

DRIVEN UNDER THE INFLUENCE

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DRIVEN UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Selected Essays in Theology, 1974–2004

Frans Jozef van Beeck, S.J.

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for
John Urban
Curé de campagne
and in memory of
Jo Verhaar, S.J.
Friends, Teachers, Friends of the Word

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Preface

I had chosen, impulsively as usual, a title for this collection: “Choices.” Almost immediately, a different title presented itself for my inspection. It was: “Driving under the Influence.” I approved of it, except that it sounded too active; “Driven under the Influence” would be better, especially since this collection of essays shows what I find myself to have been driven by these thirty-plus years, and how.

Still, whatever the collection's title, it will give readers an intimation of every tipsy driver's experience, a feeling also conveyed by the cover image for the book, which captures the uncanny simultaneity of looking forward and backward, and the co-presence of the familiar and the mysterious. Such disorientation, combined with desire and occasional frustration in the course of one's attempts at reaching a dimly known destination in a city, returns us back surprisingly to spots that are vaguely reminiscent of places once traveled before. In any case, in the end I recalled that what to the busy writer may look like responsible, even knowledgeable choices, will strike the older author as having been favorable winds of invention—one seems to have been guided by them, but one does not quite know Whence they came or Whither they went. Is “having been guided” the same as “being offered the choice of accepting past moves?” That is, is it really a matter of “having been Chosen under the Influence?”

Yes, I suppose. But now I am finding myself too close to too bold a claim. Yet in any case, God knows just how I have been driven and to what identifiable purpose, and I have enjoyed the adventure. And what's even more, I remain curious, for “without a future there is no thought,” as Hans-Georg Gadamer told me when he was ninety-nine years old. So let readers choose for themselves and take such bearings as they find their own.

A special word of thanks is due to my good friend, Anthony J. Cernera, president of Sacred Heart University, and all those from Sacred Heart who worked so patiently with me in accomplishing this labor of love, especially David L. Coppola, executive assistant to the president; Sidney Gottlieb, director of editorial and production work for the Sacred Heart University Press; Roberta Reynolds, manager of Creative Services; and John DeGraffenried, assistant professor of Art and Design.

SEEING THE MYSTERIES, ARTICULATELY

Belief in God and the Sense of Privilege

The Bible does not support the view that God is God in the same way at all times.

—Karl Barth

Monotheism

One survey after another confirms that most people in the United States believe in God; most of them attend “the church of their choice” often enough to count as churchgoers. The United States has more houses of worship *per capita* than any other country (as President Bill Clinton reminded us in his 1995 State of the Union address). Close to seventy percent of the population prays, regularly or irregularly, as Andrew Greeley has shown.

Factoids like these regularly make the headlines. This is curious. If belief in God is established so widely, why treat it as news? With believers in the majority, wouldn't we expect monotheism to be treated like any other majority phenomenon: as a matter of course and a generally credible thing? Yet believers in God typically feel that our common belief in God is not what it could or should be. Do they find it easier to believe in God than to believe that others believe in God? Is this behind the often-heard, very emphatic politically-tinged professions of faith in God “and in Jesus Christ as my personal Savior”?

But then again, if God is such a sure thing, why do many of us turn irresolute (or just blandly tolerant) when asked what difference our belief in God actually makes? Not until he was an undergraduate at Harvard did Avery Dulles realize that if God existed, that was “the most important thing in the world.” Just how many of us make this discovery, never mind acting on it? The wag who joked that Unitarians believe “in at most one God” could have cast his net a lot wider. Isn't it odd that our belief in God is as lackluster as it is widespread? But this

raises another question. How on earth did this flat, anemic monotheism ever emerge and take root?

Objection! Isn't our belief in God simply the biblical faith we have inherited from the Christian Churches and ultimately from Israel? Good question. Answer: it is advisable to call this common assumption firmly into question. For this belief in one God, who has created the world but who otherwise remains nameless and dwells above all times and places, is a recent development; not till the Age of Enlightenment and Romanticism did it become widespread. It strikes Jewish believers and Christians (especially Orthodox, Catholics, and classical Protestants), not to mention Muslims, as pretty frigid. This faraway, one-size-fits-all God, who never changes colors and thus rarely if ever inspires people to show theirs, is so ghostly, and especially so neutral, that He or She (why not It?) strikes us only as of some kind of "Super-reality." But such an undefinable, superessential Entity, which is what it is forever and ever, hardly appeals to anyone; no wonder it is hard to appeal to, let alone to call upon in prayer and praise. This Being only gets more incomprehensible as you give it more thought; while it may appeal to our sense of mystery, it remains mainly baffling. "It" could well be adorable, but who is to tell? It is faceless—a God without Countenance; thus, not a God of visions and dreams. While inviting discussion, this God hardly ever elicits real talk; it certainly is not a God who gets prophets to talk (or preachers to "say it"). It inspires neither deeply-felt prayer, nor, for that matter, liturgy—whether of the solemn kind, with noble organ tones, or of the exuberant kind, with singing and dancing and clapping of hands in the Lord's presence. This God is a remote Supreme Being, equivalently absent, as deadly silent as the silent spaces of the universe, of which Pascal wrote that he found them frightening. At best (as the ancient Stoics thought), it is a kind, reasonable gas that permeates all things with its subtle presence (but which nobody has anything much to do with, really). Or perhaps (in the manner of the Romantics or the modern Humanists) it is the Higher Being, preferably to be approached philosophically—in which case it mainly serves to make us, modern, self-conscious human beings aware of our own immortal, profoundly spiritual nature. (So God may have drifted out of our ken, but we are turning out to be more deeply religious. Peculiar, isn't it?)

Again, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim believers have problems with so rarified an understanding of God. Not that they are against it;

they just find it dreadfully incomplete and impersonal. In this God, they hardly recognize the Living God: יהוה, Creator of Heaven and Earth, or God the Father of the Lord Jesus, or Allah, Great and Merciful.

Yet even this minimal divine Being has impact. It gives rise to higher thoughts. It reminds us there is more than meets the eye, more than can be had, acquired, gotten under control, or brought to heel. It suggests that all creatures are inherently worthy of respect, and especially every human being, without exception or distinction based on status, race, or sex. Thus even this ethereal God reminds us moderns of the unity of the world-order and of our responsibility for universal conciliation. That is no small thing in our world, violent and destructive as it has been from time immemorial, and inclined to make a virtue of exclusion, and thus, unable to stop disparaging and harassing aliens, very much off-kilter affectively (and thus sexually as well), and as a result of all this, intensely divided.

In this perspective, straightforward belief in one God helps encourage humanity, in the face of all this dissociation and dissipation, not to abandon the search for new things, new knowledge, new ways. It positively inspires most of us in the United States to peace, quite apart from any sort of “organized religion,” to hold on to our high hopes for unity, reasonableness, meaning, solidarity, equal civil rights, harmony. But many of us disagree. To the atheists among us it makes no sense at all to call the United States “One Nation under God.” For now, most of us find it unreasonable to resort to the courts to get the words “god” and “God” (and the issues they raise) thrown out of the civic vocabulary. But the question is real nonetheless. Is there such a thing as the rights of professed atheists and their children?

Divine Menageries?

Believing in “at most one God.” It sounds a bit cynical. Still, do not most of us find it reasonable to believe in one, and only one, divine being—“One God of the Universe,” as a Passover Seder song puts it? Monotheism is ingrained in us; if there is more than one god, we spontaneously figure, none of them are really God.

That may very well be logically and even theologically correct; it is not what humanity has always and everywhere felt and thought. It is far

from being felt and thought everywhere today. Look around in India or South East Asia or Japan; you may soon find yourself wondering how we modern Westerners have managed to reduce, in the name of Reason, the entire supernatural world to one bland lowest-common-theological-denominator God. Notice the many shrines in India, read one of the Vedas in translation, or drive around in Bali; let yourself be fascinated by the Hindu world, so alert to the staggering and often overwhelming diversity of life forms, life forces, and living spirits—a powerful and far from peaceful torrent of vital energy, emanating ultimately from the all-encompassing but utterly inaccessible One. Or take a walk in Bangkok, with its profusion of statues and statuettes of the Buddha. All of them obviously carry the same message, yet all of them also acknowledge the countless experiences that affect human life, and the innumerable disruptions to which it is apt to be exposed. Those images are meant to place all that scrambling and struggling in the perspective of Nirvana—the cool, transcendent, perfectly quiescent peace of soul that has literally Nothing in common with the hot busyness of life. Or walk in on a *wayang* show in Java, and watch all the gods, godlings, heroes, and demons that populate the *Ramayana* and *Marabharata* epics, recounted from time immemorial; take time to listen to modern Javanese youngsters, and discover that the moral and religious imagination of innumerable Indonesians continues to be controlled by these great epics. And while you are there, visit a Chinese temple in one of the big cities, with its statues and statuettes, big and small, kitschy and refined, and representing not just the Buddha, but also all kinds of gods and heroes and sages and fools and protectors and fiends.

Now those are the kind of places you want to go to—small, insignificant person that you are. So you go, alone or with your family or your neighbors and friends, to make an offering or just to think or implore or lament, with your whole perplexed, torn-apart self, with your family feuds and your whole assortment of worries. There you can get squared away with all those invisible, inexplicable forces that dominate your life.

We, visitors from the West, must slow down to take in what happens in such places. If we do, we may begin to realize, in a surge of either anxiety or realism, how we, too, in the monotheistic West, let ourselves be moved and guided and surprised and baffled and dislodged

and terrified by all kinds of prevalent or controlling mentalities and powers and authorities, big or small, cosmic or human, not to mention the inhuman. Then a thought may occur. Could it be that we Westerners *think* we are monotheists without actually *being* it?

Back home again, you may find yourself stopping by a museum, and savoring the quiet, stately figures, animal and human, by means of which the ancient Egyptians placed humanity's varied story in the context of the invisible world, with its untold powers and forces. Or you may sense that it is unseemly to dismiss, with typically modern arrogance, the worlds of the ancient Greek and Roman gods and heroes as "divine menageries." Yes, you could do worse than read somebody like Cicero on the subject. In his *The Nature of the Gods* he left us a penetrating account of the religiosity of his day, even though in the last resort his assessment of polytheism is mainly negative. But at least he makes you realize that belief in one God is anything but self-evident.

In this way, too, you may begin to see (unless an excess of rational prejudice has got you deaf and blind) how many phenomena in the world really support polytheism. Take our earth with its amazing variety of climates and landscapes; look at the immense realms of plants and animals, not to mention humanity. All of them are undeniably ordered and interrelated, yet also startlingly and awesomely dissimilar, and far from harmonious. Such observations open us to the inherent riddles of the universe. We discover that it is all beyond us, really, it is all a bit much, everything seems charged with invisible energies.

That if anything is the most typical feature of polytheism: the stunning, irresistible omnipresence of the spiritual and the divine within our restless world (and thus not really above it). These invisible powers and influences are legion; it is characteristic of divinity to be multitudinous and to vary according to places and seasons. Yet always and everywhere it is part of human life—frequently benign, sometimes playful, roguish, or mischievous, sometimes appalling or truly malicious, always enigmatic. It is almost palpable as well: a crossfire of forces and processes: lunar, solar, planetary, astral, terrestrial, subterranean, pelagic, climatic, vegetable, animal, ethnic, dynastic, familial, social, political, you name it—a measureless mix of influences, subject to nothing but the One Inexorable World Order, stark blind, unknown, and unloved.

What does it mean to be religious in such a world? Most of all, you find yourself steeped in narratives about the unseen world and its

denizens. Thanks to these, you live in an encompassing system of cultivated attitudes and relationships—all of them incorporated in a web of traditional practices and observances, in which awe, devotion, fear, subservience, and sometimes abject obsequiousness alternate with divination and playing the odds, with cunning, calculated reverence, and desperate attempts at suborning the powers that be or buying them off, and even with recklessness, revolt, and hubris.

To have a dark intuition of the world's coherence and at the same time to experience its obvious disharmony on a daily basis is very perplexing. No wonder the world of polytheism is characterized by division and tension. Each power, even the highest, controls particular locales and seasons; jealousy both destabilizes and governs the world. No wonder mythologies are rife with rivalry. The unseen powers vie with each other; they are partial and rarely compassionate; often they will play games with particular regions and human communities, and they do not always play fair by a long shot. No wonder human life is unpredictable. No wonder human communities are apt to be rivals, if not downright each other's hereditary enemies. The simple fact is that all interests operate at cross-purposes; the nomad's death is the farmer's breath. So, if people want to create any order and stability at all, or at any rate within the circle of their own experience, they will do well to practice their local religion—sensibly and with moderation if possible. So take into account the invisible powers and comply with their wishes, preferably out of piety, but at least out of enlightened self-interest. For only if you oblige the gods, the heroes, and the powers that be are they likely to be in your corner. Or at least you will have a chance of keeping their influence within limits. Of course you must stay vigilant. For that reason, religiosity demands a fair amount of self-discipline. But that again has a real advantage: it keeps you modest—conscious of your place in this overwhelming world. For along with everything and everybody else, you are at the mercy of the play of the forces and the powers. And in the end you are no match for them.

But even that has a bright side: in the end, nobody is morally responsible. The great comfort of polytheism and mythology is the unburdened conscience. For in the last resort life is a matter not of taking things in hand but of handing things over, not of giving of yourself but

of giving in to what plays. So just play along in the ancient game, go along in order to get along, do what you have to do, and if you must, do your worst. Isn't the bottom line that we can't really help it?

Israel's God—God the Father of Jesus Christ

Only those who appreciate that Israel was part of a cluster of civilizations in which polytheism was wholly unproblematic can appreciate the uniqueness of its faith. In the ancient Near East, Israel came to stand increasingly alone. Religiously speaking, it must have looked as explosively aggressive in its world as Islam does in India and Africa today. Like all its neighboring nations, Israel acknowledges the existence and influence of all kinds of gods and spiritual powers. But instead of being awed by them and honoring them accordingly, it praises, lives in awe of, gives thanks to, implores, serves, and obeys God and nothing and nobody else. Israel's first commandment, therefore, is diametrically opposed to everything that passes for religion in the ancient world: "In my Presence, there shall not be any further gods for you." Faith in this God is so singular that it strikes one as nothing short of a revelation, and Israel is the first to declare that it is precisely that.

Thus, ordinary historical realism demands that we, twentieth-century Westerners who think monotheism is only reasonable, allow Israel's claim that its faith in God is a matter of being exceptionally favored—favored beyond reason.

Accordingly, nowhere and never does Israel's faith degenerate into a habit; it remains an immeasurably deep privilege, cherished in a living (and hence flexible) faith tradition. This is confirmed rather than contradicted by the fact that in the history of both Israel and later Judaism one prophetic figure after another will be carrying on against the worship of other gods and of the powers that be. But because Israel's god is God, how could its faith ever become a routine?

Before Israel's God, gods and powers and influences and heroes pale into insignificance. They turn into regular denizens of the heavens and the world: spirits, angels, demons, immortalized human beings perhaps. For God is beyond compare. "Which of the inhabitants of the heavens is comparable to the Lord, and which of the mighty ones is a match for the Lord?" "Not one among the gods is like You, Lord." That is why God is called "God of gods," "Lord of the dominations,"

“Sovereign of the heavens,” “God from everlasting to everlasting,” “Lord of the earth and everything belonging to it.” Obviously, you cannot abandon yourself, in praise and thanksgiving and supplication, to such a God, while keeping at hand the powers that be at the same time, just in case. For it is impossible to serve God only as needed—sensibly and with moderation. With the God of All (“of Heaven and Earth”) you just don’t negotiate or bargain. Once you understand that it is from God that you have everything you have, and indeed that it is from God you are everything you are, you can only dedicate yourself to God with everything you have and are—“with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”

This God is literally above and beyond all that is. First of all in holiness. Israel is amazed at its privileged self:

When Israel went forth from Egypt,
 Jacob’s house from a gibbering breed,
 Judah came to be God’s Sanctuary,
 Israel God’s Dominion.

Incomprehensible. But the height of incomprehensibility is this: this startlingly holy God is not remote. Moses, face to face with God’s holy fire, takes off his sandals and hears: “I Am Who I Am.” He prays that he be allowed to see God’s Glory and hears: “I will favor whom I favor, and befriend whom I befriend.” This means: “Just don’t ask; just accept. Whoever and however I may be, I am with you, you are my favorite, I love you.” God *has* nothing—not even a name; but God *is* Israel’s demanding friend—not faraway but close-in, not menacing but endlessly faithful. Israel’s Holy One inspires awe, but does not create distance; God embraces.

To accept this revelation is being born anew. To be addressed in this fashion lays bare something unfathomable and wholly original at the core of every human being; it awakens a memory that seemed lost forever. In Israel’s faith-experience, humanity recovers and recalls its native affinity with God. This is far more than an intimation of a shadowy existence after death; it is a positive aspiration to everlasting Life. Like no other creature, humanity turns out to carry the Living God’s ineradicable image and likeness in itself. Being human means living by an impulse implanted by God.

This has direct consequences for all Israel's doings. If God "has got the whole world in his hand," then human behavior in the world must not be finally determined by the inexorable play of the powers that be. Israel cannot salve its conscience; it cannot deny its freedom any longer, nor can it satisfy itself with myths, idols, and ideologies; it can no longer sidestep its responsibility for itself, for the nations, for the world. Faith in God is inseparable from the works of justice and conciliation, laid down in Covenants old and new, and (later on, in Judaism) specifically in the Torah. In this way, Israel will always feel the burden of God's plan for the world and humanity on its shoulders; it will serve God by becoming God's agent, creative and increasingly mature, in a world that is not only unfinished, but torn apart. In this way, Israel gets to acknowledge within itself the germ of the truly human life: in our deepest selves, all of us human beings are called to enter upon Abraham's faith and Israel's dignity, as the Roman liturgy prays at Easter. If God is the stamp of our being, the world is ours, and nothing and nobody is beneath our notice.

In Israel's footsteps, Christians have been privileged to watch God actualizing this reborn humanity with a new, utterly incomparable intensity, in the man Jesus Christ: the Covenant embodied, the Torah incarnate, the Word made flesh. "On Him You have conferred authority over all that lives; He is to give everlasting life to all that You have entrusted to Him. And everlasting life is this: to know You, the One True God, as well as the One You sent, Jesus Christ."

Thus favored by God and made responsible for the life of the world we are empowered to go forward, from era to era, from habitat to habitat. For God is tied to neither place nor time, whereas gods and powers and authorities are dominant only here and there and now and then. This is why Jews and Christians, and Muslims as well, cannot sidestep their obligation to declare their God-given sense of both privilege and responsibility to the world, and to express themselves accordingly at all times and in all places. They will do so in various forms of civilization, at home as well as in exile, whether free or oppressed, and for richer for poorer. In the long run, they will even find themselves, in faith, at home in exile, morally free in oppression, and inwardly rich in poverty. They will acknowledge, praise, serve, and represent God, against the grain if there is no alternative; in this way, too, they will get used to taking responsibility, in God's name, if necessary in the teeth of the powers that be.

All of this harbors a deadly danger, of course. One fatal step—a step, we know, taken from the beginning, and no longer to be discounted—and the sense of privilege will degenerate into the sense of superiority: human beings will set themselves up as God’s equivalent, and faith in God will cheapen into self-assertion, intolerance, and fanaticism. Only if, personally and communally, we keep experiencing our faith in the “One God of the world” as a lasting privilege, and not as the most reasonable thing in the world (let alone as God’s seal of approval on our prejudices), will our faith in God be the source, not just of tolerance, but of creative, civilized realism, rooted in a deep, clear-sighted and truly searching appreciation of everything the world offers to our quest for true life.

