

Understanding and Believing

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It is generally recognized that man is capable of believing without understanding; one is much less aware of the inverse possibility, that of understanding without believing, and it even appears as a contradiction, since faith does not seem to be incumbent except on those who do not understand. Yet hypocrisy is not only the dissimulation of one who pretends to be better than he is; it also lies in disproportion between certainty and behavior, and in this respect most men are more or less hypocritical since they claim to admit truths which they put no more than feebly into practice. On the plane of simple belief, to believe without acting in consequence of what one believes corresponds, on the intellectual plane, to an understanding without faith and without life; for real belief means identifying oneself with the truth that one accepts, whatever may be the level of this adherence. Piety is to religious belief what operative faith is to doctrinal understanding or, we may add, what sainthood is to truth.

If we take as starting point the idea that spirituality has essentially two factors, namely discernment between the Real and the illusory and permanent concentration on the Real, the *conditio sine qua non*, being the observance of traditional rules and the practice of the virtues that go with them, we shall see that there is a relationship between discernment and understanding on the one hand and between concentration and faith on the other; faith, whatever its degree, always means an as it were existential participation in Being or in Reality; it is—to take a basic *hadith*—"to worship God as if thou sawest Him, and if thou seest Him not, yet He seeth thee". In other terms, faith is the participation of the will in the intelligence; just as on the physical plane man adapts his action to the physical facts which determine its nature, so also, on the spiritual plane, he should act in accordance with his convictions, by inward activity even more than outward activity, for "before acting one must first be", and our being is nothing other than our inward activity. The soul must be to the intelligence what beauty is to truth, and this is what we might call the "moral qualification" that should accompany the "intellectual qualification".

There is a relationship between faith and the symbol; there is also one between faith and miracle. In the symbolic image as in the miraculous fact, it is the language of being, not of reasoning, which speaks to a manifestation of being on the part of Heaven, man must respond with his own being, and he does so through faith or through love,—which are the two faces of one and the same reality—without therefore ceasing to be a creature endowed with thought. In plain terms, one might wonder what is the basis or what is the justification of an elementary faith which is disdainful, or almost so, of any attempt at comprehension; the answer has just been given namely that such faith is based on the illuminating power which belongs in principle to the symbols, the phenomena and the arguments of the Revelation¹; the "obscure merit" of this faith consists in not closing oneself to a grace for which our nature is made. There is room for differences, on the human side, as regards the modes or degrees of receptivity and also the intellectual needs; these needs do not in any sense mean that the thinking man lacks faith; they merely show that his receptivity is sensible to the most subtle and most implicit aspects of the

Divine Message; now what is implicit is not the inexpressible but the esoteric, and this has the right to be expressed.² Attention has already been drawn to the relationship between faith and miracle; perfect faith consists in being aware of the metaphysically miraculous character of natural phenomena and in seeing in them, by way of consequence, the trace of God.

The demerit, therefore, of unbelief or lack of faith does not lie in a natural lack of special aptitudes nor is it due to the unintelligibility of the Message—for then there would be no demerit—but in the passionate stiffening of the will and in the worldly tendencies which bring about this stiffening. The merit of faith is fidelity to the super-naturally natural receptivity of primordial man; it means remaining as God made us and remaining at His disposition with regard to a message from Heaven which might be contrary to earthly experience, while being incontestable in view of subjective as well as objective criteria.³

It is related that Ibn Taimiyyah⁴ once said, while coming down from the pulpit after a sermon: "God comes down from Heaven to earth as I am coming down now"⁵; there is no reason to doubt that he meant this to be taken literally, with a literalism not to be bowed before any interpretation, but his attitude has none the less a symbolic value which is independent of his personal opinions; the refusal to analyze a symbol by discursive and separative thought—in order to assimilate it directly and as it were existentially—does in fact correspond to a perspective which is possible and therefore valid in the appropriate circumstances. "Simple faith of" may be seen to coincide here with an attitude which is its opposite while being at the same time analogous, namely the assimilation of the faith through the symbol and by means of the whole soul, the soul as such.

