

RELIGION  
*and*  
THE MORAL LIFE

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## Chapter 7

## FAITH AND TRADITION

## EXTRANEOUS INFLUENCES UPON FAITH

Human life is lived in the midst of a social environment from the influence of which we cannot escape. For better and for worse, we are the heirs of all the ages. The concept of God embodied in the simple theistic faith has been resisted and emasculated because men have been unwilling to accept its full ethical implications. It has been tragically distorted and fantastically embellished by ignorance, superstition, prejudice, wishful thinking, and pride. Though presented in its fullness and strength, and in relative simplicity, in the teaching of the New Testament, it is, even there, by no means free from embellishments and distortions due to associations from the past; and to these there have been additions in the intervening centuries. Today we are often presented with a choice—to accept or to reject this whole theistic tradition. Dogmatists on both sides would have us believe that these are the only really logical alternatives. They view the tradition as a living whole, a tree which should be preserved or destroyed, but which it is arbitrary to prune. Our analysis, on the other hand, would claim that it is not a living whole, but rather analogous to a tree overgrown with parasites. What is called for is not a pruning of the overlush development of a single organism, but the clearing away of alien growths that tend to strangle and distort the precious life on which they feed.

In brief, our thesis is that once its ideas are grasped, the

simple theistic faith enunciated at the conclusion of Chapter 5 tends to arise spontaneously from the practice of attention to conscience; that any further ideational implications of this faith (including those of our last chapter) are unessential, tentative, and few; that inconsistent distortions and arbitrary embellishments of it have their roots in different and often antithetical motives; and, finally, that rejection of the simple theistic faith is due either to its traditional confusion with these inconsistent distortions and arbitrary embellishments, to inadequate attention to the sort of experience in which it tends to arise, to the inconclusive but impressive intellectual influence of opposing philosophies, or to antithetical motives. Is it our task in this chapter to examine the tradition in which the faith has been developed and preserved, and to distinguish what is vital and wholesome in it from those factors involved in the most serious distortions and injurious embellishments.

First we should mention those distortions that come from the usually innocent and laudable attempt of intellectual curiosity to find answers to its questions and the need to relate these to the convictions of the theistic faith. These may be summarized under the headings of the influences of rationalistic philosophy and magic. Philosophy in the prescientific era was much more inclined than it is today to hold very dogmatically to certain views which seemed to be based on unquestionable principles of common sense. And in the prephilosophical era human thought was apt to leap very confidently to magical conclusions based on false analogies. The effect upon theism of doctrines thus developed has always been unfortunate, but it is particularly so when, as has so often happened, these ideas have continued to affect religious thought (because of the paucity of intellectual checks in this region) long after they have been abandoned in other spheres.

## THE INFLUENCE OF MAGIC

The earliest form of religious thought which we can trace seems to have been the concept of mana. Development from this through the stages of animatism and animism to the polytheism of a hierarchy of nature deities is intelligible as almost inevitable.<sup>1</sup> The idea of mana is that of a vague, intangible power which imbues and transcends magical and religious objects. From the localization of this power in physical objects, and its semipersonalization, sprang animatism, which looked on certain inanimate things, such as a totem pole or a river, as alive and possessed of magical power. Animism is the stage when this intangible power, in its semipersonalized forms, is regarded as capable of movement independent of the physical objects to which it is normally attached. The totem pole and the sacred river are no longer magnified nonnatural men, but the special seat of a spirit-power, full of mana, which resides there. Polytheism is developed when the forces of nature are explained as due to the operation of such spirit powers, now highly personalized, which dwell in them. The pantheon of nature deities is also apt to be complicated by survivals of totemism and the addition of hero deities.

The investigations of the well-known Oxford anthropologist, R. R. Marett,<sup>2</sup> indicate that the idea of mana arises from the powerful psychological impression of tribal ceremony upon the primitive mind. In tribal ritual and dance the effect of crowd psychology is manifest in its most intense form. The tribesman feels himself overwhelmed,

<sup>1</sup> See John Murphy, *The Origins and History of Religions* (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1952); and A. C. Gamett, *A Realistic Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1942), chap. iii.

<sup>2</sup> R. R. Marett, *The Threshold of Religion* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1914); and *Faith, Hope and Charity in Primitive Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932).

transported, uplifted, filled with a strange power, confidence, loyalty, and unity with his fellows. The power that exerts this influence is intangible but real. It is in the ceremonies and everything connected with them. This is mana. The connection of mana with the moral life of the tribesman arises from the fact that the ceremonies themselves perform a moral function. They are expressions of tribal unity, loyalty, courage, and hope in the face of common dangers and difficulties and the divisive forces of egoism. Their effect and conscious purpose is to instill these virtues into the tribe. The tribesman feels a better man, and, in particular, a better tribesman, for his part in them. The objects believed to be filled with the mana that exerts this effect therefore become objects of moral veneration. The ceremonies become definitely religious, i.e., expressions of an attitude of devotion to something beyond the self regarded as supremely worthy; and this "something" is the intangible power that lifts up their hearts and gives them unity, courage, and strength.

The idea of mana falls short of the God of theism in that it is not personal and its moral influence is limited, like that of the moral concern of the primitive, to the welfare of the tribe or clan. It also proliferates into a lush growth of superstition from which the essential religious elements in the simple faith of theism are only slowly distinguished. The idea of a mysterious, intangible power, having once developed, is used to explain all mysteries, though completely divorced from ethical associations. And because the experience of it is invoked by dramatic symbolization in the ceremonies it is believed to be controllable by such methods in all its supposed manifestations, moral, nonmoral, and immoral. The result is the development of magic in all its forms, and the mingling of magical conceptions with those of religious faith in an object supremely worthy of devotion.

The association of magic with religion has been a subtly destructive influence which survives into the present day. As a pseudoscience, magic has been used in the effort to secure fertility of the soil and of animals and to heal diseases. As a pseudoreligion it has been used to secure obedience to the moral law and to avert the evil results of breaking the law. The second of these two religious uses tends, of course, to defeat the former. Primitive taboos rely on magic to enforce obedience to moral rules; but the primitive, with or without the help of a witch doctor, can also rely on countermagic to fend off the results of breaking the taboos. Ancient Egyptian religion, which taught a wholesome ethical code and supported it with concepts of rewards and punishments in an after life, also developed magical methods, administered for a price by the priests, to avert the just judgment of the gods. The effect, as pointed out by Breasted,<sup>3</sup> was a dulling of the Egyptian conscience which stultified the further spiritual development of the nation. Magical and semimagical means of nullifying the effects of sin, such as sacrifices of atonement and priestly absolutions, must inevitably have this effect of dulling conscience. Sin is, obviously, something that doesn't matter much if God can be persuaded to overlook it so easily.

It is magic, chiefly, that brought with it authoritarianism in religion. It created the priesthood, as intermediaries between God and man, with all the power which that status put into their hands. The priests are those who understand how to use the magical means, and they have received by initiation or birth a peculiar right to use such means. Ordinary persons are therefore dependent upon them. Their power becomes a vested interest for the perpetuation and increase of reliance on magic. The priest persuades himself

<sup>3</sup> J. H. Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933).

that he can and does wield this power for the good of the people, to maintain the moral discipline, but the more the people rely on him and his magical means for their right relation to God the duller become their consciences, the less they are aware of the constraining presence of God, and the more their "religion" becomes irreligious, a pursuit of personal salvation instead of a devotion to a God beyond the self.

The tendency to utilize the idea of mana to explain all mysteries also led to the powers of nature, good and evil, becoming confused with the vaguely conceived object of religious devotion, the power of which was felt in moral experience and (confused with other factors) in the ceremonies. In polytheism the idea of the religious object has taken personal form but is confused with the forces of nature, and the function of such deities as wielders of the powers of wind and rain, heat and cold, growth and decay, becomes much more prominent in the minds of men than their function as support of the moral will and source of the moral law. This leads to the confusion of the spiritual function of symbolic acts of devotion with the idea of thereby seeking favors or averting disaster. Further, since these beings are moral agents, it also leads to the activities of nature being interpreted as expressions of moral approval and disapproval. Thus the gods become creatures more to be feared than loved, and to be honored more for their power and glory than for their goodness and justice. The true meaning of religion is almost entirely submerged in extraneous and conflicting conceptions.

This combination of magic and primitive rationalistic philosophy brought the idea of miracle into religion. This notion, however, has tended to survive the rejection of most other magical elements because of the important psychological effects of religious faith upon functional disorders

of the body and, through creation of peace of mind, confidence and interest in life, on the general recuperative powers that affect even organic lesions. Among a people ready to believe in the supernatural, religious faith works apparent miracles. The ministry of Jesus, for example, produced many remarkable cases. The excited imagination of witnesses and reporters exaggerate such happenings and rumor adds other quite impossible stories. The harm thus done is not merely to burden religion with incredible traditions. Its worse effect is the support such miracle stories give to the creation of rigid dogma out of any teaching with which they are associated, thus supporting authoritarian systems of thought and authoritarian institutions.

#### PROBLEMS RAISED BY PHILOSOPHICAL RATIONALISM

Monotheism developed chiefly through the recognition of the ultimate unity of the moral law as applicable to all mankind, from which followed the unity of the divine source of the moral law. A secondary factor was the gradual recognition of the ultimate unity of the order of nature.<sup>4</sup> It was, apparently, the first factor that developed the monotheism of the Hebrews; the second factor was more influential in the philosophical monotheism of the Greeks. The combined effect was to create the idea of the absolutely omnipotent deity, source of the moral law and supreme ruler of the forces of nature, author, alike, of good and evil, except so far as the latter could be attributed to human sin. Theology thus was faced with the problem of evil. How could a God of justice and of love inflict upon man the

<sup>4</sup> The growth of empires which asserted the supremacy of their own chief god over all others is often mentioned as a third factor, but this subordination of all gods to one is quite different from the monotheistic denial of any god but One.

burden of suffering he bears and distribute it in a way having little or no relation to moral desert?

It is important to realize that this problem arises from philosophical accretions to the simple theistic faith which have no relation to its foundation in experience. Even if God had no power whatever over physical nature, there would still be all the reason we need to love him supremely. He is immediately known as the power that constrains human beings to love one another. We do not want compulsion. We do need constraint. If we respond to that constraint then most of life's problems solve themselves and there is a joy in life that gives strength for most of its remaining vicissitudes. And if society in general were to respond, there would be little physical evil with which it could not cope. Thus the God who constrains us to love one another is worthy of our full devotion even if this life were all and He had no other power. This is the simple faith of theism. There are, as we have seen in the previous chapter, good reasons tentatively to extend that faith to some further views of God's power and hopes for man's destiny, but these views and hopes, and even less, the belief in His powers of creation and omnipotent control of nature, are no essential part of the theistic faith.

The doctrines of creation and omnipotence are accretions to theology that come from a philosophy, motivated by a natural rational curiosity, working with the common-sense concept of causation—a concept justifiable in its application to particular physical objects and events, but not applicable to the universe as a whole or to the establishment of the most general laws of its operation.<sup>5</sup> The philosophies that extend this concept of causation to problems of cos-

<sup>5</sup> The argument which applies to a whole, as a whole, a concept found applicable to every particular within the whole is known in logic as the fallacy of composition.

mology are philosophies of prescientific common sense. Their arguments for the existence of an intelligent First Cause, ultimately responsible for nature and its laws, are now rejected by most contemporary schools of philosophical thought.

Yet these arguments, which once seemed so cogent, have saddled traditional theology with a concept of God which made Him logically responsible for all the evil of the physical world and forced theology to try in vain to explain that evil as a necessary discipline of the moral life, or a justifiable punishment for sin. The result has been to transform the concept of the God of love, the Father of the prodigal son, into that of a Being who, for His own glory, creates myriads of sensitive and inevitably erring creatures, proceeds to discipline them with indiscriminating violence and often extreme harshness, and punishes them with unrelenting intensity. This is the picture of God derived from contemplation of the world He is supposed to have designed in every detail and created. Yet, in spite of reason, faith still whispers, "God is love." A partial respite from the dilemma is gained when the theologian asserts that eventually God will show His love by transforming those who love Him into angels of light. Then this ray of light is also darkened. Because it is obviously so hard to love Him as he is depicted in this theology, we must be frightened into trying at least to act as though we do; so we are told that those who do not (and that includes most of us) will be condemned to eternal torment.

