

About Understanding and Religious Belief

THERE ARE MANY KINDS of misunderstanding; and there are many ways not to understand. It is very hard to gather up in a single embrace all that is involved. So, too, it is with understanding. Think how many different qualifications would be needed to explain what is involved in saying: “Oh yes, now I understand!” Indeed the concepts, “understand,” “misunderstand,” and “not understand,” each and all, are highly ramified.

But there are some cases that loom up in some situations and become typical. And it is a few of these types that I want to allude to here. The attempt will be made so to state the cases that an inherent perspicuity will come forth respecting particularly the difficult matter of understanding and not understanding the Christian teachings. In what follows, then, I want to sketch a few instances.

I

A rather extraordinary story is told in Holy Writ about an old priest, Zechariah, and his wife, Elizabeth. According to Luke, these two were promised a son, who would make “ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17). These two elderly and devoted people were overwhelmed with the tardy prospect. They fitted this also into a conception of God and His promised land that had nurtured them and their people for a great many years. Therefore, it was not surprising that when the child was born, everybody rejoiced. The old man very dramatically called the boy “John,” even though the name was

unknown in the families. More than this, he burst into poetic song, within which he again put the old stories together to include his new son. Among other things, he remembered that God had promised to save the people from enemies and all who hate, for that was a good part of God's oath and covenant, well attested heretofore! Moreover, he dared to add something new, namely, that young John should prepare the coming Lord's way and long-expected prospects among the suffering people.

Years went by and perhaps all of us know something of John the Baptist's story. For he himself preached rather widely, once more fitting the very tangible promises of the earlier prophets to the prospect of Christ's coming. But when Jesus came, things seemed to go wrong. John was imprisoned and one can easily imagine his perplexity. His father's poem, his own preaching, plus all the prophet's love, had linked the Messiah with the crooked being made straight, the rough made smooth, with no more hatred and the abolition of triumphant enmity. But in that lonesome cell, after a lifetime of preparation for a Messiah, so manifest that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Luke 3:6), John's understanding began to falter. In desperation he hurries his friends to Jesus to ask: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Matt 11:3 and Luke 7:20).

Imagine his disappointment, his chagrin, his hurt! The one who came after him, who was so mighty, who would burn the chaff of history with an unquenchable fire, what kind of Messiah was he to a man languishing in a dirty cell?

Jesus answers him to the effect that the blind receive sight, the lame walk, and the poor have good news preached to them. Not a word about release for the captive John or being saved from the hands of those who hated him. Besides, there came the almost shocking conclusion: "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (Matt 11:6; Luke 7:23). What an answer to a man who was promised much and was suffering more, mostly because of God!

This is one very startling occasion for misunderstanding. Most of us have a very tender regard for our dearly bought expectations. Civilization, culture, learning, and even the poetry of the fathers can easily enough conspire to mold our conception of what we want, what we need, and what would constitute our fulfillment and happiness.

Nothing seems both so obvious and so essential as our own intimate convictions about what would make us truly content. Unlike most men, John even had a pious father, he had shared deeply in an expectant prophetic tradition, and, besides, had a successful career as a prophesying preacher behind him. No wonder, then, that he could not easily—and that is all we have a right to say (for he must have found his joy)—put it all together with suffering all over again because of the Messiah. It all must have seemed a very serious mix-up.

Then, too, there is the altogether new note. For Jesus says in effect that that man is happy, is blessed, apparently whatever the other conditions, who takes no offense in Him. This is to link, granted Jesus' ministry and teaching, human satisfaction and happiness with hearing Jesus' words and doing them, despite enmity, one's own society, and familiar expectations. Think how easy it is to be offended. It looks as if the Messiah does not care enough, as if He does not see where the problems lie, as if He is not morally and politically committed, as if He does not understand man's needs and visions, his deepest moral cry, and most urgent yearnings for happiness. Instead we hear Him cry: "Happy is the one who is not offended in me."

