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REINHOLD NIEBUHR

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FAITH AND HISTORY
A COMPARISON OF CHRISTIAN AND MODERN VIEWS OF HISTORY
BY
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CHAPTER X

The Validation of the Christian View of
Life and History

I

The Christian Gospel as the final answer to the problems of both individual life and man's total history is not proved to be true by rational analysis. Its acceptance is an achievement of faith, being an apprehension of truth beyond the limits of reason. Such faith must be grounded in repentance; for it presupposes a contrite recognition of the elements of pretension and false completion in all forms of human virtue, knowledge and achievement. It is a gift of grace because neither the faith nor the repentance required for the knowledge of the true God, revealed in the Cross and the resurrection, can be attained by taking thought. The self must lose itself to find itself in faith and repentance; but it does not find itself unless it be apprehended from beyond itself.¹

The love of Christ thus always stands in a double relation to the strivings and achievements, the virtues and wisdoms of history. Insofar as they represent developments of the goodness of creation it is their fulfillment. Insofar as they represent false completions which embody the pride and the power of individuals and nations, of civilizations and cultures, it is their contradiction.

The truth of the Gospel is not subject to simple rational valida-

¹ Philippians 3:12: “Not as though I have already attained, either were already perfect; but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.”
tion because it stands beyond the ambiguities of human existence; and it negates both the complacency which denies these ambiguities; and the despair which results when they become fully known and destroy the sense of a meaningful life.

Nevertheless, a limited rational validation of the truth of the Gospel is possible. It consists of a negative and a positive approach to the relation of the truth of the Gospel to other forms of truth, and of the goodness of perfect love to historic forms of virtue. Negatively the Gospel must and can be validated by exploring the limits of historic forms of wisdom and virtue. Positively it is validated when the truth of faith is correlated with all truths which may be known by scientific and philosophical disciplines and proves itself a resource for coordinating them into a deeper and wider system of coherence.

The negative task of exploring the limits of human knowledge and the fragmentary character of all forms of human virtue is a procedure not unrelated to the experience of repentance. St. Paul distinguishes between the “foolishness of God,” as revealed in the absurdity of the Cross, and the “wisdom of the world.” The foolishness of God is recognized as an ultimate wisdom in comparison with the wisdom of the world. The defect of the latter wisdom is “that it knew not God” (I Corinthians 1:21). The failure of the wisdom of the world to discern the final source and end of life is due on the one hand to the fact that it seeks God too simply as the truth which supplements historic truth but does not stand in contradiction to it; which completes human virtue but does not judge it; and which guarantees some historic form of justice and does not anticipate its doom. On the other hand the wisdom of the world may be so impressed by the fragmentary character of human virtue and knowledge and so overpowered by the tragedies and antinomies of life that it sinks into despair, finding no meaning in life and history at all.

These two alternative forms of the “wisdom of the world” may be most simply defined as idolatry and atheism; and their fruits may be termed complacency and despair. Consistent atheism is rare. Most forms of ostensible atheism are merely protests against some traditional or conventional conception of the divine. They usually contain some implicit or even explicit conception of the divine in the sense that they have a system of coherence with an implicit or explicit center and source which is not explained but is the principle of explanation. Their god may be “nature” or “reason” or some particular natural or historical vitality. Thus the “god” of Marxism is obviously the dialectical process, in terms of which the coherences of both nature and history are explained. These implicit “gods” of explicit atheism place most atheistic systems in the category of idolatry, of the worship of false gods, rather than the denial of God. The gods are “false” if they make some inadequate principle of coherence into the center of meaning. The worship of false gods may lead to a hidden despair, rather than complacency, when the interpretation of life, involved in the worship, excludes a true dimension of life from the system of meaning. A consistent naturalism, for instance, which requires that man should adjust himself to the system of nature as the ultimate norm of his existence, excludes the profoundest dimension of human personality from the structure of meaning.

Idolatry is more general than consistent atheism partly because it is difficult, if not impossible, to live without presupposing some system of order and coherence which gives significance to one’s life and actions. Furthermore, the idolatrous worship is usually some version of self-worship, either exalting mankind as such as an object of worship or (in more flagrant forms) exalting some historical vitality or achievement related to a particular tribe, nation or culture into the place of God, by making it the source, center and end of the meaning of life.

