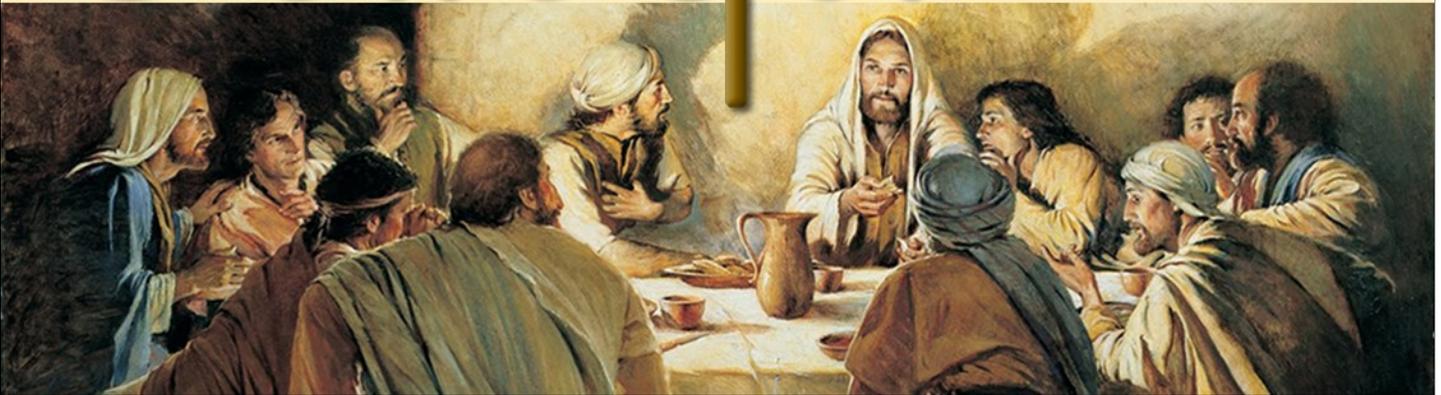


Colloquī

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A journal for restless minds

Brambles Among Roses

With thorns Truth is crowned

Colloquī is a Deacon's Corner weekly journal. Its mission and purpose: to encourage serious discussion, to promote reasoned debate, and to provide serious content for those who hope to find their own pathway to God.

Each week Colloquī will contain articles on theology, philosophy, faith, religion, Catholicism, and much more.

Be forewarned! Articles may and often will contain fuel for controversy, but always with the express intent to seek the Truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

Brambles Among Roses

With thorns Truth is crowned

What is it that defines a thing? Should a bramble be a rose by comparing pricks? Or, as Juliet suggests, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."¹ True of roses but brambles have neither the temperament nor sweet bouquet. You cannot change the nature of a thing by mere appropriation. Proclaiming a cat a dog cannot change its mewling; a cat will never bark, it has no voice for it; no doubt either or both would be insulted or humiliated by the interchange.

There is a vagrant thought, a question simply put, which like a bramble scratches the tender edges of the mind. There is no comfort in the asking, no pluck of prickly barb to salve the willful

aggravation short of plodding through its puerile pricking. The question is of such a simple nature, and yet the answer, shielded behind those barbarous barbs, mocks and jeers with alacritous glee at what feeble attempts are made to free it from self-incarceration.

What is truth? Pilate asked, received no answer; a question debated before and since with often contradictory answers. The pragmatist claims truth relative, subjective, variable and shifting. But above all, truth is that which is expedient.



[Pragmatism,] as its name sufficiently indicates, it is nothing if not practical. It had its origin, as was appropriate, in America, that land of strenuous practical endeavor, and its chief exponent is an American—the late Professor W. James. Now Pragmatism stands among other things for "a theory of truth," and the pragmatic theory

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of truth is this—practice is the test of truth. “An idea is true so long as to believe it is profitable to our lives. ... The true is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as the right is only the expedient in the way of our behaving.” But the Pragmatist goes further still. “Truth in our ideas means their power to work.” “Pragmatism’s only test of truth is what works best.”