This surely is an occasion for not being able to go on. For if that is the way it is, then Christianity indeed looks out of step with the most advanced thinking as well as concerned social planning. "Blessedness" has never been a joke; on the contrary, it is the great desideratum and goal of most personal striving as well as the expression of the most sensitive and refined social consciousness. Here, however, one must simply pause and ask himself just what is involved in this conception of blessedness. The Christian teachings are not an obstacle to understanding always because they are other-worldly (though this aspect can be difficult), but rather because they confront the rather plain and heavily trafficked view of happiness (via prosperity, no enemies, no war, no suffering) with another this-worldly proposal, that one can find blessedness in being passionately given to Jesus and His suffering way. And strangely enough, that blessedness can begin with John, in prison, or not, as the case might be.

We do not know the rest of John's intellectual history, though his ignominious fate is clearly transcribed. It is almost as if the enemy triumphed even in a ghoulish and spite-ridden way. . . . Perhaps it was

that the education of John did not cease until the last moment. For he had a great deal to rearrange—promises, hopes, poems, fatherly regard, the whole picture of life, enemies, friends, possibilities, even the view of what God was.

Perhaps, too, with expectations and promises being what they are, with human potential being projected and thwarted by social and political ideals, we, too, are very inclined to link God with good as we see it and happiness as we know it. The coming of the Kingdom looks like it may be effected by common cause, by liberality, by God and man in educated tandem. Then our pattern of understanding is made firm by the very degree to which we get committed to these overarching cultural idealities. It is not difficult, after a while, to fail completely at comprehending what is apparently incongruous and out of step.

It should, then, be no surprise to balk a bit at Christianity, which is so radical that it proposes a new conception of happiness itself, almost relieving us of the oppressive burden of the other, while not slacking our will or encouraging effete-ness. Once that conception begins to change at least one obstacle to understanding Christianity is removed, not so much by learning as by a subtle change of orientation and heart. One might say, in brief, that if one gets trained to this new way of finding happiness and gets it linked up even with suffering and unfulfilled expectations, then a source of misunderstanding is also done away with.

II

There is another kind of failure of understanding when somebody says: “The trouble is that the word ‘God,’ is a symbol and it doesn’t mean anything today.” We all know that this is said also about salvation, sin, repentance, redemption, atonement, heaven, and a host more. If we think that these hang together with God, in a kind of conceptual net, then it makes a kind of superficial sense to say that “it,” i.e., the whole batch of teachings, just does not make any sense for, of all things, “modern man.”

It is not mine to speak for the whole age, so I confess only to reporting the difficulties. And I know there are all kinds of inspired students of these matters who are preparing themselves to sup-

ply a new set of meanings to all of these erstwhile lifeless symbols. According to some, flirting with phenomenology and Heidegger is bound to help; others are convinced, though not altogether convincing, that Whitehead's metaphysics will resuscitate the whole scheme; and some are all for radical surgery and will construe everything in the scheme in the light of a neglected feature, like "obedience," or "hope," or some secret feature of linguisticity. For reasons which quite escape me, others seem to think that a kind of meaning can be salvaged if one strips off everything Godly, divine, and otherworldly, leaving something necessary and ruggedly human by which we can get our bearings again.

It all sounds as if the words are in trouble. They have gotten trite, too familiar to matter, or worse, they have plainly worn out. It is one thing to be alert to contemporary scientific and political ideas, but it is exceedingly dangerous to state them in traditional Christian terms. For then an alien content is introduced. It is another matter altogether to say traditional Christian things in terms that are fresh, imaginative, and contemporary. Nothing said here opposes the latter. If this is where the difficulty lies, then it can be supposed that the realm of meanings is in fairly good health. The difficulty is that there is so little light in or on that realm; it is dusky and dark and one is never sure what one is finding. Words are obvious enough, we seem to think, but their meanings are harder to get at. Once the words and the meanings, like husband and wife, had a happy relation, and where you had one, you had the other. From there on, though, the story gets a little burdensome; for I am not sure if new meanings have somehow happened along (maybe they are emergent the way new women are to a restless husband) and are seeking a word—trying to muscle in or maybe slither in, or whether we really need new words, too, to go with the exquisitely refined and deeply cultured meanings that are now ringing the world.