Idolatrous schemes of meaning are more widespread than consistent atheism also because there are always provisional and tentative structures of meaning in nature, life, and history which seem for the moment to be ultimate, if not probed too deeply. The relation of a person to his family may answer the problem of meaning so long as no great family loss or disruption disturbs this little island of coherence. In the same manner the stability of a nation or a culture may make the national life or the cultural structure appear to be the source and end of existence. It is when these seemingly “eternal” values are shaken that life is threatened with despair or is challenged
to a profounder consideration of the meaning of life. Thus periods of social and political catastrophe, when idols fall, may lead men dimly to sense an ultimate Majesty “who bringeth princes to nothing and maketh the judges of the earth as vanity” (Isaiah 40:23). They may, on the other hand, also prompt men to the despairing conclusion that life has no meaning.

Biblical faith clearly recognizes complacency and despair as the two alternative fruits of the “wisdom of this world.” “They that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night,” according to I Thessalonians 5:7. “Let us, who are of the day, be sober.” The complacency of sleep and the drunkenness of hysteria are regarded as the two enemies of, or alternatives to, faith. They are, however, not equal enemies. Any consistent confidence in human virtue or wisdom makes faith irrelevant. A destruction of such confidence makes faith possible, but not necessary.

The preference which Christ has for the “sick” as against those “who are whole,” and his ironic remark that the latter “have no need of a physician” (Matthew 9:12) is a perfect expression of the fact that despair has a greater affinity with repentance than complacency has with faith. Of course, despair is not identical with the repentance which issues in faith. It is not possible to convince men rationally of the truth of the Christian Gospel by analyzing the limits of human knowledge and virtue. The rational analysis may not penetrate through the armor of complacency; and when it does it may inflict a mortal wound. There always remains a mystery of grace in true faith which is not subject to manipulation. It is nevertheless important from the standpoint of faith to puncture the idolatrous pretensions of cultures and to appreciate the significance of the periodic moods of despair into which moralism, legalism, rationalism, and every other form of complacency fall. These moods of despair may be more dangerous to the ordinary stabilities of life than complacency. Self-righteous Pharisees may have a superficial sanctity, superior to the inner confusion of “publicans and harlots.” Civilizations and cultures which are too sure of themselves may distil a measure of stability from their self-confidence. But ultimately they hasten their destruction by being too sure of themselves; and the promise that the “halt and the blind,” the “publicans and harlots” will enter the kingdom of God more easily than those who are whole, or who wrongly regard themselves as whole (Matthew 9:10–12), correctly estimates the therapeutic value of the recognition of the sickness in which all human life is involved.

The note of pessimism is always subordinate to the mood of optimism in the wisdom of the world; but it usually contains a profoundity (not mixed with perverse elements) which establishes its superiority over the more popular optimism. Thus the classical age expressed its confidence in the possibility of establishing justice or of escaping from historical ambiguities through reason. But the Greek dramatists, who recognized that there are tragic antinomies in life which can not be brought into a simple rational harmony, were closer to the ultimate truth about life than the philosophers. The historian Herodotus blurs out the truth which classical philosophy and history usually evaded. “Of all the sorrows which afflict mankind,” he declares, “the bitterest is this, that one should have consciousness of much but control over nothing.” Herodotus’ conviction is typical of the insights which emerge periodically to disturb the complacency of human self-esteem.

In the history of modern culture, the romantic tradition has been the chief bearer of disillusionment about the virtue or the wisdom of man or about the stability of human institutions. We have previously noted that modern naturalism, which seeks to understand man from the standpoint of his relation to nature might be expected logically to issue in disillusionment, since it emphasizes the natural con-

2 Pascal’s analysis of the two alternatives is the most searching in Christian literature. “Without this divine knowledge,” he declares, “what could men do but either become elated by the inner feeling of their past greatness which still remains with them, or become despondent at the sight of their present weakness? . . . Some considering nature as incorrupt and others as incurable, they could not escape either pride or sloth, the two sources of all vice. . . . For if they knew the excellence of man they were ignorant of his corruption; so that they easily avoided sloth but fell into pride. And if they recognized the infirmity of nature, they were ignorant of his dignity; so that they could easily avoid vanity but it was to fall into despair. . . . The Christian religion alone has been able to cure these two vices, not by expelling one through means of the other, but by expelling both according to the simplicity of the Gospel.” Pensees, 435.