“If the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily ... it is true.” In other words, the truth of any particular statement is an hypothesis, a working theory, and so the truth of God’s existence is a working theory, on a par with any other working theory, such as the nebular theory, or the atomic theory, or theories of electrons and ether and the rest. But working theories change. The working theory of today is rejected tomorrow in favor of a theory which works better. Does truth change too? The pragmatist says yes: “We have to live today by what truth we can get today, and be ready tomorrow to call it falsehood.”

So truth is a variable quantity, and must be according to this account of the matter. For truth being “that which works best,” it can only be tested and verified by our experience of its working. But experience varies. The experience of one man varies from the experience of another; nay, the same man’s experience may vary from day to day, and therefore truth varies too.²

Like beauty, truth is therefore to the mind of the beholder subject to the vagaries of whim and fancy; thus, it must be true that “brambles are roses” until they are not. Truth then is whatever one wants or holds to be true, which is to say “The truth (of an idea) means, go here or there; do this or that” for truth is but a practical rule of conduct.

The answer, still ensconced behind its bramble cage, more worried now as thorns are cleared away. Such vaporous truth—flagrant word abuse should be declared a mortal sin—now thoroughly fouls the air in which we live and breathe and have our being. The modern mind has been so severely inculcated—that is to say, brain-washed—with the ideological mantric that truth is subjective, relative and personal that objective truth has been brought to the brink. To the modern western mind, objective truth and its corresponding reality are archaic and obsolete notions best discarded.

What then of God? Of Jesus Christ? Of Christianity? Of the Catholic Church? Of dogma and doctrine? How should the modern Catholic mind respond without firsthand knowledge (truth) obtained through personal experience? Such metaphysical speculation is seldom, if ever, the topic of congenial conversation well-met over a glass of Chardonnay and a sliver of Gouda.

We flatter ourselves as a race on being practical. We like to be practical in our religion as in other things, and speculative theories on religious subjects possess little charm for our minds and exercise little influence on our beliefs and conduct.³

Such unpleasant musing preys harshly upon my mind with each new issue of this journal. I am reminded of the disclaimer written on the front of it:

Be forewarned! Articles may and often will contain fuel for controversy, but always with the express intent to seek the Truth, the whole

truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

The spirit of contemporary thought “exalts the modern at the expense of antiquity, extolling the new because it is new, and depreciating the old because it is old, ...” With regard to religion and Christianity and in particular, Catholicism, the object is quite clear and openly stated.

That object is not ostensibly to set up a brand-new form of Catholicity, but to reconstruct the old on new lines. Its object ... is to readjust Catholicity to the mentality of the age, to reinterpret Catholicity in terms of modern thought. That sounds at first a perfectly legitimate proposal. But the question is, what modern thought? There is modern thought and modern thought. There is modern thought which is sound, and modern thought which is, to say the least, unsound. So, when it is proposed to adapt Catholicity to modern thought, it is of some importance to inquire what modern thought is meant.⁴

Much of modern thought has been deeply influenced by Immanuel Kant, the eighteenth century German philosopher who argued the human mind cannot know of anything which cannot be directly experienced through the senses. All we can know, according to Kant, what true knowledge we are capable of knowing is limited to what we can see, hear, touch, taste and smell. Phenomena, appearances, according to Kant, are all we know; knowledge cannot transcend experience. Thus the human mind is incapable of knowing with true intellectual knowledge anything beyond the data of sense experience.

Kant's philosophy suffers a fatal flaw. That the basis of all knowledge must come from what we experience through our senses and that the intellect acquires knowledge either directly or indirectly through the senses there is little or no disagreement.

Catholic philosophy agrees with Kant then in holding that knowledge begins with the experience of the senses. It differs from Kant in saying that it does not end there. Catholic philosophy holds that the mind recognizes that the objects presented to the senses are real things, and that its knowledge regarding them is true knowledge.⁵

In his book *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant maintained that the intellect knows only phenomena, appearances alone. What belongs to the unknowable—God and the things of God, supernatural truths—cannot be directly experienced through the human senses, and therefore, are unknowable to the human mind. Such a position would seem at first blush to lean toward agnosticism. But Kant was not in the strictest sense an agnostic and in *Critique of Practical Reason* he argues that while it is true that God cannot be known to the intellect by our pure or speculative reason, we can attain to God and the supernatural by our practical reason. For our practical reason postulates God as the basis of the moral order and reveals to us the need of God as our ideal.