But vagueness about this relation between words and meanings is almost in order; for again, it is like the disorder between two people, when after a while, one does not know where to put the blame. The difficulty, I suspect, is often simple, seen from the outside, but terribly confounding when seen from within. To point it out from the outside is not the same as resolving the difficulties when they are felt within as

the loss of meaning and the inability to understand. But here, unfortunately, we can only say a thing or two from the outside. Perhaps the most singular way to frame the issue is that we all think that in every instance of the use of language there “must” be an interpretation of the word in order that the word mean something. And we continue to think that, over and over again, because we forget that being meaning-blind is like being tone-deaf or color-blind. Being color-blind is a matter of not being able to do something, just as being tone-deaf is not a mistaken interpretation, but is, rather, a lack of capacity. One is not able to hear tones and to discriminate tonal qualities. But not “being able” is what counts.

There is a time and a place for interpretation, even with religious words and teachings. But it is not the case that every use of a word needs an interpretation, or some kind of mental act of assigning meaning, before one has a use for the word. This issue will be described in another context in the third section of this paper.

So with understanding and being meaning-blind. It is an inability to do something. This inability does not depend upon, first, a mistaken interpretation, or no interpretation at all; for interpretation is not required at all. It is not as if one interprets the word first, thereby assigning the meaning, and then, secondly, goes on to use the word. Contrariwise, to understand a word is, indeed, to know its meaning, but that is only to be prepared and poised for one of its uses. The meaning of a word, that which we commonly believe a word somehow has, is a pseudo-object—actually no object at all. When one uses a word, in ways that make a difference and that are recognizable, then, and then only, can we say that the word has meaning. But interpretation is not required in most cases; for the employment of a word is a practice, a ruled use. One simply learns that. To be able to use the word is to understand it.

To say, then, that the word “God” has lost its meaning is usually to misconstrue the difficulty. For most of us are then led to believe that the meaning, which we apprehend ostensibly by an act of thought, call it interpretation, or insight, a “knowing,” that that meaning is obsolete, or lost, or no longer correct. Therefore, we cannot, supposedly, go on using the word. But if the use of the word is what we are after,

not first, an interpretation, then we have to ask: what uses does the word “God” have? An entirely new perspective then opens up.

Take as an example a kind of human trivialization that has a long history, that called Philistinism. When one is a Philistine in taste, one refuses to discriminate and to exercise judgment. In religious affairs, one is a Philistine when one has no spirit, no vision, and no imagination. Philistinism is the all-too-human proclivity to be average in wish, hope, and accomplishment, to be content with being like all the rest. But even in such a denuded human situation, there comes the striking theme that with God all things are possible. Purposely, we have placed that thought in a Philistine-like setting, in which no more possibility is conceivable than a dull average mentality will engender, and that is very little indeed.

If one asks, within that context, what the God-idea means, one could say without qualification that it is all tied up with the notion that all things are possible. But this is not saying very much, unless one knows when, to whom, and why, one says it. Then the range has to be increased, but not just on paper, for what is required is a non-linguistic exercise and use too. The uses are practices indeed, calculated to get a man out of the narrow tract of experience that has closed in upon him, that makes him think that he knows how things must go, what is very likely, and surely those that can never obtain. So his convictional scheme has to be broken up by the new thought of a God for whom all things are possible. This is not all, though, for unless a hope grips him and unless his boredom and tedium, maybe even despair, are vanquished, the use of the thought has not been realized. But this is not to say that the latter, the new emotion, is always dependent upon the former, the new conviction. They may sometimes vary independently or even happen in non-concurrent order. One might be stirred by the hopefulness of a man who starts with hope before he knows such about God, who is the source and object of that hope.