It is in this way that traditional theism has become a strange mixture of the antithetical motives of fear and love. "Perfect love casteth out fear."<sup>6</sup> But fear also casts out love. Thus the rationalistic, legalistic, and punitive elements in theology war against the life of faith, hope, and

<sup>6</sup> I John 4:18.

love which is the essence of religion. They tend to put in its place an authoritarian institution inducing obedience by the motive of fear. In Christianity the opposing motives of fear and love have been held together in the one system of thought by dividing the personality of God, so that He is, in one personality, the just but fearsome judge, in the other the loving Savior of mankind. The result, for simple-minded Christians, is expressed in the words of the child who is reported to have said, "I love Jesus, but I hate God." Those of greater maturity and intelligence try to reconcile the contradiction in the concept of God the Father by remembering that He is orthodoxly depicted as, in spite of his omnipotence, beset by a dilemma in the necessity of being both loving and just, and that he sacrifices His Son to solve it. It is nevertheless the case that the love and devotion of the Christian tends to be directed toward the person of the Son rather than to the austere and forbidding majesty of the Father.

#### THE BLIGHT OF A PUNITIVE THEOLOGY

A tragic feature of the legalistic and punitive element in Christian doctrine is its tendency to introvert the personality, thus defeating the wholesome extroverting tendency of faith and love. Where the doctrine of divine punishment is so emphasized as to create in the believer a fear for the salvation of his soul attention is inevitably turned inward upon the self. He is made to give chief attention to the thought of his own sin and virtue. The major end of everything connected with religion becomes his own salvation. He is taught to love God and his neighbor. He may succeed in doing so—at least in loving the Christ who saves him. But in so far as his own soul is his chief concern, his love of his fellow men is stifled. He cannot joyously forget

himself in the service of God and humanity. His religion becomes narrow, personal, harshly moralistic, and other-worldly. If he persuades himself that he is one of the elect, or sufficiently virtuous, or a secure son of the Church, this satisfaction with himself tends to develop spiritual pride. If he does not so persuade himself his religious life becomes one of fear and trembling, of severe and narrow moralism. He never learns that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace . . ." <sup>7</sup>

An example of this latter type is the tragic figure of Søren Kierkegaard. He was raised in a pietistic tradition which placed a tremendous emphasis on human sin and divine wrath. His childhood and youth were deeply impressed by a stern and melancholy father who believed himself accursed because of a childhood sin. As a result his theology is dominated by the conviction that "Christianity with the terror removed is merely a Christianity of the imagination." <sup>8</sup> Such an upbringing in a young man of genius naturally issued in a severe introversion, a sarcastic, superior, and unlovable disposition, an early atheism, and a completely unsuccessful attempt to live a life of pleasure. He recovered his faith through a reaction of disgust and dissatisfaction with the pursuit of private happiness and through the one fine and tender thing in his life—his attempt to restore spiritual comfort and hope to his father in his old age after having received from him the confession which revealed the secret of his melancholy.

The recovery of faith meant a transformation in his way of life, but the inward twist of his personality and the dismal form of his theology blighted all prospect of the flowering of faith into trust and hope and the love that issues in a

<sup>7</sup> Gal. 5:22.

<sup>8</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 524.

social concern for the welfare of his fellow men. His conception of Christianity is a travesty of the vision of the teacher who told the stories of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. "Christianity is spirit, spirit is inwardness, inwardness is subjectivity, subjectivity is essentially passion, and in its maximum an infinite, personal, passionate interest in one's own eternal happiness" (*italics ours*).<sup>9</sup>

The development of a predominant tendency of concern for one's own eternal happiness is a blight on the spiritual life almost as severe as that of a similar concern for earthly happiness. Its mitigating circumstance is the teaching that the way to attain eternal happiness is the practice of love toward God and one's neighbor. The attempt to maintain this practice has an extroverting effect. The Christian believer in whom the doctrines of sin and punishment have established these contradictory tendencies finds his religious life painfully devoid of that love, joy and peace which his religion tells him are the fruits of the spirit, and which he believes he ought to experience. This failure deepens his concern for his eternal welfare and has often issued in the spiritual distress of which much famous religious autobiography is full.<sup>10</sup> It is a condition for which the religious life only finds a remedy when trust and love of God, expressed in active work for man, bring about a reorientation of personality.

#### LEGALISTIC ETHICS AND VICARIOUS PUNISHMENT

This conception of God, as a judge administering punishment for sin, we have traced to its source in the rationalistic philosophy which made Him omnipotent ruler of all

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> For a discerning analysis of this state of mind, see Georgia Harkness, *The Dark Night of the Soul* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1945).



the forces of nature. This led to the conception of the evil of nature as a divine discipline and punishment. Involved in this conception, however, there is also another piece of bad philosophizing, namely, ethical legalism. This is the interpretation of the moral law on the analogy of the laws of the state. It is a first principle of legislation that to every law must be attached sanctions and means of enforcement. Otherwise, it is ineffective and meaningless. Similarly, it was thought that the moral law requires both sanctions and a power to enforce them. So this must be the function of God, and He would be derelict in His duty if, through softness of heart or favoritism, He allowed any to escape.

The moral law, however, is more akin to the laws of nature than to civil law. All laws are uniformities. Natural laws are the unbreakable uniformities of natural processes. Civil laws are breakable, but are uniformities demanded by authority and supported by sanctions. Between these two types of uniformity are conditional principles—uniformities or laws that are breakable, but only at cost of certain consequences which occur with statistical frequency or with unbreakable uniformity. Of this type are the laws of health and growth, and the laws of success in human endeavor. Moral laws are laws of the healthy growth of personality. They can be broken, but only at the cost of spiritual stultification. This is the meaning of the supreme importance of loyalty to the critical conscience as a principle of conduct. Without such loyalty, personality is stultified and loses its integrity. This consequence is not a penalty imposed by divine authority to uphold the law. It is an ineluctable natural effect.

Moral laws therefore need no sanctions. Indeed the threat of sanctions is worse than useless as a means of securing adherence to them. For the basis and essence of all moral law is the attitude of agape, productive love. And

fear does not create love. It tends to produce introversion. The purpose and function of God in human life, therefore, is not to enforce the moral law by inevitable sanctions, but to influence man's decisions in harmony with it by winning his love.

Within Christianity the legalistic conception of the moral law has created a tragic misconception of the function of Jesus Christ in the history of religion. There can be no doubt of the enormous influence of his personality on the course of history, an influence exercised through his effect upon individuals. Those individuals found that the contemplation of his life, teaching, and personality wrought a transformation in them. It made them aware of the presence of God, called forth their love of Him, and gave them a sense of trust and confidence. They held a legalistic conception of the moral law according to which they felt that, as sinners, they had incurred God's condemnation. The Hebrew tradition had taught the making of atonement through blood sacrifices. Greek religion suggested appeasing the gods with gifts. Yet a sensitive conscience could not be satisfied with such subterfuges. The great Hebrew prophets and the best Greek thinkers had protested against the thought that the justice of God could thus be turned aside. People of sensitive conscience therefore could not but be uneasy at the thought of the divine majesty. Yet somehow, marvellously, Christ brought peace to their souls. He did not blind them to their shortcomings. Rather, he made them more than ever conscious of these. But he made them feel the presence of God, respond to it in love, and in that love find strength and peace.

What had he done to them? Our analysis of the religious attitude provides the answer. It was the content of his teaching and the example of his life and death that stimulated the critical conscience to a fuller and keener



awareness of the duties of the moral life, making them aware of a constraining presence within. It had, at the same time, given them the stimulus to respond to the ideal, a response in which they found joy. Both this experience, and his teaching of the love and forgiveness of God, created the response of love toward God in which they found new strength, an inward peace, and further joy. They found they could live in communion with God in spite of their frequent failures to realize the ideal Christ kept alive in them. Without shutting their eyes to their own imperfections they knew that they had found the power to grow in grace. Truly, Christ had wrought for them an atonement between man and God.

Yet a legalistic ethical theory found a theological problem in these facts of psychological experience. How could God forgive sinners when it was His duty to punish sin? It was the ingenuity of Paul that found an answer in the theory of a vicarious atonement. The death of Christ was sacrificial and substitutionary, like that of the scapegoat to which the sins of the people were ceremonially transferred, and the unfortunate creature then driven into the wilderness to die. This magical atonement and that of all the other blood sacrifices were symbolical anticipations of the really legally adequate vicarious sacrifice made by Jesus Christ, and they might now be abolished as no longer needed. The sinless one, Jesus, had taken upon himself the penalty; and God might accept this, as a judge may allow one person to pay another's fine. The penalty paid by the one sinless man was adequate for all mankind because it was due to the sin of one man, Adam, that sin had come into the world, passing a taint of "original sin" to all his offspring, a taint which made their subsequent sinfulness inevitable.

Ingenious as this theory is it is ethically unsound even on the basis of a legalistic ethics. To impose the death

penalty on an innocent man, and let the guilty go free, even though the innocent one offers himself voluntarily for the sacrifice, is not justice, but injustice. Where the penalty is one of death or imprisonment the case is quite different from that of a fine. Property may be passed by gift, and the gift may be made and used to pay a fine. Where the law requires a penalty suffered in the person, however, the law is not upheld unless it is suffered in the person of the one who commits the crime. Further, the use of the idea of original sin to explain why the sacrifice of one innocent man may be accounted as paying for the guilt of all mankind is also illogical and immoral. If all the rest of the sins of mankind were rendered inevitable by the sin of Adam, then the law of God requiring the same penalty for these inevitable misdeeds as for the really avoidable one of Adam is unjust. Indeed, justice would require, not penalties, but merely preventive and reformatory measures for the subsequent wrongs. On the other hand, if the sins of the rest of mankind were not all inevitable after the sin of Adam, then the paying of the penalty of Adam's sin could not justly compensate for all the later independent sins.

#### THE MEANING AND METHOD OF MAN'S SALVATION

If Paul had had the insight to see that the moral law is not analogous to civil law he would have seen that he was worried over a pseudoproblem. God is not in the position of a judge whose duty it is to enforce laws, and the moral law does not become meaningless if those who break it can be saved from the usual bad consequences of doing so. The moral law is rather analogous to the laws of health. It is a law of spiritual health. God's problem is, precisely, how to save man from the bad consequence in his spiritual life brought on by his breaking the laws of spiritual health.

To save man he must be brought to see what is truly worthy of his supreme devotion and won to the love of it. In terms of the theistic faith, he must be brought to see that God is love and be won to the love of God in return. It was this that Christ did for Paul, and that was why Paul found a salvation of his soul in Christ, a new spiritual birth that the legalism of Judaism had not given him. It is a tragedy that the survival of legalism in his thought made him unable to understand what the knowledge of Christ had done for him. For this he cannot be blamed. Others, too, had experienced the "saving" power of the personality of Christ without understanding it.

If Paul had had the advantage of hearing the teaching of Jesus at first hand, he might have seen the true solution to his problem. For the ethics of Jesus, even as it has come down to us through reporters who did not thoroughly understand it, is free from legalism. The whole duty of man is summed up in the principles of the Golden Rule and love to neighbor, not in specific precepts such as the ten commandments. The prodigal is forgiven without question when he returns penitent. The woman taken in adultery is not condemned, but told, "Go, and sin no more."<sup>11</sup> The evil is found in the hatred and lust that lead to murder and adultery rather than in the overt acts. The publican who repents is said to be more acceptable to God than the much better-behaved Pharisee who manifests neither penitence nor spiritual aspiration. The angels are said to rejoice more over the penitence of one sinner "than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance."<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, it is not actual conduct, the keeping of the law, which is chiefly a result of habit and environment, that

<sup>11</sup> John 8:3-11. This story is a late addition to the fourth gospel, but is so typical that it can be accepted as probably a genuine tradition.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 15:7.