Faith as a quality of the soul is the stabilizing complement of the discerning and as it were explosive intelligence; without this complement, intellectual activity lets itself be carried away by its own movement and is like a devouring fire; it loses its balance and ends either by eating itself up in a restlessness without issue or else simply by wearing itself out to the point of sclerosis. Faith implies all the static and gentle qualities such as patience, gratitude, confidence, generosity; it offers the mercurial intelligence a fixative element and thus realizes, together with discernment, an equilibrium which is like an anticipation of sainthood. It is to this polarity—in the highest degree—that the complementary terms "blessing" (or "prayer", *salah*) and "peace" (or "greeting", *salam*) are applied in Islam.

An intellectual qualification is not fully valid—in view of the contents which correspond to its scope—except if it be accompanied by an equivalent moral qualification; here lies the explanation of all the fideist attitudes which seem bent on limiting the impetus of the intelligence. The upholders of tradition pure and simple (*naql*) in the first centuries of Islam were deeply conscious of this, and Ash'ari⁶ himself felt it (although in a somewhat opposite way since he ventured on to the plain of theological reasoning) when he attributed to God an unintelligibility which, all told, could only signify the precariousness of man's intellectual means in the face of the dimension of absoluteness.

One can meditate or speculate indefinitely on transcendent truths and their applications—that is moreover what the author of this article does, but he has valid reasons for doing it, nor does he do it for himself—one can spend a whole lifetime speculating on the supra-sensorial and the transcendent, but all that matters is the "leap into the void" which is the fixation of spirit and soul in an unthinkable dimension of the Real; this leap, which cuts short and completes the in itself endless chain of formulations,⁷ depends on a direct understanding and on a grace, not on having

reached a certain phase in the unfolding of the doctrine, for this unfolding, we repeat, has logically no end. This "leap into the void" we can call "faith" ; it is from the negation of this reality that all philosophy of the type "art for art's sake" springs, all thought that believes it can attain to an absolute contact with Reality by means of analyses, syntheses, arrangements, filtrations and polishings—thought that is mundane by the very fact of this ignorance and by the concomitant fact of its "vicious circle which not merely allows no escape from illusion but also reinforces illusion by the lure of a progressive and in fact non-existent knowledge."⁸

In view of the harm that the prejudices and tendencies of ordinary piety can on occasion do to metaphysical speculations, we might be tempted to conclude that piety should be abandoned on the threshold of pure knowledge, but this would be a false and eminently pernicious conclusion; in reality piety—or faith—must never be absent from the soul, but it is only too clear that it must be on a level with the truths that it accompanies, which means that such an extension is perfectly in its nature, as is proved by the Vedantic hymns, to take just one particularly conclusive example.

The Hindus have been reproached for being inveterate idolators and for finding in the least phenomenon a pretext for idolatry; there is, it seems, an annual festival at which the artisan gathers his tools together in order to worship them. In fact, the Hindu refuses to become rooted in outwardness: he readily looks to the divine substratum of things, whence his acute sense of the sacred and his devotional mentality; this is the last thing that modern man wants, monstrously "adult" as he has become in conformity with the worst illusion that has ever darkened the human outlook. The reflection of the sun is not the sun but it is none the less "something of the sun", and in this respect it is not wrong to speak elliptically of a kind of identity, the light being always the one light and the cause being really present in the effect; he who does not respect the effect makes himself incapable of respecting fully the cause, apart from the fact that the cause withholds itself from whoever despises its reflections; whoever understands the cause perceives it also in its earthly traces. The sense of the sacred: this phrase expresses felicitously a dimension which should never be absent, either in metaphysical thought or in everyday life; it is this which gives birth to the liturgies, and without it there is no faith. The sense of the sacred, with its concomitances of dignity, incorruptibility, patience and generosity, is the key to integral faith and to the supernatural virtues which are inherent in it.