One God of the World: The Great Surmise

Feeling privileged makes one appreciative; those who feel privileged have a taste for what is truly precious anywhere and at any time. Accordingly, those who feel privileged by God and reborn in faith are apt to discover and appreciate the vestiges of that privilege and the germ of that rebirth in humane civilization of every kind. Great Jewish thinkers like Philo of Alexandria and Moses Maimonides, great Muslim thinkers like Ibn Sina and Ibn Roschd, an early Christian apologist like Justin Martyr, and church fathers like Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine—all of them have perceived God’s Word and intuited God’s countenance, not just in Israel’s prophets and sages, but also in Socrates, Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle, and in the civilizations that have drawn nourishment from those wellsprings of the human spirit. Christian thinkers of the second, third, and fourth centuries came to regard the Stoics, with their disciplined life style and their respect for transcendent Intelligence, as allies, not adversaries. Seventeenth-century Catholic missionaries in China discerned “the Lord of the Heavens” in writings by Lao-tsu and other sages, while Roberto de Nobili, in the South of India, ventured to take the haughtiness of the Brahmin into the bargain, to be able to combine his deep respect for the nobility of their civilization with catholic catechesis. In our own day, Christians have beheld the Spirit of God and Jesus in great souls: Mahatma Gandhi, Dag Hammarskjöld, Jan Tinbergen, and countless other peaceable, dedicated people. It is deeply Christian to say this. Did

not Jesus himself admit that he had found, in some gentiles, the kind of faith he had been vainly looking for in Israel?

Live faith in the Living God, in other words, must prove itself true in our capacity for religious surmise. It must open our eyes to the splendid variety of non-Jewish, non-Christian, non-Muslim religious sensibilities, discernible at all times and in all places. It remains discernible even in the sallow monotheism of North America. For to the eye blessed by faith, the Living God is simply the One Who is ever Present yet ever Veiled, ever Old and ever New, always according to times and places. This is how God is God. Think about it. Pray, without asking if you can. Even better, be thankful and offer praise, without words if you can.

Notes

Originally delivered as lecture at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute for Theological Studies, Jerusalem, in the Spring of 1996. Abridged version published as "One God: And Other Revelations" in *Commonweal* 123, no. 6 (March 22, 1996): 15-19. Just before the original lecture, the author decided, on an impulse of insufficiently discerned origin, to promise his audience that he was not going to vocalize the word "God" wherever he would find it in his text, following the Jewish tradition of not enunciating the "ineffable tetragram" יהוה, out of reverence. The performance "worked"; many were moved. Still, unwilling to put God to the test, the author has never repeated the experiment.

*Humanity Alive to God's Glory:
Ten Basic Quaestiones Disputatae
in Christology and Soteriology*

1. What is the origin of christology?

Christology, which encompasses soteriology, is theological reflection on, and formulation of, the Church's faith in God inasmuch as it centers on Jesus Christ.

The Christian faith-tradition knows Jesus Christ primarily as the living Lord, present now: "I am the first and the last, and the living One; I was dead, and behold, I am the One alive forever and ever" (Rev 1, 18). This faith in Christ alive originates in what has been called, from the earliest tradition on, his Resurrection. Christian faith would be devoid of meaning without it (1 Cor 15, 17); arguably, it would not even exist. It follows that the Resurrection of Jesus is the origin of all christology. Two reflections can flesh this out.

Christ's Resurrection is the origin of Christian worship, which inseparably links the One True "Living" God and the One sent by God (Jn 17, 3). On the one hand, Jesus is professed as Lord "to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2, 11); conversely, God is "blessed" for being "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 1, 3). Through Christ, "the Amen, the Witness Faithful and True" (Rev 3, 14), Christians say their "Amen" to the glory of God (2 Cor 1, 20). Conclusion: no christology must disregard worship as a theological theme.

All speech and thought about the historical Jesus are set in the context of present faith in Christ alive. A dead Jesus leaves (besides deep shame at the manner of his execution) only disappointed hopes (Lk 24, 21); a Jesus raised from the dead prompts christological recollection and reflection. Conclusion: Christologies which speak of Jesus Christ only in the past tense are essentially incomplete.

2. What is the *double christological meaning* of the proclamation “Christ is risen”?

By the Resurrection, Jesus’ divine identity is established, definitively. God, and God alone, has effectively recognized Jesus, “established as Son of God in power, according to the Holy Spirit, by resurrection of the dead” (Rom 1, 4).

This living Jesus is identical with the Jesus who was crucified: “God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2, 36; implied in Lk 24, 39). Consequently, Jesus’ identification as God’s Son also reveals, in retrospect, the divine depth of his life and death. What had been well-attested human history (Acts 2, 22; 10, 36ff.) now turns out to have been God’s work, for if Jesus “went about doing good,” this was because “God was with him” (Acts 10, 38). God was active, mysteriously, even in Jesus’ death: the Christ “had to” suffer to come into his glory (cf. Lk 24, 26).

“Resurrection” is not a metaphor of Christian origin. It was a piece of “apocalyptic,” Pharisaic spirituality, rejected by the Sadducee establishment (cf. Acts 23, 6ff.; Mt 22, 23). It involved the confident hope, held on to amidst oppression and injustice, that final justice, for both Israel and the world, was to be expected from God alone. On Judgment Day, the Lord’s own Day, the Sun of Justice would rise, and God’s genuine servants, “too good for the world” (Heb 11, 38), would be “raised up,” “revealed,” and “glorified”—all those good people who had suffered at the hands of the powers that be because they resisted the temptation to make common cause with injustice (Wisd 2, 10ff.).

The revelation of Jesus alive, “vindicated in the Spirit” (1 Tim 3, 16), activated the Resurrection metaphor to an unprecedented level of significance. By raising him from the dead, God, and God alone, has vindicated Jesus, condemned by the Jewish authorities as a blasphemer and executed by the Romans as a threat to the emperor’s sacred authority, as “the Holy and Just One” (Acts 3, 14). This vindication also identifies Jesus as the Christ—i.e., as the anticipated agent of God’s final judgment: “God has set a day-in-court on which he will do justice to the whole world by someone he has appointed, and he has guaranteed this to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17, 31). All Christian teaching, life, and worship, therefore, imply the prayer: “*Marana tha*—Our Lord, come” (1 Cor 16, 22; cf. Rev 22, 20).

3. What is involved in Jesus' identification as the Son of God?

The risen Jesus evokes, not detached affirmation of, but participation in, his divine identity. Professing Jesus' divine Sonship involves us; involvement with God's Son makes us children of God in actuality.

This participation is gift, and only God's to give. The New Testament conveys this by having the risen Christ communicate the Holy Spirit—the very intimacy of God's Holiness, revealed as the total love-abandon of Father and Son.

Only by the Spirit do we worship God, by professing Jesus as God's Son, as Christ, as Lord (1 Cor 12, 3; cf. 1 Jn 4, 2-3; Phil 2, 11). By the Spirit, therefore, we fathom the awesome depths of God (1 Cor 2, 10ff.; cf. Jn 4, 23-24), and receive access to all truth (Jn 16, 13). Drawn by the Spirit into Christ's Sonship, we are God's children (Jn 1, 12; Rom 8, 16), addressing God as Jesus did: "*Abba*—Father dear!" (Mk 14, 36; Gal 4, 6; Rom 8, 15-16). Hence, what Christ is by "birth" or "nature" we Christians are by "adoption" (Gal 4, 5), "rebirth" (Jn 3, 3), or "grace": we are "sharers of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1, 4), "gods by [God's] grace" (Athanasius).

Yet this gift is not foreign to humanity's natural aspirations. Made in God's Image (Gen 1, 27), we reach the fulfillment of our original selves by being graciously remade in Him whom the Resurrection has identified as "the Image of the invisible God" and as "the Word of God," in whom God created all things (Col 1, 15-16; cf. Jn 1, 3).

Participation in Christ's divine identity is also a matter of hope. Christ is risen, but the full resurrection, with the definitive "Amen! Halleluyah!" (Rev 19, 4), is still outstanding. Our participation in Christ's unity with God, therefore, is imperfect and hidden. Christ is in us "the hope of the glory" (Col 1, 27), not the vision (Rom 8, 24). The gift of the Spirit is the "first fruits" (Rom 8, 23), not the harvest—the "down payment" (2 Cor 1, 22; 5, 5; Eph 1, 14), not the inheritance. Our true life is still hidden, waiting to appear (Col 3, 3-4); we are God's children, but our divine likeness is not yet apparent (1 Jn 3, 2). Creation is still groaning in hopes of sharing in the freedom of

God's children (Rom 8, 18-25); the new heaven and the new earth (Rev 21, 1) are still to come.

4. How does the narrative of Jesus' life and death figure in Christian worship and witness?

By raising Jesus, and only Jesus, God has definitively vindicated him, and identified him as the Savior: "In no one else is there salvation, since God has given people no other name to invoke under heaven for us to be saved" (Acts 4, 12). This "invocation of Jesus" becomes a basic feature of Christian worship; it takes the shape of the thankful rehearsal, in the Spirit, to the glory of God the Father, of the significant themes of the life and death of Jesus, in anticipation of his coming.

Invocation of Jesus also governs the community's witness. Christian witness, therefore, interprets Jesus' life and death in light of his Resurrection. (Bible scholars now find substantial harmony between this post-Resurrection, witnessing account of Jesus' person, ministry, and death, and the picture of Jesus recoverable by historical-critical analysis of the Gospels.)

Accordingly, Christian witness serves a double purpose:

a) To the world at large, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are the substance of the Gospel message. The risen Jesus is held up as the standard by which God will judge the world. Accordingly, the Gospel calls for faith in God in Jesus' Name, and for conversion to the true God in anticipation of Jesus' coming (e.g., 1 Thess 1, 9-10; Acts 10, 36- 43).

b) Within the Christian community, the rehearsal of Jesus' ministry and death—model of the life of holiness and justice—spells out the Gospel commitment to discipleship: no exclamations of "Lord, Lord!" to the living Christ without doing the Father's will, in imitation of Jesus, in watchful anticipation of his coming (cf. Mt 7, 21; 25, 11). (This tradition of rehearsing the life and death of Jesus for the benefit of the Christian community eventually produced the written "gospels.")

5. By what interpretation can Jesus' life and death be viewed as having saving significance?

The theme of the Christian story of salvation is the person of Jesus, now risen, as he went about not just teaching, but embodying a new, unprecedented, urgent offer of salvation, calling for total abandon to the living God, and defeating the powers of evil. He encountered people, in word and deed, in a ministry of compassion that set aside accepted forms of socio-religious discrimination; he challenged the sole authority of the Mosaic Law. He did so with unprecedented, authoritative freedom—evidence of an original sense of mission. Most importantly, his style implied an incomparable intimacy with God, in which he invited his followers to share (Mt 11, 25-27; 5, 43-48). His person and ministry elicited faith, but not generally or for long. Miserably, he turned out to be altogether too much to take; he met with misunderstanding and rebuff; in the end, a disciple betrayed him to his enemies; sentenced as a blaspheming criminal, abandoned, desolate, and crucified like a foreigner and a slave, he accepted what was inflicted on him, and entrusted himself and his life's mission wholly to his Father's saving will.

The treatment Jesus received reveals a world estranged from its God: "He came into his own, yet those who were his did not welcome him" (Jn 1, 11). Much as the world yearns for a lost innocence, it is misguided in the pursuit of it; enslaved by "the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen 3, 5), it is hell-bent on judgment, and determined to bolster alleged right by might. Both the just and the unjust repay sin with sin, and will let the Holy and Just One be traded for a murderer (Acts 3, 14).

Put to this test, Jesus clung to God (Mt 4, 1-11). He neither made common cause with sin, nor even did he "resist the evil one" (Mt 5, 39) or turn against anyone in judgment (Jn 3, 17; 12, 47). Instead, he freely took on, absorbed, and outsuffered humanity's violence and sin, as well as the shame of crucifixion (Heb 12, 2); willingly bearing others' sins, "he carried them in his body to the tree" (1 Pet 2, 24). Loving and forgiving his enemies even while suffering death at their hands, he remained faithful to his mission as God's agent of salvation, determined to let nothing get lost, but rather to bring it home to God (cf. Jn 6, 37-40).

In this way, Jesus revealed a God who is "for us" (Rom 8, 31), "reconciling the world to himself, not holding their sins against them"

(2 Cor 5, 19)—a God who “shows his love for us by having Christ die for us while we were still sinners” (Rom 5, 8). In the risen Christ, therefore, “we have an advocate with the Father, . . . and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the whole world as well” (1 Jn 2, 1-2). Consequently, Christians live “with their eyes fixed on Jesus, who sums up faith from start to finish” (Heb 12, 2), and who draws them along the way of perseverance he went to where he is—“to the throne of Mercy” (Heb 4, 16).

6. What is the fundamental principle of christology?

Easter proclaims the identity of the raised Son of God with the Jesus who ministered and died. This remains of pivotal significance: the Tradition insists on faith in “One and the Same Lord Jesus Christ.”

This must be interpreted dynamically, in terms of an encounter involving a divinely initiated mutuality of sharing. In Jesus Christ, the living God meets humanity, in an “admirable exchange” of “natures.” The Church Fathers never tire of repeating, in endless variations, the exchange-principle: “The Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ . . . , out of his limitless love, became what we are, so that he might make us what he is” (Irenaeus). “God’s Only-Begotten Son, wishing us to share in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that, having been made man, he might make human beings gods” (Thomas Aquinas).

In Jesus Christ, therefore, God “recapitulates” (Eph 1, 10) and transforms humanity by graciously participating in it. This draws humanity and world into participation in the divine life, which also restores them to their original innocence. This is accomplished by Jesus being the embodiment, both of God and of the fullness of creation; specifically, he also embodies everything we human beings are, including his being “tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4, 15). Yet the depth of the divine participation in the human condition is revealed by Jesus’ enduring our inhumanity, without paying back in kind (cf. 1 Pet 3, 21-25). This implies two important truths.

First, far from being centered in himself, Christ is entirely other-related, both in his divinity and his humanity. A perfect windowpane is near-invisible and draws almost no attention to itself. Similarly, Jesus’ crucial perfection lies, not in his being perfectly self-identified (“a strong Ego”), but in that he finds his identity by being wholly “empty”

and transparent, both toward God and toward humanity. His divinity is his being “God from God”; his humanity is his being “for others”—Gentile and Jew, slave and free, woman and man (cf. Gal 3, 28). In him, therefore, God’s “love of humanity has appeared” (Tit 3, 4) and humanity has gained access to God: “I am the way” (Jn 14, 6).

Second, the central purpose of Christianity is not the betterment of humanity, but union with God. There are a hundred admirable ways to become better, more just, and more humane, but only one way (Jn 14, 6) to become divinized. Christians are very much called to practice goodness, justice, and humanity; they are not sanguine about unaided human effort. Humanity tends to be self-maintaining and self-righteous; we do justice with a vengeance, without compassion. Christians expect true justice from union with God, who, by graciously taking on humanity in Christ, disarms it. Orthodox christology blocks the reduction of faith to ethics—both autonomous and heteronomous.

7. Did Jesus learn from experience? Did he gradually discover who he was? Or did he, as God’s Son, only appear to grow?

These questions involve the meaning of the doctrine that Jesus Christ is “perfect in humanity.” This is crucial to Christian life, for if Jesus, on account of his divinity, was incapable of human growth, any real imitation of Christ will be impossible, and hence, an unsound ideal.

While eloquently conveying Jesus’ all-embracing sense of God and his love of all, the Gospels provide no information about his personal life-experience. Hence, well-intentioned statements like “Jesus discovered who he was at his baptism” are fanciful. Yet the Gospels do mention Jesus’ growth (Lk 2, 40–52), and present him as exultant (Lk 10, 21), troubled (Mk 14, 33; Jn 11, 33), upset (Lk 19, 41), impatient (Mk 8, 17f.), and even as ignorant (Mk 13, 32). Jesus’ divine Sonship clearly does not demand that he be pictured as a person constantly in sovereign control, incapable of truly human life-experience.

The only common New Testament tradition that involves Jesus’ inner history is that he did not sin (cf. 2 Cor 5, 21; 1 Pet 2, 22; Jn 8, 46; 1 Jn 3, 5). This cannot mean he was unable to sin; incapacity for moral choices would have made him less than human. It must mean that he “could not get himself to sin”; that is, he was able not to sin: he was “tempted as we are, but did not sin” (Heb 4, 15).

We can reverently try to understand this. Far from diminishing any person's free and conscious humanity, union with God enhances it. Unconditional union with God, therefore, must have drawn Jesus into an ever deeper human (i.e., moral) maturity. Consistent obedience to God must have made him ever more deeply free as new decisions came his way; his pervasive sense of God must have resulted in ever deeper understanding as he learned more. Far from being effortless, this growth must have been a struggle: as a deeper understanding of God, the world, and himself became available to him, mystery must have deepened, too. Total abandon to the Father must have given him an increasingly uncomfortable wisdom (cf. Mk 3, 21; 6, 2-6). The obtuseness of others must have tested his patience (Mk 8, 17f.); prophetic insight into others' thinking (Mt 6, 8; 12, 25; Lk 9, 47) must have involved the painful realization that he could not entrust himself to them (Jn 2, 24). Yet for those very others he lived.

Jesus' unity with God was not a matter of being in control—of having the kind of “grasp” that gives one a sense of what one is all about and thus, an advantage over others (Phil 2, 4). Rather, it was a matter of voluntary “emptiness” (cf. Phil 2, 6-7)—of service and obedience in total abandon, down to a slave's death. It was a school of testing and endurance, in increasing loneliness.

Divine compassion, not power, is the motive of the Incarnation; accordingly, Jesus' human experience as God's Son must, in the end, have been one of bottomless inner suffering. Jesus' “whole life was cross and martyrdom” (*The Imitation of Christ*); he did not come to his passion and disgraceful execution unprepared. “From what he suffered he learned what obedience is” (Heb 5, 8).

8. Why did Jesus have to suffer?

This question invites a retort. Given the world we live in, how could Jesus *not* have suffered? No one should “have to” suffer, yet—natural disasters and mishaps aside—humanity does inflict suffering and death on itself and the world. The fact that, of all people, Jesus, “who did nothing wrong” (Lk 23, 41), “had to” suffer, and at the hands of persons no better or worse than ourselves, reveals both the fragility of the cosmos and the ugly depth of human sin.

The Christian faith does not glorify suffering and death in themselves. Jesus was in agony about them and prayed that they might pass him by. Yet he did willingly accept them, out of obedience to the Father's will (Mk 14, 32-36; Phil 2, 8).

What the Father wills is not suffering but *the salvation of all* (1 Tim 2, 4). Yet true salvation is open only to a humanity responsible as well as responsive to God. Simple indulgence would have been an easy way out, but it would have consigned humanity to perpetual infancy: God could have fondly smiled, forever, at our pardonable mistakes. But such a humanity does not really *matter*; it would be unworthy of God.

Conceivably, God could have held humanity responsible by punishing it, consigning it to the deadly consequences of sin. God, however, *graciously chose to enable humanity to make amends*, by freely "giving up" his Son for us all (Rom 8, 32); Jesus, in his turn, "gave himself up" (Gal 2, 20), freely shouldering responsibility for sin and its consequences. In so abandoning himself wholly to the Father, he took the sting out of sin and death and turned them into the very stuff of life. The chasm of sin and death now help reveal the measure of God's mercy. *O felix culpa!*

9. What does it mean to say that Jesus suffered and died "for us"? Was the world redeemed by a heavenly transaction which occurred without our involvement and from which we benefit without our consent?