3 Herodotus, I. 16.
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tingencies which condition all forms of human culture, and since it can offer no basis of meaning for those dimensions of human existence which transcend the system of nature. Actually, however, the main stream of modern naturalism generates complacency, rather than despair. It does this by creating a very non-naturalistic confidence in the perfectability of human reason and virtue.

Death, as the final evidence of the ambiguity of the human situation, is usually evaded in naturalism by the promise of social immortality. “Within the flickering inconsequential acts of separate selves dwells a sense of the whole,” declares John Dewey, “which claims and dignifies them. In its presence we put off mortality and live in the universal. The life of the community in which we live and have our being is the fit symbol of this relationship. The acts in which we express our perception of ties which bind us to others are its only rites and ceremonies.” 4 Since men live in particular communities, whose existence is even more contingent than that of the individuals who are able to survey their relations to them, this is a rather inadequate triumph over life’s ambiguity. It is perilously similar to Hitler’s dictum: “It is not necessary that any of us should live. It is only necessary that Germany should live.” On a lower plane of evasion is modern bourgeois culture’s effort to rob death of its sting by the perfection of appointments for coffin, grave and cemetery in funeral rites. 5

Modern culture has remained officially as optimistic as was classical culture, for reasons we have previously considered. The subordinate romantic stream of thought, on the other hand, usually moves on the boundary of despair. Ernest Hemingway is the only modern American novelist who deals with the problem of death basically. In typically romantic fashion he tries to rob death of its sting partly by a robust affirmation of vitality in defiance of death, and partly by the suggestion that love between a man and a woman creates a deathless realm of meaning. But this suggestion is only tentative. In Hemingway’s Farewell to Arms death casts its shadow upon this bit of eternity and draws the despairing cry from Hemingway’s heroine, Catherine, that life is “just a dirty trick.”

The profoundest expression of romantic despair in modern history was Nietzsche’s revolt against the complacency of a liberal and Christian culture. Nietzsche sought to restore the classical cyclical concept of history, bound to the endless recurrences of nature, where “everything goeth, everything dieth and everything returneth.” 6

It is significant, however, that ages of Christian and modern historical consciousness in the background of Nietzsche’s thought made it quite impossible for him to recapture the equanimity of the Greeks in the contemplation of the endless cycles of history. His sense of the vital unity of human personality made a simple separation between human reason and the realities of life impossible. His sense of the spiritual dimension of this vitality made all simple naturalistic solutions equally unavailable. His solution was to exploit the eternal dimension, the absolute meaning of every moment in defiance of history’s cycles. “This, however, is my blessing,” he declared, “to stand above everything as its own heaven.” 7

He regarded this as a profound affirmation of life and himself as a “yea-sayer.” But the note of despair in this too robust titanism is apparent in his final formula for the assertion of human freedom. Man asserts his true freedom, according to Nietzsche, by removing death from the realm of necessity to the realm of decision and desiring consciously the fate which nature has in store for us. 8

5 For a malicious satire of this aspect of modern culture see Evelyn Waugh’s The Loved Ones.

8 Thus Spake Zarathustra. English translation, p. 245.
Ibid., p. 206.
6 The inability of a culture which embodies a sense of the meaning of historic existence to return simply to a classical view without replacing classical equanimity with despair, is illustrated in an age previous to our own, in the view of life and history expressed in the Book of Ecclesiastes. Koheleth, the “gentle cynic” who is the author of this book, expresses a view of life drawn from Hellenism, in an Hebraic culture during a period when the disappointment over unrealized messianic hopes filled it with great perplexity. Koheleth interprets history in terms of the classical concept of recurrence: “One generation passes away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever... The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:4, 9).