Jesus saw as the deepest concern of God. Rather, it is the attitude of love toward the morally constraining Presence within; an attitude manifest as much in the penitence of the sinner as in the virtue of the saint. For penitence manifests the awareness that something is wrong with the inner attitudes; and at the same time it shows that the desire is present to make an effort to put it right. The deadening inertia of self-satisfaction can manifest itself at high levels of legally correct habit as well as at low. But only where such self-satisfaction is broken through is there spiritual life, sensitivity, and progress. This was what the personality of Christ had done to Paul, to make a new, better, and greater man of him. This was the "salvation" that had come to him. He knew it had been wrought by faith and love, not by "works of the law." If he had understood that the whole meaning of righteousness is not legality, but love, he would have found no problem in it.

#### PRIEST, PROPHET, AND THE IDEA OF REVELATION

We have examined the corrupting influence upon the simple theistic faith of three factors entirely extraneous to that faith itself and independent of the experience on which it rests, namely, rationalistic philosophy, magic, and legalistic ethics. We must now come to examine a corrupting factor which is not entirely extraneous, but is largely a misinterpretation of the religious experience itself. This is found in traditional conceptions of revelation. One type of alleged revelation found in traditional religion is definitely of extraneous origin. It comes from magic and the resultant activities of the priesthood. This is divination. It can be dismissed as superstition. Its one important survival in Christianity is the claim to papal infallibility made by the Roman Catholic church. The really significant con-

cept of revelation, however, comes from another source, from the prophet rather than the priest. The priest is a professional intermediary between God and man by reason of his special knowledge and initiation or birth. The prophet is one who spontaneously has heard what he believes to be a call of God to preach some message which is distinctive and relatively new to him and his hearers. He preaches it under a compulsion of his conscience because he believes it is right and true, and somehow God-given to him to preach. Often he meets with opposition. He may be exiled, stoned, or crucified. But eventually he wins a following. His writings, or those in which his teaching is recorded, come to be venerated as containing, or perhaps verbally constituting, a revelation from God.

This notion of specific revelations contained in historical documents, more or less accurately preserved, is typical of all the great traditional religions. Together with philosophical rationalism, magic, and priestly authority, it is the basis of the dogma and authoritarian institutionalism of the Roman Catholic church. For Protestants, who reject magic and priestly authority and make no claims for philosophical rationalism, it is the sole basis of authority. Protestantism's insistence on the right of private interpretation of the scriptures, however, greatly mitigates the element of authoritarianism that derives from this source. It is further reduced by the insistence of most Protestants that the authority of the New Testament (so far as it is recognized as authoritative) has replaced that of the Old. For Fundamentalists, however, questions of ethics, doctrine and church practice must still be settled by appeal to these scriptures.

The traditional reliance of Protestants on the authority of scripture, maintained now only by the Fundamentalist sects, was destroyed for all others by the critical study of

biblical sources carried out in the last three quarters of a century. This has shown that biblical history, of both the Old and New Testaments, contains much that is unreliable and mythical, that few if any biblical writers make for themselves the sort of claims to inspiration that orthodoxy has made for their works, nor can any such claims be justified. Thus the whole basis of authoritarianism in the Hebrew-Christian religious tradition has collapsed.

To many this seemed to mean that the whole idea of a revelation of God must be abandoned. The teaching of Christ and the apostles could have no deeper basis of insight than the metaphysics and ethics of contemporary philosophers—and less basis in logic, science and history. Faith appeared to be a product of wishful thinking which intelligent people had to examine critically, and support if they could, by scientific and philosophical inquiry. Some went for such support to rationalism, others to empirical methods in philosophy. Liberal Protestantism became very unsure of its foundations and its content. It tended to abandon theological thinking. It kept itself alive by turning with zeal to the practical side of religion, which found expression in the social gospel. It tried to justify its faith with the arguments of probabilism, creating a new and hesitant rationalism. Protestantism had relied so long for its knowledge of God on a false theory of external revelation that the reality and significance of the internal revelation were almost forgotten.

It is a tragedy that the power of a magnificent tradition should be enfeebled because its history is inevitably mingled with error. The story of the prophets of the world's great religions, particularly those of the Hebrew-Christian tradition, is the story of the critical conscience of mankind working toward its culmination in that vision of man's duty toward his fellows expressed in the principle of agape, of

universal productive love. Throughout its development it has received its vigor from that conviction of theistic faith that the source of the demand which the critical conscience feels, the demand to consider the welfare of others equally with one's own, lies in a moral power beyond man and society.

If this conviction of theism is accepted, then we cannot but agree that whenever the prophet, in his moral struggles, came out with a solution that expressed more completely than its rivals the principle of agape he was justified in his announcement, "Thus saith the Lord." We also must admit that without the great seers who came with such pronouncements man's ethical insight and achievement would have remained on a low level. We do them no honor to perpetuate the errors in their teaching. Yet we must ourselves be blind if we do not see the justification of their claim to come to us with a message of God. With the culmination of that message, in the agape taught by Jesus, clear in our minds, we can sift the wheat from the chaff in what they have said. We can honor them and share in their great historic fellowship while carrying on the activity of the critical conscience, inspired by love of the God whose love they have taught us how to see. By such loyalty and understanding the strangling tentacles of extraneous growths may be removed from the simple theistic faith, its validity maintained, its implications clearly seen and its power in human lives raised to a new level.

## Chapter 8

### THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

#### CHRISTIAN THEORIES OF REVELATION

The core of historic Christianity is the simple theistic faith. We have stated that faith in terms derived from Christian texts. Christianity has also understood and taught certain concepts which we have seen to be reasonable implications of the simple theistic faith. These include the concepts of God as source of our spiritual being (the fatherhood of God), the personal survival of bodily death, and the revelation of the will of God in history through great prophetic figures who have seen the true nature of the constraining influence of that will more clearly than their contemporaries. These concepts, however, have been overlaid and more or less distorted by extraneous influences, as we saw in our last chapter. The last concept in particular, that of the revelation in history, has been almost smothered by additions deriving from myth and magic. These, as preserved in the Bible and hallowed by application to it, as a book, of the concept of historical revelation, have become the chief source of authoritarianism and sectarianism in the Christian religion.

Biblical authoritarianism has, however, now been abandoned by all save the Fundamentalist sects and Catholicism. The question is, therefore, as to what significance for Christianity lies in the concept of a historic revelation, as implied by the simple theistic faith, once the concept of Biblical authority is surrendered. As has already been

mentioned, Protestant liberals, in rejecting traditional views of the Bible, have frequently found themselves bereft almost entirely of the concept of a revealed religion. This has occurred because, during the centuries of Biblical authoritarianism, Christianity had no clear and adequate conception of a general revelation of God available to all. The distinction between the critical conscience and the traditional conscience had not been clearly drawn. The Pauline conception of the conscience of the Gentiles as a law of God "written in their hearts" had been interpreted in the Catholic doctrine of natural law as a set of specific rigid principles, and in modern thinking this had been abandoned, along with all claims to self-evident moral principles. Protestant orthodoxy concluded that the "image of God" in man, which should have given him insight into the divine will, has been effaced by original sin. Protestant liberals, rejecting this idea of effacement of a divine image, often inclined to the view that man has no moral insight at all that can be regarded as a revelation of the divine will.

In this state of confused thinking, with its resultant weakness, a reaction has occurred in Protestantism which has sought to find new support for the principal specific doctrines of the historic Christian creeds in a reinterpretation of the manner of the revelation of God in history. This interpretation accepts the results of Biblical criticism, but still claims a very special content of revelation through the historic personalities of the Hebrew prophets, Christ and his apostles, and the subsequent history of the church—a revelation attested to only by the individual's vivid impression of being therein "confronted" by the divine. This new approach has had an important influence in reviving the emphasis on personal religion. It has, however, made faith the more difficult for many by insisting on the retention by faith of doctrines opposed, rather than sup-

ported, by the balance of rational evidence. In the "encounter" with the divine, to which it appeals as evidence, it has mistaken feelings due to the associations of religious tradition and institutions for an experience justifying faith's acceptance of alleged historic revelations. It has thus claimed too much for special revelation in history. At the same time, it has failed, as we shall see, to recognize all that is really present in the general revelation open to all.

We shall examine this new concept of historic revelation as presented by Professor Emil Brunner,<sup>1</sup> one of the most distinguished representatives of the movement. The Church, says Brunner, is the witness and herald of a revelation which has taken place and is still taking place. In opposition to the scientific point of view, which refuses to accept as truth anything that cannot be proved and verified by experience, the Church "proclaims as absolute truth that which can be neither proved by the intellect nor verified by experience" (p. 6). Yet it is the duty of the Church to reflect upon this revelation, for in the past she has proclaimed as "revealed" truth matters which scientific research has shown to be erroneous—and with results disastrous to faith. For the apostles and prophets "divine revelation" always meant "the whole of the divine activity for the salvation of the world" (p. 8). The Church, however, made the mistake of regarding the human documents, the Scriptures, in which the story of revelation is told, as themselves constituting the revelation. She created the false concept of a divinely revealed *doctrine* in place of Christ himself who in his person is the true revelation. Doctrine is always a human interpretation of the revelation which is given, not in words, but in the mighty "acts of God" (p. 8).

<sup>1</sup> From *Revelation and Reason* by Emil Brunner, copyright 1946 by W. L. Jenkins, published by The Westminster Press. Quotations in this chapter with pages indicated in parentheses are from this work.

## THE DISTINCTION OF HISTORIC AND GENERAL REVELATION

In the Biblical understanding of "revelation," Brunner continues, the term means that something hitherto a mystery is made known. It is the communication of something particular, unique, and historical, the communication of a redemption which "can happen only once for all" (p. 31). We can be blind to the revelation. It is received by faith, which is an act of recognition and obedience arising in and with the abdication of the self. Faith is a venture of trust in the Person of Christ, not a belief in doctrines about him. The God who is revealed in these mighty "acts," and above all "in the Person of Christ," is "absolute and sovereign Lord" (p. 63), but also absolute and self-giving Love.

Man, to whom the revelation comes, is, in the Biblical view, a sinner, disobedient to a "general revelation," distinct from the specific historical revelation by which the way of salvation is opened to him. "Those who speak of sin and deny the reality of an original revelation do not know what they are doing" (p. 53), for the concept of sin as disobedience implies an "original primal revelation from which man is always falling away" and which is still something "present." This original and present revelation against which man sins is the "*imago Dei*," the law of God "written in the heart." It is also the revelation of God in the natural Creation in which man lives.

Here Brunner quotes Acts 17:27, "that they should seek God, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him though He is not far from any one of us." Yet, in spite of the assertion of this text that *through this general revelation men may find God*, Brunner asserts that, according to the Biblical doctrine, they cannot do so without the special revelation recorded in Biblical history. Certainly he can

quote texts which seem to convey this meaning, such as Acts 4:12, "for there is none other name . . . whereby we must be saved." But logically he should either admit here a contradiction of Biblical doctrines or reconcile them (as has often been done) by admitting that man can find God through the general revelation, while still asserting that man's sinfulness is such that salvation in a *complete* sense is only made possible through Christ. Instead, we are told that "once man has become a sinner the general revelation is not sufficient to enable him to know the true God, . . . the general revelation exists but . . . it has no saving significance" (p. 75). Yet when Paul says that men can *find* God, he surely implies that they can *know* that it is God they find! And when he says that the Gentiles who "do by nature the things contained in the law . . . are a law unto themselves" (Rom. 2:14), he surely implies that *some degree* of salvation is possible for them in this way. It would seem, therefore, that at this point Brunner hardly does justice to the Biblical doctrine of the "general revelation." Paul is much less harsh than many Pauline theologians.