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When one admits the distinction made by the alchemies between a "dry path" and a "moistpath", the former corresponding to "knowledge" and the latter to "love", one should know also that the two poles "fire" and "water"—which these paths represent respectively—are both reflected in each path, so that "knowledge" has necessarily an aspect of "moisture", and "love" an aspect of "dryness". Within the framework of a path of love, this aspect of "dryness" or of "fire" is doctrinal orthodoxy, for it is well known that no spirituality is possible without the implacable and immutable bulwark of a Divine expression of the saving Truth; analogously and inversely, the aspect of "moisture" or of "water" which, being feminine, is derived from the Divine Substance (*Prakriti*, the *Shakti*), is indispensable to the path of "knowledge" for the evident and already mentioned reasons of equilibrium, stability and effectiveness.

When one compares the quality of "knowledge" with fire, one is aware that this comparison cannot perfectly and exhaustively account for the metaphysical reaches of the intelligence and

for its activity of realization : fire in itself, besides its qualities of luminosity and ascension, has in fact an aspect of agitation and destructiveness, and it is this aspect—the very one that the fideist opponents of *kalam* had in mind—which proves that "knowledge-fire" is not self-sufficient and that it has in consequence an imperative need of a "knowledge-water", which is none other than faith with all its fixative and peace-giving virtues⁹ Even the most penetrating intelligence, if it relies too much on its own strength, runs the risk of being abandoned by Heaven ; forgetting that the Subject, the Knower, is God, it closes itself to the Divine Influx. Profane thought is not only thought which is ignorant of metaphysical and mystical truths,¹⁰ but also that which, while knowing these truths well enough in theory, has none the less a disproportionate approach to them, an approach that is unaccompanied by sufficient adaptation of the soul ; not that such thought is profane by definition as in the case of ignorant thought, but it is so secondarily or morally and lies in grave danger of error, for man is not merely a mirror, he is a cosmos which is both complex and fragile. The connection—often affirmed by tradition—between Knowledge and Peace, shows in its own way that in pure intellectuality the mathematical element is not everything, and also that fire alone in itself could not be the symbol of intellectuality.¹¹

The combination between the principles "fire" and "water" is nothing other than "wine", which is both "liquid fire" and "igneous water"¹²; liberating drunkenness proceeds precisely from this alchemical and as it were miraculous combination of opposite elements. It is thus wine, and not fire, which is the most perfect image of liberating gnosis envisaged not only in its total amplitude but also in the equilibrium of its virtual modes, for the equilibrium between discernment and contemplation can be conceived at every level. Another image of this equilibrium or of this concordance is oil; it is through oil that fire is stabilized into becoming the calm and contemplative flame of the lamps in sanctuaries. Like wine, oil is an igneous liquid, which "shineth even though the fire have not touched it", according to the famous Verse of Light (*āyat an-Nur*).

From a certain elementary point of view, there is a connection between the emotional path of "warriors" and water, which is passive and "feminine", just as there is a connection between the intellectual path of "priests" and fire, which is active and "masculine" ; but it is only too clear, we repeat, that water has sacerdotal aspect of peace, and that fire has a warlike aspect of devouring activity, and that each path has necessarily a "dry" pole and a "moist" pole. All these considerations converge on the problem of the relationships between speculative intelligence and faith: faith is a pure and calm "water", intelligence is an active and discriminating "fire". To say that water is pure amounts to saying that it has a virtual quality of luminosity, that it is thus predisposed to be a vehicle for fire and to be transmuted into wine, as at the marriage of Cana; when considered with regard to its possibilities, water is a virtual wine since it has already, through its purity, a luminosity, and in this sense it is comparable to oil; like wine, oil is igneous by its very nature, but at the same time it does not correspond exactly to wine except when combined with the flame that it fosters, whereas wine has no need of any complement to manifest its nature.