But this Hellenized Hebrew author is unable to achieve the equanimity which the classical age exhibited in contemplating the recurrences of history.
The perverse note in Nietzsche's thought has been a constant topic of sermon and essay. If modern Nazism may be regarded (though not altogether justly) as the final fruit of his moral cynicism and pessimism, it would prove very nicely that despair does not necessarily issue in repentance and newness of life but rather that, in the words of St. Paul, "the sorrow of the world worketh death" (II Corinthians 7:10).

It is nevertheless important to be mindful of the profundity of this despair as compared with the more dominant note of optimism in modern rationalism. Nietzsche is both more perversive and more profound than Kant, for instance, in his most optimistic moods: "We may reasonably say that the kingdom of God is come on earth," declares Kant, "as soon as ever the principle has taken root generally in the public mind that the creeds of the church have gradually to pass into the universal religion of reason, and so into a moral, that is, a Divine community on earth; although the establishment of such a community may still be infinitely remote from us. For this principle, because it contains the motive-force of a continual approach to perfection, is like a seed which grows up, and scatters other seed such as itself; and it bears within it invisibly the whole fabric which will one day illuminate and rule the world. Truth and goodness have their basis in the natural disposition of every human being, both in his reason and in his heart. And because of this affinity with the moral nature of rational beings, truth and goodness will not fail to spread in every direction. Hindrances arising from political and social causes, which may from time to time interfere with this expansion, serve rather to draw closer the union of hearts in the

Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics felt that the meaning of life was fulfilled in the life of reason, above the change and decay of nature and history. But the Hebraic author does not have this assurance. He tries bravely to rise to the Greek confidence in the immortality of wisdom; but he is finally forced to the conclusion that the wise man dies as the stupid man. This conclusion leaves him only the alternative of clinging desperately to physical existence; "A living dog is better than a dead lion" (Ecclesiastes 9:4). The moral despair in this solution is obvious.

There is manifestly no possibility of return from a culture which embodies the sense of a meaningful history to one which equates history with nature.

The Proof of the Christian Faith

good. For the good, when once it has been clearly perceived, never abandons the mind.

"This, then, though invisible to the human eye, is the constantly progressive operation of the good principle. It works towards erecting in the human race, as a community under moral laws, a power and a kingdom which shall maintain the victory over evil, and secure to the world under its dominion an eternal peace." 9

Kant is not always as consistently optimistic. These words do not measure his ability, revealed in other writings, to measure the limits of human reason or virtue. They do betray those elements in his thought, bequeathed to him by the Enlightenment, and are expressive of the Enlightenment's complacency.

II

We have previously noted that the primary root of modern complacency is to be found in the belief that historical development insures man's triumph over whatever is fragmentary, tragic, and contradictory in human experience. A Christian (Quaker) version of this faith states the modern creed exactly: "Quietly underneath the iceberg of corruption, which causes false pessimism, the warm waves of Christian progress are doing their work; and soon it will totter over. . . . Our scepticism results from the fact that we expect immediate results and are not willing to abide the process of nature." 10

Though the complacency is drawn primarily from the idea of progress, it has been enhanced by the characteristic circumstances of a bourgeois civilization. This civilization, in the period of its expansion, was able to obscure the conflict of interest and passion which expresses itself in even the most ordered community and in even the most delicate equilibrium of power between the nations. The predominance of economic power, which operates covertly

9 Religion Within the Limits of Pure Reason, Book III, Section 7.
10 Isaac Sharpless, Quakerism in Politics, p. 97. The identification of "Christian progress" with "process of nature" is an illuminating confession of the capitulation of Christian thought to the modern creed.
rather than overtly, gave rise to the illusion that human relations are, or will soon become, a meeting of mind with mind, in which no appeal to force will be necessary. The fragmentary and contradictory aspects of human culture and civilization were partly veiled; and insofar as they were apparent, historic development was expected to overcome them. Modern complacency was supported, in short, not only by a creed of progress, but by momentary historic circumstances which gave the creed a special plausibility.