The New Testament uses several Greek prepositions translated by "for": *hyper* ("Christ died for all": 2 Cor 5, 14-15), *peri* ("he is the expiation for our sins": 1 Jn 2, 2), and *dia* ("for whom Christ died": 1 Cor 8, 11). There is another Greek preposition meaning "for": *anti*. Significantly, with the exception of the lone expression "ransom in exchange for" (*lytron anti*: Mk 10, 45 parr. Mt 20, 28), the New Testament does not use *anti* in a soteriological sense.

Anti implies substitution; it means "instead of." The New Testament never says that Jesus suffered "instead of us," which would imply that Jesus settled the debt humanity owed to God by excluding us from what he did and suffered by way of satisfaction. It would also imply that God had decided to "impute" Christ's merits to us, with no cost to ourselves. The world's salvation would have

been a matter of divine power overriding human sinfulness and responsibility.

Peri and *dia* mean “for the sake of,” and *hyper* “in behalf of.” Therefore the New Testament says that Jesus Christ, in living, dying, and rising from the dead, was moved by us and represented us. Christ shared our predicament out of sympathy and compassion, to enable us to live for God again. This is the meaning of the doctrine that the Word has “assumed human nature.”

Substitution excludes participation; representation invites it—indeed, from our point of view, it demands it. Christ’s saving work, therefore, does not get us off the hook; on the contrary, having been “bought free dearly” (1 Cor 6, 20; cf. 1 Pet 1, 18-19), *we are restored to freedom and responsibility before God and called to follow Christ*, for the salvation of the world. This is why the praise we offer to God must take the form of rehearsing the story of Jesus, not only in word, but also in active and patient discipleship. Attracted by Christ, we are called, like Paul, to “spend and be spent” (2 Cor 12, 15).

The great Tradition unequivocally rejects the unfortunate (yet widespread) view of Jesus as *scapegoat*, implying that the Father owed it to himself to demand damages, and that consequently, the Father’s will was for punishment in return for atonement; in this construction of the Atonement (often wrongly attributed to Anselm and his treatise *Cur Deus homo*), Jesus submitted to being dispatched *instead of us*—i.e., as our substitute, to appease an angry Father-God, forced by his own Majesty to demand satisfaction for the infinite offense involved in even the smallest human sin. The faith-conviction which the Tradition endorses is entirely different: (a) the “law of Christ” calls for the shouldering of the burdens of others’ (Gal 6, 2), and (b) God’s blessing rests on the patient, willing acceptance of undeserved suffering, in imitation of Christ the Lamb (cf. Jn 1, 29; 1 Pet 1, 19; 2, 19- 24; 3, 14; 4, 13-16; Mt 5, 10).

10. Does faith in Jesus as sole Savior imply the rejection of non-Christian religions and cultures, and of the great figures held in reverence by them?

The perspective of Christ’s Resurrection is God’s universal judgment; this commits the Church, along with her message, from the

outset to the whole world. From the outset, too, the Church has had to learn, often painfully, and never without dialogue with the world, new ways to give shape to this universal mission.

Christian mission does (or should) not aim at imposing an alien religion on the nations. Christians believe that God, in Christ, recapitulates and transforms all of humanity, “overpowered by sin” (Rom 3, 9), by graciously participating in it. Simply in virtue of common humanity, therefore, all human persons and nations, no matter how sinful or virtuous, are “naturally Christian” (Tertullian), if (perhaps) “anonymously” (Karl Rahner). To proclaim Christ to them is to call them to the fullness of their original integrity.

A Church that anticipates God’s judgment does not meet the world judgmentally; she is too aware that its own faith is incomplete. While it does have “the word of the truth, the Gospel” (Col 1, 5) to proclaim to all nations, it knows that it, too, is incomplete till all of humanity’s riches are incorporated into Christ. Moreover, the imitation of Christ, who admired the faith he found outside Israel (Mt 8, 10; 15, 28), requires the Church to behave as the agent (“sacrament”) of salvation, not judgment (Jn 3, 17).

Hence, while always calling for conversion “away from idols” (1 Thess 1, 9), the best of the great Tradition has met the world in an attitude of critical sympathy. Far from committing her to intolerance, the knowledge of Christ can enable the Church to understand and cherish the world, without expecting to understand or be understood quickly. Patient, discriminating appreciation will enable it to discern the activity of God’s Word wherever wisdom and virtue are found, and to be edified by them. This first applies to Israel and her models of longsuffering faith (Heb 11, 1-12, 2), but then also to the great souls of all times (“from Abel on”) and places, who have lived and suffered for wisdom and justice. “Such were Socrates and Heraclitus among the Greeks, and those like them” (Justin Martyr). There is no good Christian reason not to include in this “cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12, 1) the Buddha, Lao-tsu, Mahatma Gandhi, Dag Hammarskjöld, Martin Luther King, and countless other peaceable men and women touched by grace (Lk 2, 14).

Judgment can take two forms, disapproval and approval. Christians, therefore, can commit two sorts of errors in this regard. Out of a mistaken sense of superiority, we may think that our commitment

to Jesus Christ obliges us to carp at non-Christian religions and cultures and at the great figures held in veneration by them without discernment; alternatively we may think, out of a lack of a sense of the privilege involved in being a Christian, that Christian love of humanity and the world entails the obligation to admire them in an undiscerning way.

Notes

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This theological essay is studded with references to Scripture. Their purpose is not to prove that the doctrines formulated in the essay are right (“orthodox”) by undisputed biblical standards. Instead, the ten questions-and-answers pull together the *de facto* consensus of the catholic tradition as it stands today. Put differently, the scriptural quotations serve the vital purpose of acquainting the reader with the “family idioms” of the Catholic (and Orthodox and classical Protestant) tradition.

The order in which the ten issues are proposed is broadly historical. The first five questions and answers substantially represent the scriptural record and the first three centuries, but the probable motives attributed to Jesus Christ in the fifth answer owe a lot to twentieth-century efforts to enter into the consciousness of the historical Jesus. Questions and answers 8-9 represent the sixteenth-century debates between the Catholic Church and the chief Calvinist (and Jansenist) interpretations of Christ’s saving work; these debates are largely (but by no means wholly) a matter of past history.

On Professing the Uniqueness of Christ

Introduction: The Triple Embarrassment of Christian Doctrine

Doctrines are, at root, nothing but the Church's praise of God, even though spoken and heard outside worship, by way of witness. What we sing and speak before God by way of praise is indeed couched in words that are ours, but they are elicited from us by the Risen Christ, present in the Holy Spirit. Our words before God, therefore, are fruits of the Spirit, not original human achievement of the liturgical or theological kind. Risen beyond the wildest human expectation, Jesus Christ has opened for us unprecedented access to where God is enthroned in graciousness; hence, it is through him that we are to offer up, in everything we do, and indeed in our very persons, an offering of praise to God (Heb 4, 16; 13, 15; Rom 12, 1).

Unsurprisingly, the first form this praise takes is words: "the fruit of lips that acknowledge [God's] name." Our words of praise to God, recounting how Jesus lived and died and lived again, so as to be Lord of the dead and the living (cf. Rom 14, 9) turn out to do more justice to God than our own lives. This is hard to admit; Pelagius is alive and well in everyone. But we are to remember that, even though our lives have the advantage of being real, they have the drawback of being far from perfect; they fall short of the glory of God. And while it is true that we can (and often do) use words to *escape* from deeds, we also use them to *express* our aspirations and our commitments. The Risen Christ draws out of his Church the *Halleluyah* ("Praise God") to his Father in the form of the story of his life, death, and resurrection. In doing so, the Church is drawn into a life commitment that will transform it, a commitment such as Paul details in Romans (Rom 12, 2-15, 12), wedged in between a call to worship and a wish for hope (Rom 12, 1; 15, 13). The Christian life is a life of discipleship and *imitatio*

Christi, but its soul is worship, in anticipation of the Lord's coming: "*Marana tha*"—"Come, Lord Jesus" (1 Cor 16, 22; Rev 22, 20).

This means that our Christian witness, that echo of worship, embarrasses us, and it does so in two ways.

Firstly, the word of faith is not our own: it is drawn out of us by the Risen Christ; the Christian *kerygma* presents itself for acceptance, not as a "human word," but "as what it really is, the word of God, at work in you, believers." The presence of a kind friend or a good-looking work of art can prompt us to respond from the heart, with words we did not know we had inside us, and we feel a bit embarrassed uttering them, albeit delightfully. Analogously, the presence of "the glory of God, in the face of Christ" prompts us to speak words too big for our mouths and for others' ears (1 Thess 2, 13; 2 Cor 4, 6). What we do is, quite literally, "boasting," as Paul repeats. Put differently, all Christian witness is overstatement, though encouraged and authorized by God.

Secondly, the word of faith which we speak puts our lives to shame; our walk belies our talk. Being a Christian means living by overstatement; we are always tempted to tailor the faith we profess to the lives we lead, if only to avoid the sense that we are living above our station, or worse, that we are being hypocritical. Then it is time to recall that our witness draws its authority, not from the power of our words or the appeal of our lives, but from God. Others may indeed recognize us as Christ's disciples from the love we show one another; we realize that such love as we show, and indeed our entire "competence," is from God (Jn 13, 35; 1 Jn 4, 7; 2 Cor 3, 5).

Thirdly, Christian doctrine is the Christian articulation of faith; it is witness couched in the language of statement. It, too, therefore, is, at root, authorized by God, and all the more uncomfortably so for being part of the Christians' effort to "give an account of the hope" that is in them to those who want an explanation (cf. 1 Pet 3, 15). For that is yet another thing about doctrine: it mediates between faith-community and world, both by helping identify and define the former and by trying to gain understanding in the latter. Thus the pressure to hedge on doctrine comes, not only from within, but also from the world we live in, the world we are called to appreciate and love, not flatter or kowtow to.

Thus, in the final analysis, we find ourselves, with Christian doctrine, in a triple bind of embarrassment: (a) we speak out of God's

Spirit, not our autonomous selves; (b) our lives only partly bear out what we say in words; and (c) we are called to account for what we say by people who do not necessarily share what we have come—precariously—to believe and understand in worship and mutual love.

Christ's Uniqueness: An Embarrassing Doctrine

If doctrine is embarrassing in and of itself, some doctrines are more so than others, depending on times and places. One of today's embarrassments, even among Christians, is saying of Jesus Christ, without qualification, that "there is salvation in no one else, and God has made it so: there is here among people on earth no other name to be invoked by which God has decreed we will be saved."¹ Saying such a thing smacks of intolerance and self-righteousness; it raises the suspicion that we think there is incontrovertibly no salvation outside the Church, in the sense that at least all non-Christians are damned; and it tends to associate us with imperialists, colonialists, and other advocates, real or alleged, of the superiority of Western culture, including its religion.

Thus, to get out of this bind, many of us feel the urge to tone down the affirmativeness of the Christian profession of faith to the level of earnest conviction; we may say that "in my personal opinion," Jesus Christ is Savior "for me" or "for us." Not a few *bona fide* theologians, too, have (rightly) decided that intolerance in relation to, and condemnation of non-Christians cannot possibly be part of the Christian faith. Many have (however questionably) come to the conclusion that Jesus must not be professed as universal Savior, except in the sense that he is one of the numerous ways in which God has been with all of us and dealt with us all. Thus, over twenty-five years ago, John Hick could write: "Christianity will—we may hope—outgrow its theological fundamentalism, its literal interpretation of the idea of incarnation."² It is not only the comparison with world religions that prompts us to tone down our profession of Jesus Christ; ecumenism—strongly colored, in the United States, by the experience of religious pluralism as a public blessing—adds its share of pressure. While religious devotion to the person and work of Jesus Christ is undeniable in all forms of Christianity in the United States, the churches and denominations show a whole range of degrees of affirmativeness in declaring just where Christ's significance lies. To mention just one example, Evangelicals are

quite forceful in urging us to accept Jesus as our “personal Savior”; still, the emphasis on personal raises the question whether we are dealing with no more than individual conviction—something perfectly acceptable in a country with deep roots in the Enlightenment conviction that religion is a private affair. Recognizing the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as what the Catholic and Orthodox traditions have taken it to be, namely, as an indispensable and obligatory element of a Christian Church’s public and communal faith-commitment—is a different matter altogether.

So the pressure is on. In a situation like this, it is tempting to look for quick answers to alleviate the stress, whether of the “liberal” or the “conservative” kind. Then it is time to remember the repeated calls for perseverance in the profession of faith, in the Letter to the Hebrews. Precisely because the community has a “sure, firm anchor of the soul” secured in the everlasting Holy of Holies, where Jesus has preceded them (Heb 6, 19), they can afford to be patient, without grasping for quick remedy. Doctrine is part of the Church’s perseverance, of its having settled in for the long haul, once the Parousia appeared to be longer in coming than (perhaps) originally expected. The pilgrim Church has, as part of its traveling equipment, *pistoi logoi*.³

In this connection, two questions are worth asking. The first concerns history—always a good school for perseverance. Has the Church had to deal with the issue before, and if so, how? The second concerns the interpretation of the New Testament and the early Tradition; it will be treated later. So for now, can it be argued that the first generations of Christians positively meant to affirm the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, or must this feature of their profession of faith be put down to their limited world-view?

Some Pertinent and Distinctive Historical Developments

The question, as we know it today, has been with us since the eighteenth century, with its interest in other, non-Christian religions. Curiously, that interest was not so much in other religions for their own sakes; rather, it was predicated on interest in Religion as a universal, natural human phenomenon. Other religions came to be cited to witness that Christianity was only one of the many forms general human religiosity had taken. John Toland had made this underlying

point as early as 1696. His personal journey had taken him, away from the Catholicism of his native Ireland, by way of the Protestantism of Glasgow and Leyden, to Oxford, where he published his book *Christianity Not Mysteriorus*. Toland argued that there is nothing essential to Christianity that cannot also be developed on the sole authority of Reason; and all that is not essential to it is just the result of pagan intrusion.

Toland's book still caused an uproar, but slowly a widespread, widely authoritative conviction took shape: "Religion"—that is to say, natural, universal religion—is humanity's real, quintessential blessing; special doctrines, moral codes and rituals are at best secondary. (Toland considered them quite simple: just live like Jesus and the apostles.) After all, had Gottlob Lessing not written in Germany, "of what interest to Christians are theologians' opinions, so long as they feel blest in their faith?"⁴ About century later, in distant America, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were to agree.

Thus, normative, doctrinal Christianity found itself summoned before the allegedly impartial tribunal of Reason, and challenged, for the first time in about 1500 years, to account for its uniqueness. This uniqueness ultimately lies, so the traditional profession of faith had always maintained, in the absolute uniqueness of the person of Jesus Christ. Still, 1500 years is a long time, and even Christians sometimes forget. Over the years, they had come to take an important fact for granted, namely, that the Christian faith was the normative political (and eventually also intellectual) climate, and that this climate centered upon the divinity of the *Logos*, uniquely Incarnate in Jesus Christ. For all its internal disagreements, the Christian Church had developed its teaching in an imperially steadied, increasingly unified climate, firmly set by Nicaea in 325 A.D. and Constantinople in 381 A.D. It continued its course, never mind how precariously, at Ephesus and Chalcedon in 431 A.D. and 451 A.D., piloted by the classic theologians of the fourth and fifth centuries: Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers, and, in the West, Hilary, Ambrose, Augustine, and Leo the Great. In 361-63 A.D., the versatile and determined Emperor Julian ("the Apostate") tried to reestablish the old Roman religion, but the effort proved abortive. The Christian faith, already at this early stage of its development, had enough inner coherence to last as the religion of the Empire.

This leads to an important conclusion. The great doctrinal and theological tradition, which took shape, roughly, between the fifth and sixteenth centuries, and out of which most of us are still living, was never forced to deal with our modern issue in any serious fashion. Thus, three centuries ago and even today, the new theological issue of Christ's uniqueness of has not found us very well equipped. The long "Constantinian Era" had by and large prevented the development of a theological account of Christ being the world's universal Savior that combined doctrinal affirmativeness and openness to other religious cultures.

Long before the Christian Church had become established, however, there had been a serious intellectual challenge, by a man who saw much in Christianity to commend it, especially its *Logos*-theology, but who seriously objected to what he perceived as the Church's intolerance and its unwillingness to respect the state. It was the particularity of Christianity that Celsus, the late second-century philosopher, rejected in a special way. In his *Alethes Logos* ("True Reasonableness"), he characterized all religions as essentially local and particular; the objects of religions' attention, so he maintained, were local gods, spirits, and demons. But despite their plain particularity and grossness, Celsus observed, all religions tended to advance absolute claims—something that can only lead to barbarism. Therefore, he argued, it is in the interest of humane civilization to reject the absolute claims of every single religion. This can only be accomplished if the human mind everywhere places all religions in the light of the transcendent Reason or *Nous*, in which it participates; only true reasonableness will realize that no single religious group can put its God or indeed any gods above *Nous*.

Celsus appreciated the fact that the Christian faith claimed universal significance, but he was offended by its insistence on being its own particular self—an insistence, Christians know, is nothing but the echo, at the level of ecclesial sense, of the profession of faith. The Creed acknowledges Jesus Christ, and no one else, as the Savior of the entire world. There is no doubt about the Christian self-understanding Celsus was dealing with; the Church was committed to the profession of Christ's absolute uniqueness.

Can the same be said of the New Testament and the Church before Nicaea?

Interpreting the New Testament

This second question is not as simple as it is sometimes made out to be. It is not, Does the New Testament affirm the uniqueness of Jesus Christ? It clearly does, in a variety of ways. Still, an anthology of proof texts is never a satisfactory answer, and, in fact, often a way to hide the truth. “Proofs tire out the truth,” Georges Braque once wrote. We must face the task the second-to-fourth century fathers found themselves facing, i.e., the task of interpretation. That is to say, we must ask the question: Did the New Testament authors and their communities mean to affirm the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, or must their verbal affirmations about Christ’s uniqueness be put down to the limitations of the world-view they were necessarily operating with?

A case in point. The author of the fourth Gospel writes: “The only-begotten God who is at the Father’s bosom—he has been our guide.”⁷⁵ Now was he making a claim involving an unparalleled, incomparable knowledge of, and saving access to the one True and Living God, or was he just professing a novel religion’s faith—one eventually to be sanctioned by an Emperor who continued to enjoy the aura of divinity. Clearly, Constantine was implying that this religion was better or nobler than other religions. Did the author of the fourth Gospel do the same?

Put differently, if the New Testament authors had been aware of what we know now about the great world religions, would they have written what in fact they wrote, or would they have couched their affirmations about Christ’s uniqueness in different, less offensively absolute language? And are the fourth-century fathers likely to have fully appreciated this serious problem?

We will argue, in three moves, that the former is true. First we will argue that the Christian faith did not very well fit the religious conceptions prevalent in the world it came into; after that, we will argue, in two steps, that New Testament authors show themselves well aware of what they were implying when they makes their claims about the universal and unique significance of Christ.

Religions in the Ancient World

First of all, what did the Ancients think about religion? Above all, they thought of religions, in the plural, as local and particular, and they

were right; Celsus was not alone. Curiously, in a number of passages in the Jewish Scriptures, we find this conception, too. To take one example, Naaman, a Syrian courtier just healed in the waters of the Jordan at the word of the prophet Elisha, comes to believe in the Lord God of Israel, and at once requests that he be allowed to take two mule's loads of Israel's soil with him. Why? Henceforth, he wants to offer sacrifice to Israel's God; but on Syrian soil the god Rimmon is worshiped, so he needs some of Israel's soil to build an altar on, to worship the true God (cf. 2 Kings 5, 17-18).

