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## Christian Insight

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# Christian Insight

By Rev. John A. Elbert, S.M., Ph. D.

St. Paul always had one and the same answer for every inquiry into the truths of Faith and of Reason. He offered to every man (learned or ignorant) the same master key which could unlock the mysteries of grace and of nature: *Christ the Incarnate Word*.

## *The Starting Point for Christian Scholarship:*

In his proper field every scholar accepts his own or another's insight as *the point of departure for the pursuit* of the truth that he is seeking; he may begin with Aristotle, Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Newton, Darwin, Einstein, even Huxley.

Why may not a Christian scholar choose, on *reflection*, the *insight* of the Author of the Fourth Gospel "in the beginning was the Word," or the Author of the Epistle to the Galatians, "God sent his Son made of a woman"? Let us not be deceived by mere difference of terminology: Theologians call such an insight, FAITH; Philosophers say, INTUITION; Natural Scientists propound a THEORY; Artists reproduce a VISION; Poets have an INSPIRATION.

Fundamentally they are all the same kind of operation and from a purely natural point of view, they are all worthy of consideration. *But by the same token, all are subject to the same test of TRUTH*, namely human EXPERIENCE (personal and social) checked by human REASON.

The burden of this inquiry can therefore, be put into one question and one answer. The question: Where can the Christian scholar find a *rational starting-point* for his intellectual life? The answer: In the first six words of St. John: "In the beginning was the Word."

St. Augustine says of the opening verses of the Fourth Gospel, 1:1-15, that they ought to be embossed in characters of gold and framed in an appropriate setting above the center of the altar in every Catholic Church of the World.

It should be permitted to expand the idea of the great Doctor of the Western Church. My recommendation is to provide two more plaques, one for the Gospel side of the altar, the other for the Epistle corner: for the Gospel side, St. Luke 2: 1-14, which gives the historical record of the Incarnate Word's advent among men. For the Epistle corner, St. Paul, Gal. 4: 4-7, who points up the apostolic process and product growing out of the Incarnation for every individual Christian and the emergence of the Incarnation in the life and work of the Christian.

The three (John, Luke, Paul) say one and the same thing: "God became

man.” This is enough.

But why three independent individuals with the same insight? They give us three *witnesses* to the same truth, three *approaches* to the same truth, three *stresses* of the same truth, for every level and shade of thinking. Theologian, Historian, Apostle, all proclaim the same insight into the Incarnation, which is in St. John, the point of departure for human thinking; in St. Luke, the key fact in human history; in St. Paul, the answer to the temporal and eternal destiny of the human individual and of the human race.

Every aspect of this great truth, the intellectual, historical and apostolic, is of such depth and extent that it deserves the treatment and the meditation of a life-time.

We put aside for the moment the account of the sacred historian and of the inspired apostle to give full attention to the first few words of the greatest of all Theologians.

Note the similarity with Gen. 1:1 “In the beginning God created heaven and earth.” Genesis gives us the fact of the creation, namely, that TIME and SPACE had a beginning. John gives us his insight into *the point of departure* which is also the point of ultimate return of creation.

Again, it should be stressed that one need not take John’s insight as a demonstrated theological truth. One can simply do what every seeker after Truth has done in the past and is doing in the present without apology and sometimes without giving due credit to the source of his insight. For at this point (the BEGINNING) every approach to an understanding of reality, philosophical or scientific, must “presume,” “assume,” reach into the dark.

Beginnings, even the most important, are not difficult for pretenders; they merely bridge the immeasurable gap between nothing and something, between being and non-being by a gesture of impatience and move directly from nothing to perfection, from darkness to light, from void to fullness, thanks to a progressive movement which is self-initiated without being self-subsistent.

The fear that haunts all scholars and researchers, that they are not on firm ground in the beginning of their field, is a relatively recent phenomenon — formerly the “solid earth” was foundation and center for the universe; Euclidian Geometry had the field — Newtonian Physics was supreme — today all that is changed, but the “WORD” still stands as the only rational “Beginning.” The opening verses of the fourth Gospel have all the matter-of-factness of a scientific treatise, all the wonder and sublimity of epic poetry, all the lure of an awe-inspiring truth that is stranger than fiction. Moreover, St. John’s beginning has never been dislodged — it has been questioned — it has been ridiculed, as a “once upon a time” myth or fable; it has been challenged by every passing theory over the last two thousand years. Yet it is ever the new challenger of every new age.

My sole contention thus far can be stated succinctly: INTELLECTUALS need not leave their Christian faith behind them or look elsewhere for a beginning that

will stand the test of time, experience and reason — *they need to raise their sights.*

*The Way of Christian Scholarship:*

“In the beginning” — marks the advent of time and of creatures; only they had a beginning.

God has no beginning; He *is* already in the beginning. In that beginning which dates the advent of creatures, God operates as the WORD; hence, whatever other character the creation may take on in its evolution, its first and its most distinctive character is conferred by the WORD: All reality must somehow reflect the rational character of its origin. And because that WORD is creative, there will be something in the creature akin at least remotely to that creative power, otherwise the product would not be a fair exemplification of the Power that produced it. From the beginning, therefore, God *speaks* through His WORD (and only through His WORD) to the creatures He has brought into being. Those creatures that have a rational nature must therefore be capable of receiving the divine message and of reacting to it. Those that are lesser than rational must be at least capable of receiving the WORD imprinted in their inmost being, so that they, too, can at their inmost core testify to the rational character of their Author. So there is the possibility of COMMUNICATION between God and creatures from the beginning and it is through the WORD that this channel of communication is established between God and man. And that channel, through the WORD, is the only authentic channel and the sufficient channel of communication between God and man. As long as man does not repudiate his rational character, that channel of communication remains open. As long as sub-rational creation retains its original character, it must reflect the WORD which was in the beginning with God.

The Christian starting point for human thinking gives a new horizon on St. Paul's “I live — no longer I — Christ lives in me” — the Christian no longer loves but it is Christ who loves in and through him. The Christian no longer acts but it is Christ who acts in and through him. The Christian no longer thinks but Christ thinks in him.

The WORD which was in the beginning can answer all the questions that man can put, in time and eternity. In general these answers to man's inquiries come in a three-fold stream through *the word of God, the works of God, the works of human genius*, hence through theology, through natural science, through history; in every one of these fields the same answer must evolve, provided the movement has as its starting-point the WORD and as its progression, the Incarnation of the Word and as its fulfillment, Light and Life.

“Beginning” is the distinctive mark of the creature. In the rational creature and especially in the Christian, “beginning” constitutes the *very form* of his life. It is an unending thing, one that will never be completely fulfilled; in modern terminol-



ogy, the Christian life will always have “a tension toward the future;” time cannot complete it, nor yet eternity. No matter how far the human mind has ranged, no matter how amply the human heart has been filled, it will always be as only beginning. All great thinkers have had such a view of life even when they were unable to give a satisfactory explanation for its grounds or a rational justification for its character. Thus Dewey’s concept of education as “growth” is a true insight into the nature of learning. Thus also the concept of the most modern scientists on the ultimate structure and character of the universe as a constantly never-ending expanding universe, to the outside and to the inside, could be a true insight into the nature of the universe. So, too, the concept of the philosopher viewing history as a homogeneous evolution of the human race through all the stages of nature and grace, ever upward to new heights, always beginning, never ending, could be the answer to Browning’s “What’s a Heaven for?”