Needless to say, Catholic teaching, preceding Kant by some seven-hundred years, represents a view counter to many of Kant's arguments, especially with respect to knowing of

God and of supernatural things. What Catholics know of God comes either from the Word of God as revealed to us in Sacred Scripture or from the Word made flesh, the Son of God, Jesus Christ. It is a fact, an historical event, that the Son of God became man, was born of the virgin and dwelt among us. He taught by word of mouth his doctrine to his apostles.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age (Mt 28:11).

Jesus revealed his divinity and his doctrine to the Apostles and they in turn delivered it to the body of believers. This is revelation, as Catholics understand it, public not private revelation, externally revealed truth enlightening the mind within.

But in its origin it is from without, transmitted by oral communication from Christ, and from those commissioned to speak in Christ's name: "He that heareth you heareth me." So much as to Revelation. In the next place, it is a fact that the believers in this revelation were constituted by Christ Himself into a body which He called the Church. To that Church He gave a form of government which we call hierarchical, that is the sacred rule of the priesthood; a government not democratic but hierarchical, with Peter and Peter's successors at its head, as supreme teachers of Christ's truth, and supreme rulers with the powers requisite to support their teaching. That is the Church, as Catholics understand it.⁶

What then of faith? "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1).

Once more, the doctrines which Christ revealed, either directly or through the Church, were in many cases truths superior to reason, beyond the power of reason to discover, and, when discovered by other means, beyond the power of reason to comprehend. It would not be difficult to show that, to believe such supernatural truths as they should be believed, with saving belief, supernatural aid is required. That supernatural aid we call the gift of Faith. Faith, then, is a supernatural gift of God for the acquisition of truth in the supernatural order, just as reason is a natural gift of God for the acquisition of truth in the natural order. That is Faith, as Catholics understand it.⁷

What Kant and his disciples so adamantly deny is that all the things of God which cannot be seen can become known by the evidence of all visible things made by God.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made (Romans 1:18-20).

Here, then, we begin to see the conflict now so virulently engaged between Kantian and modern philosophical doctrine toward Catholic doctrine and dogma as taught by the

Catholic Church. If we, as Catholics, are to authentically believe these supernatural truths of faith, we must believe them not only on the word of God, but on the word of God made known to us by the Church which Christ ordained and established.

Truth, which one may not come to know through one's own use of reason, can come to be known only by the word of another, one who knows the truth authoritatively. Christ gave the Church, through the Apostles and their successors, the magisterium, the *authority to teach all* that he had taught. Thus, by the authority given to the Church in matters of Faith by Christ himself, Catholics can come to know what to believe and the truth of Faith.

Further, if the Church is to tell me these truths so I may believe them, then the Church must speak plainly. For, if the Church is not clear in her statements, how am I to be clear in my belief? The Church must formulate her doctrine in language clear and definite and precise. And truths so formulated are what are termed Dogmas. That is Dogmatic teaching, as Catholics understand it.⁸

Modern thought, beginning with the philosophical assumption that all we know with intellectual knowledge is not reality, but only appearances, thus concludes that we cannot know with intellectual knowledge God and the supernatural. While Kant said that by means of our *practical reason* we can come to know of God and the supernatural, modern philosophical thought prefers to call it *religious sentiment* or as

the song goes, "nothing more than feelings."