This is to tell us, then, that the word “God” means something. But how? “God” means something mostly because it has a power to effect differences in thought, behavior, emotion, and long-term disposition towards oneself and the world. This theme about God is a theme about possibility, and that is not so much to be interpreted as it is to be imbibed. It is for the human spirit like oxygen is for human

breathing. A new lease on life is what the concept of God provides. Motivations and spirit will return and life will no longer be trivial and meaningless.

How tempting it is to say that the idea of God is old-fashioned and that it has lost its meaning. This is where we earlier met the issue. However, if what we have said has described a new setting for the issues, then it is not the idea that is in so much difficulty as it is all of us Philistines. Perhaps science and popular learning have been construed for us so that we believe that it all adds up to a new scientific determination, which means that there is no possibility, so that the past is indeed prologue. Maybe someone, a teacher or writer, has put science in that picture. But now comes another teacher who says that with God all things are possible. That suggests even another employment of science, an unheard of veto on common sense wisdom, a diatribe on dumb submission. With all of that one is released to new hopes, new fears, new possibilities. And these are the “meaning” of God. To know “about” that is to understand, but in a lesser and linguistic sense: to do these things, to find joy and a lasting hope, is to understand in richer and wider senses. To have been enabled, empowered, emboldened, made strong—these are the uses of the concept of God. Then one understands indeed.

The surface grammar of the word is one thing, and it can be read off the language and what the terms include and exclude; the depth grammar is something else altogether. To be a student of despair and hope, of novelty and boredom, enough to see the tie-up between these and the words, is to know in an altogether different way the rules of life and faith. This kind of understanding is not a function of literature alone but is gained only when one has used the literature to forge one’s life—and then thought about that!

Of course, this is to change the focus quite a little. No longer are the words in difficulty but rather it is the human Philistinism that is the cause of the difficulty. For it is very hard to see how one could put the words of the New Testament to work in one’s life if one stayed trivial and average in all of one’s judgments and behavior. It is this sort of thing that makes Wittgenstein’s remarks about a form of life so pertinent. For he saw that there are times when the meaning of a word depends upon the sentence and paragraph in which they

are being used. But more, when you know that the whole paragraph is a part of physics or religion or making fun, that that is the game that is being played, you can place the word and surmise a lot about it at once. Then there are times when a dismal judgment of despair is understood far better, or even understood at all, when you know that the form of life in which the words made a difference was, e.g., Philistinism rather than, say, a vigorous kind of activism like that of Napoleon or St. Paul. Not everything meant by the word is said by the word; some of that meaning has to be shown us by the quality of life in which the word has a genuine force. Some of that meaning is shown us by the form or stage of life.

This is to say, then, that understanding certain teachings, especially those of Christianity, is all bound up with seeing the kind of strenuous life that produced those words. And if one places those words in one's own mediocre life or in the familiar context of an everyday life where even moral judgments are seldom taken with seriousness, then a subtle kind of misunderstanding begins to develop. It is as if the triviality of everyday culture that we all share plainly gives no role for such magnificence and extravagance of hope, of novelty and powerful motivation, as the New Testament suggests. One can, of course, try to reconstruct the historical situation that was primary for these sayings, but that is an exceedingly long way around. A shorter and surer way is to change one's own life, make it a little more primitive and plain in pathos, so that it becomes a setting for the New Testament extravagance that is faith, hope, and love, *extraordinaire*.

This is not so difficult as it seems. For our lives are often so lived that deep feelings and plain concerns, consuming self-concern and primitive wishes for happiness have only been masked over, smothered by proprieties, and not actually lost. Our conformity to the world and its fashions has often merely blurred pathos and not altogether extirpated it. So it is almost a self-knowledge, a self-acknowledgment that is called for; a grief that is unrequited, a disappointment that we have lost in being like others when we really wanted to be different, a refusal to see our distinctiveness in the desire for peer approval. When these come back in force—when we let them manifest themselves—then it is like an essay in honesty, an effort in being true to

oneself. Then the conditions for understanding the New Testament come flooding into one's life again.

