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FAITH
AND
CERTITUDE

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CONTENTS

1	The Empty Ache.....	II
	The inner empty ache . . . Is there a sure answer? . . . A spreading scepticism . . . Is apologetics the answer? . . . Our approach	
2	Do We Need Certitude?.....	24
	Is scepticism viable? . . . Universal scepticism . . . Partial scepticism . . . Roots of scepticism . . . Healthy receptivity . . . Our need for certitude . . . Ecclesial certitude . . . Practical reasons . . . Response to reality . . . Truth as symphonic . . . Convictions and difficulties	
3	Obstacles—The Prevailing Atmosphere.....	45
	The atmosphere of subjectivity . . . The extent of contemporary scepticism . . . The blurring of reality	
4	Obstacles—Ourselves.....	56
	Resistance to thinking . . . The nonthinking person . . . Academic chaos . . . Doubt and sin . . . Ac- commodations to secularism . . . The destruction of credibility . . . Chronological snobbery . . . Selec- tivity . . . Bigotry . . . Unconscious needs and motivation . . . Conclusion	✓

Faith and Certitude

CONTENTS

5	Clarifying Our Concepts.....	75
	Does certitude exist? . . . What is truth? . . .	
	What is certitude? . . . Doubt and difficulty . . .	
	Belief and faith	
✓ 6	The Causes of Error.....	87
	Specific, proximate motivation	
7	How We Attain Certitude.....	103
	Inadequacy of logical analyses . . . Convergence of evidences . . . Illustrative applications	
8	Scholarship, Doubt and Certitude.....	116
	The factual situation: secular sciences . . . The factual situation: biblical studies . . . Why scholarly errors? . . . Implications for finding truth	
9	Biblical Criticism and Theological Certitude.....	135
	Alternatives . . . A pastoral problem . . . What is biblical criticism? . . . Value of historical-biblical study . . . Limitations of the method itself . . . Misuse of the method . . . Contradictions among exegetes	
10	Biblical Criticism and Pastoral Practice.....	156
	Is certitude possible? . . . Scripture needs an ecclesial community . . . Elitism versus democracy . . . Some specific questions . . . Implications	
✓ 11	Attaining Truth.....	177
	What is it to know? . . . Moral integrity . . . The pharisee problem . . . Conversion . . . Vision of the whole . . . Love for truth . . . Expenditure of effort . . . Role of the will . . . Certitude of faith . . . Science and religious commitment . . . Truth and the polls . . . Theology and prayer	

12 A Case in Point: Atheism.....202

 The poverty of materialism . . . The dogmatism of materialism . . . Objections to God's existence . . . The impossibilities of atheism . . . The idolatries of atheism . . . Atheism and meaninglessness

13 Another Case: Theism.....223

 Radical trust in reality . . . The inner ache . . . Human transcendence . . . Our amazing universe . . . The proclamation of conscience . . . Experience of the transcendent . . . The handwriting of miracles . . . The figure of Jesus . . . A note on evil

14 Letters to an Atheist.....245

 Epilogue.....263

CHAPTER ONE

THE EMPTY ACHE

There exists a depth in human existence in which knowing and decision, truth and goodness are no longer separated but in which only the true have goodness and the good cannot fall away from truth.

— Karl Rahner¹

The human person alone is capable of boredom. Cows are not. They only look that way. We all know what boredom means when it is experienced in particular situations: a dull conversation, party or book. But I wish to speak of something more basic than a growing number of us experience. We may call this existential boredom, an apathy about life itself.

When a person is existentially bored, he may experience occasional pleasures, but for the most part his life is dreary, uninteresting, loveless. To him it also appears useless. Though he may retain some capacity for sense pleasures, he is incapable of the thrill of joy. He does not respond to reality. Splendid scenery, beautiful music, intellectual keenness, a sparkling personality all leave him untouched and unmoved. He may know the dictionary definition of genuine love, but he has no experience of it. He is a stranger to enthusiasm, and he feels both rootless and restless. Because he is incapable of interpersonal depth, he is in love with no one. People in love are not bored. Nor are they in doubt about the beloved one.

How does existential boredom come about? We may be sure that it is not preprogrammed in our genes. Though one's environment, that is, one's interpersonal relationships, has a great deal to

¹ On Heresy, trans. W. J. O'Hara, Quaestiones Disputatae II (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), chap. I.

do with the genesis of this pervasive rootlessness, more important still is the person's use of his freedom. Like joy, its opposite, boredom is not first of all a result of what is "out there"; it is the quality of the person, not the state of the world.

Thoughtful, normal people are alive to a deeper dimension of human existence. They know from their deepest center that there is more to life than pleasure, power and prestige. They sense that ultimate insecurity and emptiness are abnormal and unsatisfying. Yet they see this unhealthiness everywhere. The condition of modern technological society contributes its share to the genesis of a fundamental restlessness in the individual. Parents begin the dulling process when they smother the child's natural inquisitiveness with a refusal to answer questions or by a failure to excite further interest. A wonderless education more concerned with facts than with amazement continues to deaden the youngster. A flood of experiences mostly on the sense level leaves the adolescent more and more blasé, less and less impressed with what matters most in life, with what is deepest and most beautiful and most satisfying. Loss of innocence without its recovery continues the process, and lack of love finishes it off in the adult. The existentially bored man and woman have no vibrant goal. Their sense of the Real weakened, they are intellectually dead. Worst of all, they are not in love and they are probably well on the way to cynicism and scepticism. They are in desperate need of healing.

