succeeded in discovering an aspect of the intelligible law and rational regulation which governs free activity.

If this indeterminate power [of our will] is defined by the fact *that* it wills, and not by that *which* it wills, further, if in the very activity itself of the will is revealed the end to which it necessarily tends and the series of means which it must use, then, that rigorous continuity contains a scientific determination; there is a necessary logic of freedom [Blondel, 1893, p. 127].

However, one must never conceive the rational structures of freedom as given a priori at the point of departure of one's philosophical quest. In order to be the truth of free action, rational structures, without ceasing to be necessary, must be engendered by that spontaneous source which is the reality of a free subject. In other words they must be engendered by the free commitment of the first moment.

Blondel speaks of the thought content of this second step as the "fruit of past action and the seed of consequent action." The instinctive role of thought is to project out all the unused potentialities of the human will as ideal goals for human commitment. He also locates the entire traditional concept of metaphysics within this moment of the moral dialectic:

The metaphysical order is certainly not something which is outside the will as an extraneous end to be attained; it is contained within the will as a means to move beyond. It does not represent a truth already constituted in fact, but it places that which one wishes to will as an ideal object before thought. It does not express an absolute and universal reality; rather, it expresses the universal aspiration of a particular will [Blondel, 1893, p. 293].

The possibility of incorporating the transcendent ideals of a metaphysics into action leads to an awareness of that action as a properly free moral action and of self as a free moral agent. Man is, thus, freed from all pre-determinism; ". . . the will is led to place the center of its equilibrium beyond all factual realities, to live as it were on itself, to search in itself alone the purely formal

reasons of its acts” (McNeill, 1966, p. 87). The creative power of the moral act is not to be found in the creation of a universal law; this is given in the metaphysical system of the second step. Rather, this creative power is to be found in the power of the will to synthesize that given set of ideals into the factual reality of its activity by free choice.

Because truth is founded on that which is within us and yet does not depend on us, on that which is the most intimate aspect of our subjectivity and yet common to the entire community of subjects, truth-in-us depends on the existential attitude we freely adopt in its regard. Or, to reverse the perspective and speak more properly, it is human existence itself which depends on the reception we freely give to truth or value. Consequent on the reflection of the second step, every free human agent is necessarily faced with the decision to accept or refuse the presence of transcendence within his will. Depending on the alternative chosen, that choice resolves itself either into the existential identity of lived truth or the real contradiction of lived error.

Synthetic Stage of Option

An option in the face of transcendence reveals itself in Blondel’s system as the final synthetic step in the moral dialectic of life and the final necessary condition for the fulfillment of free human action. At this point in the dialectic, free affirmation reappears legitimately within the field of reflection. Option represents the necessary juncture in thought between the two planes of affirmation and reflection. From this point on, the free assent, which until now supported the dialectic of thought from without, is reflected from within in its turn. Reflective thought returns on its own existential reality.

The option of the third step has the function of existentializing reflection or thought itself. "The knowledge of being implies a necessity of option; the being which is within our knowledge is not before but after the liberty of choice” (Blondel, 1893, p. 436). Obviously there is at this synthetic moment a precedence once again of will or action over reflection. Freedom has the first and the last word in the moral dialectic of life.

Option’s function is to render the unity of the abstract universal discovered in the second stage simultaneously experientially and rationally real. The two previous criteria, experiential and rational, are fused into one at the synthetic stage of option. However, just as will takes precedence over intellect at this stage, so the experiential criterion takes precedence over the rational criteria, using them as directives but finding ultimate certitude in the immediate and, therefore, absolutely certain experience of fulfillment or privation. Since this experience follows the second stage in the dialectic and is consequent on acceptance or refusal of transcendence, it is no longer necessarily an experience of the isolated self, as in the first stage of the dialectic. Rather, in its positive form of acceptance it is an experience of being existentially one with the other.