The local character of religion asserted itself in a variety of shrines, dedicated to the miscellaneous gods, spirits and demons that gave every aspect of life—weather, harvest, love, wisdom, family, business—a religious charge. Local religions also tended to be subsumed under larger religious “systems,” represented by cults offered to tribal, or even national, gods. Various (and in some regards mutually compatible) pantheons symbolized these comprehensive religious world-pictures, in which every place and every pursuit had its divine representative, cultivated by appropriate votaries.

In the Greco-Roman world, religiosity was local in yet another way: it was contingent on geographical location; the guidance of astrology, one of the products of Hellenism, was avidly sought. The “inclination,” or celestial angle⁶ of one's city or country was a matter of great consequence; so were the stars under which one was born or got married or clinched a deal; heavenly powers conditioned life on earth, inexorably. Even if there should be a supreme “God of the heavenly hosts,” for immediate purposes it was more conducive, both for individuals and communities, to deal with the heavenly hosts themselves, and even closer to home, with the lower local gods and lords.

In the large cities of the ancient world, such as Alexandria, Antioch, Corinth, Rome, and later on Constantinople, with their numerous ethnic enclaves, many religions were represented. It was there that they also showed a characteristic that was very much theirs, yet which they showed less in the places of their origins: tolerance. At home, local cults were intolerant; tribal religion always is. But votaries of local religions know that other religions hold sway in other places; hence, though locally intolerant, ancient cults had the potential for tolerance built into them. Once settled in Rome, the numerous imported cults did as the Romans did. They had few problems with the

demands of Roman religion, which required little more than periodic offerings to the emperor, symbol of the all-powerful state. Well-educated Romans, who had seen through the pretenses of popular religions, made no bones about their contempt of these imports. When Tacitus, with his solemn respect for the observances of the state religion, mentions the execution of the Christians, whom Nero had declared guilty of the fire of Rome, he offers a brief, stereotypical account of Christianity's origin, growth, and move to Rome—"a place where revolting and disgraceful scum of every kind will gush in from everywhere and draw crowds by their observances."⁷

Christianity, coming into the Greco-Roman world, availed itself of the established public habits of religious tolerance. In this regard, it imitated diaspora Judaism. There even were Roman edicts protecting the collection of the Jewish temple tax and those carrying it to Jerusalem. The Christian communities, too, profited from the toleration offered to them; the New Testament warnings to lead quiet lives and to respect the civil authorities bear witness to Christians' attempts not to push their freedom beyond the bounds allowed by toleration (Rom 13, 1-7; 1 Pet 2, 13-17).

Still, in this tolerant world, Christians, like Jews, looked strangely irreligious, as well. Like Jews, they refused to recognize any divine presence at all in the many sacred places; they insisted on worshiping one God—worship incompatible with any other worship. They must have appeared like atheists, not only in the eyes of those who insisted on the periodic enforcement of the demands of state religion, but also in the eyes of those who had taken the "higher viewpoint" of philosophy; they viewed all particular religions, including the official state religion, as superficially tainted forms of the pure religion of mind.

All of this raises a demanding question. How did New Testament Christians in their turn interpret the pluralistic religious world they lived in?

The New Testament on Christ's Unique and Universal Significance

The New Testament shows a curious combination of acceptance of the ancient world's habits of toleration and refusal to accept the grounds on which they are based. Paul bluntly calls the gods from

which the Thessalonians have turned away “idols” (since that is what these recent Christians now know they are); they have come to know “God living and true” and to await his Son’s coming (cf. 1 Thess 1, 9-10).

Those idols were taken seriously, just as seriously as people took the demons and spirits Jesus cast out. When Paul discusses the eating of meats previously used in pagan sacrifices, he does not treat idols and demons *en bagatelle*. Thus, no matter how true it is to say, with Deuteronomy, that “No god is God except the One,” he demurs at the (mildly gnostic) slogan “Not one idol in the whole world is for real” (1 Cor 8, 4; cf. Deut 6, 4). And he continues:

For it is true, people do refer to gods, in heaven as well as on earth, and they are right: there *are* many gods and many lords. Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things come and to whom we go, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things come [into being], and through whom we go. (1 Cor 8, 4-6)

So even if idols are not really significant (1 Cor 10, 19c; Gk. *ti* meaning “really something”), they are real enough to those who offer sacrifice to them; and Christians, too, can get involved with them. And, weak as some of them still are, they may end up putting their salvation in jeopardy (1 Cor 10, 20; 8, 9-11; 10, 22). Hence, Christians should not play with their religious loyalties, lest they should force the Lord into competition with the demons for the loyalty of those who belong to him; that would amount—intolerably—to placing themselves equivalently in a position superior to the Lord’s.

Faith in the one, true God, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, has given Christians a true, higher freedom. They know God in the Spirit in which God knows himself, and they have the thoughts of Christ. This gives them a perspective on the whole world; they will even sit in judgment on the angelic powers. Still, while Christ has put the local gods and demons—that is to say, the gods of the religions—in their places, they are still very real; they are not destroyed and subjected just yet; it is dangerous to associate with them, and in any case, they are not on the same level of excellence as Christ (cf. 1 Cor 2, 9-16; 6, 3; 1 Cor 15, 24-27).

In the first letter to Timothy (1 Tim 3, 16), we have a community profession of the “mystery of religion” which is “professedly great.” It

bears out the same faith, except that the place of Christ is here defined with reference to an astrological world picture. In that world picture, the (“sublunary”) earth is enclosed by a number of crystal-clear spherical heavens; on the spheres, the moon, the sun, and the planets harmoniously revolve around the polar axis, with the fixed stars as the outermost sphere. On the one hand, these heavens, moved and powered by “angels”, are interposed between the-world-and-humanity and the realm of God’s glory, which is “above the heavens”; thus, the “heavenly powers” effectively block (or at least impede) free access to God. Yet by the same token, they influence everything and everyone on earth, in a hierarchy of interventions and intercessions. Nowhere on earth is there true freedom from these powers-that-be; nowhere is there unobstructed, immediate access to the living God.

Now this is the universe in which Christ was

- a. manifested in flesh
- b. vindicated in Spirit
- c. seen by angels
- d. preached among gentiles
- e. believed in the world
- f. taken up in glory.

That is to say, the one whom God sent among us as a one of us, sharing our weakness (a), has been proclaimed the Just One by God, in a new existence, enabled by God’s Holy Spirit (b). In this newness (i.e., in the Spirit), Christ also dealt with the powers that run the world and separate it from the living God (c);⁸ he has cracked the power of these “angels,” and opened direct access to where God dwells in his glory (f). As a result, the Christian Mystery is now being heralded everywhere on earth (d), and (believe it or not) actually welcomed (e).

This cosmic victory of Christ is echoed in various places in the New Testament, but most eloquently in the hymns in Ephesians and Colossians, and in Romans (Eph 1, 21; Col 1, 16; Rom 8, 38-39). Two implications are to be noticed in all these texts.

First, the powers of the universe, which no longer separate us from God, are the objects of religious attention and invocation (“all names that are named”).⁹ The New Testament authors are not interested in describing some kind of objective cosmography whose merits can be

scientifically evaluated; they are dealing with religious observances offered to the cosmic powers that be—observances that enslave, and do not make free.¹⁰ The exaltation of Jesus has inaugurated, everywhere in the cosmos—in the heavens, on earth, and in the nether world—a new worship in celebration of true freedom. The same worship also does justice to the One True God the Father who raised Jesus Christ, summed up in the words: “Jesus Christ is Lord!” (Phil 2, 11).

Secondly, Paul mentions the hardships of his apostolic travels in the same breath with the ultimate defeat of the powers that be: they will never be able to separate him from “the love of God in Christ” or from “the love of Christ” (Rom 8, 35. 38-39). In other words, access to the living God also means that the various places in the world are no longer completely under the spell of the celestial powers or in the grip of the local gods and demons. The universalist vision of Israel’s prophets has become an actuality in these last days, inaugurated by Christ’s Resurrection. Now that the whole world is opened and set free by the one God of heaven and earth, all of it must be brought home, the mission to the Gentiles must start, the message of the one Christ must travel: the feet of those who have the good news must simply walk (Rom 10, 15, quoting Is 52, 7). Now that Christ is being “preached among gentiles,” and has been “believed in the world,” he has brought together those far as well as those near” (1 Tim 3, 16—above, d and e; Eph 2, 17).

Finally, the itinerant apostolic life is shaped and empowered by the love of Jesus Christ, and its dangers, no matter how numerous and real, are now no more an obstacle to the Gospel than the powers themselves. Christian missionaries effectively must now take on the local lords and gods, everywhere in the *oikoumen*—the inhabited world. Live faith in Christ Risen means being on the road.

The New Testament: Tolerance and Pluralism

In spite of their clear awareness of Christ’s victory over the powers that be and their own participation in it (cf. 1 John 5, 4), the tone of the New Testament churches is remarkably free from triumphalism or aggression. True, the New Testament has harsh words for Christians who have seen the freedom and the enlightenment found in Christ, and have yet returned to the slavery of the powers (e.g., 2 Cor 4, 3-4;

Gal 3, 3; 4, 8-10; Phil 3, 18-19; Heb 6, 4-6; 10, 26-31). It is also true that neither the Synoptics nor the Pauline Letters have any illusions about the world—a world “subject to futility,” where people live “oppressed by the devil” (Rom 8,20; Acts 10, 38). There are the demonic powers; there are the great prejudices of all times: the walls of separation between the free and the slaves, between men and women, between Greeks and barbarians, between Jews and Gentiles; there is also the encumbrance of the noble Mosaic Law, with its knack, on the one hand, for breeding self-righteousness, and on the other, for driving home the dread weight of sins past and present, thus shutting the door to newness. Yet on the whole, the New Testament does not inveigh against these gods and lords, these “elemental spirits of the universe” (Gal 4, 3), and even less against those who serve them. Paul’s passionate account of the plight of Gentiles and Jews, both of them turned merciless, callous, and hardened in their ignorance of the living God, is hardly a warrant for a war on paganism. The famous tale of Paul’s sympathetic inquiry into the Athenians’ groping faith in an unknown God, even as they defer to their many “objects of worship,” sets the tone throughout (Acts 17, 16-34).

A final point. The New Testament reveals that the early Christian communities were very much aware of living in a world of religious pluralism—a world where many “powers and authorities” demanded respect, as did their worshippers. Put differently, we have a manifold record of the encounter-in-process of one very particular religious community (though widespread and driven by a universalist sense of mission) meeting with numerous, very particular cults.

By the end of the first century, what was still outstanding was the development of Gnosticism, which was to explain to Christians that what was truly good and constructive, both about the Christian faith and about the person of Jesus the Christ, was not a life of flesh and blood, but an idea. That idea consisted in the freedom consequent upon initiation into life’s central mystery understood as a purely spiritual divine presence. The issue had occurred in raw form in Corinth; Paul dealt with it by pointing to Christ’s cross, the business of everyday living,¹¹ and the call to mutual love and service. For the communities that possessed the first Johannine letter, half a century later, the issue had considerably sharpened; they had to be pointedly reminded that “every spirit that professes that Jesus Christ has come into the flesh is

from God," so they, too, are told to love, "not by speech or word, but by action and real concern" (1 Jn 4, 2; cf. 2 Jn 7; 1 Jn 3, 18). In this way, in the New Testament, Christianity's encounter with ancient philosophy is foreshadowed rather than developed. The apostolic Fathers, the second-century apologists, Irenaeus in the West and Origen in the East were to write the record of that later encounter.

Time to sum up. The New Testament shows the Christian Church at its beginning, coming into a world of religious pluralism and profiting from it, yet confidently claiming that its faith involves a call, to be issued to all alike, to turn away from all the local gods, lords, spirits and demons, in order to find salvation in the one true God, and in the man Jesus Christ, God's unique Son. It was with open eyes that the Churches made the claim; if modern Christianity has been guilty of "theological fundamentalism," it has merely learned its New Testament lesson.

Now the next question is whether this obliges the Christian Church to principled intolerance.

Jesus Christ: Divine and Therefore Superior?

For present purposes, let us assume without argument that the definitions of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, involving the full divinity of the Logos and the true divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ, the *Logos* Incarnate, express the faith embodied in the various writings put together under the title of "the New Testament." The two themes, divinity and humanity, naturally suggest themselves as approaches to an answer to the question asked at the end of the previous section. Let us begin with Jesus Christ's divinity.

It is often said that the affirmation of Christ's divinity causes members of the Christian churches to think of other religions as inferior. This may have happened in fact, but the question is whether the inference is legitimate, or even orthodox. It is neither.

In the year 393 A.D., at the General Council of the North African Churches held at Hippo Regius, Augustine, thirty-nine years old, not a bishop yet, but at the peak of his youthful intelligence, newly sharpened by his debates with the Manicheans, presented a compact exposition of the Creed. In the course of his presentation he said:

I am confident that spiritual people will recognize that nothing can be the opposite of God. Only of God can it properly be said that he *is*, for what truly *is*, remains without change, since what is subject to change *was* what it no longer is, and *will be* what it is not yet. Now if God *is*, he has nothing opposite to him. If we should be asked what is opposite to white, we would answer: black. If we should be asked what is opposite to hot, we would answer: cold. If we should be asked what is opposite to quick, we would answer: slow, and so forth. However, when it is asked what is opposite to what *is*, the right answer is that it is not.¹²

There is more the matter here than mere logic; this is where metaphysics and mysticism meet. God is not “against”; God may have opposition, but he has no opposite. God is God of each and all at the expense of none.

Accordingly, the affirmation of Christ’s divinity puts him in a position not of *superiority* but of *sovereignty*. Let us put this in different words. “God or Man” is “a false dilemma,” as the late Piet Schoonenberg used to argue time and again.¹³

This proposition warrants close inspection. In his so-called “proofs of the existence of God,” Thomas Aquinas “places” God, not at the beginning of all motion, nor at the apex of the scale of being, nor at the end point of all desire, but, as the old textbooks used to say, *extra seriem*—“outside the series”—outside the hierarchy of created beings.¹⁴ So God is the First Cause of all that is, in the sense that God causes all causes to cause; all degrees of being participate in the absolute ontological intensity of God; all beings strive to attain their perfection, drawn by a God who remains beyond attainment. So, whatever the “divinity of Christ” may refer to, it cannot mean that he is the author or the focus of the “highest,” “noblest,” or “most perfect” religion—who would be in a position to make that judgment, anyway? Nor does it mean that Christ is superior to the Buddha or to Muhammad. Christians may have argued this way, but whenever they did, they did not have orthodox Christian faith on their side—except (perhaps) an orthodoxy inadequately understood or politically motivated. For God is incomparable. No one must bring Christ’s divinity into play to defeat other religious figures.

The history of Christian thought proves that this understanding has eluded much of modern thought. For the claim that Christianity is the superior religion has not been heard until the late seventeenth century, and not from any orthodox tradition, but from schools of thought that qualified the affirmation of Christ's divinity—the traditions often called “Neo-Protestant,” or “liberal Protestant.” Many of these traditions were interested, of course, in finding new, modern answers to the question, What is the real, “objective” (i.e., historical) truth about Jesus Christ? With that question, the historical-critical search took off, in search of the real Jesus.

At the start of the twentieth century, George Tyrrell characterized the “real Jesus” discovered by the application of “unprejudiced” historical-critical method to the New Testament as a century's worth of discovery of “a liberal-Protestant face seen at the bottom of a deep well.” But those liberal Protestants were convinced of the superiority of their form of Christian faith. When one scrapes the surface veneer, the reasons most commonly given for Christianity's alleged superiority turn out to be not theological, but *rational* and *cultural*. For the liberal-Protestant tradition has tended to say that the Christian religion favors the loftiest type of morality, cultivates the most spiritual form of humanity, embodies the highest form of pure consciousness, possesses the noblest symbol-system, spurs the human mind to the highest achievements in industry and technology, or most deeply appreciates the infinite value of the individual human soul.

It is easy to recognize in this list the historic themes of the Western sense of superiority, the soul of colonialism and imperialism. It looks as if the missionary West, in the process of losing faith in the central truth of Christianity, was forced more and more to fall back on cultural prejudices to maintain its authority. Had it not also taken the superior insight of liberal Western Christians to idealize the pure religion of the noble savage and play it off against orthodox Christianity? And is it not true that this same superiority is still operative today, at least in some quarters? The overt profession of Christianity's superiority has been dropped, of course; Christianity is now simply presented as one of the many religions. But it is still often said that what Christ is to the Christians, that Muhammad and the Buddha are to the Muslims and the Buddhists. Modesty? Hardly, for Christianity is still implicitly used as the yardstick of the other religions. It is theologically

sounder to try to understand and appreciate Islam and Buddhism on their own terms.

This has, in fact, been the tendency of orthodox Christianity at its best: it has often been critical of other religions. The Christians of the second half of the second century explained that guests were as welcome to their tables as they were unwelcome to their beds, and that they exposed none of their infants. They ridiculed the deifications of emperors as much as the marital affairs of Zeus and company. But they knew how to be appreciative as well as discriminating. Because they knew the One Teacher, they had a good eye for the many tutors. Because they knew the *Logos* Incarnate, they recognized the voice of the *Logos* in the many and varied ways in which God had spoken to the prophets (cf. Gal 3, 24; Heb 1, 1). They also knew that Jesus Christ

is the *Logos* of whom the whole human race partakes, and . . . those who live according to the *Logos* are Christians, even though they are considered atheists, such as Socrates and Heraclitus among the Greeks, and those like them.¹⁵

Thus, to the early Church, Christ's divinity was the guarantee of a deep affinity with the true, the good, the beautiful and the noble, wherever they were to be found. Justin was not implying that Christians were morally superior to others, or that there was nothing for them left to appreciate elsewhere. To him, Christ's divinity was the warrant of full and true humanity.

But there's the rub . . .

Humanity: The Power and the Glory

The orthodox profession of the Christian faith, we have argued, puts Christ in a position of uniqueness, but this involves not superiority but *sovereignty*. This sovereignty entails, we have hinted, not intolerance, but appreciation and discrimination. This leads us to the the final issue of this essay. It can be worded in twin questions. Have this appreciation and this discrimination been professed in the past? And how can they be professed and practiced in Christian doctrine and life today? Let us start with the former.

The liberal tradition has diminished the profession of the uniqueness of Christ, by qualifying the fullness of his divinity. Still, the tradition of Christian orthodoxy has put enormous obstacles in the way of a new interpretation of this uniqueness—one that would fit Christians in the pluralist world of today. The great tradition of Christian doctrine, we have said, has not prepared us very well to deal with this situation.

The era of the great councils, Nicaea and Chalcedon, which set the intellectual climate of the great tradition of Christian theology, also marks the period in which the Church gained public acceptance, first as the Emperor's favored religion (Constantine, *Edict of Milan*, 313 A.D.), and eventually also as the official religion of the Roman Empire (Theodosius, *Cunctos populos*, 380 A.D.), to the exclusion of all forms of "heresy" and "paganism." Orthodox Christianity developed a habit of thinking not that it was the *superior* religion, but that it was the *only* one, and Emperors developed a taste for promoting the unity of the Church in the interest of the unity of the Empire. The association of faith with power was born; the sovereignty of Christ was regarded as a victory for the Church; Christians began to relate faith with winning as early as the days when Eusebius of Caesarea was finishing his *Ecclesiastical History*, in the three-hundred twenties.¹⁶

This tight linkage between political identity and doctrine was reinforced, in the course of subsequent centuries, by the mass conversions of the Germanic tribes, and by the medieval establishment, in which the secular arm served the spiritual realm and its truth; one symbol of the close association was the eighth-century *Christus vincit*.¹⁷ Even when the unity of Christendom broke down in the Reformation, the principle remained intact: the religion of the land was determined by the religion of its prince (*cuius regio illius et religio*), and despite differences in professions of faith and ecclesiastical establishment, christological orthodoxy remained the norm. The last and far more serious wave of this tradition came when the great monarchies, each with their established churches, started exporting their versions of the Christian religion by the use of power, in the interest of their expansionist trade policies. By now, it was often hard to tell which arm held the sword, which the cross. Divided Christianity became a threat to the world.