That is why the more tragic contemporary historical facts are beginning to undermine this complacency. The hidden despair, which is never absent from complacency, is beginning to reveal itself. One development in modern culture adds a special depth of pathos to our situation; for the most obvious challenge to the complacency of our culture, Marxism, has become the source of a new and more fanatic complacency. The Marxist dialectic challenged the confidence of Hegelian rationalism in the power of reason. It saw that reason may be an instrument of interest and passion. But unfortunately it transmuted this discovery into a mere weapon of social and political conflict by attributing an ideological taint to the moral and social ideals of every group except the proletariat. The pretension that one group in human society is free of sin, naturally became the source of new and terrible fanaticisms. Marxism also challenged the bourgeois confidence in the virtue and stability of a democratic society. It discerned the social conflicts of society where bourgeois idealists saw nothing but a harmony of social interests. It predicted the doom of a civilization, when liberal society hoped to achieve ever wider and more perfect forms of social justice. Marxism became a new religion, to which not only industrial workers but a vast section of the intellectual classes repaired when the pretensions of a bourgeois culture were shaken by the realities of history. However, Marxism did not challenge the moral complacency of modern culture, essentially. It only substituted new illusions for discredited ones. It has therefore been more fruitful of a demonic idolatry than the liberal culture. It sacrificed one great source of virtue, possessed by the liberal culture: the latter's provisional recognition of the contingent and conditioned character of all forms of historic virtue. This relativism of the liberal

culture is the source of the democratic virtue of tolerance. It may be superior not only to Marxism but to forms of the Christian faith which encourage a too simple identification of the goodness of Christ with whatever social value to which an ecclesiastical institution or a devout believer may be committed.

The Marxist misapplication of the discovery of the sinful taint in human knowledge and virtue leaves this problem still unsolved. The liberal culture tries to avoid disillusionment by regarding the ideological taint in human knowledge and virtue as the consequence of finite perspectives which may be progressively eliminated by a more and more astute sociology of knowledge.\textsuperscript{11} The theory unfortunately leaves one important aspect of the process of rationalization out of account. Men are inclined to make the worse appear the better reason, not only unwittingly but wittingly. Ideology is a compound of ignorance and dishonesty. The dishonest element in it, the tendency of men to justify self-interest by making it appear identical with the common good, is an expression of the person, and not of the mind. It betrays a corrupted will, which is a mystery with which rationalism does not deal. Insofar as Freud does deal with the problem, at least in individual life, he arrives at morally cynical conclusions, thus moving toward the abyss of despair.\textsuperscript{12}

The complacency of the liberal culture is most unshaken in America, where the social and political situation, which supported it, still bears some semblance to the stability of previous centuries. The opulence of American life and the dominant position of American power in the world create the illusion of a social stability which the total world situation belies. The absence of overt social conflict permits sentimental versions of social harmony and stability to arise, which are overtly refuted only by the fears and hatreds of racial antagonisms. The fragmentary and contradictory character of human virtues and ideals is recognized; but the abyss of meaninglessness is avoided by the confidence that a critical analysis of all historic politi-

\textsuperscript{11} As, for instance, in Karl Mannheim's effort to overcome ideology by ferreting out the various bases of ideology. He hopes to lay the foundation for a rational politics by a rational purge of the irrational elements in moral and political ideals. See \textit{inter alia} his \textit{Ideology and Utopia} and \textit{Man and Society}.

\textsuperscript{12} Cf. Sigmund Freud, \textit{Civilization and Its Discontents}. 
Parochial, and contingent elements in the various human cultures except by a desperate expedient. Modern technicians, symbolized by a group of conspiratorial aviators, would establish a world authority, sufficiently powerful to dictate the standards of universal truth which would inform an educational program for the whole of mankind. This educational program would ultimately create the universal mind and the comprehensive culture, essential for the stability of the universal community. The movement of his thought from democracy to tyranny is evidence of his desperation.

Shortly before his death Mr. Wells’ desperate optimism had finally degenerated to complete despair. He wrote: “A frightful queerness has come into life. Hitherto events have been held together by a certain logical consistency as the heavenly bodies have been held together by the golden cord of gravitation. Now it is as if the cord had vanished and everything is driven anyhow, anywhere at a steadily increasing velocity. . . . The writer is convinced that there is no way out, or around, or through the impasse. It is the end.”