The ideal of a unity in existence with all men reveals itself in the second stage of the dialectic as a necessary aspiration of the human will. The very fact that man spontaneously thinks universally in the name of humanity, as though humanity were one, indicates that man's will necessarily aspires to exist universally at one with all men. This ideal is the primary example in Blondel's thought of the category of those commitments which man discovers as necessary, if he is to find his fulfillment, and simultaneously impossible to accomplish by his own unaided powers. Insofar as these commitments are necessary, they represent a possible immanent dimension of man's existential reality; insofar as they are impossible for man to realize by his own unaided freedom, they indicate the presence of a power within man that transcends man himself. This, in Blondel's opinion, is the key experience which leads man to project out an idea of God as the immanent-transcendent. Our idea of God, taking its genetic origin in the experience of the necessary and impossible, is a "projecting out of all the unused and unusable potentialities of the human will." Man finds it necessary in order to find the perfect identity of himself with himself in his voluntary actions to look within himself until he comes to that point where that which is of himself ceases. What we can know of God, Blondel argues, is precisely "that surplus of interior life which demands its employment."

Blondel is well aware that the possibility of an existential unity with one's fellow man would remain forever an abstraction unless man could somehow realize an existential unity with the divine will.

At the very root of being, in the common practice of life, in the secret logic of consciousness, without God there is no fellow man for man. In order to be *one*, in order to exist, it is necessary that I do not rest alone. I have need for all the others. What is necessary, then, is to capture within myself the source of all unity (the divine will) and to transmit the truth of its intimate action [McNeill, 1966, p. 190].

To refuse to acknowledge the transcendent which manifests itself from within self carries with it as a necessary consequence the total isolation and alienation of the individual existent. Whereas to open to the transcendent, to recognize a truth, a value, a being which imposes itself from within man and is valid for all, is an absolutely necessary condition in order that man escape the isolated self and achieve unity with the real self in a community with others.

As the moral dialectic of life evolves, existence will always remain to some extent solitude, and truth and value will always remain to some extent at least abstract and external. The fusion of truth and value with existence, however, is always the result of man's free moral commitment and can be acquired by no other means. By his free choices man has the power to insert the absolute of being into the relativity of phenomena. Ultimately, man's knowledge of God is his immanent experiential awareness that "at the roots of his *ego* there is an

ego that is no longer his *ego*.” However, it is only in the very act by which we would freely consent to such an intimate presence that we can achieve actual consciousness of it as an immanent dimension of our own existential reality. For it is only by free consent that we can change that presence from an abstract possibility to an experienced actuality. This, then, is the ultimate creative meaning of man’s moral freedom - it lies in our power to make God exist or not exist *in our lives* by reason of our freely chosen style of existence.

The moral dialectic of action does not come to an end with Blondel’s justification of the option for self-transcendence on the level of reflection. Philosophy, he believed, is necessarily false precisely when it tries to enclose life within reflective thought. Philosophy is capable of showing the necessity of a final option and clarifying its terms, but it cannot supply for option Itself. Free commitment, then, has the last word, and philosophy must give way to a new dialectic of religious commitment and theological reflection based on the immediate certitude of the experience of religious life as a response in faith to revelation.

FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

Moral life, then, is evolutionary. It is a dynamic dialectic of fact and possibility, of the actual and the ideal. We must look for ideal human nature not in the past but in the future. And the key to that future is the creative moral freedom of man. In this evolutionary framework natural law should no longer be understood as based on a static structure or essence; rather, it represents a statement of conditions for man’s own growth seen as a possibility and a task to be freely accomplished.

Conscience within this perspective is a developing form of self-awareness; it is to be understood as the deepest self-consciousness of man insofar as it acts as a power of discrimination, deciding in every choice what will promote authentic selfhood and what will stand in its way. Man on the moral level is characterized by self-development. He perceives every choice as a choice between authentic and inauthentic humanity. He sees his life as having a meaning Only he can give it through his free choice. Moral obligations can only be accepted; they cannot be imposed. A psychologically mature adult can be called on to commit his freedom; he cannot be called on to submit it. For as long as a man is not directing his own activity on the moral level he is not to that extent a free agent. Consequently, to the degree that he is not a free agent, he is neither a responsible nor a moral person.