As long as orthodoxy was supported by political means, it became more and more determined by images that associated truth and power.

From Constantine on, victory—increasingly understood, not as victory over demons and unholy powers, but as public victory—became a favorite Christian word. Julian the Apostate was recounted as having died exclaiming: “Thou hast won, Galilean!” The standard representations of Christ became the Victor and the Teacher. Even when, from the late eleventh century on, the dying man on the cross became the favored image in the West, it was set against the background of a theology of “objective atonement”: Christ had suffered vicariously, and the Church had access to the inexhaustible treasury of Christ’s merits, which had more than abundantly redeemed “the entire world.” The Reformation came, but none of its bitter polemics touched these christologies. It was to take another few centuries before the Constantinian settlement broke down altogether, and Christianity became once again what it had been for the first three or four centuries: one religion among many.

In christology, all of this has had an impact on the interpretation of Christ’s humanity. The universality of the salvation wrought by Christ was conceptually expressed by saying that the Word had assumed “human nature”—i.e., whatever it takes to be human; all of humanity, therefore, has been welcomed, in advance, into the communion with God. There is no doubt that this doctrine is profound as well as fertile; it has served as the charter for a whole tradition of Christian humanism and mission. Still, it is one-sided, too: it reveals the universal Lord, but it hardly shows the way he went; it assures all of humanity of salvation, it does not show anyone how to follow in the footsteps of the historical Jesus. The way in which the uniqueness of Christ appeared in the life of the historical Jesus is left out. The picture is attractive, but it paints too static, too intellectual, too impassive, too totalitarian a picture of Jesus Christ. It reflects the christology of a Christian nation or civilization, not the faith of a catholic Church in a modern, “post-Christian,” pluralist world. We must develop a way to profess Christ’s uniqueness that positively does justice to the fact of modern religious pluralism, and yet does not compromise the profession of the fullness of his divinity. This means we should return to Christ’s humanity. However, we should do this, not in the abstract, by simply attributing to Christ, with Chalcedon, a truly human nature, but by concentrating on the style of his humanity.

Humanity: Imitation of Christ in Weakness and Patience

Let us clearly state, from the outset, that a simple “return to the New Testament” would be a historic illusion. Modern pluralism is a far cry from the pluralism of the first century, and the Christian Churches are a significant global presence, not a hardly noticed minority—it would not be candid for modern Christianity to pose as weak. Still, the triumphalist Church is yielding to the servant Church; the settled Church is resuming her pilgrimage; the fortress Church is becoming the open Church. All of this means much change. Let us close this essay with at least a few suggestions.

Given the openness of the modern Church, the Christian identity experience can no longer be so strongly associated with the experience of limits—catechism answers, dogmatic definitions—as previously. If we do not draw our convictions about Christ from a central experience, we will not go out to meet the culture’s questions with confidence. “A central experience”: convictions about Christ must become a matter, not just of dependence on authoritative teaching, but of a true, and shared, experience of the core of the Christian faith. This central experience is essentially mystical, and actualized in worship: only if we experience Christ’s uniqueness in vital participation in the Church’s liturgy—the main locus of catechesis—will we develop an inner sense of his unique significance. Through, with, and in him, the living, risen Lord, we address ourselves to the Father; through, with and in him we wake up to the hope that is in us, a hope for salvation which the Christian cherishes, not against a rotten world, but in behalf of a world groaning for redemption. For hope unites us with the world. At the doctrinal level this means: a shift of emphasis, from the Incarnation theme, to the theme of the Lord’s Resurrection, that is to say, his presence now: “The mystery is this: Christ in you, the hope of the glory to come” (Col 1, 27).

It is from joy and hope—the assurance that comes from the Risen Christ—that we draw the courage to be patient. It is important to understand this well, for the association of power and truth in the great tradition has produced an impatient christology—one not very capable of entering into a discriminating dialogue with the world. This impatience has two sides to it: withdrawal and aggression; the impatient tend to ensconce themselves in the security of a self-protective fortress,

from which they can also attack the outside world. Patience, let it be noted, is not passivity, but deep receptivity: patience unites us with the world as well. The patient can empathize and sympathize and understand, as well as endure and suffer. Where the impatient withdraw, the patient are hospitable; where the impatient attack, the patient question. The impatient want to win; the patient are prepared to struggle—"to labor with" Christ.¹⁸ This means: the patient do not seek quick and easy answers; they can appreciate and be discriminating. They neither reject nor idealize.

The Christian courage to be patient, we have said, derives from the risen Christ. This amounts to saying that the risen Lord draws the Church into discipleship, into the *imitatio Christi*. How? The hope and assurance and confidence of the Resurrection is meant to free us from our need to win, from our desperate instinct for self-defense and self-justification: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom 8, 31). It is meant to disarm us, and thus to make us disciples of Jesus the Christ. He was so open as to welcome all, yet so free as not to be taken in by any. No one encountered the world with less prejudice. He recognized faith where the customs of the day saw only unbelief. He saw suffering and oppression where the religion of the day saw sin and guilt. He freed the people from the powers that be, whom he challenged and silenced and told not to identify him publicly, as if he were one like them: a power to be reckoned with. Where he saw no more than the brave trappings of religion, he did not call it faith. He did not hesitate to question the establishments. He did not hesitate to call for total abandon to God. He courted no one's favor, but when rejected, he did not reject in return. He gave himself—to all, to his Father.

In this way, he uniquely showed what kind of God his Father is. He resisted the temptation, offered him by religious people all the time, to win debates about God and to justify himself or prove his own authority. There was a claim of unprecedented authority and intimacy with God, but it was implied rather than stated, acted upon rather than proved. He was God's welcome to the world, not in talk, but in deed; God can take the world.

This is how Christ's uniqueness can be shown, today as always: not by mere tolerance, but by patient appreciation and a real meeting of minds and hearts—that is, by love. We are Christ's welcome to the world, not in talk but in deed; Christ can take the world.

Accordingly,

Always be joyful; pray ceaselessly; give thanks to God for everything, for this is what God would have you do in Christ Jesus. Do not extinguish the Spirit; do not despise prophetic gifts; test out everything; hold on to what is good; keep away from every semblance of evil. (1 Thess 5, 16-22)

Notes

First published as "Professing the Uniqueness of Christ," *Chicago Studies* 24 (1985): 17-35. Carefully edited for this collection. Again, the numerous biblical references are not meant to "prove" anything, but to further introduce the reader to the Christian family language, taken mainly, in this particular case, from the New Testament.

1. Acts 4, 12. This elaborate rendition of the Greek makes its connotations explicit; both passive *dedomenon*—a semitism meaning "placed"—and impersonal (Gk.) *dei* imply divine agency.

2. "Jesus and the World Religions," in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 167-85; quotation at 183.

3. For "reliable things to say," cf. 1 Tim 1, 15; 3, 1; 4, 9; 2 Tim 2, 11; Tit 1, 9; 3, 8; cf. Rev 31, 5; 22, 6.

4. Gottlob Lessing, *Axiomata*, ed. Gösche, vol. VII, 407.

5. John 1, 18: Gk. *monogenes theos*: "one-and-only-born God."

6. Greek *klima*, hence English "climate."

7. *Annals*, xv, 44.

8. Cf. an analogous expression in 1 Pet 3, 18-19, where the cosmic powers are below.

9. That is, invoked: Eph 1, 21.

10. Powers such as these are still known and revered today, though usually located elsewhere. Examples are the law of supply and demand, the territorial imperative, and the armaments imperative.

11. *Bitika*: 1 Cor 6, 3.

12. *De fide et symbolo*, 7 (PL 40, 185).

13. See Piet Schoonenberg, *The Christ* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 13-49.

14. *S. Th.* I, q. 2, a. 3.

15. Justin Martyr, *Apology* i, 44, 2-4.

16. See F.J. van Beeck, *Loving the Torah More Than God? Toward a Catholic Appreciation of Judaism* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1989), 70-73.

17. See the eighth-century *Laudes regiae* (also called *Laudes Hincmari*, after Hincmar (c. 806-82), archbishop of Reims).

18. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises* [95].

My Encounter with Yossel Rakover

My first encounter with Yossel Rakover was only indirect, but very unsettling nonetheless. The year was 1969. I was in my late thirties, and, academically speaking, I had behind me three years of philosophical studies, five years of theological studies, and six years of doctoral studies, the latter in English and Italian Literature at the University of Amsterdam. In the late summer of 1968 I had arrived, as a visiting lecturer, at Boston College, to teach, not English, but theology. For, under the influence of Vatican II, a deep-seated taste for things divine in me had blossomed into a passion for theology; and, given that faith is both deep and wide (that is, both liturgical and ecumenical), true prayer and transparent (or at least open) human relationships were becoming my themes. I had come to regard the two as both fully actualized and fully reconciled in Jesus Christ, who (as I had understood in a flash of blinding insight in the early afternoon of Thursday, December 12, 1968) is at once humanity's wholly transparent, distortionless window opening out on to the living, invisible God, and the living, invisible God's transparent, wholly human welcome extended to all human beings, at the expense of none—a welcome that includes the whole world.

A friend in the Netherlands sent me a present: a collection of essays entitled *Het menselijk gelaat* ("The Human Face") by Emmanuel Lévinas, translated into Dutch and clarified by means of illuminating notes by Adriaan Peperzak, now happily my colleague in the Philosophy Department at Loyola University, Chicago.¹ Having tried Lévinas's *Totalité et infinité* seven years before, I was vaguely familiar with some of his themes. I especially remembered his insistence that more than anywhere else, it is in the *face* of the other that we meet the unconditional demand for goodness, thoughtfulness, and concern that lies at the heart of the moral (that is, the responsible) life; before morality ever wells up from the depth of our autonomy, Lévinas had long insisted, it arises in us in response to a call from outside. I advanced

from essay to essay—an interesting introductory tour of a thought-world which, at this early stage, appealed to me mainly because it was reminiscent of Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*. That profound little book, which I had read seventeen years before, when I was in my twenty-third year, had not only made me a firm (if largely inarticulate) convert to personalism; it had also prompted a profound desire in me, amounting to an intellectual conversion. That was how I would love to be able to think! To have real thoughts and insights, as well as encounters with intellectually and personally significant others to learn them from and share them with!

Lévinas’s touch, I found, was sterner, harsher, more insistent than Buber’s; he sounded much less contemplative and serene, and, frankly, much less religiously comforting as well. Going from essay to essay, I came upon a piece entitled “To Love the Torah More than God.”² It was, in Lévinas’s own words, a commentary on

a text which is both beautiful and real—as real as only fiction can be. An anonymous author published it in an Israeli journal; it was translated for *La Terre Retrouvée*—the Zionist paper in Paris—under the title *Yossel, son of Yossel Rakover of Tarnopol, speaks to God*, by Mr. Arnold Mandel, who, it would appear, had read it with deep emotion. The text deserves even more. It conveys an intellectual attitude that reflects something better than the reading-habits of intellectuals . . . What this text provides is Jewish learning modestly understated, yet full of assurance; it represents a deep, authentic experience of the spiritual life.

Now, thirty-five years later, what I most vividly remember is the consternation that invaded me as I read Lévinas’s short, squarely polemical piece—originally a radio talk broadcast from Paris on Friday, April 29, 1955. Rereading only made things worse. There it was. Right under my nose I had the single most compelling intellectual and moral challenge to my Catholic and Christian faith I had ever experienced.

In the figure of Yossel Rakover, so Lévinas was explaining, we meet the core of Judaism: an ordinary Jew, proud of the faith of his ancestors, who, in the midst of mindless, criminal, totally undeserved violence inflicted on him, his family, and his people, holds on to his

God. He can do so only by holding on to the Torah. For in a world in which God's countenance is entirely veiled, and in which justice has disappeared and humanity has turned savage and merciless, only those who represent what is noble and holy and godlike—that is, those who live by the discipline of the Torah—are left to represent the hidden God. In this predicament, faithful Jews are destined to feel the weight of God's responsibility for the world on their own shoulders; naturally, they are also the first victims of the forces of injustice. Thus in Judaism, cultivation of the Torah makes mature moral responsibility for a just world an ineluctable element of life with the God of the Covenant—the God who, while incommensurably greater than humanity and hence, wholly incomprehensible, freely and graciously elects human beings (not as slaves but) as partners,

capable of responding, of turning to their God as creditors and not all the time as *debtors*: *that* is truly divine majesty! . . . How vigorous the dialectic by which the equality between God and Man is established right at the heart of their incommensurableness!

Thus instructed and shaped and equipped by the Torah for the disciplined, fully responsible life, faithful Jews can proudly (that is, with a deep sense of their privileged position) acknowledge and glorify the living God, even at times when God manifests the divine greatness only by veiling his countenance.

By contrast, so Lévinas went on to argue, in Christianity, God's free and gracious love of humanity takes the shape, not of a call to discipline, but of reassurance and indulgence. The sinner's utter dependence on the comforts of the Incarnation and the all-atoning death of Jesus, and on the all-forgiving divine clemency implied in both, becomes the center of the faith. But this makes full moral responsibility negotiable; Christians are permitted (and indeed, encouraged) to settle for a morally imperfect world—are not all human beings sinners, justified by God's grace alone? In this way, not only are Christians excused in advance from the full holiness demanded by God; far worse, they can make their moral incompetence the measure of God's majesty and God's demands. Thus they can reduce God's majesty to God's willingness to forgive human sins; Christians can rest and take comfort in that

forgiveness, and settle, by divine warrant, for a world that is less than just. Christianity's complicity with the Holocaust, or at least its ineffectualness in the face of it, Lévinas suggests, are there to prove just that point.

So, Lévinas warns, instead of thinking of Judaism as the prefiguration of their own, superior religion, Christians had better wake up to the fact that the shoe is entirely on the other foot. Judaism is seasoned religion, professed and practiced from time immemorial "in Spirit and truth," and cured and matured in the furnace of suffering.³ Christians have an alibi: not only can they invoke the always-readily-available divine mercy as an easement from full moral responsibility for unjust suffering in the world; by pointing to Jesus, they can even accept unjust suffering as mysteriously meaningful.

Thus, while Christians can settle for an immature variety of both religion and humanism, Judaism is

an integral and austere humanism, coupled with difficult worship! And from the other point of view, a worship that coincides with the exaltation of Man.

The implication of all this is obvious. Judaism, Lévinas points out, is a religion of adults; Christianity is, in the last analysis, a children's religion.⁴

Despite this frontal attack on my fundamental convictions, I found Lévinas's piece irresistible. Here I was, a graduate of the secularization and death-of-God theologies of the 1960s, deeply convinced that faith in God was not a crutch, that we modern Christians had "come of age," and that, if any god was dead, it was, not the living, true God, but only "the problem-solver God," "the god of the gaps"—the god who (it had been thought) was needed to fill the lacunae still left in the human understanding of the world and humanity, and to furnish irresolute, immature believers with the props they still craved. The central contention of Lévinas's essay blew this complacent theological picture of myself and my theological generation out of the water. For what Lévinas was equivalently saying was this: precisely because the God of the Christians is the God of the Incarnation, of the close comfort involved in a humanity shared with God, and of unconditional indulgence and forgiveness extended to human weakness for the sake of Jesus' Passion and Death, the Christian God is the god of the

gaps *par excellence*. Christianity, in other words, draws the living God into complicity with human injustice, interpreted as an acceptable part of the world. With a terrible clarity I saw that I must come to terms with Lévinas's piece, if I wanted to be a Christian, a Catholic, a Jesuit, a priest with intellectual and moral integrity. Thank heavens I also realized that it would take time. But a big quest had begun.

* * * * *

That quest clearly consisted of two parts. First of all, I must begin to think through Lévinas's interpretation of Christianity and its relatedness to Judaism. That was the main task and the most demanding by far. Secondly (as well as more practically), I must find the story that Lévinas had commented on.

For a start, I wrote to a friend. Dries van den Akker, a Dutch Jesuit who was studying in Paris at the time, succeeded in putting his finger on the French original of Lévinas's radio broadcast. I translated it into English, and, initially with more zeal than discernment, began to use it in the christology courses I was teaching. Thus I got to understand it thoroughly—an essential first step if I were ever going to come to terms with it. Then I asked Dries to find the *Yosel* story in *La terre retrouvée* and send me a copy. He did. In fact, he not only sent me a dim photocopy of the actual pages; he became so engrossed in the French text that he went to the trouble of typing it out for me in full. At the very least, I had more translation work ahead of me.

In the meantime, in January, 1973, before I had received the French text, I had temporarily moved to Regis College, Toronto. The move would enable me to get a book on christology under way;⁵ I was to return the favor of the college's hospitality by teaching, in that Spring semester, the basic christology course at the Toronto School of Theology. Not long after my arrival I met Barry Walfish, a young Jew who had recently become the assistant librarian at Regis College. We started talking occasionally, and one day, in the reading room, I showed him my English translation of Lévinas's essay. He glanced at it and told me it looked familiar. An hour later he was sure he knew the story Lévinas was talking about. The next day he came to see me, Albert Friedlander's anthology *Out of the Whirlwind* in hand.⁶ I was stunned. The anonymous Yiddish story whose French version I had just asked

my friend in Paris to find for me turned out to have an author, in the United States. His name was Zvi Kolitz.

It did not take me long to discover that things were complicated. When the French version of the story arrived, it proved to contain passages that were absent from Friedlander's English version—absent even from the first published English version which, some time in early 1974, I had found in Zvi Kolitz's own *Tiger Beneath the Skin*, which had appeared in 1947.⁷ This raised questions. What had happened? Who had written what? For the time being, however, these redactional questions stayed on the back burner; I reverted to them only sporadically, as time and interest allowed. The truly burning issue was neither the textual tradition nor the matter of authorship, but the theological challenge implicit in *Yossel Rakover's Appeal to God*—the one that Emmanuel Lévinas had made so painfully explicit in "To Love the Torah More than God." However, lest I confuse my present readers by a mixture of theological reflection and reports on my pursuit of matters of text and authorship, let me first tell the full and curious story of my involvement with the text of *Yossel Rakover's Appeal to God* and its author.

* * * * *

By the middle of 1984, I had found—I no longer recall how—a letter that Zvi Kolitz had written, in 1972, to the editor of *Shdemot*, the journal of the Israeli kibbutz movement; Dr. Arye Motzkin, a Jewish colleague in the Department of Theology at Boston College, translated it for me. In it, Kolitz unequivocally claimed authorship. With (as I was to learn) characteristic contempt of detail, he called the text "an original story which I wrote and published about twenty years ago in New York." He further explained that "in 1953, a great Yiddish poet, Avram Sutzkever, was misled by a Jew from Argentina, who had read the story in Yiddish, and passed it on to Sutzkever as a 'document.' Mr. Sutzkever published it as such in *Di Goldene Keyt*." And Kolitz added: "Meanwhile the origin of this error has become clear, but errors like these have a life of their own."