Professor Brunner also says that "The reason why this general revelation cannot have any saving significance for the sinner is that in it God, as Person, does not meet man personally, but impersonally" (p. 76). Here again he betrays a failure to appreciate the profundity of Paul's teaching. "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). If God's will works in us, then God does meet us in the depth of our own selves as Person to person. For what is will but personality? For the conception of revelation held by the church that created the New Testament we may also refer to a fourth gospel text. The life "which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (John 1:9) is not an abstract idea of right and wrong. It is the operation of the divine *life*, the



divine *will*, within us—within every man. This is where we can *find* God, and know his will, if only we “feel after him.” The racial inheritance and individual growth of impulse and habit that constitute our *finite* individuality tend to blind us to the working of the divine will within us; but it is there. And they who seek Him can find Him.

Our present vision is only possible because we are heirs to a great tradition. God is revealed in every deed of love, in the life of every good man, and above all in the prophets and the Christ of the Hebrew-Christian religion. Without a revelation of God in history such as this, we should never have guessed the depth of love for ourselves and for all men in that will of God that thus forever confronts us. We should never have seen the heights to which it calls us. In emphasizing man's need of the historic revelation recorded in the Bible, as well as the general revelation ever present with us, Brunner is profoundly right. We need the revelation in history to open our eyes to the revelation within. But in denying that God is in man, that in the general revelation He personally confronts man, and that His will is fully revealed to all who open their eyes to see, Brunner fails disastrously to do justice to the Biblical doctrines of God and of man.

This failure to see the true nature of the *imago Dei* as the form of the divine will working within man, as implied in the simple theistic faith, has disastrous consequences. It accounts for the undue pessimism of the whole theological movement of which Brunner is such an important exponent. That pessimism is now eating out the heart of hope in churches faced by terrible problems and needing some faith in their fellow men lest they despair of free institutions and resort to authoritarianism. It is flinging the churches to the side of conservatism just when they should be giving a bold lead in the development of political freedom and economic cooperation.

For a time this pessimistic view had a certain salutary function in offsetting the optimism that thought man to be all-sufficient without God. What is needed is a recognition of the true relation of God and man, which shows that the moral law making man responsible for the welfare of his fellows *is* the will of God, that man carries a load of racial and individual drives and habits that run counter to the will of God, but that God is so present in man that man can never be satisfied with himself until he brings his will into harmony with the will of God, that, therefore, in spite of his weakness, man can learn by his errors to walk humbly with his God. In this conception there is no false optimism, and no false pessimism. Instead, there is realism, warning—and hope.

Another harmful effect of this failure to understand the nature of the general revelation of God in man is that it leads to an unjust view of the adherents of non-Christian religions. There is a certain forbidding arrogance in the theology that flourishes the text—“none other name.”<sup>2</sup> It is also really disastrous to its own assertions concerning the dependence of man on God; and it dishonors God by narrowly limiting his “mighty works” for the salvation of man. Was it by a human insight, divorced from all direct relation to God, that Socrates was able to declare that “it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it”? Or was it God in him that enabled him to see it? Was it by his human moral strength alone that he chose to drink the hemlock rather than abate one jot or tittle of the principles for which he stood? Or was not this, too, one of the “mighty acts of God”—and one that helped to prepare the mind of Greece to receive the greater revelation of God in Christ? Is there any “mighty act of God” prior to Christ so much mightier than this that we should see God at work

<sup>2</sup> Acts 4:12.



in it and not in the life of a Socrates? It is surely plain that nothing but an emotional bias created by a traditional theology could drive a theologian to assert the reality of God in the Biblical preparation for Christ alone, and deny that God is genuinely, though not completely, revealed elsewhere in history. It is true, as Brunner says, that there is much that is false and sinful in non-Christian religions. But so there is in Old Testament religion and in the religion actually taught and practiced by the Christian Church.

#### THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT TO HISTORIC REVELATION

There is much that Brunner has to say on this matter that is very important and in complete accord with the simple theistic faith. He endorses the Pauline dictum, "No man can call Jesus Lord save by the Holy Spirit"<sup>3</sup> (p. 170). This means that neither Christ, nor the Bible, nor any creedal doctrine can be recognized as revealed of God apart from "the witness of the Spirit" within. The question is, therefore, To what does the Spirit bear witness? Brunner rightly says

It is not the Book which carries Christ, but Christ who carries the Book, and He carries it *only so far as it bears witness to Him* (p. 176, italics ours). The Holy Spirit does not guarantee the truth of world facts, whether historical or cosmological (p. 175). The faith which requires submission either to dogma or to the Bible as a book is a "false faith." True faith . . . is the divinely effectual miracle that man, through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, becomes able to see the truth of God in Jesus Christ. . . . This faith . . . is the coming to birth of a *new* person; it is the rebirth, the restoration of the defaced image of God (p. 184).

These statements may be accepted so long as caution is maintained concerning what is meant by the witness of the

<sup>3</sup> I Cor. 12:3.

Spirit to a doctrine of Christ and to the Book. Even within the limits of the words italicized above, it must be remembered that the Scriptures contain much unjustifiable interpretation of Christ and fallible human reporting of his biography. Nevertheless the Scriptures contain a clear portrait of the person of Christ; and it is to the God-revealing character of this personality that the witness of the Spirit responds. Much that Brunner says, however, concerning the content of revelation—his references to "atonement," "creation," "salvation," "the defaced image of God," "objective facts," "Incarnation," "none other name," the "absolute and sovereign Lord," his limitation of God's self-revelation in history to the Hebrew-Christian tradition, and his general support of creedal confessions—would imply that the witness of the Spirit goes much further than this. This is due to the fact that his failure to recognize the immanent activity of God in man leaves him with a very vague notion of what may be called the work of the Spirit of God in creation of a living "saving" faith (the faith that makes our spirits whole) and this intellectual vacuum is filled by the emotional influences upon thought of Christian institutions and tradition.

Brunner comes close to the conception of the divine immanence presented in this book when he speaks of "the connection of this form of revelation, which opens up our hearts, with the fact that our human heart has been created in the image of God" (p. 172). But then he adds, "all that remains of this, as a consequence of sin, is an undefined sense of responsibility" (p. 173). This last statement, however, is simply a contradiction of the psychological facts. Man also *loves* his fellow men. Except where driven and blinded by special prejudice, he *desires* the good of his fellows. Except for special prejudice and selfishness, he *seeks* their good, and the critical conscience demands that

he seek the good of others equally with his own. What then is man's love of his fellows and his critical sense of duty but a will that is in the *form* or *image* of the will of God? This may have been only partly grasped by the writer of the opening chapter of Genesis who first used the phrase, but it is clearly in the mind of the author of the fourth gospel and of Paul. For the apostle, indeed, man's good will *is* the will of God. "It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

This, then, is the witness of the Spirit within us—that God is love and that we ought also to love one another. Man, of course, begins his life without consciousness of this witness because he is not even conscious of the existence of other selves. He inherits impulses and develops infantile habits that run counter to it and blind him to it. This is the element of truth in the doctrine of original sin. But the Spirit of God within man convicts him of sin if he reflects. This is the divine-human "encounter" of which Brunner speaks. It is the "confronting" of man within himself by a will that is other and higher than that which he familiarly recognizes as his own. The response to that constraining will which sees it and accepts it as transcendent and universal love is the response of the simple theistic faith. Inevitably it is interpreted in the light of traditional beliefs which need to be critically sifted lest they distort and stultify the vision or clothe it in garments that make it incredible. At the same time we must cherish the tradition and understand it, for it is only in its light that we today see the vision of the love of God in its fulness—or see it at all. The true nature of the will of God as universal redeeming love is made manifest in the person of Christ. If we let our minds dwell upon him, then the Spirit of God within us bears witness to this revelation of God in Christ. Many factors, volitional and intellectual, then affect the

issue, but in the Christian response the self surrenders its opposition. It acknowledges that it has no right to maintain any preserves where self is first, no right to set up any limitations to the love of fellow men. The Spirit of God, which has ever been present and at work in the soul, now recognized as transcending all human life, is set up in the place of acknowledged authority. As Christian experience has declared, the Holy Spirit makes its presence felt in a new way. The lust of the flesh and the pride of life may still lead to sin. But sin is acknowledged for what it is by the soul that has humbled itself because it has caught the vision of the love of God in Jesus Christ.

If we thus understand the "life" that is the "Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world," the true nature of the witness of the Spirit," we can see what that is to which the Spirit bears witness and how "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself" (II Cor. 5:19). We see that *the special historical revelation can never exceed the content of the general revelation*, for it needs the witness of the Spirit to declare that it is a revelation of God. We see that what is revealed in the person of Jesus and by the Spirit of God within us is the same, and is very simple: *that man is loved of God; that we ought also to love God and one another; that in such love our spirits are made whole*. That is the whole content of revelation. It is apprehended by faith; by faith it is believed to be the revelation of God; and man needs no more. With this revelation of God and His will to inspire and guide him, the rest can and must be left to human choice and human intelligence.

#### THE PERSONALITY OF JESUS

For Christians, Jesus is the "Christ" and "Lord" and "Savior." These terms have been filled with magical,

philosophical, and legalistic content which we have now set aside. Our problem, for the understanding of Christianity as a historic religion, is as to how the personality of Jesus of Nazareth could come to mean so much to the people who knew him that they believed these things of him, and how the picture they left of him continues to exercise such an influence that it sustains such belief. The question is not one as to the origin of the magical, philosophical, and legalistic beliefs, which are mere accretions to theistic faith, but as to what there is in the personality of Jesus and the New Testament picture of him that has the power to create this faith that makes whole the spirit of man. The accretions are not a part of that power, but a drag upon it. Somehow, *through* the knowledge of the personality of Jesus, there is created in men and women an attitude which makes a difference in their lives so important that they are ready to call it their "salvation." This attitude, as we have seen, is that of the simple theistic faith, involving love to God and man. They are "saved" by faith in God, but, being brought to that faith *through* the influence of Jesus, involving a faith in many ways similar, they say they are "saved" by faith in him—as, indeed, they are.

In the legalistic theory of the atonement the emphasis is laid on the death of Jesus. This is because Paul was concerned, not with how his acquaintance with Jesus had wrought such a transformation within him, but with how any transformation in him could justify God in forgiving his sins. When we set aside this pseudoproblem, created by the legalistic theory of the moral life, and ask the primary question as to how the personality of Jesus works this transformation in man, we find that his loyalty unto death—even the death of the cross—is an essential part of that which makes him "the power of God unto salvation." Man

has no duty to do that which is either physically or psychologically impossible. The demonstration of an ideal of duty therefore requires, not only the teaching of the ideal in the abstract, but the manifestation in practice that it is possible for man to live up to it. That manifestation could only be given in conditions of supreme trial. In the circumstances of his life and time that trial was inevitable. He was preaching doctrines of universal love, of God's forgiveness toward sinners, of man's freedom from the onerous burden of ceremonial law, of the transformation of society in a coming "Kingdom of God" to be brought in by divine power when prepared for by repentance in human hearts. These teachings aroused the hatred of those in authority, whose lives and doctrines he criticised, and fear that his preaching should create a disastrous public disturbance. This hatred and fear presented him with the choice of abandoning his prophetic mission or going on until he met crucifixion. He chose the latter, and there could be given no more convincing demonstration of the power of the love of God in a human life.

Christian theology has weakened the impact of this demonstration by its exaltation of Jesus into a being of more than human spiritual power. It has tried at the same time to save it by an insistence on his true humanity. The admitted contradiction in the theological "mystery," however, inevitably has the psychological effect of lowering the appreciation of his human achievement and weakening its psychological effect. Yet the record is faithful in its depiction of his human weakness amid human strength, even to the preservation of that cry which theology has rendered so enigmatical, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"<sup>4</sup> This becomes intelligible when we remember what we have seen to be the source of the sense of the presence

<sup>4</sup> Matt. 27:46.

of God. To feel that presence man must be aware of the constraining influence of the critical conscience and recognize it as the constraint of a universal transcendent love. To feel that constraining influence attention must be turned outward from the feeling states and prestige states of the self to concern for human welfare. To become absorbed in oneself is to lose the sense of an other and higher will than one's own. It is no matter for surprise that even Jesus had this experience when, in the impotence of crucifixion, unable to help himself or others, his attention became absorbed for a time in his own pain.