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It follows from all that has been said so far that faith and intelligence can each be conceived at two different levels: faith as certainty, ontological as it were and pre-mental, ranks higher than

the discerning and speculative aspects of intelligence,¹³ but intelligence as pure intellection ranks higher than that faith which is no more than an adherence of the sentiments; it is this ambivalence which is the source of numerous misunderstandings, but which makes possible at the same time an exo-esoteric language that is both simple and complex. Faith in its higher aspect is what we might call *religio cordis*: it is the "inward religion" which is supernaturally natural to man and which coincides with *religio caeli—or perennis—that* is, with universal truth, which is beyond the contingencies of form and of time. This faith can be satisfied with little: unlike an intelligence which is all for exactness but never satisfied in its play of formulations, and which passes from concept to concept, from symbol to symbol, without being able to make up its mind for this or for that, the faith of the heart is capable of being satisfied by the first symbol that providentially comes its way,¹⁴ and of living on it until the supreme Meeting.

The faith in question, which we have called *religio cordis—it* is the subjective and immanent side of *religio caeli—has* two poles, in conformity with the distinction between the "dry" and "moist" paths; they are represented in the Buddhism of the North by *Zen* and *Jodo* respectively. Both turn away from verbal comprehension, the one to plunge into our very being and the other to plunge into faith: For *Zen* truth must coincide with reality and this is our substratum which is both existential and intellectual, whereas for *Jodo* truth-reality is attained in perfect faith, the giving up of oneself to the universal Substance which is Mercy and which is manifested in some Sign or some Key.¹⁵

The "wine" element referred to previously is represented, in the Mahayana, by the union of the two poles *Vajradhatu* and *Garbhadhatu* --the Thibetan *Yab-Yum--which* signifies the conjunction of "illuminating truth" (*upaya*) and "saving Gnosis" (*prajñā*), this sexual symbolism (*lingam-yoni*) having the same meaning as that of drunkenness in the case of wine; the "great Bliss" (*mahasukha*) which results from the union of the two poles, evokes the Beatitude (*Ananda*) of *Atma*, wherein is the meeting of "Consciousness" (*Chit*) and "Being" (*Sat*). According to its most general and most human acceptance, this symbolism expresses the equilibrium between mental assets and virtue; on this basis, the equilibrium may be between doctrinal investigation and spiritual practice, or between doctrine and method. All these modes can be brought back to a confrontation between a "knowledge" and a "being", or between an intellectual objectivization and a participation of the will, that is, an as it were existential participation, or, we might say, between a mathematical or architectural dimension and an ethico-aesthetic or musical dimension, in the vastest sense that these terms can have, in view of the fact that phenomena have their roots in the Divine. It is true that from a certain point of view, the element "being" is more than a complement: it is the combination of the elements "knowing" and "willing", and in this case it represents the sainthood synthesis that underlies the polarity "intelligence-beauty", which brings us back the symbolism of love and wine, and to the mystery of the coincidence of faith with gnosis.

The cult of a Goddess, of a *Shakti*, of a *Tara*—of a "Lady" if one will—may indicate the predominance of a perspective of love, of dogmatic and methodic *bhakti*, but it may equally well be the sign, even within a perspective of gnosis or of *jnāna*, that stress is placed on the element "faith" in the highest sense of the term, the very sense in which *Zen* and *Jodo* conceive it, the one according to the "dry path", and the other according to the "moist path". This is also what Ibn `Arabi meant—and there cannot be the slightest doubt that his perspective was that of gnosis—by the "religion of Love", which he identified with *al-islam*, the essential conforming of intelligence and of soul to the Divine Nature, which is beyond forms and oppositions.

