



In But Not of the World

Christians have always struggled with double citizenship. It has seldom been entirely clear what things are to be rendered unto God and what things are to be rendered unto Caesar, but it has always been clear that Christians are to struggle with that problem. The “in, but not of, the world” nature of Christian life has been expressed in many ways. In his high-priestly prayer, Jesus acknowledges that neither he nor his disciples are “of the world,” but he prays that they will be kept from the evil one rather than taken out of the world. Paul writes to the congregation in Corinth that they are to live in the world as though they were not in the world. The dialectic is clear in the juxtaposition of Romans 13 and Revelation 13. The second-century Epistle to Diognetus exhorts Christians to “live in the world, but as strangers,” and to “live as strangers, but in the world.” Augustine expressed it by talking about two cities and by referring to Christians living in the world as “resident aliens.” Luther talked about two kingdoms. The “Holy History” theologians picked up and used the biblical imagery of the two ages. Reinhold Niebuhr loved to quote from II Corinthians: “As deceivers and yet true; as unknown and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.” It is expressed in the name of this journal. In this issue it is focused on the connections and the disjunctions of experience and Christian faith. In this context, “in, but not of, the world” means that Christian faith can never be separated from experience, but that it must always be distinguished from experience, that experience and Christian faith will always necessarily be identified with one another by Christians, but will never be made simply identical to one another.

Sometimes the two poles of our issue title are collapsed into the single phrase “Christian experience.” It is usually done by people who believe that there is an experience not common to all humans, but common to all Christians, which is either uniquely Christian or so characteristically Christian that it can be called “Christian experience.” These same people, then, have to struggle with the connections and disjunctions between “Christian experience” and that category of phenomena grouped by others under the rubric of “religious experience.”

In any case, whatever the objectivities of Christian faith, it is only in experience that we know it and express it. The Bible is read and interpreted, the Holy Spirit is received, the Gospel is believed or rejected, prayers are uttered, even visions are “seen” and voices are “heard.” There is no way to escape or to exclude experience.

This is even more true if we understand experience in a less narrow way, not just as “personal” experience, but as the total grasp that humans have on the real, or external, world. In this case “experience” is closely correlated with “empirical.” It gathers up all those data received through the senses, collected and grouped and interpreted by our fellows, perceived by various

perspectives, insights, and intuitions throughout human history. We ask what it is that we have experienced in order to determine what it is that we can know. Because God made the world and made us all, because the Word became human flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, Christian people are obligated to learn whatever there is to learn from “human experience” as well as from “Christian experience” and “religious experience.”

The problem is how to do that without evaporating Christian faith, how to take “experience” seriously but “Christian faith” even more seriously, how to integrate the “in, but not of, the world” into the doing of our theology and the exercising of our ministry. Luther said that God was of course in the water and the fire and the rope, but that the one who looks for God there will wind up being drowned in the water, burned by the fire, and hung by the rope. On the other hand, the one who looks for God where God has promised to be, in the baby in the manger and in the man on the cross, will also then find God in the water and the fire and the rope, and will then use the rope to haul water from the well, and the fire to boil that water to cook the family dinner. That is a beautiful “in, but not of, the world” statement spelled out in terms of prioritizing ways of knowing. The intention of Luther’s statement is clear. The carrying out of that intention becomes very difficult and complex as soon as one gets started on it. We do know what we want to do. We are not so certain how it should be done. So we offer here some variations on the theme of experience and Christian faith hoping that it will help us, and our readers, to sort out some of the problems and to clarify some of the methods of going at this task.

We begin with a personal perspective by poet Gracia Grindal. It eases us nicely into the issue. Gilbert Meilaender provides a link to one of the major themes in our last issue in his discussion of C. S. Lewis and the narrative quality of experience. Richard Jensen uses Claus Westermann’s categories of “blessing” and “saving” to introduce a way in which biblical talk about God and about Christian experience of God can be brought together. Using Bonhoeffer as a resource, Donald Shriver presents a perspective on Christian faith and the American experience which carries with it a mandate for action. The sharp analytical tools and rich verbal capabilities of Paul Sponheim combine to give us a cohesive constructive statement on the theme. Elizabeth Bettenhausen invites us to consider with her four personal experiences and then to reflect on insights derived from them. Geoffrey Kelly seeks to understand the experience of Christians through an analysis of the experience of Jesus. The six major articles in this issue are not arranged in any logical sequence, nor do they collectively argue a point of view, nor are they intended to balance out with one another. They are rather variations on a

theme, invitations to further investigation and reflection. We are confident that anyone who wrestles through these statements will have sufficient material with which to work for some time to come on the relation of experience and Christian faith.

To assist in that continuing work, we offer as resources an update on the “charismatic renewal” movement by John Koenig, and an extensive treatment of recent theological literature as it relates to the theme of this issue by Lee Snook. The groupings of this literature by Professor Snook provide a typology by which different points of view can be recognized and distinguished. It will be a helpful roadmap for anyone interested in pursuing the topic.

Again, we offer crisp review of current literature. The fall issue will be under the editorship of Arland Hultgren, currently associate editor, who has now been elected editor. The

present editor is taking leave of teaching and other duties to spend a sabbatical year of study and writing. A splendid editorial team is assembled, publishing procedures have been organized, a subscription list is established. I leave this position with confidence in the future of the journal and with appreciation for past support.

J.H.B.