The despair which follows upon complacency could not be more consistently or tragically expressed. The spiritual pilgrimage of Mr. Wells is an almost perfect record in miniature of the spiritual pilgrimage of our age, though in its totality it will not reveal so neat a pattern. Yet the general movement in our day is from complacency to despair. The Christian faith which “is perplexed, but not in despair” (2 Corinthians 4:8), seemed completely irrelevant to a culture which had no perplexities. It has become relevant, though not necessarily acceptable, to a generation which has moved from faith without perplexity to despair. It is, in any event, the apprehension of a wisdom which makes sense out of life on a different level than the worldly wisdom which either makes sense out of life too simply or which can find no sense in life at all.

The wisdom which leads to complacency seeks both to overcome the ambiguity of human existence by the power of reason and to deny the sinful and dishonest pretension in this enterprise. The wisdom which leads to despair understands the limits of reason. It also sees something of the dishonesty by which a more idealistic culture

18 H. G. Wells, The Mind at the End of Its Tether, pp. 4-5.
seeks to hide the contingent character of human knowledge and virtue, and the fanaticisms and power lusts which are the fruit of this pretension. The moral cynicism which results from this discovery is delicately balanced between complacency and despair. Insofar as it recognizes the power lusts and pretensions of other men and nations but not its own, it leads to a new and more terrible complacency. Insofar as it recognizes the sinfulness of all men, including the self, but knows of no forgiving love which can overcome this evil, moral cynicism is despair.

The Christian Gospel is negatively validated by the evidence that both forms of worldly wisdom, leading to optimism and to pessimism, give an inadequate view of the total human situation. This evidence is partly derived from the testimony which the optimists and the pessimists bear against each other. The optimists rightly insist that the pessimists do not fully appreciate the dignity of man, the integrity of human reason, and the tentative coherences of life and history which establish provisional realms of meaning. The pessimists rightly declare that the optimists do not understand the misery of man in the ambiguity of his subordination to and transcendence over nature; that they hide or wilfully deny the elements of dishonesty and pretension in human culture which are the consequence of man's effort to obscure his true situation; and that they give a false estimate of the stability of cultures and civilization because they do not understand the destructive character of human pretensions.

The Christian Gospel is thus distinguished from both forms of worldly wisdom; but its truth lies closer to the testimony of the pessimists than the optimists because it is a truth which can not be apprehended at all from the standpoint of intellectual, moral or social complacency. That is why Jeremiah condemns those prophets as false who make the “word of the Lord” to conform to the world’s complacency by assuring every one “who walketh after the imagination of his own heart, No evil shall come upon you” (Jeremiah 23:17). This also is the reason for Christ’s preference of the moral derelicts over the righteous of his day; for the former have some contrite recognition of the real situation and the latter have not.

Yet the truth of the Christian Gospel is not logically established from the standpoint of the position of the pessimist, the moral cynic and the social catastrophist. There is no knowledge of the true God in it, and therefore neither hope of redemption through genuine repentance, nor confidence that a power, not our own, can complete what is fragmentary and purge what is evil in human life. Since this knowledge can not be supplied by a further rational analysis of the human situation or the course of history, there is no force of reason which moves from despair to hope or transmutes remorse into repentance. Ultimately the acceptance of the truth of the Gospel is a gift of grace which stands beyond both forms of worldly wisdom and can not be achieved by the testimony of either one against the other.

III

While the negative proof of the Christian truth can not be transmuted into a positive one, which would compel conviction on purely rational grounds, there is nevertheless a positive apologetic task. It consists in correlating the truth, apprehended by faith and repentance, to truths about life and history, gained generally in experience. Such a correlation validates the truth of faith insofar as it proves it to be a source and center of an interpretation of life, more adequate than alternative interpretations, because it comprehends all of life’s antinomies and contradictions into a system of meaning and is conducive to a renewal of life.