As Ignace Lepp notes, the evolution of moral conscience takes place according to the same general laws that govern the passage of individuals and social groups from infancy through adolescence to maturity (Lepp, 1965, p. 8). The growth of human psychic life will always proceed from instinct to rational self-development, and should culminate in a continuous process in religious self-donation. On the level of religious life, conscience is transposed into love

itself. Sin on this level becomes the refusal to be for others. Freedom is a true moral value for religious life only when and to the degree that it promotes a superior form of personal and community life. The fullness of moral life is to be found precisely in that act by which one establishes oneself as person in a community of persons.

With a personal community, the false notion of conscience is the idea that we are each equipped with an exclusively private source of moral information, that we have a conscience in isolation. Today's identity crisis, its sense of alienation, and its crisis of faith are all related to the problem of the proper relation between person and institution. As John Sisk points out, modern man has been conditioned to think disjunctively of the relation of person to institution (Sisk, 1968). Institutions are the objective expressions of the communal and social aspects of ourselves. The institution tends to become the other, the enemy, only insofar as we are alienated from a part of ourselves, If a conscientious decision is really to be mine, I must make the effort of self-discovery; and I can do this only in communion with others. I cannot discover myself in isolation. Therefore, I cannot have a conscience in isolation.

If, as Vatican Council II declared, the Church in its essential reality ought to be an interpersonal community of love, then the achievement of true moral freedom and adult responsibility is a necessary condition for authentic religious life in the interpersonal community of the Church. Also, there can be no true moral authority unless a community is one of free persons. A community based upon power and subservience produces not authority but domination. Our call in Christ is a call to share in a community of love, a community in which each member retains his full personal responsibility and, consequently, his full personal freedom.

In the teachings of Paul, the negative aspect of the law was its inability to give life, precisely because it remained an external norm which did not contain in itself the *dunamis*, the power of life (Fitzmeyer, 1967). The law schooled man in preparation for Christ, the end of the law. The law was a temporary disposition of God permitted until mankind reached the maturity in which it would be able without a pedagogue to respond to Christ with an adult and personal commitment. The principle of Christian activity is no longer merely in the external listing of "do's" and "don'ts" but, rather, in the internal whispering of the dynamic Spirit. Love in Paul's teaching is the fulfillment of the law because it is itself a dynamic force impelling man to seek the good of others. Ideal spiritual adulthood for the conscience would consist in this: that the compass of love would point the direction so unfalteringly that the external law is no longer needed. In such a man the law has been so fully assimilated, its deepest implications so much a matter of personal experience, that it has become a conscious instinct and an infallible power of discrimination. If we can assume that there has been a gradual assimilation of revelation within the community of the church, then, what the Council seems to be telling us is that perhaps today the Christian community is in a position to begin to live out

Paul's concept of the new freedom which should characterize a follower of Christ in a more perfect manner than ever before.

DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS

Blondel's moral philosophy indicates a new appropriateness for Saint Ignatius' doctrine of the discernment of spirits as a means of pragmatically resolving our conscience in the process of making free moral choices. For that doctrine, as Karl Rahner points out, tacitly presupposes a philosophy of human existence in which a moral decision in its individuality is not merely an instance of general ethical normative principles but something positively individual and unique (Rahner, 1964. p. 110). Since man is positively an individual, and not just a negative or material instance of a general nature, as a spiritual personal being man is more than the point of intersection of general truths and maxims, more than the particular instance of a multi-pliable essence. This unique and special factor, the single human existence, can be summoned by an imperative prescription which is different in kind from any moral principle derived from general characteristics. Thus, the individuality of the person is the norm which the person must finally obey when pursuing his perfection by means of free choice.