Man, he says, feels within himself instinctively the need of the Divine. That need of the Divine excites in him a corresponding sentiment, a sentiment described ... as "the ceaseless palpitation of the human soul panting for the Divine." That sentiment is the Religious Sentiment, and is God revealing himself to the soul of the man. Thus considered, that Religious Sentiment is Revelation. Further, the Religious Sentiment unites the soul with God, it is an "inward recognition of God, a response of spirit to spirit." Thus considered, the Religious Sentiment is Faith.⁹

The difference is striking. For Catholics, Revelation is external, coming to the soul from without, from the oral teaching of Christ and the Church, accepted by Faith. To the modern way of thinking, Revelation is internal, a psychological experience and Faith is the response of the soul. To the Catholic, Revelation is statement and Faith is belief in the statement. Outside of Catholicism, Revelation and Faith are experience. To the Catholic, the content of Revelation, which is the object of Faith, is truth addressed to the intelligence. Modern thought says it is truth addressed to the feelings, to the emotional faculty. Or, as the nineteenth-century poet and critic, Matthew Arnold, would say of religion, "Morality touched with emotion."

God thus apprehended by the religious sentiment, is indwelling, immanent in the soul, and this doctrine of God indwelling in the soul and apprehended as revealing Himself to the soul, not by means of any external teaching, but through the

soul's inward experience, is the ... doctrine of Vital Immanence.

Now it is natural that a man should wish to give some account to himself of his religious experience, that he should wish to interpret it to himself, to translate his religious experience into words. And for this purpose his reason begins to work upon his religious sentiment. So [he] is able to say that his religion is not a mere matter of sentiment, but of reason as well. [He] then brings his reason to bear upon the religious sentiment, and tries to express in language his religious experience. He admits he can do so only in language very vague and indefinite, "in terms quite inadequate to express his inner experience, in terms little better than symbols of the religious experience within him, symbols that shift and change and need to be modified as his religious experience undergoes modification. These vague and variable statements are what [they] call Dogma. They are "tentative and provisional formulas." Contrast this Dogma ... with Dogma as understood by the Catholic. To the Catholic, Dogma is something fixed, precise, something stable and immutable.¹⁰

What is yet unclear is why modern man has found it necessary—compelled would perhaps be a more appropriate word to use—to remodel well-established, long-held religious beliefs. There are, no doubt, a multitude of factors, reasons and purposes for such a compulsive endeavor, far too many to describe in this brief essay. What is clear is this: modern philosophy has, with unwavering haste, altered our understanding of, all that we believe, and all believe we know of God and all which he has made.

Should there be any doubt of the indelible, mind-altering changes wrought by modern philosophical thinking, one needs only be reminded of the views expressed most recently by "Catholic" public figures. This is then leading to the question yet unasked or unanswered. But before the question can be asked, more must be explained.

As stated previously, the fundamental doctrine of our Catholic Faith was revealed by word of mouth to mankind by God become man, Jesus Christ. This is the basis upon which Catholic thought on revelation, faith, the Church, Church authority, dogma and doctrine has and is stated. Modern thought claims this to be unsound; such thoughts were all very well in the Dark Ages, but advances in historical and scientific criticism have shown them to be unsound.

Kant and modern philosophies claim there can be no intellectual knowledge of anything but what we experience through the senses, that our knowledge does not transcend the facts of experience. Such a view presents serious but less than obvious consequences.

But the God-Man is not a fact of experience. Such a Being, then, is incapable of being known by us intellectually. Neither is supernatural revelation, ascribed to such a Being, a fact of experience. Therefore such a revelation cannot be a matter of intellectual knowledge. You do not know ... from the nature of the case you cannot know intellectually anything about a God-Man, or a supernatural revelation imparted by Him. What, then, be-