#### JESUS AS SAVIOR

To remember the source of the experience of the presence of God also enables us to understand the peculiar significance of the personality of Jesus in what Christianity calls the "saving" of souls. The constraint of the critical conscience can only be felt when attention is turned outward from the feeling states and prestige states of the self and becomes concerned with the welfare of others, and critically aware of our own frequent failure to make our due contribution. This is achieved to some extent by everyone. We tend, however, to become complacent, excusing our selfishness by comparing it with that of others and developing moral self-satisfaction. Persons of a relatively high level of character are apt to develop spiritual pride. In this way society as a whole is apt to settle down into a condition of spiritual stagnation. This can only be broken by something that forces individuals, particularly persons of the better type of character, to become self-critical. This happens often when the complacency of society tolerates the development of social evils that threaten it with collapse. But the presence in social thought of the memory of the personality of Jesus, and the homage paid to his

spiritual leadership, have become an ever-present power in our social life, warring against spiritual stagnation, and stirring a leadership in every generation which is conscious enough of its own shortcomings to feel the call of God to the service of mankind.

For the individual and for society, therefore, the personality of Jesus has proved to be the power that can break down the last psychological wall that hides the face of God from man, spiritual pride. It is a condition that is always with us, both inside religious movements and without. In Jesus' own day he found it characteristic of the most zealously religious sect of the times, the Pharisees. All too often in history it has come to characterize the descendants of those who have initiated truly significant religious, moral, and social reforms. It consists in self-righteous satisfaction with a moral condition easily attained by good training and good breeding in the respectable circles of society. It leaves the individual unaspiring and contented with himself, and usually also contented with the social order which supports him in his comfortable superiority. But no Pharisee, nor any other person, can measure himself by the moral stature of Jesus and remain self-satisfied.<sup>5</sup> It was this influence which St. Paul found as "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth."<sup>6</sup> It is this influence which produces, in every Christian generation, that "salt of the earth" which preserves our society from moral corruption, or, in periods of stagnation, has become a spark to light again the fires of spiritual life.

The reason that Christians came to call Jesus "Savior" is, therefore, the fact that they found in him their spiritual

<sup>5</sup> This assumes, of course, that the picture of Christ in the synoptic gospels is a broadly accurate outline of the impression he made on his contemporaries. If it is not, his early influence and the development of the picture is historically unaccountable.

<sup>6</sup> Rom. 1:16.

salvation. To those that knew themselves to be sinners, and by reason of their consciousness of sin could find no peace in their souls, he brought peace and the consciousness of the presence of God in spite of their sin. By winning them to see in that condemning conscience the constraining influence of universal and transcendent love he brought them the sense of God's forgiveness and a new power to fight against sin within. To those who had believed themselves righteous he brought a consciousness of their immaturity and spiritual stagnation, the stirring of a deeper and stronger spiritual life, which filled them with a high purpose for the service of God and man, and made them look back on their previous complacency as a condition "dead in trespasses and sin." At the same time he kept them humble and aspiring, conscious of God's forgiveness, aware of their need of Him, able to find joy and achievement in His service.

With this consciousness of a new spiritual life and power for the earthly pilgrimage there went the assurance of the life everlasting. The "salvation" of which they spoke therefore carried the double connotation. It was for here and hereafter. This faith in the life hereafter rested on the assurance of the forgiveness and love of God. It was by a tragic distortion that, under the influence of beliefs derived from rationalistic philosophy, magic and theories of specific verbal revelations, the future salvation came to be thought of as a salvation from the wrath and punishment of God. It thus came to have a negative emphasis and made otherworldliness play much too large a part in the concept of "salvation." These elements, of course, need to be expurgated from Christian theology. They turn attention away from the real experience of spiritual renewal and revitalization. That experience, however, is to be encountered by the Christian of the present day, as in the past, when

through contemplation of the personality of Christ he is brought into fuller realization of the presence of God; and it carries still its valid hope to lighten the valley of the shadow of death.

#### JESUS AS CHRIST AND LORD

It is not without justification, then, that the Christian church has recognized Jesus as "Savior." Can we say the same for its recognition of him as "Christ" and "Lord"? At this point the Christian tradition is beset by ideas of miracle and magic, and the critic who recognizes this cannot help but feel inclined to cast aside the whole tangle of supernaturalism. This was bravely done by that band of honest and intelligent thinkers who formed the movement known as Unitarianism. Yet the fate of Unitarianism should give us pause. It is a movement that has had great intellectual and material resources, yet it has not had the vitality to make progress commensurate with its opportunity. It had abundant allies in the science, philosophy, and biblical criticism of the nineteenth century, yet has manifested little power to win converts. Nor has it developed the capacity to cultivate an intensity of the spiritual life and zeal for service such as is manifested by another small body, the Quakers. Evidently the rejection of Trinitarianism cast out something in traditional Christianity that gives vitality to the religious life.

It is evident that the personality of Jesus has more power to become a savior in the spiritual life of man when he is thought of as "Lord" and "Christ." His being "Christ" or "Messiah" marks him as playing the central part in the providence of God in history. With this view goes the conception of God held by the Hebrew prophets, as actively interesting Himself in human life, working with man to

save him from self-destruction, disciplining a nation and a church to be the means of the salvation of the world, and calling upon individuals to fulfill a mission for mankind. It is a picture which brings God close to man and makes the believer a coworker with God in His purposes. In presenting Jesus as the Christ it makes him the central figure in the fulfillment of those purposes, gives him a place of leadership, makes him the center and the rallying point of a mighty movement in which the individual believer can feel he has a place. In calling Jesus "Lord" the Christian recognizes that in this man of Galilee and Calvary God is present in a peculiar way and that in drawing close to him in love and loyalty one is drawing close to God.

How God could be present in the life of Jesus of Nazareth was a mystery, as it was also a mystery how God could be present in the life of the believer. Yet the religious experience of the Christian required that these incomprehensible things should be accepted as true. A verbal solution was found by speaking of Jesus as the Son of God and of the divine influence in the heart of man as the Spirit of God, or Holy Spirit. God was manifest to man's experience in two different ways—in Christ and in the constraining power within. Yet He had to be thought of as transcendent and beyond all human form. The idea of an anthropomorphic and purely transcendent God in the heavens above could not do justice to man's experience of God. Yet He must be thought of as One. To recognize a multiplicity of gods would be a backward step.

What made this experience of God incomprehensible was that God had to be thought of as personal; yet a person, as understood by common sense, is a single individual private center of experience, each personality completely distinct from every other. Philosophy stated this common-sense view in the doctrine of the soul as a simple, indi-

visible substance. How then could one God be three persons? Indeed, the omnipresence of the Holy Spirit seemed to require an enormous multiplicity of persons, though theology never consented to that!

#### THE TRUTH IN TRINITARIANISM

In the controversy between Trinitarianism and Unitarianism the Unitarians chose the side of logic and claimed that since God is one, He must be only one person. Trinitarianism left the logic of the problem as a mystery and clung to the evidence of religious experience that God is manifest in the human person of Christ and somehow, vaguely, in the Spirit whose presence other humans may feel. No solution could be found until philosophers gave up the common-sense notion of the private, individual consciousness and the doctrine of the substantial soul that went with it. Only when we think of reality as process rather than substance does the mystery become intelligible. Personality, we now see, must be thought of as an integrated system of interest processes. One personality can have several subsidiary centers, or subsidiary personalities, if its organization of interest is differentiated into relatively independent systems not in full communion with each other. The mind of the universe (or of God) must be a vast and varied interrelated system of systems of interests. The distinction between human minds and the divine must be understood as a distinction between subsidiary and relatively independent interest systems and the universal system in which they arise. Human minds, in their finiteness and ignorance of the ultimate purpose of the whole, often behave in ways out of harmony with that purpose. The divine mind is, in one sense, the all-inclusive whole; in another sense, it is the ultimate and basic purpose of the



whole. Whatever we see of mind or purpose that is true to the ultimate and basic purpose of the whole is a true expression of the divine mind.

The insight of the Christian who saw in the mind of Christ a true expression of the divine was therefore profoundly correct. The myth, magic, miracle, and mystery can be set aside. We can see why Jesus has impressed us as in a distinctive sense divine, a true son of God, and, by reason of his place in religious history, *the* true Son of God. There is an element of metaphor in both forms of statement, but the symbolism is profoundly true. Likewise, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit takes on intelligible and acceptable form, for we, as subsidiary organizations of mind within the universal mind, cannot but feel the constraining influence of the ultimate will and purpose from which we are derived. From these experiences of the divine our thought passes to the universal whole of which our minds are a part, and we arrive at the conception of the eternal and universal Person in whom we live and move and have our being, a conception which early Christian thought sought to state in the concept of the first Person of the Trinity.

Thus understood, we see that Trinitarian theology has striven to do justice to the facts of religious experience in spite of a common-sense notion of personality, and a philosophical doctrine of substance and attributes, which made that experience unintelligible. The Unitarian insistence on the logical implications of the common-sense concept of personality was sound, as was its rejection of the miraculous and magical. But the logical use of an incorrect concept led to a false conclusion and a failure to recognize the manifestation of God in history. Trinitarianism, abandoning logic and tolerating contradiction and mystery, became entangled in magic and miracle, but the myth it created

contained the germ of truth. What was needed was not an abandonment of logic but a better psychology. With that to aid us, we can see that the reason why Christianity has found a saving power in the thought of Jesus as Lord and Christ is because, in the light of the simple theistic faith, that thought is found to be profoundly true.

#### THE OLD EVANGEL: A NEW UNDERSTANDING

It is not a new evangel that is needed by the modern world, nor is it simply a return to the old in the exact terms in which it first was stated. It is rather a better understanding of the spiritual realities embodied in the ancient evangel and portrayed in terms of mingled myth and history. What is needed is the evangel which points man to where he can find God and wins him to the love of God.

There have been times in history when it has appeared to many that man has no real need of God. But those have been times when society has been living on its spiritual capital. Such were the eighteenth century and the latter half of the nineteenth. The former ran along smoothly by means of the principles and the dynamic inherited from the Protestant reformation; the latter drew its directives and power from the spiritual revival of the first half of the century. But the eighteenth-century enlightenment ran to wreck in the horrors of the French revolution, and the confidence of later nineteenth-century humanism has been shattered by two world wars and two totalitarian tyrannies. Today, even those who find it difficult to believe in God are coming to see that human society cannot do well without Him.

In the earlier part of this study we saw the reason why. Man needs a God to serve. The human psyche is wholesome only when its interests are predominantly extroverted



and unified. It must find its progressively unfolding ends, the ends in which it finds temporary satisfaction and new impetus, not in doing something to itself, but in doing something to an object beyond itself; and these satisfying ends must be unified in service of some supreme end. That supreme end must be sufficiently attractive to dominate all others, sufficiently rich in its possibilities to draw out all the potentialities of the individual life, and yet so single in its nature as to integrate them all. Furthermore, if human society is to be an integrated whole, then this supreme end must be essentially the same for all; the "god" that each man serves must be the God in whose service all men can find fulfillment, or the service of his "god" will set him at some point against the true welfare of some or all of his fellows.

Without a God worthy to serve, man's extrovert interests are apt to become one-sided, confused, conflicting, and weak. But still worse, he is apt to become more or less introverted. The feeling states of satisfaction, which should function merely as a directive and stimulus to active interests in the objects and affairs of his environment, begin to absorb attention. The states of the self, the prestige and power and sensory gratification in which those satisfied feelings are found, become the ends predominantly sought. Pride and sensuality become the dominant motives, in place of wholesome constructive interests in the affairs of the world. And out of pride and sensuality grow hatred, harshness, unwarranted fears, lust, and greed.

From these dangers man is saved if he has a high God to serve with true devotion; he must find something beyond himself that he can recognize as more worthy than self, which he can learn to love more than he loves himself. This is religion. Ethics alone is not enough. It teaches him to love his neighbor *as* himself. But this can still leave

him divided between the balanced interests of self and neighbor—with the strong tendency that self will win. Thus the second of the two great commandments requires the support that comes alone from obedience to the first. Man must love his God first, that thereby he may find it in him to love his neighbor consistently and well. And he must love his God, not as he loves himself, but with all his heart and all his strength and all his mind. Then he can rejoice in the conviction that God loves him; and he will find that spontaneously he loves his neighbor whom God also loves; and he can even safely (without introversion) love himself equally with his neighbor, loving himself not as an end, but as an instrument in the service of God.