III

We are thinking about “understanding” and what it entails. We have noted one kind of obstacle to understanding Christian things that looms up in the New Testament itself, especially when it locates happiness and blessedness in a way that is exceedingly strange and unfamiliar. But secondly, we then turned to the odd consideration that “understanding” itself is over-intellectualized, as if it always is related to word or words as an interpretation is supposed to be. We offered, instead, a case or two that allowed us to see that understanding was, more often, the ability and capacity to do something—follow a rule, recover equanimity, re-do one's posture towards the world. Now, however, we want to take up still a third focus for misunderstanding.

This has to do with a tendency to misuse and to over-evaluate the general ways of talking that make up much of theology. Not for a minute, though, must one denigrate all general concepts or every remark, theological, or otherwise, that has those powers to make us take in a large swath of the world around us. We will note this feature of theology later. But here we are noting a misuse. For misunderstandings are sometimes very specific in origin, so that we are not able to say simply that we have a problem in the discourse or in the conceptual scheme *per se*. It may not be that all misunderstandings are stateable in general terms because some of them are difficulties that are indigenous to a person, not to a concept, a theory, or anything stateable at all. Under these circumstances, it is absurd to believe that a highly general remark, or a piece of specialized terminology, probably theological jargon, will provide a complete explanation of the individual cases.

A certain conception of the power of theology seems to us to be at fault here. In what ensues, then, I propose to look at theology when it is conceived to be, in itself, an understanding of a text or of a teaching. Perhaps this will make clearer a source of difficulty.

Whatever else theology is, it is not “the” understanding of a text. It might be an explanation, by which one can understand, but it is not

in itself the understanding. Think of mathematics, for an example, where someone not understanding Pythagoras and his ingenious notion of the square of the hypotenuse of a right triangle equaling the sum of the squares of the other two sides, is asked to compute it algebraically: if that fails, one can do it geometrically and see the squares. But those are calculations and projections; not the understanding but the means to the understanding. However, the understanding is not in the words, the figures, or the numbers. It is rather an achievement in the life of the person. But a person does not typically understand only once, though it happens often rather suddenly; for “understanding” is not like a flash of pain or an episode like a spell of nausea. It does not go away unless one loses his wits, for it is not an experience, a happening, an event in your psyche, a process going on like the flow of blood.

To be understanding is rather to be able, to be empowered, to have a capacity. And all of these remarks are not about words on paper but about people. With understanding, one might finally be able to speak to the point and see the issues, do the right thing, and make no more mistakes. In the Christian context, guarded by the use of the New Testament and some of church practice, the aim is not to provide the understanding only in a piece of theology, for that is an absolutely egregious error. But theology, instead, is like calculating to a mathematician, philology to a linguist, and discipline of the child to the wise parent, the means to the understanding, not the understanding itself.

Understanding has to live as a capacity, as a kind of potency, in a person. Of course, it can be lost; and in Christian literature we are rather fully warned about the duplicity of worldliness, of the unrepentant spirit, of the hardness of heart, wherein understanding can be darkened and capacity thus lost. So the utmost of care is in order to guard one's life, to keep oneself from falling; for here a fall might mean more than a bruise. Instead one might lose everything, even eternity. Of course, one must be reminded that one is not altogether alone here; for there is a rich and very peculiar sense in which one does not understand in and for himself and in which, instead, God Himself supplies the condition and becomes part of the capacity. But even this supposes a willing disposition and a seeking man; and to be

so misled by the world and by one's spirit, so as to think that nothing matters, or that one does not need God is, again, to lose even the grace that will make the difference.

But the issue is, again, what theology is. Surely, it is not "the" understanding; but it might be the explanation by which one understands. It might be the logical portrayal that will end an ambiguity or clear up a confusion, or it might be an argument establishing a point one had not thought of. There is a way to catch all of this up by saying that theology is something like grammar, which does not represent an understanding of a language as much as it does the tools by which to use it with understanding, or a set of rules, again, that are reminders of the way subsequently to behave.

