

What, exactly, is "the fundamental decision which decides [a human being's] life on earth and in eternity"?

If one says, as Christians find it natural to say, that it is the decision of faith in God's prevenient love for all of us and of returning love for God and for all whom God loves, the formulation is still too narrow, assuming, at any rate, that "God," "faith," and "love" are all used in their ordinary theistic, not to say, specifically Christian senses. This means, among other things, that it will not do to advise Christians who wish to bear witness of their faith (to whatever extent they can do so, given the experience and assumptions of those to whom they wish to bear it) that they should strengthen such persons in their faith in and love for God even if they cannot yet give them full communion with Christ and his church.

The truth is that even talk about faith in and love for God is but one way of formulating the fundamental decision, as distinct from being that decision itself. In terms of John XXIII's distinction, it, too, belongs to "the form in which [faith] is clothed," as distinct from "the content of faith."

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If one really opens oneself to strictly ultimate reality at the deeper level of one's *optio fundamentalis*, one implicitly opens oneself both to the meaning of strictly ultimate reality for us and to who- or whatever is sent or appointed to re-present it; and in accepting strictly ultimate reality in its meaning for us, one already accepts implicitly who- or whatever decisively re-presents this meaning. In this sense, or for this reason, Christians may say of anyone who is thus open and accepting that she or he exercises a *votum implicitum Christi s. ecclesiae*.

There are three aspects of the act of thus really opening oneself to strictly ultimate reality and accepting it in its meaning for us.

First, one orders one's entire existence to strictly ultimate reality in its meaning for us. Augustine speaks in this connection of "the love of God extending to the contempt of self," while Thomas Aquinas speaks of an "ordering of the whole life to its due end." One may also speak with Piet Fransen of "a completely free and dynamic orientation of one's whole life to the fullness of reality, the centre of which is God."

Second, this fundamental decision at the transcendental level of self-understanding necessarily expresses itself in some form of personal witness at the categorial level of life-praxis—of what we think, say, and do, or what we believe and enact—both secular and religious, given the possibilities and limitations of one's personal situation as a human being. Fransen calls this second aspect, "personal creed." Although the process of expressing one's fundamental decision through personal witness is guided by strictly ultimate reality itself in its meaning for us (whence talk of the *lumen fidei* or the *sensus fidei*), it also perforce occurs through our own sinful creatureliness and historicity, which allow for misinterpretations as well as correct interpretations. Thus, although the *lumen fidei* or the *sensus fidei* may itself be infallible, it is also merely implicit, and our interpretations accordingly are not controlled by any decisive revelation that is explicit as well as infallible.

Third, then, there is the communal witness (in Fransen's terms, the "ecclesiastical creed," or, better, "ecclesial creed"). This communal witness has three forms: the particular form of the communal witness of a religious community that is taken to be formally normative; other forms of the communal witness of the same religious community that are substantially normative when judged by its formal norm; and the communal witnesses of other communities, secular as well as religious, that, in their different ways, are also more or less substantially normative when judged by that same formal norm.

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If anyone who, in making an authentic fundamental decision, is *eo ipso* open to strictly ultimate reality in its meaning for us is also open to and already implicitly affirms anyone who, or anything that, re-presents this meaning—if this is so, then, presumably, anyone who understands her- or himself authentically is not only implicitly a Christian, but also implicitly a Buddhist or a Hindu, or anything else that itself re-presents substantially the same meaning and is religiously significant precisely because or insofar as it does so. Thus, if I as a Christian believe, and must believe, that anyone who understands her- or himself authentically is implicitly a Christian, this need not preclude my allowing that anyone, including myself, may at the same time also be implicitly a Buddhist or a Hindu, or anything else that expresses substantially the same truth—the same self-understanding/ understanding of existence—that Christians hold to be decisively re-presented through Christianity.

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