Outside the theistic faith there is no god that can meet this human need. It is not impossible that a man may love his family, or his nation, or his work, or an institution, or some good cause, more than he loves himself. Thus he may be saved from introversion, but at the risk that his peculiar devotion may set him in conflict with men who serve other but equally worthy gods, may blind him to the needs of some who are not served by serving his god, and may cause him to starve the development of some part of himself.

To some extent, as we have seen, the god of humanism can meet this need, but only partially and with little power. For man cannot make himself love humanity because he believes he ought to. Love does not grow in response to effort of will. It grows only in spontaneous response to that in the object of love that wins it. There is much in human life that wins our love, but much also that repels it. To love Humanity is not to love all the concrete human beings, with their hatreds and divisions; but to pity them, and out of pity to frame a hope and an ideal for them. Humanism is the love of an ideal framed by man for other men. It is the response of good men to that which is best in them.

The theist must see it as a response to God without recognition of him. It is a noble and a beautiful thing with a touch of tragedy in its blindness and its fragility. It has some power to keep good men good, but none to make bad men good. It cannot save sinners, for a man must first have gone far with love of his neighbors in the concrete before he can develop a love of all humanity in the abstract. It can arise and live only in an environment that creates good men and enables them to enjoy their goodness. It flourishes in an era of serenity created by a period of spiritual revival that has temporarily solved its problems and spent its force, but it has no medicine for the sick soul, no dynamic to revitalize a disintegrating civilization.

Only the God of theism, then, can answer man's need of an object of supreme devotion. Only in the love of God can the faltering human spirit be made whole. But to love Him we first must find Him. And to love Him well we must learn to know Him. We cannot gain knowledge *about* Him of the kind we have in science, but we become aware of a subtle *acquaintance*, and we grow to know Him as we grow to know the feelings of a friend. It is a knowledge that grows by the mystic sense of communion, by sympathetic insight, and by faith; and, being a knowledge of spirit in action, it is tested by its power to guide the spirit to fulfillment of its needs. No man can live without the awareness of that Presence which constrains and condemns him. But if he does not recognize it as God, he may hate it. Or, without recognizing it as God he may love it, as the humanist does, without the inspiring vision of faith. But with that vision he can grow both in the knowledge of God and in love of God and in the spiritual power that comes from the union of his spirit with the Spirit of God.

Yet this growth in grace is not by the power of man's own will. No man can create love in his heart by his own

act of will. Love cannot be commanded. It has to be won. Man first becomes aware of God as a commanding Presence within. It commands him to respect the rights of other men, to do toward his neighbor the deeds of love whether he love him or not. Before the majesty of the moral law and the commanding Presence he feels behind it man stands in awe. He learns the fear of the Lord, and in fear he serves Him. In that service he finds inward peace and surprising joy, and gradually he grows to rejoice in the law of the Lord and at last to love the Lord his God with all his heart. In love he obeys the will of God, and he may think that his love itself is an act of obedience to the divine command. But it is not. He has not loved God of his own good will, but God has *won* his love by His striving within him to turn him from the ways in which he would only destroy himself to the ways in which he can find inward peace and lasting joy. Man's love of God is but a response to the love wherewith God first loves him.

By the constraining Presence of His Spirit within, God is ever seeking to win the love of men, and those who respond in love become instruments through whom He can seek to win the love of others. Because "it is God which worketh in [us] to will and to do of his good pleasure," we can say that God is revealed in every good deed and in the life of every good man. Particularly is God revealed in the life and teaching of those prophetic souls who have seen the meaning of His love more clearly than others of their age and preached a new and higher concept of His will. Orthodoxy has not erred in finding here a divine revelation, but in sometimes failing to distinguish the divine from features that belong to the human medium, and in failing to recognize the divine as truly, though less clearly and fully, present elsewhere. Nowhere in ancient times has God found a people more ready than the Hebrews to be

persons in whom, and instruments through whom He could seek and find the love of men. Sensitive to the divine Presence, their prophets grew to hear in the moral law the voice of God. Responsive to that voice, they saw its meaning in man's need to love his God with all his heart and his neighbor as himself. This ideal, however, they set forth as God's command, as though man should obey it by his own act of will. They sought to obey this high command and felt their failure as a condemnation calling for some act of atonement. For generations they lived as a people of the law, striving to serve God, but conscious of something missing, that something was yet to be revealed of Him.

That which waited to be realized was the fullness of the love of God, ever patiently seeking man, seeking him and loving him even in his sinfulness. This was the knowledge of God that was needed to win the love of sinners, that in the response of love to God they could find a new power to overcome sin. The Spirit of God striving within man makes all men cognizant to some extent of His righteousness. In the succession of the prophets the Spirit of God had gradually been able to make those most attentive to Him aware of the full meaning of that righteousness and begin to understand His love. But the world had to wait for Jesus Christ for one who could grasp the full meaning of His love, and, grasping its meaning, respond to that love, so that in his life and thought there could be manifested the true life of the divine and the fullness of divine love. It was a vision too bright and a challenge too high for the world of his time, and they crucified him for it. But that, too, was a part of the revelation of divine love, for had he not had to die to be true to it the fullness of its meaning would not have been revealed to us.

As with so many other truths that long have been dark to us, once they are pointed out, and we see them, we see

them clearly and we wonder why we have not seen them before. So with the revelation of the love of God that comes to us through Jesus Christ. Once we see it through the eye of faith we see it clearly. God can then have no other meaning for us than that of a God of redeeming love. The love of God, revealed to us through Jesus Christ and witnessed to by the Spirit of God within us, calls forth from us, if we do not strive against it, the response of love to God, and love to God bears fruit in love to our fellow man.

This was what the apostle found when he learned of Jesus. It is the experience he tried to understand and boldly declared as the great new evangel. It is an experience that thinkers of today must also try to understand, and understanding may declare in words through which ring the echoes of the apostle's voice.<sup>7</sup> "For I am not ashamed of the ancient story of Christ, for it is still the power of God unto salvation to them that heed it, to the children of tradition first, and also to the children of the enlightenment. For seeing that in the wisdom of God the world through science knows not God it is God's good pleasure through the simplicity of the gospel story to save them that respond in faith. Thus, while the children of tradition seek for signs, and the children of the enlightenment seek for scientific knowledge, we preach Christ, and him crucified, though the children of tradition have made his life a stumbling block and the children of the enlightenment regard it as foolishness; but to them with an ear to heed God's call, whether children of tradition or of the enlightenment, in Christ is found the power of God, and the wisdom of God."

<sup>7</sup> Paraphrasing Rom. 1:16 and I Cor. 1:21-24.

## Chapter 9

### THE CHRISTIAN ETHIC

#### THE LAW OF LOVE AND SECONDARY PRINCIPLES

The basic concept of the Christian ethic is that same law of universal and impartial love which is also basic in the simple theistic faith. This involves the interpretation of the moral life as fundamentally existing in the endeavor to produce the conditions of human welfare for all, rather than in conforming to a number of specific moral principles. This is known as the teleological, as distinct from the formalistic, standpoint in ethics—an ethics defined in terms of ends or consequences rather than a set of formal principles. Such an ethic is both more far-reaching and more flexible than the formalistic type. No set of principles defining specific types of action, such as murder, theft, truthfulness, and almsgiving, can specify all the duties and ideals of human conduct; and any attempt to do so involves rigidities which may become contradictory, harsh, and absurd in special circumstances.

The teleological viewpoint is a mark of an advanced stage of ethical thinking. Ethics begins with the recognition of a few specific principles, mostly negative, such as those of the ten commandments. It was by an insight of great significance, rare in ancient times, that Jesus declared that all the law hangs on the two great commandments of love to God and one's neighbors,<sup>1</sup> making the specific

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 22:40. See also Paul's affirmation, Rom. 13:8-10.

principles of the law secondary to and dependent upon the aim involved in love of God and human kind.

Jesus' mode of statement of the teleological point of view in ethics clearly indicates, however, that he did not conceive it as devoid of principles. It is quite inadequate simply to state that questions of right and wrong must be decided by reference to consequences for human welfare. It must be admitted that what constitutes human good (or welfare) must be decided by common sense and scientific investigation, and may change in each particular case. However, common sense and scientific investigation cannot answer the question as to with whose good we ought to be concerned, and whether any one person's welfare should always be recognized as *equally* important as any other. A teleological ethic, therefore, has to decide for or against the principles of universality and impartiality, for a narrow ethic of class or race preferences may be teleological in form. This is the question which, as we saw, was left undecided by the secularistic and humanistic approaches to ethics. What sort of community do we regard as ethically satisfactory? Does it, or does it not, permit of arbitrary distinctions of race, nation, class, creed, or sex? The answer requires an ethical decision expressing the fundamental "feeling" of the moral consciousness. To this question of basic principle the reply of Jesus is emphatic. He extends the meaning of the principle "Love your neighbor" to include "Love your enemies"; and he illustrates his meaning with the story of the good Samaritan who played the part of love to a stranger of enemy race under circumstances involving considerable inconvenience and some danger to himself. This affirmatively answers the question as to universality. The question of impartiality was already answered in the injunction to love each one "as thyself."

In addition to the basic principles of universality and impartiality, Jesus' statement of the teleological point of view implies a place for principles of secondary generality—the moral laws that “hang upon” the law of love. Thus conceived, the moral law spells out the implications of the law of love for certain specific human relations. It means that man must honor his parents, respect the lives and property of his neighbors, and so forth. At the same time, it goes far beyond these injunctions. Furthermore, since they are explicitly set forth as owing their validity solely to the law of love, all problems which arise in the attempt to follow the secondary principles may be resolved by reference to the primary. If it be necessary to rob one man of his property to avoid taking the life of another, then an equal love to both will justify the preference for the saving of life. This is the Christian solution of the problem of absolutism and relativism in ethics. The law of love is absolute; all other moral laws are relative to it. This repudiates the unqualified relativism of secularist ethics and takes its stand firmly for the principle of universal and impartial good will. At the same time, it repudiates the rigorism which would make absolutes of principles of secondary generality.

#### RELATIVISM AND ABSOLUTISM IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Recognition of the relativity of the secondary, or dependent, principles of the moral law is not, however, without its problems. It superficially suggests that moral laws, recognized as generally valid principles defining human rights and duties, may be set aside and violated for the purpose of creating conditions of human welfare which involve goods that are believed to outweigh the injury done in the breaking of the moral law. This is usually described as the

doctrine that the end justifies the means. It has been used to justify religious persecution, violent revolution, aggressive warfare, torture, political assassination, oppression, and injustice of many kinds. The methods of communism in furtherance of the proletarian revolution are the outstanding contemporary example of the application of this doctrine, but they are by no means the only one.

In reaction to such abuses of the conception which recognizes that specific moral laws are secondary principles which function for the primary purpose of promotion of human welfare, there has been a tendency to insist that the absoluteness of the secondary principles is required by the primary principle. This is done in the Thomist doctrine of the moral law as “natural law.” It recognizes that the purpose of all moral law is to promote the good, but asserts that its principles are nevertheless absolute and can be discerned by the rational moral consciousness. This raises the problems of rigorism—the conflicts of principle in special cases, and the occasions when great harm would be done, or great opportunity for good lost, by rigid adherence to specific moral principles. These have to be dealt with by the methods of casuistry, defining and redefining limiting principles attached to the general principles. The more this is done, however, the clearer it becomes that no principle can be regarded as absolute except the basic and primary one—the teleological principle of impartial good will to all, of agape or productive love.