In pursuing the task of correlating the truth of the Gospel as apprehended by faith to truth otherwise known, Christian theology is subject to three temptations to error. Each error tends to destroy the redemptive power of the truth of faith. The first error is to regard the truth of faith as capable of simple correlation with any system of rational coherence and as validated by such a correlation. Thus many modern versions of Christian theism are embarrassed by the traditional Christian trinitarian definitions of God and seek to construct a theistic metaphysical system without reference to it. Trinitarian definitions are indeed embarrassing rationally; but they are necessary to embody what is known about the character of God, as apprehended in faith’s recognition of the revelation of divine mercy,
to what is otherwise known about God. At worst such theistic interpretations may hardly be distinguished from pantheistic systems. At best they acknowledge God as creator, thus drawing upon what may be known about God in terms of “general revelation.” Thereby they acknowledge that the world we know points beyond itself to a creative ground which we do not immediately know but yet apprehend by faith. But this worship of God the Creator may still be devoid of all the deeper problems of human existence for which the “mercy” of God is the answer.

Naturally the ascription of divinity to Christ is equally embarrassing in such systems of thought. This embarrassment is overcome by fitting Christ into some general scheme of the history of culture. He becomes the great teacher or exemplar of the moral ideal or either the anticipator or the culmination of the law of moral progress. His perfect love is regarded as a simple possibility for all men, if only they are able to recover knowledge of the “historic Jesus” persuasiveness as a teacher of the law of love or his rigor as its law-giver. The moral complacency of modern culture is supported, rather than challenged, by a faith which thus brings Christ into a system of simple historical possibilities.

The second error arises when the effort is made to guard the uniqueness of the truth of faith and to prevent its absorption into a general system of knowledge by insisting that Christian truth is miraculously validated and has no relation to any truth otherwise known. This is the error to which Protestant literalism is particularly prone. Its consequence is cultural obscurantism. The truth of faith, thus jealously guarded, degenerates into a miraculous historical fact. Miracles may be believed without the repentance which is the prerequisite of the renewal of life. The tendency to transmute a truth of faith, which can be known only by a person in the totality and wholeness of his life, into a miraculous fact, which the credulous but not the sophisticated may easily believe, accounts for the frequent spiritual aridity of Protestant orthodoxy. The whole Biblical story of redemption is not inwardly known in such orthodoxy. There is therefore no power of a new life in its wisdom and no grace in its truth. The knowledge of a series of miraculous events may be perfectly compatible with a graceless legalism or with racial and religious hatreds of every kind.

Failure to relate the truth of faith to other knowledge and experience furthermore leads to a cultural obscurantism which denies the obvious truths about life and history, discovered by modern scientific disciplines. The cultural obscurantism of this kind of literalism not only brings Christian truth in contradiction with the facts, known by natural science and indisputable on their own level. It also makes that truth completely irrelevant to the truths discovered by the social, political, psychological, and historical sciences.

Ideally there should be a constant commerce between the specific truths, revealed by the various historical disciplines and the final truth about man and history as known from the standpoint of the Christian faith. In such a commerce the Christian truth is enriched by the specific insights which are contributed by every discipline of culture. But it also enriches the total culture and saves it from idola
trous aberrations. Thus every discipline of psychology and every technique of psychiatry may be appreciated as contributing to the cure of souls provided the self in its final integrity is not obscured by detailed analyses of the intricacies of personality, and provided techniques are not falsely raised into schemes of redemption. In the same manner the social and historical sciences may give constantly more accurate accounts of cause and effect in the wide field of human relations. But without relation to the Christian truth they finally generate structures of meaning which obscure the profounder perplexities of life, offer some plan of social enlightenment as a way of redemption from evil, and lose the individual in the integrity of his spirit to the patterns of cause and effect which they are able to trace.