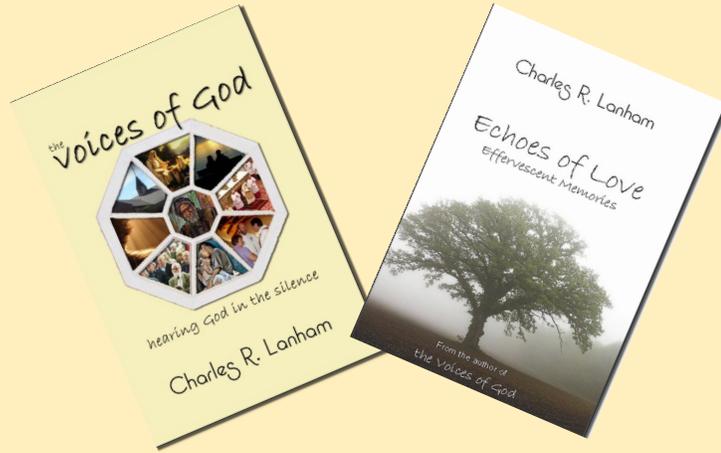
comes of Christianity founded upon the hypothesis that you can? Your basis is unsound. Reduce the facts as we know them to their proper proportions, and the facts are these. It is true there existed a Jesus of Nazareth, a man, a prophet, if you like to call Him so, "mighty in word and work." We do not for a moment deny His existence, nor His exceptional holiness of life and purity of doctrine, nor His extraordinary natural powers. These things belong to the realm of phenomena; they are facts of experience, and therefore ascertainable by human knowledge. The facts of experience go to make up history. This Jesus of Nazareth is, then, an historical figure. The Jesus of history I know. But, when you claim supernatural powers for Him, when you speak of Him as possessing supernatural knowledge, as imparting a supernatural revelation, when you talk to me of a Being Who wrought miracles, that is, departures from the laws of nature, of which laws alone I have experience, you are speaking to me of things that transcend my experience, of things outside the realm of phenomena. To be true to my Kantian principles, I must say I have no intellectual knowledge of such things. I simply don't know. But if you ask me how people have come to invest Him with this supernatural character of a God-Man, and claim to know Him thus, I have an explanation ready, and my explanation is this. Let it be remembered, in the first place, that the Jesus of history alone is the object of our knowledge properly so-called. But besides knowledge I have, as already indicated, another faculty, the religious sentiment, which, in so far as it unites me with God, I call faith. Now Jesus of Nazareth may be the object not only of my intellectual knowledge, but also of my faith. As the object of my intellectual knowledge, He is a mere man, a wondrous man indeed, but still a man in the natural order, for

knowledge can take cognizance of nothing else. Regarded thus, I call Him the Jesus of history. But, as the object of my faith, He assume a different character. Faith recognizes the Divine in Him, that divine immanence, already mentioned as existing in all believers, but existing in Him in an exceptional degree. Faith gradually expands that divine element in Him, magnifies it, amplifies it, till it transfigures Him completely. Gradually legends gather round about Him, divine powers are attributed to Him, until at last He is crowned with the areola of divinity, deified. Is He therefore God? Not to knowledge. Knowledge, remember, takes no cognizance of the supernatural, of the divine. But to faith, in a sense, He is God. He is God not in fact, but in the belief of Christians. Christ the God-Man is a creation of faith. But, thus considered, He is to be carefully distinguished from the Jesus of history.¹¹

Thus Jesus Christ is split into two: Jesus, the man of history, and the Christ of faith, not God in fact but in our Christian belief. Christ, the Divine, is only a fact of human consciousness, thought by some to be God; but that does not make Him God. Facts of human consciousness may be theories, may be ideas, and thus Christ may be an idea or the Incorporation of an Idea.

Making progress through the brambles, until next week.

1. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (II, ii, 1-2).
2. Fr. J. M. Bampton, S. J., *Modernism and Modern Thought*, (London and Edinburgh: Sands & Company, 1913), 75-76.
3. *Ibid.*, 8.
4. *Ibid.*, 10-11.
5. *Ibid.*, 21.
6. *Ibid.*, 29-30.
7. *Ibid.*, 30.
8. *Ibid.*, 31.
9. *Ibid.*, 33.
10. *Ibid.*, 34-36.
11. *Ibid.*, 44-48; Cf. "Simple Reflexions," Loisy, 158.



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Deacon Chuck Lanham is an author, columnist, speaker, and a servant of God.

He is the author of **The Voices of God: Hearing God in the Silence**, **Echoes of Love: Effervescent Memories** and is currently writing his third book **Without God: Finding God in a Godless World**.

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Deacon Chuck can be contacted thru email at

deacon.chuck@deaconscorner.org

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4742 Cougar Creek Trail

Reno, Nevada 89519