In retrospect, it is clear to me that Mr. Kolitz, in this letter to the editor, was appealing to the English text published under his own name in 1947, in *Tiger Beneath the Skin*, solely to document his claim that he truly was the author of the story. At the time, however, I interpreted it

differently: I took it as a declaration that the English version was the original, and that, consequently, the Yiddish version behind the French translation was a text that had not only been pirated by an unknown translator, but tampered with as well. That Yiddish version, I assumed, had been sent to Avram Sutzkever by the nameless Argentinean Jew mentioned in Kolitz's letter. Thus it became a matter of the highest urgency to find the Yiddish version published, in 1954, in *Di Goldene Keyt*.⁸ When, in late May, 1985, I traveled to Chicago to take up my position at Loyola University, I had among my papers a photocopy of *Yossel Rakover Redt tsu Got*; I had finally put my hands on it, in the library at Brandeis University, in March or April, 1985. In the fall of that year, Dr. Anita Abraham transliterated it. In early December, 1985, I finally had everything I needed to start comparing the texts—or so I thought, since I remained unaware of Anna Maria Jokl's German translation published in book form that same year.⁹

However, by that time I had, once again, other things to do: I had come to Chicago to write a multi-volume systematic theology. The first volume, started in October, 1985, did not get finished till the late summer of 1987; it was to appear in the spring of 1989.¹⁰ Work on that book had been intense and I needed a break. In February, 1988, the thought came to me that I might at last be ready to take on *Yossel Rakover's Appeal to God*—both its textual problems and Lévinas's unsettling interpretation. It turned out I was ready; by the end of November, 1988, the manuscript was finished. It appeared in the fall of 1989, under the title *Loving the Torah More than God? Toward a Catholic Appreciation of Judaism*.¹¹ My friend Rabbi Eugene B. Borowitz wrote an appreciative foreword for it.

In that little book, the first chapter consists of an introduction, followed by the text of *Yossel Rakover's Appeal to God* itself; a commentary on some issues raised by the text brings the chapter to a conclusion. The composition of that first chapter had given me quite a bit of trouble. Throughout, I had operated on the assumption that the text in *Tiger Beneath the Skin* was the original; accordingly, I had come to the conclusion that this English text had been, not only translated into Yiddish, but also revised and significantly expanded by one or more alien hands. But Lévinas's essay, which was to be the subject of the second chapter of the book, was a commentary on that expanded text; in fact, it treated some of the expansions as the most significant

parts of the story. If my readers were to make sense of Lévinas's argument in the second chapter, they would need to have the expanded text available to them in the first. Thus I decided to print the 1947 English version of *Yossel*, but to insert, in indented paragraphs, the seven principal expansions I had found in the Yiddish text, while registering further differences in the footnotes.¹² And by way of explanation I wrote:

The Yiddish translation . . . had not only dropped Kolitz's name; it had also undergone a process of revision. This is understandable. A story like Kolitz's, appealing, as it does, to such a deeply neuralgic theme as the Holocaust, is likely to elicit passionate responses, and hence, it will invite commentary. That is to say, at the hands of an editor, it will invite editorializing, and at the hands of a translator, it will invite expansion. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Yiddish version shows both: the anonymous translator availed himself of his freedom in order to introduce seven major expansions as well as a large number of relatively small changes.¹³

In putting together this expanded version—the English text from *Tiger Beneath the Skin* augmented by seven passages from the Yiddish version in *Di Goldene Keyt*—I had received considerable help from my friend and colleague Jeffrey V. Mallow, a theoretical physicist at Loyola University Chicago who learned Yiddish in the Yiddish school system, and subsequently earned a bachelor's degree in Jewish Literature. Little did I know that in a few years we would be collaborating again. Even less did I realize that, in putting together the expanded version of *Yossel Rakover's Appeal to God*, we were unwittingly approximating, as closely as the data available to us at the time permitted, a complete English translation of a Yiddish text written in 1946 by none but Zvi Kolitz himself!

That realization did not dawn on me till several years later. It began when, on February 10, 1993, a German journalist named Paul Badde contacted me both by phone and by fax. He had found the *Yossel* story in Anna Maria Jokl's version, had been deeply touched by it, and had come to New York City to interview Zvi Kolitz. At the end of the conversation, he told me, Mr. Kolitz had given him a copy of my *Loving the Torah More Than God? When Herr Badde had started to read it on the plane, he had been surprised to discover that the story existed*

in several different versions. From then on, it had become imperative for him to try and recover the Yiddish original, which was the reason why he called me. At this first contact, the only thing I could put at Mr. Badde's disposal was my copy of the transliterated version of the text that had appeared in *Di Goldene Keyt*. But I did suggest to him that he might call the Jesuit theological college in Buenos Aires. By a stroke of good fortune, when he did so on March 9, it was Father Oscar Lateur, S.J., the librarian of the Colegio del Salvador, who answered the phone. It was that same Father Lateur who succeeded in finding the text a few days later, in the library of the Asociación Mutualista Israelita Argentina, in the Tuesday, September 25, 1946 issue of *Di Yiddishe Tsaytung* (also known as *El Diario Israelita*). On March 12, he hastily sent a pale fax copy of the first three pages of text to Mr. Badde. They established, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the place and date of the story's original appearance as well as Zvi Kolitz's authorship. It was sufficient to enable Paul Badde, a few weeks later, in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Magazin* of April 23, 1993, to publish an virtually complete German translation of the story based upon the Yiddish, along with a moving feature article on Zvi Kolitz. In due course, Father Lateur succeeded in procuring a better, better legible copy of the text as it had appeared in *Di Yiddishe Tsaytung*. Paul Badde sent me a copy of that on August 31, 1993. At long last, Jeffry Mallow and I were in a position to prepare an English translation that would do justice to what we now knew was the Yiddish original, written by Zvi Kolitz in Buenos Aires, in 1946.

We started slowly and carefully. In the fall of 1993 we made a detailed comparison between the anonymous Yiddish version published in *Di Goldene Keyt*, and the text in *Di Yiddishe Tsaytung*. The first thing we discovered was that what I had taken to be expansions were all part of the original text written by Zvi Kolitz himself. It also became clear that this original Yiddish text, by the time it had been rendered anonymous and before it saw the light in *Di Goldene Keyt*, had been subjected to extensive editorial revision. While most of these revisions are lexical and stylistic, in as many as five places they involve simplifications and omissions. Yet in the end, the revisions, numerous and sometimes drastic as they are, substantially alter neither the tone nor the tenor of the piece. It became clear that either the unknown person who first sent the text to Avram Sutzkever, or the Yiddishist Sutzkever himself, or perhaps both, had basically respected the text.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said for the English translation that had appeared in *Tiger Beneath the Skin*. A comparison between it and the original Yiddish text showed that the translator and editor, Shmuel Katz, had taken the liberty not only of adopting many non-Jewish religious idioms more accessible to Christians, but also of deleting ten sizable passages; some of them were potentially offensive to either Christians or non-Orthodox Jews; quite a few of them were also among the most memorable passages in the text.

By now, the conclusion was obvious: in very different ways and to very different degrees, neither the English version published in 1947 in *Tiger Beneath the Skin* nor the Yiddish version published in 1954 in *Di Goldene Keyt* were faithful to what young Zvi Kolitz had written for *Di Yiddishe Tsaytung* in his room in the City Hotel in Buenos Aires, in the late summer of 1946.

A story that commands such a wide appeal in North America, Jeffrey Mallow and I thought, deserved a better English translation. So, with the encouragement of Mr. Kolitz, with whom I had meanwhile had a moving encounter in his New York City apartment on Sunday, April 10, 1990, we started work on a new English translation. We finished it in the middle of May, 1994; it first saw the light in early November, in the journal of the Association for Religion and Intellectual Life, *Cross Currents*.¹⁴ At long last, English readers were in a position to read what Kolitz wrote. A month before, the original story had been made available to German readers by Paul Badde, in the form of a handsome little book published in October, 1994.¹⁵ But ominously, on July 18, 1994, the Jewish community center AMIA in Buenos Aires, in whose library collection the original of the *Yossel* story had been found in March, 1993, had been almost entirely destroyed—by a terrorist's bomb. With it, the only known surviving copy of the text perished as well.

* * * * *

With the issues of text and authorship recounted, I must now turn to the more important questions of faith and theology. What has my encounter with Yossel, son of David Rakover of Tarnopol, taught me?

A first answer must be: simply itself. A good piece of literature is its own study and its own reward; it shapes us the way friends shape

us, especially dear and difficult friends: deeply, if often almost imperceptibly. They affirm and enhance us as persons, they broaden our inner horizons and deepen our capacity for appreciation, understanding, and compassion; thus they ready us for further encounters with others yet unknown.

But secondly, and more specifically, in encountering Yossel Rakover I encountered the world of living Jewish faith in a manner in which my almost lifelong familiarity with the Jewish Scriptures, and especially with the Book of Psalms, had never quite let me encounter it. One of the tragedies of the West is that Christians and Jews have almost no shared religious, intellectual, and theological traditions other than the Hebrew Bible, which, however, we Christians read in significantly different ways. In the second century, the frictions between Jews and Gentiles, which had exercised the Christian communities in the first, gave way to a next to definitive estrangement between Jews and Christians, to be substantially reinforced by the later establishment of Christianity as the religion of the West. It fixed a chasm of ignorance, prejudice, and adverse judgment between us. Across such chasms, true calls from faith to faith rarely occur. But they do occur.

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One of my favorite instances of such a call happened just over two centuries ago, when an unconventional Christian theologian took Moses Mendelssohn to task.¹⁶ Johann George Hamann, a pietist, yet a friend of Immanuel Kant's, is nowadays best remembered for his odd-titled tract *Golgotha und Scheblimini! Von einem Prediger in der Wüsten* ("Golgotha and Sit-at-my-Right! By One Preaching in the Wilderness"), published in 1784.¹⁷ It is a fierce attack on Moses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum* ("Jerusalem, or, On Religious Authority and Judaism") published the year before, in 1783. Mendelssohn (whom Hamann considered a friend) had argued that Judaism was entirely compatible, both with the spirit of the Enlightenment and with the religious, cultural, and socio-political establishment of late eighteenth-century Prussia. That thesis had Hamann utterly dismayed, so much so that even after *Golgotha und Scheblimini!* was published, he remained restless and

dissatisfied with himself. In the end, he decided to raise the alarm once again in a brief tract for general circulation, to be entitled *Entkleidung und Verklärung: Ein fliegender Brief an Niemand, den Kundbaren* (“Denudation and Glorification: A Flying Letter to Nobody the Well-Known”).¹⁸ He never lived to see it in print. In capitulating to political and religious convenience, Hamann felt, Mendelssohn had forsworn the voice of prophecy. He had presented Judaism as a time-honored tradition of ritual and conduct, but one that incorporated nothing substantially new in the way of truth or fact. In doing so, he had settled for the Enlightenment proposition that the only substantive realities are the timeless, generally acceptable truths always accessible to natural reason. While appearing to honor the Jewish Tradition, Mendelssohn had robbed it of any claim to distinctiveness. Hamann felt that his friend had protested too much; unwilling and unable to prophecy, he had denied the chasm that lay between Judaism and the Enlightenment; at Mendelssohn’s hands, Judaism had deteriorated into a profession of harmlessness. The record had been misinterpreted, and Hamann felt that he had the duty to point this out, precisely as a Christian. For Scripture treats the most intractable passions and paradoxes as part of the substance of the faith of ancient Israel and its inheritor, post-exilic Judaism—not as incidental to it. Honesty in reading the Bible demands that we refuse to domesticate the truth. Mendelssohn had forgotten the real Jerusalem. That Jerusalem is not timeless but painfully historical, and hence, inseparable from the gift of prophecy and the duty to prophesy; only in this way can it be appreciated as the Vision of Peace and the Holy City—the substance of faith, hope, and universal reconciliation.

* * * * *

Johann George Hamann’s outcry, across the chasm that separates Christianity from Judaism, came from the Christian side: in the name of the City of Jerusalem—both its historic glories and its historic sufferings—Hamann called on Judaism not to sell its soul to the conveniences of the Enlightenment.

In my case, the outcry across the chasm came from the Jewish side, in the form of Zvi Kolitz’s story and Emmanuel Lévinas’s commentary

on it. In the remainder of this essay, let me give an account of some of the ways I have come to terms with its impact. I shall do so by raising three issues.¹⁹

* * * * *

The first concerns the Glory of God. In the name of the victims of the Holocaust and of their faith, *Yosel* calls on Christians not to sell their souls to the conveniences of anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism yields a version of Christianity that is little more than a clearly revealed divine scheme for the salvation of a humanity mired in sin; it reduces humanity and the created universe to a mere stage on which the salvation of Christians is taking place. This variety of Christianity is mainly a religion of piety and reassurance; it assures sinners of forgiveness, and proclaims, often in deeply moving organ tones played in Crystal Cathedrals, that the forgiveness of human sin is the paramount wonder of God's gracious love and the principal manifestation of God's greatness. Lévinas obviously had encountered the type in Europe; arguably, it is even more wide-spread in North America.

There is an enormous problem with this interpretation of Christianity. In the phrase of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (who was hanged in Flossenbürg on April 9, 1944, for his complicity in a plot to kill Hitler), this version of Christianity "cheapens grace."²⁰ It allows human beings to take comfort in the assurance that they are in God's good graces at no cost to themselves; they can rely on God's love, and God is welcome to be entirely at their service, weak and sinful as they are. But this indulgent, very intimate God is a caricature of the God of the Covenant—the merciful, faithful, steadfastly loving God who "will by no means clear the guilty" (Ex 34, 7). While graciously forgiving the People of Israel its dreary history of unfaithfulness and sin, this living God never ceases to call his people to worship and to loyalty to the Covenant, to the practice of steadfast, responsible stewardship on behalf of all of humanity and the whole world. Made in the divine image and likeness, those who worship the living God must be the representatives, in time and place, of God's own Glory and Holiness, which permeate and encompass all times and all places.

A Christian community that merely basks in God's forgiving love will lose the sense of God's transcendent majesty. It will believe less in

God than in salvation, which it will in due course feel free to define any way it pleases;²¹ thus it will be inclined to absolve itself from any wider responsibility, whether for humanity as a whole or for the cosmos at large. This form of Christianity makes human weakness and sin the measure of God's greatness. It fails to remind Christians that God is immeasurably greater than the forgiveness of human sin can communicate and convey. Thus it also loses the ability to remind Christians that God's graciousness is not cheap but (again in Bonhoeffer's words) *costly*: God's mercy should lead the mature human conscience to heroic, self-sacrificing virtue.

Let me put this first theme in the stark language of theology. Doxology should govern soteriology, not the other way round. Faith and theology understood as human participation in the everlasting, worshipful glorification of the living, evermore transcendent God should be accorded pride of place over faith and theology understood as the human experience of salvation in history. Only in this way can the radical asymmetry be upheld that prevails between God and all things created, which is the central conviction of the great Tradition of faith in the One True God, both in Judaism and in Christianity. In Zvi Kolitz's story, Yossel's final words combine a profession of this faith in the One True God with that ultimate act of worship: the unconditional abandonment of self, by which human beings acknowledge that God alone is God and that they themselves are entirely God's.

It is only fair to observe that the mainstream Christian Traditions of East and West, especially in their great liturgies, have consistently said "Amen" to this ultimate act of worship. In that sense, Lévinas's description of Christianity is only partly accurate. Consequently, his comparison between Judaism at its noblest and Christianity at its cheapest must be called somewhat unfair. But the indubitable power of his essay lies in its critical analysis of a type of Christianity which is dangerous, both theologically and morally, yet into which Christians slip only too often and too widely, even if largely unintentionally.

* * * * *

The second theme, it seems to me, must be the Torah—God's Word and the exalted repository of God's eternal Wisdom. Here both Zvi Kolitz and Emmanuel Lévinas have simply forced me to come to

terms with the continuing meaning of Torah for Christianity. After much reflection and some study I have come to the conclusion that when the Fourth Gospel declares that “the Word was made flesh” (Jn 1, 14), it brings into play “a number of the religious currents of the time,” among them speculations current in Hellenistic Judaism.²² But one of the themes indubitably also brought into play is the Christian interpretation of Jesus’ life and death as the fullness of the Wisdom of the Torah, so much so that one title that can be responsibly applied to the person of Jesus is “the Wisdom of God” and in that sense, “the Torah Incarnate” (1 Cor 1, 24).

I realize, of course, that putting things in this way raises a host of issues between Jews and Christians—far more than can be discussed here. To mention just one: in the eyes of a Jew, what is left of the Torah when, with appeals to Jesus and to the evangelization of the Gentiles, the observance of the sabbath, circumcision, the purity regulations, and the food laws are abolished, as the Christian community has done? Christian universalism, while not alien to the later writings in the Jewish Bible, sacrifices far too many essentials of the Torah to be still recognizable as a legitimate form of life in obedience to it.

Yet, it seems to me, there is a bridge across the chasm even here. For Jews, faith in God is as inseparable from obedience to the Torah as faith in God is inseparable from faith in Jesus for Christians; in both cases, the latter is the shape and the actuality of the former (as well as its verification). And, most importantly, *both the Torah and the person of Jesus involve demands of divine origin*. Here Christians, and perhaps Jews as well, have a great deal to ponder and learn.

When we Christians say that Jesus suffered and died “for us,” what do we mean? Do we mean that the world was redeemed by a heavenly transaction which occurred without our involvement and from which we benefit without our consent? No. That would be nothing but divine whim posturing as mercy. The New Testament never says that Jesus suffered “instead of us”—that is, as our stand-in or substitute. Jesus, Christians say, settled the debt humanity owes to God, but he did not do so by excluding humanity from what he did and suffered by way of satisfaction. If God had decided to impute the merits of Jesus’ individual suffering and death to us who believe in him, with no cost to ourselves, then salvation would be no more than the cancellation, by mere divine *fiat* and by mere indulgence, of the sins of Christians; but

that would imply that God had absolved Christians from any moral responsibility, either for their sins or for their conversion. That would make Christianity a children's religion indeed, as Lévinas well saw.

Against this, what the New Testament does say is that Jesus, in living, dying, and rising from the dead, did so "in our behalf" or "for our sake"—that is, as our *representative*. Jesus, living and dying in unconditional self-abandon to his God, freely took on the human predicament out of compassion, to enable and call us to live for God again, in hopeful anticipation of the resurrection of which he himself is the first-fruits.

Thus, *whereas substitution excludes participation, representation invites it*; it even demands it. Jesus's saving work, therefore, does not get anybody off the hook; on the contrary, having been "bought free dearly" (1 Cor 6, 20; cf. 1 Pet 1, 18-19), Christians are restored to both freedom and responsibility before God and insistently called to follow Jesus, for the sake of humanity and indeed the whole world. Faith in Jesus, in other words, is vacuous without life in imitation of him. This is why the praise Christians offer to God in Jesus' name must take the form of rehearsing the story of Jesus, not only in word, but also in active and patient discipleship.

Not surprisingly, the mainstream Christian tradition has often put this in terms borrowed from the Jewish Scriptures. It has unequivocally rejected the unfortunate (yet widespread) view of Jesus as scapegoat. That view would imply, blasphemously, that God made the punishment of an innocent the precondition for atonement, and that Jesus, therefore, "had to" be dispatched as humanity's substitute, to satisfy the divine demand for retribution. (There are, of course, good reasons for saying that Jesus was scapegoated and victimized, but if we do so we ought to add at once that this was done, not at God's bidding, but by characteristic human injustice.)

