

SOME THING TO THINK ABOUT

Beware of the Dogma?

Could there be any word less popular than this one? Or more foreign to the spirit of the age (if there is such a thing)? Yet I think I want to recommend it to you as a commodity much-needed, and essentially Christian. (It may make a big difference to your life to think about this.)

Is there such a thing as Revelation? One of the features of Protestant religion is the great stress laid on the value of revelation - mostly this means *scripture*, which in Protestant thinking is often the limit of it. *Holy Writ* is the sacred deposit, with *Gospel Truth*, or *The Plain Truth Of The Gospel*, as its summit. Catholic theology talks about this in a wider sense, seeing the Creation itself as a vast revelation of God, with human beings in his image and likeness, and the Church gifted with the Holy Spirit, as well as the Scripture. These realities, in the Catholic mind, are all alive with revelation, and the Church's task is to point out the fact. This is the basis for *dogma*.

Not everyone, it goes without saying, sees reality like this. For many people the world does not seem to be illuminated by its Creator, or its ultimate purpose; they see it as a basically unguided and (in all senses) accidental reality, a series of coincidences that happen to permit, quite by serendipity, a measure of intelligent life that is more or less tolerable depending on one's share of the luck. People are more likely to *suspect* this fatalism about the world than to declare their *belief* that it is so; it is a pretty horrific prospect to think that we are so mindlessly vulnerable.

That is the sort of world I would not care to live in. In fact I refuse to live in it. The only excuse for a world like ours is that there is some kind of purpose in it - as yet only partially visible to us, but real - reliable, therefore - and comprehensive - giving meaning to *all* that happens here.

So *I want revelation*: I need to have it revealed to me why I am here and what I am meant for. I would like to have some information at least about where I am going; unless the veil which clouds over the future is essential in some way, I want to know something about the purpose of this huge world of experience, action, and suffering.

Knowing I have the experience of knowing. It helps me to rest, rise, make my breakfast, start the car. I arrive without killing anyone day after day. I get to know facts which extend my awareness of the world beyond my own life, and I become conscious of the universe. Little by little I add to my knowledge *understanding*, my own synthesis or judgment; life is good, life is dreary, life is gruesome, life is mediocre, life is rapturous. In order to make this judgment sound, I need to have knowledge that I can trust.

This judgment seems to me to be vital. It needs, I think, to be a positive one. I want to make it irrespective of the way I *feel* at the time, I want it to rest on the basis of my knowledge as a whole. It isn't, perhaps, something I can carve in stone tablets, but it is a real judgment that has a real effect on my experience; it is also an act of faith for the times when I feel quite negative about, say, this day, this job, this situation. But I don't want my judgment of the world to depend on my personal experience alone, because I

know my judgment to be frequently untrustworthy and partial. If I can use light from beyond myself, all the better.

Our society is so wary of dogmatic truth that the very word has become dirty. It evokes mindlessness and arrogance, insensitivity and murderous generalization, everything that will not accept truth in its variety, or people as they are. When we are so aware of the messiness of life, it appears as a mad attempt to force reality into an unnatural tidiness, with handles on. Hitler and co. had dogma, so did the Spanish Inquisition. Dogma is something you can use to gas or burn or disembowel people you don't like.

A Truth Greater Than Myself I'd propose a rather different sort of dogma: a body of truth that preserves us from lies that kill. We are very prone to swallowing lies, even the ugliest and most death-dealing ones, as long as they contain half a truth. Because they are usually simpler than the whole truth, perhaps? Or because lie is unbalanced, and therefore dynamic - even if its dynamism is the speed of a headlong fall, or the explosive force of disintegration, some people will surrender themselves to it *because it's moving*. Thus the cults, seemingly ridiculous, which capture people so totally and undo them so radically, can actually lead people to poison their children and themselves, or set fire to themselves so as to go to heaven on a comet; total obedience has a perennial attraction. The all-important question seems to be *How can we be sure it's telling us the truth?*

One can be fairly sure of not merely worshipping oneself (however projected) if the way of looking on the world is demanding of us, and contains elements we would not have chosen, or which we find personally off-putting or challenging. There is an instinct in scripture studies always to take the *lectio difficilior*, the most difficult meaning of the text, the most seriously. If, by contrast, our beliefs fit us like a glove, then it is all too likely that we have made ourselves very much the measure of their truth.

Revelation and Faith The Church proposes certain truths as basic and inviolable: that God is good, that human beings are made out of kindness, that we are all called to be loved by God and to love one another, that no-one is created in vain or unsaveable, and so on. The presence of this body of *dogma* acts as a basis for the unity of the Church, and, through the Church's mission to the world as a whole, it forms a basis for the unity of mankind. We are helped not to reinvent the wheel in every generation; we are made kin with all who have gone before us in faith, and we keep the faith on behalf of those who are yet unborn. We are not alone!