The third error, to which Catholic rationalism is particularly prone, is to validate the truth of faith but to explicate it rationally in such a way that mystery is too simply resolved into ostensible rational intelligibility. The rational exposition of Christian trinitarianism illustrates this difficulty from the Caristological controversies of the early church to this day. It is not possible to state the truth about God, as known from the standpoint of Christian faith, except in trinitarian terms. God was revealed in Christ in actual history. The
Second Person of the Trinity thus defines that aspect of the divine power which is engaged in history, and which is known primarily by faith. The relation of the Son to the Father is most simply stated in the Scriptural word: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The relation of the Son to the Father, in which the Father’s love is on the one hand the force of redemption and the Son’s suffering is on the other hand the revelation of redemptive love in contrast to the "wrath" or the justice of the Father, reveals to us a partly understandable mystery, without the understanding of which either the Christian doctrine of redemption degenerates into sentimentality or the Christian conception of law and justice degenerates into legalism. This is a mystery rich in meaning. If we seek to reduce it to simple intelligibility by pretending to know too much about the relation of Son to Father and to Holy Spirit, we fall either into an impossible tritheism or a too simple monism. In the same manner the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, as the third person of the Trinity is important, if we would understand that all forms of holiness and all signs of redemption in actual history are not merely extensions of human wisdom or human virtue but are the consequence of a radical break-through of the divine spirit through human self-sufficiency. Without relating these manifestations to God’s nature, Christian faith degenerates into a shallow spiritualism. Yet this fact hardly justifies the long "filioque" controversy in Christian history in which theologians sought abortively either to prove or disprove that the Holy Spirit proceeded from only the Father or from both the Father and the Son.

The effort to validate the divine nature of Christ by attributing divine omniscience to the human person is an equally abortive attempt to explicate a truth about Christ, as known to faith, in rational terms, with the consequence of reducing it to rational nonsense.

Thus a modern Anglo-Catholic theologian engages in the tortuous effort to prove that Christ both was, and was not, omniscient. He does this by supposing that there was a "stratification of knowledge in such a way that quite apart from the experimental knowl-

edge which he acquired by the normal human use of the intellect, the Christ includes in himself, by the infusion of omniscience which the divine person possesses through its real identity with the divine nature, the possession in principle of everything that is knowable by man." But he does not always use this possession because "the exercise of his knowledge is adjusted with the most precise and exquisite accuracy to the precise needs of every situation with which he is confronted." This picture of an omniscient person who usually hides his omniscience comes into conflict with the plain Scriptural confession that Jesus did not know the "day and hour" of the final judgement. Jesus’ admission of ignorance, we are told, "is neither on the one hand a mere affectation which would be difficult to reconcile with truthfulness, nor yet on the other hand the sign of the absence of knowledge in the mind considered in its totality." 14

It is difficult to understand what could possibly be gained by such implausible efforts. The meaning of Christ’s revelatory power, as apprehended by faith, is imperiled and a logical absurdity takes its place.

It is interesting that Christian piety and art are usually closer to the truth than various theologies in seeking to symbolize the true nature of Christ in both the historical dimension and in the revelatory depth or height which reveals Jesus to be the Christ. Christian art wisely centers upon the Cross in seeking to portray this deeper significance of the person of Christ and of the whole drama of his life. Other portrayals easily degenerate into sentimentality. Christian piety follows the same course, though it is not insensible to the fact that the teachings of Christ have a rigor which point beyond simple historical possibilities and that the life of Christ is filled with signs of that suffering Agape of which the Cross is the supreme symbol. The Cross is the symbolic point where this story most obviously ceases to be merely a story in history and becomes revelatory of a very unique divine "glory," namely the glory and majesty of a suffering God, whose love and forgiveness is the final triumph over the recalcitrance of human sin and the confusion of human history.

That history is fulfilled and ended in this Agape of God, as re-

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14 E. L. Mascall, Christ, the Christian and the Church, p. 59.
vealed in Christ, is the basic affirmation of the Christian faith. Such a love both completes and contradicts every form of historic virtue. It can not be comprehended as the completion of life, by faith, if that which stands in contradiction to it in historic forms of virtue and wisdom is not contritely acknowledged. If this truth of faith ceases to be a truth requiring such repentance, it ceases to be a truth which contains "grace," which is to say it loses its power to complete what is fragmentary and to overcome what is wrongly completed in human existence.

If the truth of faith merely becomes a "fact" of history, attested by a miracle, or validated by ecclesiastical authority, it no longer touches the soul profoundly. If it is made into a truth of reason which is validated by its coherence with a total system of rational coherence, it also loses its redemptive power. The truth of the Christian Gospel is apprehended at the very limit of all systems of meaning. It is only from that position that it has the power to challenge the complacency of those who have completed life too simply, and the despair of those who can find no meaning in life.