What the Christian tradition, in continuity with Judaism, endorses is something quite different. God's blessing rests on the voluntary, willing, patient acceptance of suffering—even undeserved suffering. The book of Job stands as the prototypical instance of this affirmation, for Jews and Christians alike. Additionally, the Christian tradition has seen the theme reflected in Isaiah's Suffering Servant bearing the sins of many and interceding on behalf of sinners; thus it has regarded Christ as the Lamb led to the slaughter (cf. Is 53, 12. 7; Jn 1, 29; 1 Pet 1, 19;

2, 19-24; 3, 14; 4, 13-16; Mt 5, 10). What all of this means is this: there is such a thing as the “law of Christ.” It calls for a life dedicated to discipleship, which includes the shouldering of others’ burdens (Gal 6, 2).

The differences between the fictional figure of Yossel and the historic person of Jesus of Nazareth are, of course, legion. Yet I wish to suggest respectfully that what I have just explained establishes a deep affinity between them—an affinity, it seems to me, able to challenge both Christians and Jews. Let me put this differently. Koltitz’s story makes the same provocative statement as Marc Chagall’s *White Crucifixion*—one of the treasures of the Art Institute in Chicago. In this disturbing painting, the crucified Christ is surrounded by scenes of pogroms: Jews killed, hunted down, and driven away, synagogues burning, Torah-scrolls desecrated. To a Jew, this is the world turned upside down: the cross, traditionally the sign and symbol of their persecution, has become the emblem of compassion. But for Christians, too, the tables are turned. In Chagall’s painting, far from being the victim of Jewish rejection—as he is depicted even by the Gospels—Jesus is on the victims’ side. Naked and exposed, his only covering is a *talith*: in his death, Jesus has become total prayer. He has also become the exemplar of the suffering, rejected Jews who have none but God to commit themselves to. In light of this comparison, is it surprising that, in Zvi Koltitz’s story, Yossel’s last words are identical to Jesus’ in the Gospel of Luke: “Into your hands, O Lord, I commit my spirit?” (Ps 31, 6; cf. Lk 23, 46).

In Chagall’s painting, by whom is Jesus rejected? The answer, while not explicit, is very much implied: in the persons of the persecuted Jews, Jesus is rejected by the very people who, at least by tradition, acknowledge him as their Savior. How do they reject him? Koltitz’s story answers that question very explicitly: those who profess faith in a God whose universal love-commandment Jesus proclaimed have actively inflicted violence on the Jews for close to two thousand years; even more insidiously, there are many self-centered, irresponsible, and apathetic Christians who are passive, silent accomplices of that violence. Here the figure of Yossel turns into a massive challenge to the Christian conscience, testing its willingness to acknowledge that forgiveness of sin and the assurance of eternal life in the name of Jesus have consequences for the Christian community’s commitment to the promotion

of justice in the world. A Christ believed in but not followed is a stumbling-block, a scandal, not the center of the Christian faith.

* * * * *

The third theme. Here I wish to speak rather more personally. If there is one thing Judaism and Christianity have in common it is that they believe that the fullness of salvation promised by the living God is still outstanding. For all their differences, both Jews and Christians live by hope and desire for the revelation of the Glory in the resurrection of the just; consequently, both live with the realization that salvation is still incomplete. In this interim, Judaism and Christianity are inseparable—tied in with each other dramatically, in mutual tension. For Christians, faith in Jesus as the risen Messiah has not made God's promises to Israel vacuous; much as Judaism opposes the Gospel, it remains God's Beloved, for the gifts God bestows and the calls God issues are irrevocable (Rom 11, 28-29); whatever blessings God may have graciously accomplished in Jesus and in the Christian community, they have not displaced the faith embodied in Judaism.

My encounter with Yossel Rakover drove this home to me, and the manner was anything but theoretical; it put my Christian faith on the line. More than I could ever have learned from books, I came to realize that the Christian community is and remains radically dependent, for its faith and its understanding of God, on Israel's faith and its understanding of God. This fact has all too often been obscured by traditional, yet (upon reflection) relatively superficial assumptions and statements about allegedly wholly irreducible differences between Israel's monotheism and Christianity's trinitarian faith, and between Jewish interpretations of Jesus and the Christian acknowledgment of him as the Messiah. In this light I have also come to the conclusion that the common Jewish-Christian understanding of God must remain the yardstick by means of which contemporary Christian theologians must take the measure of modern Western civilization, which has been so deeply shaped by Christianity—its triumphs as well as its failures. They must do so both to the extent that the West continues to profess a commitment to some form of monotheism and to the extent that it has settled for, or positively committed itself to, the various atheisms.²³ I

wish to suggest that Jewish theologians have an important part to play in this enterprise.

Since *Yossel*, these are no longer theoretical truths for me. It is extremely unlikely that I will ever acquire the learning needed to meet Jewish believers on the ground of their own faith-traditions, nor do I expect to meet many Jewish experts on the Christian faith-traditions any time soon. Others will doubtlessly take up these complementary challenges and shed light on the relationship with the authority and the mutual respect that comes with broad and deep learning. I cannot afford the luxury of waiting till this comes about. I have come to find it impossible to be a Christian (and *a fortiori* a Christian theologian) now without having actual ties of (mostly implicit) worship, shared manners, and especially mutual instruction with Jewish thinkers and believers now. The chasm simply has to be taken on *now*, in full awareness of our considerable mutual ignorance, and hence, in careful faith, patient hope, and thoughtful affection. For in the last resort, God alone can raise up true Wisdom in us and among us, by graciously turning not only the Holocaust and its bitter aftermath, but also centuries of alienation and injustice, into blessings. I have been fortunate enough to find such Jewish thinkers and believers. They are friends in God. They have become part of my company as I Walk the Way. And, I am finding out, like Christians, they come in kinds.

Notes

A piece of intellectual and theological autobiography contributed to Zvi Kolitz, *Yossel Rakover Speaks to God: Holocaust Challenges to Religious Faith* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1995), pp. 41-63. Revised.

1. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Het menselijk gelaat: Essays van Emmanuel Lévinas* (Utrecht: Uitgeverij Ambo, 1969).

2. Emmanuel Lévinas, "Aimer la Thora plus que Dieu," in *Difficile liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1976), 189-93; English translation in F.J. van Beeck, *Loving the Torah More than God? Toward a Catholic Appreciation of Judaism* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1989), 31-53.

3. Obviously, this is a quotation from the Gospel of John (4, 25).

4. See Lévinas "Une religion d'adultes," in *Difficile liberté*, 24-41.

5. It eventually appeared as F.J. van Beeck, *Christ Proclaimed: Christology as Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

6. Albert Friedlander, *Out of the Whirlwind: A Reader in Holocaust Literature* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1968).

7. Zvi Kolitz, *Tiger Beneath the Skin: Stories and Parables of the Years of Death* (New York: Creative Age Press, 1947).

8. *Di Goldene Keyt* 18 (1954): 102-110.

9. Zvi Kolitz, *Jossel Rackower spricht zu Gott, unter Mithilfe von David Koban aus dem Jiddischen übersetzt von Anna Maria Jokl* (Neu-Isenburg: Verlag Tiessen, 1985).

10. F.J. van Beeck, *God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Understanding the Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989; second revised edition Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

11. F.J. van Beeck, *Loving the Torah More than God? Toward a Catholic Appreciation of Judaism* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1989).

12. See van Beeck, *Loving the Torah More than God?*, 13-26.

13. F.J. van Beeck, *Loving the Torah More than God?*, 10-11.

14. "Yossel Rakover's Appeal to God: A New Translation with Afterword," *Cross Currents* 44 (1994): 362-77.

15. Zvi Kolitz, *Jossel Rakover's Wendung zu Gott, Aus dem Jiddischen übertragen und herausgegeben von Paul Badde* (Möhlin und Villingen: Raureif Verlag, 1994).

16. I am here drawing on my essay "Israel's God, the Psalms, and the City of Jerusalem: Life Experience and the Sacrifice of Praise and Prayer," *Horizons* 19 (1992): 219-39.

17. Johann George Hamann, *Golgotha und Scheblimini! Von einem Prediger in der Wüsten* ["Golgotha and Sit-at-my-Right! By One Preaching in the Wilderness"], in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 3, ed. Josef Nadler (Wien: Thomas-Morus-Presse, Im Verlag Herder, 1951), 291-320. The title alludes to Ps 110, 1, one of the classical christological proof-texts (cf. Mk 12, 36 par.; Mk 14, 62; 16, 19; Mt 26, 64 par. Lk 22, 69; Acts 2, 34; cf. also 1 Cor 15, 25; Eph 1, 20; Col 3, 1; Heb 1, 3. 13; 8, 1; 10, 12-13; 12, 2).

18. Hamann, *Entkleidung und Verklärung: Ein fliegender Brief an Niemand, den Kundbaren* ["Denudation and Glorification: A Flying Letter to Nobody the Well-Known"], in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 3, 348-407.

19. The present essay is a fresh effort to give an account of my thinking. Still, it inevitably contains themes and insights also contained in my earlier, and much fuller, response to Yossel Rakover and to Lévinas's commentary on it, under the caption "God's Love and God's Law," in *Loving the Torah More than God?*, 55-83.

20. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 43-114.

21. On this tendency, see John Henry Newman's devastating critique in *Essays Critical and Historical*, 4th ed., vol. 1 (London: Basic Montague Pickering, 1877), esp. 47-48.

22. Thomas H. Tobin, "The Prologue of John and Hellenistic Jewish Speculation," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990): 252-69; cited at 252.

23. A first attempt at demonstrating these points is found in my *God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology*, vol. Two/2, *The Revelation of the Glory: One God, Creator of All That Is* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995), §§96-99.

*A Blessed Wait for “Infinity”:
Hans-Georg Gadamer*

It is 2:30 P.M., on Easter Monday 1999, in Heidelberg. We have had a vigorous, four-hour conversation. As we try to say goodbye in the front hallway, Gadamer says: “*Wissen Sie*, van Beeck, I now tend to think that I am really not so much a thinker as a speaker. Heidegger—he was a thinker; I am more of a speaker, a lecturer—a *Redner*.” I think: the sheer modesty of this ninety-nine-year-old man, still reviewing his life and consciousness and coming to conclusions. To celebrate his hundredth birthday this February 11, the whole world of philosophic thought has its superlatives at the ready, but he is still examining his life, quietly and in the main silently—that is, in thought. Outside, we shake hands a third time, and, precariously, I go down the curved front steps, where Frau Gadamer is waiting with the Volkswagen to take me to the railway station. On to Amsterdam.

I had arrived at 10:30 in the morning by taxi. Frau Gadamer, a spry seventy-four-year-old, had answered the door and told me her husband had been looking forward to my visit for weeks. As I walk into the large living room, Gadamer is getting up from behind a big table by the window overlooking a beautiful valley formed by a tributary of the Neckar. He looks well—much better than he did three or four years ago. He says, with his intensely polite smile: “I notice we have both become richer by one cane,” and we shake hands. *Kaffee und Kuchen* are not far behind, with the promise of lunch a little later. We are on our way.

I have enjoyed conversing with him ever since we first met, in the Roberts House Jesuit Community at Boston College, in the autumn of 1977. He lived with us Jesuits while teaching at the university. Like us, he made his own breakfast. Most of us were music lovers; so, obviously, was he. He worried out loud to us when one of us went into deep withdrawal for a time. When, on weekdays at 5:15 P.M., we and the

unforgettable Sebastian Moore went down to our basement chapel to celebrate the Eucharist, Gadamer would occasionally remark: "Time to go to my stony bench to contemplate."

Gadamer first swam into my ken in 1961, when I was an assistant to the editor of a journal, in charge of getting book reviewers to live up to their promises. Two books caught my eye: Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* and Lévinas's *Totalité et infinité: Essai sur l'extériorité*. I read them hastily, getting only the main drift of the two arguments, but aware that both had given me something important to ponder. Lévinas had reawakened Buber's *Ich und Du* in me, save that both Hegel and the Holocaust had been added to the mix. Suspicions about grand schemes of understanding were revived, and memories of Jews raided, picked up, and kicked into a waiting truck returned; so did the sealed front door of Mr. Samuel Schuijjer, my violin teacher, arrested and (as I found out much later) killed in Auschwitz on December 11, 1942.

Truth and Method took longer to enter into my bloodstream. I had long been fascinated by the eighteenth century's knack for Sentiment—feeling for feeling's sake. Such bits of Enlightenment thinking as I had found in excerpts from the *Encyclopédistes*, Locke, and Hume had struck me as lucid but curiously disturbing. As a boy I had also wondered how you could possibly get, in a matter of decades, from Bach's monumental geometry to Mozart's melancholic, sweet, often thin melodies, and as a twenty-year-young Jesuit seminarian I had discovered Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart, the eighteenth-century poet and music theorist. He had made things clearer by introducing me to Johann Stamitz, the Mannheim school, and the *empfindsamer Stil*. Later on, with my seminarian's knowledge of Kant and my passion for Max Scheler's passionate refutation of Kant, I had concluded that, intellectually speaking, there was less to be said for the Enlightenment than met the eye, and that Mozart was a grand exception. So, I figured, *Truth and Method* had to be right, even without my getting the details.

I joined the Roberts House community in early 1977, while completing at the time a sizable book on christology. One evening I found myself conversing with Gadamer about my interpretation of the Council of Chalcedon. He asked if he could see the pertinent chapter in its draft form. The next day I got it back, with a long note in English that included the sentence: "The interpretation and the use you make of the Chalcedon-text is absolutely a masterpiece—really a step toward

a new foundation of hermeneutics of religious texts!” I wondered what to make of the overstatement—Gadamer was not given to making them. What I did know was that he had a way of respecting knowledge any way he found it. I had noticed how he listened to Jesuits in our community: a biochemist, an economist, a clutch of philosophers, an English scholar, a theologian or two. I had never seen a person so ready to understand and so meek (if decisive!) in turning his own knowledge to good use. What he did show was considerable acquaintanceship with scholars of every stripe (including Pope John Paul II) and with notable politicians and thinkers across the spectrum, whom he had either taught or met. His little book *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, a collection of thumbnail portraits of thinkers to whom Gadamer felt intellectually and personally indebted, published when he was eighty-five, turned out to be a portrait of the man himself. Not that Gadamer was nice in conversation. A fellow Jesuit, whose considerable thoughtfulness suffered under a burden of worry, once tried to end an argument saying, “Well, Professor Gadamer, I think I will simply stick with Saint Thomas Aquinas on this point.” Gadamer did not miss a beat: “But, Father, surely you don’t wish to imply that for me to listen to you is as good as for me to listen to Thomas Aquinas?”

About ten years ago, I had indicated in a Christmas letter that I had been tired. In mid-June, 1995, a note from Gadamer arrived:

Your health is a matter of concern to yourself and all your friends. How are you, I wonder? Aging is a hard process, and even if one is so fortunate as to remain of sound mind, like you and me, we are to allow Nature to make its claims, and defer to Infinity much of what we still wish to do and would be able to do as well. May you succeed in finding the discerning balance that is now being asked of you. I am with you, as I am looking for this balance as well.

This tender note reminded me of an occasion on which he told me how important it was to live in tune with one’s health and not to believe in specialists. It reminded me even more of a fairly long autobiographical letter from him I received in January of 1989, in which, besides other things, he explained how he viewed his relationship to Christianity:

While Christianity has never touched me more than peripherally, it has provided me all the same with the openness not to be completely enslaved by the delusions of the Enlightenment.

Openness. At that point I began to realize why my hermeneutics of Chalcedon had enthused him. Like so many other children of the German *Aufklärung*, he had been unaware that hermeneutics had long been part of Catholic philosophy and theology. He later told me that he had been led to believe that the Christian faith was based on axioms that were simply not a matter for debate, “justification by faith” being the principal, with Christ’s divinity and salvation by substitutionary atonement not far behind. And the great Heidegger, who had never made a secret of the fact that he was a former Catholic, had not undeceived him.

But does this make Gadamer a “child of the *Aufklärung*”? Of course it does. When his father, a professor of pharmacology at the University of Breslau and a scientist of the austere kind, sent him to the university in 1918, he told his son to study science, the only tolerable alternative being the law. But the world young Gadamer had come to inhabit was populated by the characters of Shakespeare and Dostoevsky. So imagine the relief when he noticed that a course in *psychologia rationalis* was being offered: *Psychologie*—that had to be it! He went, and found himself in a classroom full of black-robed Catholic seminarians taking the regular course in what used to be called rational psychology: Aristotle’s *De anima* and what Aquinas and other Scholastics had made of it. But he had discovered what he wanted to learn: classics and philosophy, and especially Plato—the chief source of Christian humanism as we know it. In that environment Christians and former Christians were hard to overlook.

Years ago, on a previous visit, I had told him that I had always suspected, from *Truth and Method* and from his own stories about “the happiness I have been blessed with in later life,” that the book, published when he was sixty, had been his way to settle his accounts with his father—a personification of Enlightenment rationalism. His mother had died when he was a mere child. Not until much later, he told me, had he found out—much to his consolation—that she had come from a family of teachers and artists. I decided to

bring up the subject again. He remembered the previous conversation, but this time, when I suggested that *Truth and Method* might have been cathartic, that it might have helped him settle his accounts with his father, or maybe even liberate himself from his father, it was Frau Gadamer who jumped in: “Liberated is the word!” That moment helped me understand. I am now even less surprised at a certain natural catholicity of taste I always sensed in Gadamer. Once, at least twenty years ago, he returned to Roberts House on a rainy Sunday evening. The previous Thursday he had left for a brief lecture series at one of the universities in Salt Lake City. We welcomed him, took his luggage and raincoat, but he kept shaking his head. Asked for an explanation, he could only bring out: “Terrible, no *vinum*, no *veritas*!”

There is a side to Gadamer not often discussed: he was an administrator with no small responsibilities. A professor at the university in Leipzig since 1939, he knew what it took to work with barbarians looking over his shoulder; in 1946-47, he told me that, as rector of the university, he kept only one goal in mind: preserving the university. He did not give details. What he did do was strike an imperious pose—he must have been quite effective at acting the *Magnifizenz* part in the presence of Communist authorities. In fact, one of Gadamer’s lifelong commitments was to the Platonic and Aristotelian notion that it is judgment rather than knowledge that yields truth. I have often heard him say that truth is primarily objective: *alethes chrysos*, *echtes Gold*, *true gold*. Only in dealing with objectivity does true knowledge start; dialogue, not transcendental reflection, is the road to truth. Not surprisingly, he was upset when Heidegger died while he himself was teaching at Boston College. He regretted that he would not be there for the convocation of the *Akademie Pour Le Mérite* to commemorate his most important mentor. Now, he said, for the eulogy they would have to turn to Karl Rahner—the second most senior Heidegger disciple. “Ach, Rahner is of course a splendid thinker, but he does not think in dialogue. Heidegger did, always. Rahner prefers to paint stars up against the inner firmament in his head.” I agreed, though with a smile, and he apologized, also with a smile.

Dealing with objectivity. Having moved to West Germany in 1947, first to Frankfurt and two years later to Heidelberg, to the chair previously occupied by Karl Jaspers, Gadamer succeeded in getting a

wealthy friend in Vienna, a patron of the arts and sciences, interested in providing a neutral venue where thinkers, politicians, and social economists from East and West could meet regularly. The aim was to prevent the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall from hardening into permanent cultural divides. An estate in Croatia became the venue for this forum and it was there that Gadamer first met the young philosopher-bishop Karol Wojtya, then teaching at the University of Lublin. I have never asked Gadamer if he had read Wojtya's *The Acting Person*. If he did, he will have understood. Only by taking on the world of objective fact, Wojtya argues, does one's understanding become trustworthy. Only by dint of understanding the unfamiliar other, Gadamer has consistently argued, can our own selves, familiar yet always to some extent prejudiced, form reliable judgments. Being fundamentally a philosopher of culture, Gadamer has never shirked involvement in less-than-purely-intellectual pursuits, as anyone who has heard him debate Jürgen Habermas about the events of 1968 can testify.

