

GAMALIEL

(Questions should be addressed to Gamaliel, c/o the Editor, 'The Life of the Spirit', Hawkesyard Priory, Rugeley, Staffs.)

Q. When we state that religion (natural or supernatural) is essential to sound morals, what do we mean, and on what grounds do we hold our statement to be true? If religion is essential to morals, how can we admit that the unbeliever can be moral or act morally, without such an admission contradicting our thesis? Is the word 'morals' in the phrase 'morals without religion' ambiguous?
P.D.J.

A. I personally would not be prepared to commit myself to so general and vague a statement as that religion is essential to sound morals. I would only go so far as to say that the Christian religion is essential to Christian morals, that is to say that you will not find Christian standards of behaviour without belief in Christian doctrines. The sermon on the mount makes nonsense except in the context of faith in Christ, belief in eternal life, and the hope of salvation through Christ. Christian morality grows out of faith, hope, and charity, which are *theological* virtues, putting a man in the right attitudes towards God. We might define sound morality as having the right attitude to things as they are; Christian morality puts us into the right attitude towards eternal and divine things. But we cannot adopt this attitude unless we have some knowledge of these things, and we can only have such knowledge by faith, by what I think you mean by 'supernatural religion'.

But there is a whole vast field of 'things as they are' which we know or can know without any recourse to religious faith; the world and the society we live in are realities we know by experience, and so on the basis of this experience even the unbeliever can work out a right attitude to these realities, that is to say a sound morality, and do his best to live up to it. Indeed he is obliged to do so, and we can reasonably blame him if he does not, in a way that we cannot necessarily blame him for being an unbeliever. In other words it is possible to be a sound moral philosopher without recourse to the sanction of religious truths. There is

nothing contradictory in the notion of a genuinely moral unbeliever.

But there are two qualifications to make. The first is that a knowledge of reality based only on natural human experience is a very limited and imperfect knowledge, because it cannot reach the fulness of divine reality, which is only made known to us by revelation, to be accepted by faith. So the morality based on such a limited knowledge will itself be a limited and inadequate morality, sound enough perhaps within its limits, but still very limited. And because human knowledge is such an uncertain thing, and we are very prone to adopt false ideas, such a purely natural morality is very easily, and very usually, distorted in one way or another. It does need the Christian revelation to correct it and to supply its inadequacies; but *not* to establish its elementary principles.

The second qualification is that if a man reflects rightly on his natural experience of the world and society, he can and ought to come, by the light of natural reason, to some sort of partial knowledge of God. He is able by this way to touch the fringes, so to speak, of the divine reality. And so his natural morality should include a place for religion, religion not in the sense of a faith or a doctrine, but in the sense of a virtue, a right attitude to the divine. And his reflections, if they are straight and sincere, and his natural moral principles, if they too are sincere and earnest, should make him uneasily aware of the inadequacy of his merely natural religion and natural morality. So that a sound natural morality, while not depending on true revealed religion, can be a means of leading a man towards belief, to the acceptance by faith of the divine revelation when it is proposed to him.

Q. May I follow up the discussion in 'Gamaliel' for the August-September number on the way our Lord is present in the eucharist? At school we were asked to assent to various affirmations on the actuality of his sacramental presence; for instance, that if a dog swallowed a consecrated host, our Lord would be 'in the dog'. My own mind revolted, and considered that the substance of the bread could only be apprehended by a rational, human, being. But perhaps this makes our Lord's presence only relative, in an erroneous way.

M.C.E.

A. Our faith in the real presence requires us to say of consecrated bread, 'This is the body of Christ'; 'There is the body of Christ, on the altar, in the tabernacle, in the priest's hand, in the mouth of the communicant'. In the same way, if a dog were to eat a consecrated host, it would be true to say (and false to deny) that the dog had eaten the body of Christ, which would now be in the dog. I can sympathize with your mind revolting at the thought, but revolting ideas are sometimes true.

But we ought to be quite clear precisely what it is that makes any particular idea or situation revolting. As I said in my previous reply, the body of Christ is not *localized* in the sacrament; that is to say, it is not confined there as in a particular place, and liable to be affected by whatever happens in that particular place. Christ is not spatially present on the altar, in the tabernacle, in the priest's hand, or in the dog; he is present in some other, non-spatial, but none the less real sense. Let us call it transubstantively present. The best comparison I can think of is this: you are sitting in your chair, your body is localized there, and if the ceiling falls on that particular piece of space, it falls on you. But what about your soul? Your soul is wherever you are, because you are a body-soul compound, but it is only your body that can be said to be anywhere in a spatial sense; your soul, not being a bodily reality with dimensions, can only be said to be *here* or *there* in some other, more rarefied sense—call it metaphysical, or transcendent, or what you like. The ceiling will never fall on your soul.

The body of Christ, unlike your soul, is admittedly a bodily reality or substance. But even bodily realities are only localized in space in virtue of their own proper dimensions. Now the dimensions of a consecrated host are not the proper dimensions of the body of Christ; therefore the place in which the host is is not the place of the body of Christ. There are hundreds of thousands of consecrated hosts all over the world, but there are not hundreds of thousands of bodies of Christ. There is only one, and that is localized wherever his proper dimensions are, where 'he sits at the right hand of the Father', in some place not, presumably, co-extensive with the space of the physical universe. The one body of Christ is present in the innumerable consecrated hosts, but 'transubstantively', taking the place of the 'bread-substance' which alone is proper to the dimensions of all those hosts, and which alone they can properly be said to localize.

So then, nothing happens to the body of Christ when the dog eats it; the dog does it no harm, as a tiger does you some harm when it eats you, and the inside of a dog is no more revolting to our Lord than the inside of a human being. Nor of course does the dog commit a sin. So if this thing were to occur purely by accident, through no one's fault whatever—supposing a church collapsed and a tabernacle burst open in an earthquake, and a dog ate the hosts scattered around—there would be nothing you could reasonably be revolted by. But it would be revolting if someone deliberately fed a dog on consecrated hosts; it would be a revolting sin of sacrilege. It would be an abuse, since that is not what our Lord gave us the sacrament of his body and blood for.

This brings us to your last point; is it true to say that the substance of the bread (I presume you mean the substance of the body of Christ after consecration) can only be apprehended by a rational, human, being? Yes and no. To take 'no' first; any creature that receives the sacrament receives a thing which is the body of Christ, and in that physical sense apprehends the substance of it. But now for 'yes'; the sacrament is a sacred sign, that is what the word sacrament means. The substance of a sign is not apprehended unless its meaning is understood, and clearly only human beings are capable of apprehending the substance of the sacrament in this sense. And not all human beings either, but only the faithful, because this is a sacred sign that can only be grasped by faith. One more point; the sacraments are very special signs which effect what they signify; the immediate thing signified by the eucharist is the real presence of the body and blood of Christ, and that is effected by the significant words of consecration uttered over bread and wine. But the ultimate thing signified is the loving union of the faithful with Christ, it is the unity of the mystical body, and that is effected by the significant, symbolic action of receiving the sacrament. This ultimate effect, however, is only achieved if the sacrament is received sincerely, that is to say in charity, in a state of grace. If you call this ultimate signification and effect of the sacrament its substance, then not even all believers, but only good believers, can apprehend it.