It is impossible, then, to claim intuitive awareness of any set of specific moral principles as embodied in the nature of man. The most we can do is to start from the principle of universal and impartial love and inquire what form of social order it requires us to support. From the common needs, desires, capacities, and weaknesses of man, we can then proceed to frame a set of rights and duties

which, as specific principles, need to be generally upheld by any society that could be satisfactory to the basic moral purpose. These rights and duties constitute the basic moral laws which can be seen to "hang upon" the general principle in the sense that they are so important to the structure of an orderly society, such as would satisfy the law of love, that *they should never be violated except in particular cases where the keeping of the one law would involve the breaking of another*. In such cases we must, by the law of love, choose the lesser of the two evils. The moral laws are thus to be held as not to be violated for the promotion of human welfare or the prevention of ills, but only in avoidance of the breaking of another moral law which, *in the particular case*, is more important. The relative importance of rights and duties in each such particular case have then to be examined in the light of the law of love, the ultimate teleological ethical principle.

The question of what human rights and duties constitute moral laws in this fundamental sense does not raise serious difficulties. Such laws must include the principle of obedience to the duly constituted laws of the state, avoidance of those crimes condemned by the laws of almost all states, fulfillment of the common duties of the family, and respect for all those human rights essential to normal development of human personality. Where there is hesitation as to whether respect for a certain alleged right or duty should be regarded as a moral law it will be because it is of relatively minor importance to human welfare. In cases where it conflicts with a very important moral principle the solution will be clear; and in cases where the conflict is concerned with minor issues only it is not serious. The serious problems arise, not in trying to decide whether a moral law is involved at all, but in deciding which is the lesser evil when two clear and important moral obligations so conflict

that it is impossible to perform both. The decision then has to be made in the light of the law of impartial love. Even then, what is important for the moral integrity of the individual is not that he should *succeed* in correctly assessing the conflicting values, but that he should *do his best* to do so impartially in the light of all the evidence, and act accordingly.

#### THE PROBLEM OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

There has been a tendency in Christian theology to describe as sin all actions and tendencies to action that are contrary to generally recognized moral principles, whether such actions are avoidable or not. This is manifest in the concept of original sin, which applies the judgment of sin where it is recognized that there is no rational responsibility. It also appears in the self-accusations of those who find themselves in the position where they have to choose between two or more actions each of which, considered in itself as an overt act, is contrary to some moral law. Only an arbitrary legalism in ethical thinking can account for such mental confusion. No individual is morally responsible for that which he could not have foreseen and averted by any voluntary action rightly responding to what he knows. And when a person, in a situation where every possible choice contravenes some moral law, does his best to avert the greatest evils by choosing the least, then he does right, not wrong. The term "sin" carries with it the connotation of blame, of guilt, and should never be used to refer to conditions where there is no responsibility, or where a person has not been faced by a choice between right and wrong, or where a person has done his best to avoid doing wrong.



These considerations are particularly relevant to problems of collective action. Man must live in society. To withdraw from society and leave it to sin and suffer without doing all one can to help and to improve it is wrong. That is the error of monasticism. But in society one is a part of a social order which is imperfect, one must participate in an institutionalized life, the institutions of which are often wrong. It is a duty to protest against what one believes to be wrong in these institutions, to use all one's influence to improve them, and to try to direct their activity to produce as little evil and as much good as possible. Day to day decisions, however, have to be made with the institution as it is. These decisions have, often, to be collective. One may oppose a proposal which he believes to be wrong, but when the collective decision is made one may be faced with the choice of abandoning the institution or cooperating in the collective action one believes to be wrong. This is the position of the trade unionist who does not think a strike is justified, of the politician who disagrees with a decision of his party, of the business man who thinks his firm has set its prices too high, of the citizen who finds his country involved in a war he thinks it could and should have avoided.

In such situations it is often very difficult to decide whether the lesser evil is to abandon and oppose the institution or to cooperate in its collective action while doing whatever may be possible to influence for the better its future choices. The abandonment of the institution and refusal to cooperate usually appears as the more obviously right action—being an adherence to a specific moral principle—and is usually the more heroic; but its ultimate consequences may be worse than futile. It may also mean the neglect of many other duties and loss of the opportunity to exercise further influence for good. In such difficult and

involved decisions each person must decide according to his own conscience and respect the conscientious decision of the other person, but the decision cannot rightly be made merely by considering specific rules, nor by asking what the ideal of conduct would dictate if all members of the institution were willing to follow it. The mixture of good and evil in one's own institution and group, as well as in other and opposing groups and institutions, is what creates the problem. It cannot be decided by reference to specific moral rules, but only by judgment of what is best in the specific situation; and in that situation moral rules and social institutions are only a part (though the major part) of the total number of factors to be considered. The two guiding principles which seem to follow from Christ's conception of the relation of the moral law to the law of love must be applied: (1) There should be no departure from clear moral principles so long as it is possible to avoid breaking any. (2) If that is impossible, then, in the light of the law of love, one must do that which is least destructive of human welfare.

### THE COLLECTIVE USE OF FORCE

There are two human institutions which, in particular, seem by their essential nature to contradict the law of love. Both, however, are necessary, and what makes them necessary is the existence of human tendencies to sin. The first of these is the state in its primary function of protection of its members from violence. The second is the institution of property.

Individuals are apt to commit violence upon one another both individually and collectively. The state is an organization, prepared to use force for mutual protection from such violence, whether it comes from individuals and



groups within the state or from without. The use of force for self-protection is an unideal method. The law of love would prescribe longsuffering, forgiveness, forbearance, turning the other cheek. Where an individual with spiritual strength is faced by another individual of little or no greater physical power, and therefore has the opportunity to choose between the two methods (of physical resistance or forbearance and love), the latter is the better and nobler way, provided it does not involve a failure in the duty to protect others. If it is made clear that submission is made from moral principle and love and not from cowardice the wrongdoer himself is apt to be influenced for good. In any case it is a spiritual triumph for the individual who chooses the way of love. This is the meaning of Christ's doctrine of nonresistance. It is clear from each of the examples he uses in his teaching on this question in the Sermon on the Mount<sup>2</sup> that it is individual action within the organized state that he has in mind; not the action of the organized state itself. The problem becomes entirely different when it is collective action and the prevention of evil to persons other than oneself that have to be considered.

Jesus did not present any theory of the state. We have from him only one injunction concerning it. "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's."<sup>3</sup> This recognizes the validity of the primary functions of the state without discussing the questions as to how these should be exercised and how the state should be organized. The Christian ethic sets the goal to be aimed at—an equal concern for the welfare of all—but leaves the method to be worked out by the Christian as best he can, in so far as he has power and responsibility within the state. In this situation the broad outlines of his duty, but only those, are reasonably clear.

<sup>2</sup> See Matt. 5:38-48.

<sup>3</sup> See Matt. 22:21.

First, he must do his best to insure that the state shall perform its function. Second, he must advocate the most ideal method of performing that function, remembering that no method is ideal unless it is practicable, and that no method is practicable unless the necessary collective support for it can be obtained.

Third, he must play his part in the performance of the function of the state by unideal methods, if such are chosen, unless he is convinced that his cooperation in the use of the unideal methods involves a breach of the moral law at least as serious as is involved in his refusal to do his duty to the state. If he is convinced that this is the case, then he must try to weigh the balance of good and evil involved in the alternatives open to him. The question then is not which action is right in principle, for he is faced with a conflict of principle. Nor is it a question of which course of action would be best if everybody concerned were to act in the same way, for everybody will not act in the same way; the problem is raised by the fact that sinners are using sinful methods to prevent the sins of other sinners, and it cannot be solved by asking what should be done if one side or the other were not sinful. The question is one which has to be answered by an estimation of the particular consequences to be expected from the particular situation: considering the consequences to all concerned, will the balance of evil over good be less if the individual refuses to do his duty to the state by cooperating in performance of its function by the means chosen, or will it be less if he cooperates in the performance of the function of the state by these evil means it has chosen?

Fourthly, if the state abuses its power by doing something wrong that is not a part of its proper function, such as an act of aggression against another state, then there is, clearly, no duty to cooperate, but rather a duty to oppose

such action. Unfortunately, international affairs are often so tangled, with both sides being at fault, that it is not clear who is the aggressor; and in such cases the Christian can only do his best with the evidence at hand to decide which state has been most to blame, and act accordingly. If he decides that his own state is the aggressor, however, his problem still is not clear. He has no duty to cooperate in the aggression, but he is probably helpless to stop it and finds it almost impossible to avoid aiding the aggression in some way. Even if not impressed into the army, he must pay taxes which are used in part for the war, and any useful work he does for the community helps to maintain that morale at home which is essential to the prosecution of a war. It is arbitrary for the conscientious objector to a war (whether or not he believes his own nation the aggressor) to draw the line simply at refusal to bear arms. He may help the army of his country less by bearing arms without a will to fight than by working as a street cleaner and paying taxes at home. The Christian convinced that his country is an aggressor must, therefore, consider first whether the greater good would be served by the victory or defeat of his country. Then he must, to the best of his ability and courage, work for its victory or defeat accordingly.

#### THE RIGHT OF PROPERTY

The institution of property appears as in its essential nature contrary to the law of love. The impulse of love is to give, to share gladly with others. The essence of the idea of property is the claim to a right to exclude others from the use of something. This exclusion, however, is necessary in order that human need may function as a requirement calling for human endeavor. Just as it is a part of the discipline of life that nature does not supply all the

needs of man without his labor, thought, and care, so society must cooperate in that discipline by withholding the products of labor, thought, and care from those who can but will not participate in it. This means that those who produce goods must be recognized as having the right to enjoy their use to the exclusion of others. Charity is rightly exercised toward those unable to produce or earn the goods they need, but not without discrimination toward those who do not put forward their share of work in production and their share of forethought and care in the preservation and use of goods. The apparently ungenerous and exclusive aspect of the institution of property is thus not merely a concession to human selfishness; it is an essential feature of the disciplinary function of the environment.

An excellent illustration of this fundamental function of the institution of property was given me by the Protector of Aborigines in the state of South Australia, a civil servant with many years of experience with aborigines in various stages of development from nomadic life to complete assimilation into civilization. The nomadic aboriginal has very little property, and such as he has is almost completely the communal possession of the small nomadic group. Everybody helps everybody else in the making of the few weapons, tools, baskets, shelter, and adornments the group uses, and these are passed around for all to share. The maker of an article may claim a right to first use, but he must allow others to take turns. The ethical insistence is upon the right of all in the group to share, and the duty of all to cooperate in hunting, finding, and making the things needed and enjoyed. If one member of the group performs labor for the white man and receives goods in pay he is expected to share these with his little community. The unexpressed principle of social organization is that of

true communism: "From each according to his ability; to each according to his need."

This custom and spirit is carried over into the civilized conditions of life established on an aboriginal reservation. Here the minimal needs of life can be met by the able-bodied with a small amount of labor. The needs of the aged, indigent and orphan are met by government charity. The people are urged to raise their standard of living by engaging in regular labor which enables them to buy many of the much-desired comforts and luxuries of civilization—handsome clothes, food luxuries, musical instruments, household furniture, horses, and carts, even an old car. Those who attempt to do so are constantly discouraged, however, by the social demand that the use of all such articles shall be shared by any and every member of the community. To assert the right of the owner to exclusive, or nearly exclusive, use is deplored by the community as shameful and mean. Few are careful in the manner in which they use another's property and the owner often finds himself excluded from use of his own by the borrowing rights of his neighbors. The result is the discouragement of industry, thrift, and the care of durable goods. The individual who earns extra money by a spurt of industry is thus encouraged to spend it in brief enjoyments before everyone else puts in his claim. The standard of living remains much lower than it could be because of the discouragement of the able and industrious and the encouragement of the idle and careless.

These considerations constitute the justification of the essential principle of property—the right of the producer of material goods to exclusive use of that which he produces. This right is, of course, hedged by and subject to the limitations of all his duties, including the duty of stewardship, i.e., the use of his possessions for the greatest

good of all concerned. Such stewardship includes charity to those in need, personal frugality, productive use, fair exchange, and adequate reward for services, but it also includes the exercise of the right of exclusion in such way as to maintain the social discipline for which the institution of property exists.