We have often heard it said by proponents of new teaching methods that it is not enough that children merely learn to add, multiply, subtract, and divide but that they should also come to understand mathematics. It is a rather complicated matter to discuss, for we are a little hard put to it to state very clearly what counts as understanding mathematics. Part of the issue is, though, that it does not seem enough for a child to know just that two plus two equals four, when he can know "why" four and not seven or ten. A picture of mathematical understanding includes more things than just giving correct answers, having true beliefs, and being proficient. We might say it like this, then, that much of mathematics is learned as though its variables, mostly numbers, were uninterpreted, mostly raw and brutish. But to interpret them is only another way to allude to the fact that they must be given meaning. Unlike words, which are only words at all because they already have meaning and are usually teachable only when they mean something and when something can be said with them, numbers are terribly formal and empty.

Before we can understand something, even numbers, they have to mean something. "Understanding" and "meaning" are interrelated and very closely indeed. Therefore, in mathematics we begin to get a glimmer of understanding when we get a little rationality mixed up with the numbers, when we know about numbers as sets and can give reasons for the true answers in addition to the answers. But there is more, too; we have to do something with the numbers, such as tell time, estimate this or that and apply them to a thousand relevant

situations. In addition, it might be that when one understands one has, too, these facilities by which to do more mathematics. This is, in brief, to give some meaning to the numbers. But this is not done by a theoretical stroke; instead, theories and practices, probably together, insinuate their way into a life history, by forming capacities in the individual. The person understands when he can say “why,” estimate, describe, and do a host of things, using mathematics.

So it is also in theology, with differences to be sure, but also in a manner something like this. Theology is a kind of interpretation of religious teachings, but only in the manner of keeping a person from repeating the words of Jesus and the rudimentary commands of the Apostles as if they were formulae. Those teachings, simple and plain as they are and fairly standard through the centuries, are analogous to numbers and do need to be assimilated. But repeating the creed can be like doing sums, without the understanding. One would be a fool, indeed, who learned set theory as if it were another formula and was not able to answer “why” four, rather than three. And theology, which is learned like the creed, is equally absurd if repeated by rote as is set theory; for it is not the understanding any more than is “set theory.” Both are the means to understanding and understanding is, again, an achievement in the life history of the individual.

Theology is itself misunderstood if it is thought to be “the” interpretation, meaning, or understanding. But there is something devilishly common and almost plausible about that misunderstanding. There is something about the highly general terms, “being,” “ontology,” “process,” “truth,” “reality,” and a host more, that makes theology, like philosophy, appear to be about another level or another depth (one can choose his metaphors here) that is more fundamental, truer, better in every way. We are led, almost imperceptibly, into the conviction that if we could only get clear here, we could clear up misunderstandings on everything lesser. But if what I have said makes any sense at all, this picture of conceptual levels and the dependence of our working language upon a super-language is altogether wrong.

A misunderstanding of Christian matters can ostensibly be any one of a number of things. One may have a wrong picture of understanding itself. For if we cannot understand the Gospel until an understanding is written out, surely safeguarded and defended by

reasons that command acceptance in public debate, then we are mistaken about both what “theology” is as well as what “understanding” is. For, as I should want to argue, theology has to have good reasons and be unequivocal and clear in order to say something; but this makes it usable only to gain understanding and never to be it.

Understanding, on the other hand, may occur because one has used God’s grace, because one is pure of heart, because one has done the things he has already heard commanded. Some may understand because a theologian has explained, with technical means perhaps, how the world is when it is referred to God, when seen as His Creation, when happiness and God are re-ordered. But that is to say that a capacity that is hurt by sin, by deception, by weakness, by dishonesty, by half-hearted thinking, is restored by God working even through, of all things, theologians.

SAMPLE