¹ The "signs" (*ayat*) of which the Koran speaks, and which may even be natural phenomena envisaged in the light of the revealed doctrine. A remark which calls to be made in this context is that the insensibility of the believers of any intrinsically orthodox religion to the arguments of another religion does not in any sense come into question here, since the motive for refusal is in that case a positive factor, namely an already existing faith which is in itself valid.

² It goes without saying that the implicit is to be found even on the plane of the literal meaning, but this mode of indication causes practically no problems and is not in question here.

³ To say that Abraham and Mary had the merit of great faith means that they were sensible to the Divine criteria despite the apparent impossibility of the Message ; this means also that the men of old were by no means credulous, if we may be allowed to make this remark in a context which goes beyond the level of ordinary humanity.

⁴ Arab theologian of the XIIIth century, the protagonist, Hanbalite by origin, of an extreme exoterism.

⁵ With reference to the *Hadith an-Nuzûl* : "Our Lord—Blessed and Exalted be He—cometh down each night unto the nethermost heaven (*as-samâ' ad-dunya*, a Koranic term which signifies, not the lowest of the seven Heavens, but the terrestrial firmament) while the last third of the night yet remaineth, and He saith : Who calleth upon Me, that I may answer him ? Who asketh of Me, that I may give unto him ? Who seeketh My forgiveness, that I may forgive him?".

⁶ See the previous number of this review, p. 67, note 1.

⁷ But for such completion there would be no such thing as doctrines, these being by definition forms, delimitations, mental coagulations.

⁸ A valid doctrine is a "description", the author of which is able to base his conclusions on direct, supramental knowledge and is therefore in no sense duped by his "description" as regards its inevitable formal limitations ; on the other hand, a philosophy which claims to be a "research" is a mere nothing and its apparent modesty is no more than a pretentious negation of true wisdom. There is clearly no humility in saying that one is ignorant because everyone is ignorant.

⁹ "There is no lustral water like knowledge", says the *Bhagavadgita* : it is here water, not fire, which is related to *jnana*.

¹⁰ "Metaphysical" : concerning universal realities objectively. "Mystical" : concerning the same realities subjectively, that is, in relation to the contemplative soul, insofar as they enter operatively into contact with it.

¹¹ Shankara, affirming his identity with "inward Wisdom", calls it : "That which is the stilling of mental agitation and the supreme appeasement . . . That which is the pool Manikarnikâ . . . That which is the Ganges . . ."—images referring to water, not to fire. Islam, for its part, associates coolness, the colour green, streams, with Paradise.

¹² When the Red Indians called alcohol "fire-water", they were expressing, without knowing it, a profound truth: the achemical and as it were supernatural coincidence of liquidity and ignition. According to the *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* and the *Shatapatha Brâhmana*, the Divine Fire (*Agni*) is engendered in the un-differentiated Self (*Anna*) by the tension between igneous Energy (*Was*) and the Water of Life or the Elixir (*rasa*) ; *Agni* is "churned" and "born of the Waters", or "born of the Lotus"; he is the Lightning hidden in the Celestial Waters.

¹³ This higher faith is something altogether different from the irresponsible and arrogant taking of liberties so characteristic of the profane improvisors of *Zen* or of *Jnana*, who seek to "take a short cut" by stripping themselves of the essential human context of all realization, whereas in the East, and in the normal conditions of ethical and liturgical ambiance, this context is largely supplied in advance. One does not enter the presence of a king by the back door.

¹⁴ In the lives of the saints, the spiritual career is often inaugurated by an outward or inward incident which throws the soul into a particular and definitive attitude with regard to Heaven ; the symbol here is not the incident itself, but the positive spiritual factor that the incident serves to bring out.

¹⁵ In other terms : in Amidism faith is ultimately based on intuition of the essential Goodness of Reality which is Divinely "the Other" in relation to the existence-bound subject ; in Zenism, on the contrary, what we call "faith" is based on intuition of the essential reality of our "Self", of our subjective essence in its Nirvânic Transpersonality.