The institution of property as it has developed in our contemporary society, however, is far removed from this elementary but limited right of the producer to exclusive use of the rewards of his labor, and its effects are far from securing the wholesome social discipline created in the proper exercise of that right. The proper social discipline of property is secured only if it is possible to obtain property only by output of socially useful labor (of hand or brain) and if the material rewards are roughly proportionate to the individual effort and its productive result. For the institution to be most effective ethically these conditions should apply to all able to do productive work. The existence of private fortunes which enable individuals to live luxuriously without productive work is as bad, from the standpoint of social discipline, as if such largesse were handed out to favored individuals by the state. In the teaching of Jesus it is clear that possession of such riches is regarded as a spiritual danger. This is the meaning of the advice to the rich young ruler<sup>4</sup> and the well-known hyperbole concerning the camel and the needle's eye.<sup>5</sup>

In our modern society vast masses of goods must be used in the complex processes of mechanical production, over and above the consumer's goods possessed as the reward of productive work. Under capitalism this mass of goods is privately owned, and that ownership imposes a heavy ethical burden of stewardship, with great spiritual dangers, upon

<sup>4</sup> Matt. 19:21.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 19:24.

the shoulders of a limited number of individuals. Some of them recognize this burden for what it is and administer it well. All too many accept it, or eagerly grasp it, as a privilege giving them power and luxury, without proper appreciation of its responsibilities. The corrupting effects of power and the struggle for power are all too clearly manifest. The benefits due to the fact that under this system the management of these vast productive resources tends to pass into the hands most capable of effectively administering them are also clear. The alternative is some form of public ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange. This, in its communist form, has only enhanced the concentration of power in the hands of the few. In the form of democratic socialism it has had limited trial with varying degrees of success. Whether this method could be extended without loss of productive capacity, or with improvement in it, and whether the ethical benefits from the diminution of private power would be offset, or more than offset, by an increase in public corruption, are questions which can only be answered after long-continued experimentation.

In the present situation, and under any conceivable system of economic organization, the individual Christian must find himself facing the necessity of adjusting his conduct to conditions created by the fact that he is a part of a complex of social institutions, that his only effective action must have the cooperation of others in collective action. He cannot always do what he believes to be best, because he cannot win the necessary cooperation. He, therefore, has to agree, very often, to cooperate in executing a policy he believes to be less than the best. Sometimes he finds an actual conflict between his duty to the public, to his workmates, to his family and to his employer. In such cases, where he cannot avoid committing a wrong

against someone, he must consider whether the one action or the other would involve a clear breach of the moral law. That, as we have seen, is to be avoided if possible. If he can by no choice avoid such wrong, then he must choose the lesser evil and, in doing so, may conscientiously claim that he acts aright.

#### THE USES OF LEGISLATION

In a democratic state the Christian citizen participates as a maker of law. This is a position for which none of the more specific ethical teaching of Christ prepares him, because that teaching was not addressed to those in such a position. He must therefore consider his duty solely in the light of the general principle embodied in the law of universal and impartial love. The state then comes to be viewed as Abraham Lincoln envisioned it. "The legitimate object of government is 'to do for the people what needs to be done, but which they cannot, by individual effort, do at all, or do so well, for themselves.'"<sup>6</sup> At the same time, he must remember that there is an inherent evil involved in every action of the state, namely, the use of force, so that if an equal good can be achieved by individual action or voluntary association the total result is better. The force of the state should not be used unless the results achieved have such distinct advantages as to offset the evil involved in using force.

This negative condition carries with it a general implication regarding the limitation of the function of criminal law. The function of criminal law is not to prescribe and enforce the whole moral duty of man, but to prescribe and enforce the minimum part of that duty which is essential to the existence of an orderly society in which individuals

<sup>6</sup> J. G. Nicolay and J. Hay (eds.), *The Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1902), Vol. I, p. 178.

will be secure in their essential rights. This consideration is particularly relevant to such problems as the laws of marriage and divorce. The moral ideal is to choose either a life-long monogamous marriage or voluntary celibacy. However, it is not the function of the state to seek to enforce this ideal by law. The state must consider only what standard of conduct in these matters is both enforceable and necessary to secure the essential rights of citizens in an orderly society.

Beyond the negative duties of the state concerned with criminal law there are, however, many functions of a positive character which need to be performed, and for which the state is undoubtedly the best instrument since it is the only instrument that can insure that each person shall undertake his appropriate share in the performance of these socially useful functions, whether by payment of taxes or actual services. These obligations of the state are considered and spelled out in detail in the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights. They constitute those services which the citizen of a civilized society has a right to expect from the civil organization of which he is a part. His right, in this case, is based upon his need and the moral duty of men to cooperate with one another to see that, as far as possible, every individual has the opportunity to satisfy his essential needs as a member of civilized society. Clearly, if society does not fulfill this obligation to its members, it is inviting them to use illegal means to fulfill such essential needs, or to strive by revolutionary means to change the social order so that they will be filled. A consideration of the essential needs of man will reveal what these rights are, and in so far as they are lacking in any society, it becomes the political duty of every Christian citizen to work to see that they are established and maintained. They may be briefly listed as follows.

### FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS

First, there are the rights of protection from unjustified violence of all kinds. This requires a state with a well organized police force, an intelligent method of dealing with criminals (aiming at their moral and social rehabilitation), and an incorruptible judiciary and administration. It must protect the citizen from assaults upon his good name and character as well as his person and property. It must protect him from the assaults of war as well as from those of criminals in his own community. Protection from military aggression requires not merely national strength in a world of constant threats of war but the organization of the world for peace. In a world which, like the present one, refuses to be adequately organized for peace, a combination of the several methods of securing peace and protection is inevitable. It will involve the maintenance and development of international organization as far as possible, the pursuit of friendly, helpful, and peaceful policies in relations with other nations, the maintenance of armed strength, and combination with other nations of peaceful intention for mutual protection. It is to a combination of policies of this kind that the world owes all the peace that it has ever had, but their periodic breakdown shows the necessity of striving toward a better way.

Second, there is the right to an opportunity to earn a living. This requires the organization of the economic system, not merely to protect the individual in the possession of his property, but to secure to every individual adequate and constant access to the means of production, or a market in which he can sell his services for adequate reward. Under the capitalist system, the means of production are owned and controlled by a limited number of individuals. Such private ownership is justified only so long as it proves

more productive than its alternatives and inflicts no injustices that counterbalance its advantages. It certainly is sufficiently productive to provide adequately for the needs of all in a highly civilized society. Its effect, however, is that the great majority of people have access only to the means of production owned by others, selling their services for pay, and the owners cannot purchase those services unless they can sell the goods produced. In the present loose and competitive organization of the system, this results in large numbers being periodically deprived of the opportunity to earn a livelihood. The livelihood of these people at such times therefore becomes a moral charge upon the society which supports the system—supports it because it is believed to create greater surpluses for distribution than any alternative. It is clearly a moral obligation to use such part of this surplus as is necessary to create new avenues of employment for those intermittently displaced by the system.

To provide opportunity for adequately remunerated work to all able to work is, however, not the only obligation upon those responsible for an economic system. It must also be made to supply the needs of those unable to work—and their needs are not merely those of bare subsistence, but those of self-respecting persons participating as fully as possible in the life of the community. This includes the care of the aged, sick, and afflicted, of widows with children, and of children who, for various reasons, are not adequately cared for by their parents. It would be well if everyone in the community could receive an income adequate to enable him to provide for all these things himself by means of savings and insurance. Yet even the American economy cannot at present, apparently, provide such large incomes for all as would make this possible; much less can less fortunate countries. Further, we are unable to guarantee

that such provision as is made will not be largely dissipated by inflation or other economic losses. And many do not have the knowledge, skill, character, and length of time in remunerative employment to achieve these ends out of a modest income, even if their modest income were otherwise sufficient to enable them to do it. It seems, therefore, that the capitalistic economic system cannot avoid the moral responsibility of making provision for these needs. The Scandinavian countries and several countries of the British Commonwealth have already gone far with such measures. There seems to be no way in which it can be done except by action of the state in its powers to tax and direct economic activity, but the measures required are quite distinct from the socialistic program which envisions public ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. The provisions of the so-called "welfare state" are not socialism in the proper meaning of the term, but simply capitalism organized with a conscience.

A further group of rights which the state must guarantee, as far as possible, to its citizens are those of the familiar freedoms. These include freedom in choice of employer and employment, freedom to marry and raise a family, freedom of speech and assembly and of religion and conscience, and the political freedoms involved in basic political rights and equality before the law. These are, fortunately, so well established in democratic countries that there is not much need for improvement, but we cannot rest content until they are completely secure to all in our own community and also extended to every country in the world.

The final concern which completes the basic needs of personality which a civilized community should insure to its citizens is that of education. Education means the opportunity to enter into the cultural heritage of one's people and to develop one's talents of mind and body to the full. We



have succeeded fairly well, in most civilized countries, in giving to the average citizen the education he needs. We are doing a good deal for the child who is, in various ways, below the average. But we still fall far short of doing all we can to develop the full measure of ability of those above average. The opportunities for higher education are still far too much limited by the economic status of the family into which the gifted child is born. This is a social waste which society, out of enlightened self-interest, should prevent. It is also a social injustice to the child and youth for which the conscience of the community should demand a remedy.

#### MATERIAL WELFARE AND SPIRITUAL NEEDS

This brief review of the status of our society relative to human rights reveals ample scope for moral endeavor. Indeed, it constitutes a clarion call to the Christian conscience for devoted service. In responding to that call, however, there is a danger that something even more essential than these social concerns should be forgotten. We have been speaking of the needs for collective action, but we must not forget that sound collective action can proceed only from a society in which the great majority are spiritually sound as individuals. The evils of the social system must be remedied because they are evils, and because they are destructive of the moral life of individuals. But a social organization which met only man's material and intellectual needs would not be sufficient for the spiritual life. It must also include the activities which inculcate a sound religion. Neither is it possible to do much to improve the social organization without the impulse of a wholesome religion in the life of the community. The democratic process becomes a tussle of rival pressure groups, with little respect for the weak and unorganized, unless society is imbued with a sense of justice

and the rival groups can find leaders inspired by a religious devotion to the ideal of the law of love.

There is need for men of religious devotion and Christian ideals in the places of social leadership concerned with the shaping of the economic and political orders. There is still more need for such men in the life of the church. The collapse of a great part of European civilization may well be attributed to the failure of its churches. The national churches lost their influence among the working classes because they became authoritarian systems supporting the inequities of the social structure; and this made way for communism. They lost influence among the highly educated classes because their authoritarianism preserved an irrational theology; and this made room for fascism. The result was that European civilization lacked the spiritual resources to direct the social changes required by the growth of the industrial system. Only the very small countries, where, by reason of their smallness, political organization is simpler, retained any stability. In England and America the social system has had stability enough, thus far, to resist communism and fascism, because the nineteenth-century spiritual revival among their working classes still retains its strength, and because freer types of religious thought have largely retained the respect of the highly educated classes.

The spiritual crisis of our day calls, therefore, for religious leadership of men who can manifest the spirit of Christ. He was no mere teacher and preacher of a tradition. And, deep as his sympathy with human suffering was, he did not devote himself primarily to the service of man's material needs. He saw the devastating influences of deadening formalism, legalism, traditional theological interpretations, and the spiritual pride of Phariseism upon the religious life of his day. He thought his way through the tangle of magic and superstition to discover the truth and spiritual



power of the simple principles of love to God and man. He waited long for the call to preach, maturing his own insight. It came to him after he had listened to the preaching of John and endorsed that bold new message by submitting to John's baptism. It assured him that he was no unworthy heretic because his mind had rejected so much of the teaching of the authorities: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."<sup>7</sup> He went forth into the desert to commune with the Spirit of God and to pray. He hungered. He wondered in his physical distress whether he might not better give himself to the service of man's physical need. If the kingdom of God meant good government, it might turn the stony desert into a source of bread. Perhaps he saw that the other way might well lead to a Calvary. But he also saw what was man's deeper need—the need of a truth which he had been led to understand and which he must give to the world, though he die for it. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Matt. 3:17.

<sup>8</sup> Matt. 4:4.

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