Yet we must get to a deeper level of explanation, for the above is mostly descriptive of symptoms. We have noted that cows do not get bored. They are as incapable of boredom as they are bereft of joy. The explanation is rooted in spirit and nowhere else. It is because the human person is the only inspired being in visible creation that he is the only one capable of boredom.

Why is this so? Spirit is openness to everything. Matter is closed to everything but itself. An apple can be only an apple. It cannot stretch out beyond its skin. Nor can a squirrel. Material things are always confined to here and now. This is why cows are contented

— which is very different from being happy. A cow is satisfied with being a cow. But a human being is never satisfied with being a man or a woman. Because we are spirit in the flesh we burst beyond the flesh. Necessarily so. It cannot be otherwise.

This is why we are never content with one experience of anything. If one happening ever did satisfy, we would stop with it, rest with it, be filled with it. Our endless seeking would end. But it never does.

The inner empty ache

Another way of describing the nature of spirit is to say that it is an endless emptiness. This may appear to be contradictory to our first description, an openness to everything. But actually the two statements are diverse sides of one reality. Because as spirit-in-the-flesh we are open to everything and natively begin by having nothing, we are a colossal void. We are empty as a mere animal can never be.

What few people seem to ponder is the fact that our emptiness hurts. We ache because we are not full. This is precisely the reason that every adult either is in hot pursuit of the One or is frantically seeking the many. Either we have God who does fill or we are endlessly pursuing things which do not. It is because they do not fill that we endlessly seek them.

If mere things do not fill, why do millions so eagerly pursue them? Most people would answer by saying that even if things do not satisfy, at least they give little bits and pieces of pleasure. Some would ask, "What else is there on the face of the earth?" Yes, pleasure seeking is part of the answer, but it is not the most important part. People seek prestige, power, gourmet eating and drinking, social contacts, idle talk, sexual encounters and money not because these things bring deep and lasting completion. To be convinced that such is the case one need only witness the misery of those individuals who focus their lives on the tangible.

Even if a few of these people deny that they are miserable, yet they cannot deny that after each experience they are again dreary, rootless, restless, joyless—and looking forward to the next episode. And they soon become jaded.

People seek things inordinately because they do not wish to face the aching pain of their inner emptiness. Thomas Merton has pointed out that thing-seeking serves as a narcotic which dulls the pain of a human being not achieving that for which he was made, that is, a contemplative immersion in the beauty, joy and love of God.² It hurts so much not to have that for which we were made that we frantically spill ourselves out into finite experiences not so much for their sakes as for the sake of the distraction they afford. In this sense things become drugs when they are sought for themselves. The perversion lies in making means into ends. Creation is good, of course, but as soon as we displace the Creator with his creatures, we are bound to ache. Pursuing money or travel or dining or sex or prestige for themselves is a twisting of reality and making it into a narcotic god, a god that dulls the pain of not having the real God.

Saints are never bored. A worldly person may be surprised at this statement and he may cast it aside as absurd. But the fact remains. Heroically good men and women do “rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil 4:4). Though they suffer as much as the rest of us, and sometimes more than most of us, they are the most joyful people on earth.

Is there a sure answer?

What is the point of life? Why all these sufferings, pains, failures, illnesses? Why death? Will I ever be happy, enthralled? Permanently? Will I ever experience sheer beauty? Endless being in love? Dare I think of its being possible? Or does death end

² *Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951).

everything? Am I sure of that? Is everything a grand illusion? Are these very questions illusory?

I know that I would like to be ecstatically happy forever. I know that being endlessly in love is my deep-down yearning. There is no doubt that I would jump up and down at the prospect of drinking enchanting beauty forever.

But would not most people call all this utopian, unreal, a flight from the actual world? We are born, we live, suffer and die with no discernible trace left a century later in that world through which we have so unimpressively passed. Do modern men and women care about these questions or even think about them? Do these questions arise where crowds gather: in a noisy factory, a traffic jam, the aisles of a supermarket, the cabin of a jumbo jet, the stock exchange, a closely crowded theatre or night club? Utopian or real, illusory or factual, these questions are implicated with the claims of revealed religion. If someone can for once get quieted down and shorn clean of narcotic excitements, he will find these questions raising their tiny heads. If he can remain quiet long enough the tiny heads will grow tall like the shoots of a spring planting. The trouble is that few people are brave enough to face themselves.

Those who are brave enough know full well that they do experience a gnawing yearning for a full enthrallment in joy, love and beauty. But some either dismiss it as impossible or doubt whether it could ever be for them. Deep in the human heart is the desire for completion, a lasting union with one's beloved, a union never to be disturbed or interrupted. But is it possible? Can one be sure of this sort of thing?

A spreading scepticism

You and I live in a sceptical age. If you are untouched by a pernicious agnosticism, you are rare. You may well have never given in to it, but most likely you have been more or less shaken by it.