The consequence of this understanding of man for moral life is that man's conscience has a function over and above the application of general norms to concrete circumstances. That function is that whereby the individual person recognizes an individual obligation in conscience which cannot be deduced from general principles (Gerken, 1963. pp. 141-152). The divine will is also a personal free will which is capable of entering into a personal dialogue with the individual as such and of exercising free initiative in that dialogue. Further, this personal divine will respects the free choices which the individual existent has made in the past and thus, in the context of the dialogue respects the limits which those choices have established for future response. It belongs to the moral obligation of man to be and to become by free choice the individual that he is. In the discernment of spirits one seeks an intellectual knowledge which is incapable of being expressed in objective concepts. This knowledge is ultimately grounded in the simple presence to itself of the intrinsically intelligible subject, which in the very accomplishment of its acts has knowledge of itself through self-consciousness without the contrast of knower and things known.

In important decisions, Rahner maintains, practically every man chooses more or less in the manner which Ignatius had in mind. For, in such resolves, the person forms his choice nearly all the time from the basic experience of himself and from the feeling of congruity and incongruity that the object of election has with his fundamental experience of himself. He will make decisions, not only or finally from a rational analysis, but from the experience

of whether or not something fits him. This experience is measured according to whether the thing makes him happy, satisfies him interiorly.

It is important to note the role that the creative imagination plays in making such a decision. One studies the choice to be made: one imagines the situation which such a choice would bring upon him; one tries to live in advance with such a choice. While doing this the person is constantly aware of what this choice causes in him. Saint Ignatius' doctrine presupposes that the individual morality of a proposed course of action is not discovered exclusively in the objective essence of the action. Rather, the morality of the course of action is also discovered from its effects on the individual's self-consciousness. Peace, joy, quiet, happiness: it is by using these as criteria that one learns whether the object of one's decision is good or not.

This doctrine is based on the theological presupposition that in every sincere believer the inner law of the Spirit is at work like a kind of connaturality with the God who speaks to him through Christ—a kind of power of discrimination, a spiritual sense of touch capable of discerning what is and what is not an authentic realization of God's invitation. Conscience is sacred because, when I get down to the real self in my search for self-fulfillment, I find a depth in myself which does not belong to me but to which I belong, a depth which theologians refer to as the Holy Spirit dwelling in me.

The use of the discernment of spirits as a practical means of resolving the individual conscience is based on one all-important presupposition. That presupposition is a basic option, not in terms of any particular object, but a basic option in favor of transcendence, in favor of openness. Man must open himself up to God, because his concrete nature is an openness to the infinite and transcendent God. Man must freely assent to this reality of his own being. If the inclination in any given decision concerning a particular good is really one which fits the individual, then this particular movement will necessarily support and deepen that basic openness and resulting peace. Granting that openness, the moral process of choice is a process of testing whether a particular commitment is compatible or incompatible with that openness which constitutes the innermost essence of man.

As Rahner points out, Ignatius' fundamental spiritual principle, the finding of God in all things, is only the habitual practice of that supernatural existential logic implied in the discernment of spirits, whereby one finds God's will by noting one's consolations and desolations (Rahner, 1964, p. 155). The individual reality which one meets, or which one must choose, or do, or suffer, is held up to one's fundamental openness to God.

The appropriateness of the discernment of spirits as a practical means of resolving conscience lies in the fact that it does respect the uniqueness of the existing subject and his liberty of conscience while, at the same time, it gives man a method whereby he can discover the will of God not as something totally outside himself, but as the deepest reality of his own will.

Further, this practice leads man not just to an abstract conceptual awareness of God, but to a vital experiential sense of the presence of the divine spirit

within. As Thomas Sartory observes in his article *Changes in Christian Spirituality*:

Tomorrow the devout man will be a “mystic,” a man who has experienced something, or there will be no devout men. In the past any personal experience and decision always found its way prepared by the convictions of the public and by general religious customs taken for granted in which piety could find support. But this support is fading away. The personal religious experience of the individual, therefore, is going to be increasingly decisive [Sartory, 1968. p. 79].

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