In a set of essays pulled together and published in grand old age titled *Über die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit*, now translated as *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age*, Gadamer (who survived polio at the age of twenty-two) has sounded the same trumpet. Medical specialists know about illness and disease, but only ordinary, judicious persons know about health, and so do good physicians—that is, physicians with sound judgment. Health is a mystery of wholeness, of being-well; it is not definable by dint of expertise—something the experts had better understand. He looks out of the window: “Neither my wife nor I are taking any medicine these days.”

The end of the visit was as touching as its beginning. The first thing he had said after we had greeted was: “Van Beeck, is it not interesting that one can properly think only with a view to a future?” He had also mentioned the formidable Ernst Jünger, the controversial German adventurer, diarist, commentator, essayist, and philosopher of the Right, who had died at the age of almost one hundred and three just over a year ago, a good two years after being quietly received into the Catholic Church. “I think I understand something about that,” he added. Now, toward the end of the visit, I tell him that the journal *Gregorianum* has just accepted an essay of mine in fundamental theology entitled “What Can We Hope For, Really?” My answer, I explain,

is: “What we can hope for, really, is what we do not know.” He says: “We understand one another here, do we not?” I just nod and go down the steps. Frau Gadamer is waiting in the Volkswagen.

Notes

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THINKING THROUGH MATTERS OF FAITH

*“Born of the Virgin Mary”:
Toward a Sprachregelung on
a Delicate Point of Doctrine*

This essay offers an interpretation of the traditional Catholic teaching that “Jesus Christ, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, was born of the Virgin Mary.” It will be attempted to do so in such a way as to positively acknowledge three blocks of non-theological knowledge: (1) the critical difference between tacit, unspoken meaning-elements in speech and the invisible, unwritten meaning-elements discoverable in texts; (2) the account of the anatomical and physiological “facts” involved in human fertilization and conception as they were widely understood in the classical and medieval periods, and thus, presumably, at the place and time of the composition of the infancy narratives in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, and (3) the modern, scientific account of these same “facts,” now generally understood and accepted. Indirectly, the contrasts treated in (1) and between (2) and (3) will raise issues in the field of the hermeneutics of Christian doctrine. For all this, the author’s chief purpose in writing is *systematic-theological*, but in such a way as to emphasize linguistic, and hence, pastoral elements as well. After all, the accepted, shared language of faith must never be totally severed from the live speech of the people professing it, and silence is a strangely telling part of live speech.

Happily, the Great Tradition’s constant teaching on this point is now being studied in many places. Unhappily, some of the scrutiny, often allegedly academic, is mixed with scorn; still, scrutinizing (as against doubting) Christian doctrine is the birthright of Christians; if they do not take advantage of this privilege, non-Christians will. For Christian thinkers and teachers, intellectual integrity in believing is part of the Christian project; for them, the pursuit of genuine theological questions is an outright moral and professional duty.

Unhappily yet again, legitimate questioning of the virgin birth is quite often poorly met and managed in the churches. Insinuations of heresy, not to mention overt charges, are quite common;¹ but the only thing these may succeed in doing is silencing questioners. This is apt to breed subliminal doubt and even practical denial. The same can be said for magisterial answers so forceful as to raise suspicions of fear and anxiety on the part of the teaching officers. Habitual avoidance of the issue is even worse. Such passivity, in hopes of burying this delicate issue in Christian teaching in silence, will allow doubt and denial to enter by the back door, unacknowledged. Unstated embarrassment with regard to the Catholic doctrine of the Virgin Birth will infect the household.

What we need is neither a neighborhood search by the magisterial police, nor proclamations broadcast, to flares of triumphalist trumpets, from the front balcony, nor whispers of mutual reassurance with the back door unattended in hopes of getting the unacknowledged, unwelcome visitor to leave. This essay is an effort to write a script for an orderly, informed, open conversation where it counts: in the living room. After all, even in living rooms intelligence has its part to play, at least occasionally. *Non scholae sed vitae discimus.*

I. Introduction: A Quick Essay on *Speech and Text*

In a fully literate culture like our own, an enormous amount of information and explanation goes on between and among people who do not know one another, and who in fact do not need to know one another. Wherever and whenever this happens, we completely depend on text, and specifically, text deliberately composed “on a need-to-know basis.” Nothing must be implicit; every detail counts; nothing must be left to the imagination; there is nothing to be read in between the lines; the sole idea is to “get it right.” Do this, and thou wilt be the author of a user’s guide to a software program or a scanning machine. Nobody will read your writing except the poor secretaries and technicians who must use the programmed machines, and in the end, there will be little to enjoy except the “it-works!” experience and the paycheck, yours and theirs.

It would never have entered the mind of the great logical positivist thinker Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) to compose the previous paragraph,

although he might have found it worth writing. Yet in essence a software user’s guide is the result of what he thought about the true nature of language. For this is what he wrote:

The essential business of language is to assert or deny facts. Given the syntax of a language, the meaning of a sentence is determined as soon as the meaning of the component words is known.²

Russell was wrong. For if the essential business of language is to assert or deny facts and nothing else—how about live speech—conversation, argument, *tête-à-tête*, and all those other ways of oral communication? We all know that in a strictly-business conversation we have to focus on the matter in hand, without going all over the place, and we are amazed at the merchants in the Eastern Mediterranean, who (or so we are regularly told) talk for hours about everything and nothing and then decide they have a deal. But to the extent that the story about the merchants is true, we understand the issue quite well: in live speech, there is a lot that is not purely factual: tone, pitch, force, rhythm, voice and its opposite, whisper, self-control and lack thereof, self-discipline and lack thereof, and even more, metaphors and turns of phrase galore. All these “figures of speech” keep us affectively involved, whether we want to express ourselves or not; unlike the bland software user’s guides that some of us write, we human beings cannot not-communicate ourselves as long as we are speaking or participating in a conversation.

How, then, about our practices of writing and reading? First of all, we know that there is always more than strict denotation in what we say, write, or read; in fact, we know that connotation is practically everywhere, not only in live speech, but also in written texts. Of course there are differences between a carefully prepared speech and an unprepared or ill-prepared one; the latter is apt to offer more connotation than the former. In either case, though, listening is interpreting, which enables us to ask a friend, “What’s your take on what she read to us?” or (perhaps more importantly) “What’s your take on what the piece she read to us didn’t say?” Let us put this differently. Even prepared language, written to be read out loud for others to hear, leaves room for ambiguity. Still, ambiguity is not the same as total incomprehension.

For, in the case of the prepared speech, standard idioms are expected. Insiders, who know the “family language” or the “company talk,” recognize the idioms; that is to say, they know whether the truths spoken are to be taken as strictly factual or metaphorical. At issue here is the participants’ sense of belonging: “a word to the wise is enough.”³

In the context of faith and theology, the issue of interpretation occurs regularly, especially when we touch on bodies of religious texts of great antiquity and religious authority. Here is an example. Once, in Israel, on my way down on foot from Mount Tabor, I fell in with a group of teenagers on their way home after school. One of them explained to me that I could not possibly have read the *Qur’an*, since I did not know Arabic. I said that I had read it in a carefully annotated translation, but she persisted: I had not read the *Qur’an*. However, this did not keep her from inviting me home to supper with her family, who treated me as an important guest and invited me to say grace before the meal. (After their *Amen*, they added grace in Arabic.) In this case, the acoustical elements of the prayer were obviously more relevant than the precise meaning of the words, mine and theirs; when we come to the Holy Book, those acoustical elements are obviously central to believing Arabs. We know the same phenomenon when we meet people whose respect for God’s Word is almost inseparable from the King James Bible—its cadences, its idioms, its odd past tenses, its tone, never mind the Hebrew and Greek originals.⁴

Now if we recall that all biblical texts were originally written to be publicly read or “performed,” our comparison with prepared speech delivered in “company language” comes further alive. How so? Detached scholarly treatment of scriptures as written and printed texts—and-no-more-than-that runs considerable risks; it just may miss the unstated meaning-ingredients—the ones which it takes a good and sympathetic ear to pick up. Put differently, tone-deaf scholarship may end up supplying statements of alleged fact to fill the exasperating void left by the unstated meaning-ingredients present in any written text (except software user guides and its equivalents, where denotation reigns supreme).

What has been explained here is immediately relevant to Jane Schaberg’s *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives*.⁵ Coming from a (former?) Catholic, this is a plainly unorthodox book, in the doctrinal and theological sense; still,

what is of present interest is the author's apparent lack of interest in the *theoretical* possibility of a “family language factor” in the Infancy Narratives, especially in Matthew's gospel, but also in Luke's. From the outset, Schaberg treats Jesus' illegitimacy as a plain, factual fact—though one that chiefly women are apt to detect in the gospels. For as a matter of both fact and hermeneutical principle, women will suffer at the hands of men, whether by willing subjection, fornication, or rape. Only women, therefore, are apt to appreciate Jesus' illegitimacy; they “know the story,” even if the (male) gospel writers and redactors and the (male-dominated) ecclesiastical tradition have done their best to conceal it.

Further on in this essay, we will need a good sense of what has been (somewhat ramblingly) explained so far. For in the understanding of such texts, momentous silence may be part of the total meaning.

II. The Texts: Various Important Preliminaries

1. Over more than two centuries, Christian (and post-Christian) biblical interpretation has been dominated by historical-critical method; North American scripture scholars of every stripe joined the fray about a hundred years ago. After vigorous initial participation, temporarily defeated by the anti-modernist movement, Roman Catholics have been making a distinguished contribution—a story well told by Gerald Fogarty.⁶ But pride in recent discovery has a way of making us unduly surprised at past insight. Thus, it may amaze us that pre-modern but far from uncritical readers of the New Testament could intuit long ago, *without benefit of historical-critical method*, that the infancy narratives are the result of inspiration, *not recollection*. Saint John Chrysostom is an example. In a commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, he notes that the account of the choice of Mathias is guided by Peter's proposition that only eyewitnesses would be able to credibly testify to Jesus' life “from *John's baptism* on” to his crucifixion and resurrection (Acts 1, 21-22). So what was needed were people who could testify: “This man, *who ate and drank and was crucified, he was raised.*” But why the pointed reference to John's baptism? Chrysostom explains:

none [of the disciples] knew from *observation* what happened before it; in fact, they were taught [about that] in the Spirit.

In other words, eyewitnesses to what had preceded Jesus' Baptism were not needed.⁷ That is to say, behind the narratives of the virgin birth lies inspiration, not recall.

2. The late Raymond Brown dealt with the question at length, in two books: *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*⁸ and *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*.⁹ John P. Meier has followed suit, less elaborately, in *A Marginal Jew*.¹⁰ After painstaking analysis, Brown concludes that judging by their literary form, the infancy stories are best read as renditions of the Christian Gospel in narrative form, patterned on Jewish models—a conclusion he has repeated in the more recent, updated edition of the book. In the latter, Brown, faithful as always to the *magisterium* of the Catholic Church, also reviews the “Debate over the Historicity over the Virginal Conception”; here again, he repeats the conclusion of his first treatment: “the *scientifically controllable* biblical evidence leaves the question of the historicity of the virginal conception unresolved.” Yet he also warns his readers not to jump to conclusions; the biblical evidence in favor of historicity is stronger than the evidence to the contrary.¹¹ Thus he can state that *in his opinion* Matthew and Luke “regarded the virginal conception as historical,” yet also caution that “the modern intensity about historicity was not theirs.”¹² Meier has broadly agreed with this.¹³ So will this essay.

Meier's purpose in writing is different from Brown's. He sets out to separate objective historical fact in the gospel accounts of Jesus' origins from faith interpretation or theological truth—an enterprise somewhat questionable on hermeneutical grounds. Still, on the question treated here, Meier comes to the following conclusion:

During the reign of King Herod the Great . . . a Jew named Jêshûa' (=Jesus) was born . . . somewhere within the confines of Herod's kingdom. Jesus' mother was named Miryam (=Mary), his (putative) father Yôsêf (=Joseph) . . . the many diverse traditions in the NT about his Davidic descent argue well for his being known during his lifetime as a descendant of King David, *whatever the biological truth may have been*—a truth probably *not accessible even to Jesus' contemporaries*.¹⁴

Presumably, the pointer to “biological truth” in this quotation is at least partly connected with Meier’s parenthetical designation of Joseph as Jesus’ “putative” father.

3. The treatment offered here intends, among other things, to construct two related arguments.

Firstly, it intends to distance itself from the hypothesis—often implicit—that the two synoptic narratives are adequately interpreted only if their sole point (or at least their sole essential point) is taken to be the statement of a fact, whether “historical” or “biological.” Authors making this case can be divided into three categories. Some, surprisingly, will construe the silence of the New Testament outside the Matthean and Lukan accounts as an affirmation of the historicity of the virgin birth; others will appeal undiscerningly to scriptural inerrancy; others will postulate sources for which no historical evidence exists, such as the availability to Matthew and Luke of local oral traditions or family traditions.¹⁵

Secondly, this essay will call into question a second, subtler hypothesis, which lies at the root of the accounts offered by most exegetes, including Raymond Brown and John Meier, viz., that Jesus’ conception and the manner of his birth are valid historical questions. In the case of the virginal-conception narratives, so Raymond Brown and John Meier suggest, the problem is that no historically valid answers are in fact available to these otherwise valid historical inquiries. On this exact point, the present essay will demur. It will do so by arguing, on hermeneutical grounds, that the questions are not properly historical questions. This argument will yield two related theological conclusions: (1) the unavailability of answers to these particular questions poses no fundamental intellectual obstacles to the profession of the Christian faith,¹⁶ and (2) since the questions, when actually asked, are likely to have a hidden theological agenda, they must be answered accordingly—i.e., with the help of theological, not historical, hermeneutics.

In mounting this second argument, therefore, this essay will also take its distance from efforts to interpret the two gospel accounts of Jesus’ virginal conception as “purely symbolic” (“pure legend”)—i.e., as having no basis in fact whatsoever. There are good reasons to suspect that the oft-heard dilemma “either historical or theological” (which fosters the polarized positions reviewed by Raymond Brown) is the result of a cultural impasse.

At the core of this impasse lies our inability to live with living truths that are neither wholly factual nor wholly reducible to verifiable certainties. The culture we are part of tends to insist that non-verifiable truths are unreal; they have no “cash value.” As a result, when we find ourselves encountering apparent “factlessness” in biblical texts, we will experience a “truth void” that will turn the biblical text into a Rorschach inkblot; when this happens, *horror vacui* is apt to push us into needless denials, unwarranted projections, or both.

4. Finally, with Raymond Brown, this essay will distance itself from interpretations based on extrinsic claims, viz. that the genuine sources of the profession of the virginal conception as an historical fact are the anxieties brought on by the psycho-sexual immaturity allegedly prevalent among an all-male clergy, the hidden prejudices against rape victims, or the abject submission allegedly exacted by the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching office.¹⁷

5. For reasons of clarity of exposition, the present essay will limit itself to Mary’s virginity before the birth of Jesus (“*ante partum*”) and (albeit in passing) during the birth of Jesus (“*in partu*”).

6. What are the data?

a. The Church’s indubitable teaching in this matter can be reliably worded as follows: the Lord Jesus, whom Christians acknowledge, in the Holy Spirit, as the Christ of God by virtue of resurrection of the dead (cf. Rom 1, 3), was “conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.”

b. Note that an early Coptic creed specifies “without male *‘sperma.’*”¹⁸

c. Note likewise that the fairly authoritative regional synod of Toledo (400 or 405 A.D.) expressly teaches that the Son of God,

born from the Father as God before every beginning, . . . has assumed from her [=the Virgin Mary] a true human being, generated without a man’s seed.¹⁹

d. The Latin phrase *absque semine* (“without seed”) also occurs in the third canon of the Synod at the Lateran (649 A.D.).²⁰

e. Earlier, in 521 A.D., Pope Hormisdas had written to the Emperor Justin that

the One who was Son of God before all time became Son of Man, and was born, in time yet beyond expectation, in the way human beings are born, by opening, at birth, his mother’s birth canal, yet, by virtue of his divinity, without undoing his mother’s virginity.²¹

f. Finally, a synod held in Toledo in 675 A.D. used age-old Eastern language, but emphasized the novelty and uniqueness of the event:

[The Son was born] by a new (type of?) birth: untouched virginity did not know relations with a man, yet furnished the material (i.e., the flesh) made fertile by the Holy Spirit. This virgin birth can be neither grasped by reason nor evidenced by [another] instance; if it is grasped by reason it is not miraculous; if it is evidenced by [another] instance, its uniqueness will be gone.²²

g. Conclusion: it is theologically irresponsible to state that the Great Tradition leaves the issue of “Mary’s physical virginity” open. Conclusion from this conclusion: those who state, as if it were a positive fact, that Jesus was conceived by ordinary sexual intercourse must not expect to be accepted as orthodox Christians. But, as always in the Catholic tradition, this does not imply that the door to theological reflection and interpretation is closed.

7. The Tradition’s unconditional affirmation of the virginal conception and birth of Jesus raises enormous problems, of course. Unlike many so-called “pre-modern” people, sophisticated, physiology-conscious, contemporary people will find the virgin birth most implausible. By way of rationalization, they are apt to protest that it calls into question the genuine humanity of Jesus—a reasonable observation. Miraculous events are hard to accept any day, but to postulate

an outright cosmological miracle to vouch for the true humanity of Jesus strains the ability to believe of most, including serious Christians. Why? Modern Christians know the anatomical and physiological facts of fertilization and conception; while most of them do somehow allow room for marvels and even miracles, they find it worrisome that the truth of the Word Incarnate—part of the doctrinal heart of the Christian faith—should be based on a cosmological miracle, especially since the virginal conception of Jesus was not properly considered a natural (“cosmological”) miracle until just over three centuries ago.

8. There is a final complicating factor. The doctrine of Jesus’ virginal conception is founded on two single-tradition, mutually independent gospel passages, viz., the Matthean and Lukan infancy narratives. At first blush, this seems to favor the conclusion that we are dealing not with history but with a *theologoumenon* in narrative shape—an interpretation also favored by the fact that the literary genre of both narratives is legendary. Besides, this interpretation is supported by the fact that the oldest writings of the New Testament appear to be unaware of any virgin birth.

But then again, there is the fact that the two accounts have no fewer than eleven features in common;²³ this suggests that the oral traditions behind each of them are of a fairly early date. This creates a wide field of possible interpretations—a field day both for the imaginative of every kind and for those urging caution.²⁴

9. Like any mystery of the Christian faith, the topic of Mary’s virginity invites (besides affective contemplation) frank and respectful theological reflection. The catholic tradition has considered faith a virtue; it has not encouraged credulousness. Asking keen questions and testing new interpretations of the virgin birth are not a sign of “liberalism,” let alone unbelief. Banning or maligning this kind of inquiry is a sign not of faith but of lack of faith.²⁵

10. The purpose of this essay is: hermeneutical-theological reflection. Still, sound theological reflection somehow presumes a context of ministry. Accordingly, some academic theologians calling certain sorts of theological language “pastoral” just may be damning by faint praise; at worst, they are guilty of academic complacency. By virtue of

Baptism, the so-called “simple faithful” are entitled to the full truth, at least as they can understand it, and it is not up to academic theologians to decide in advance just how much the faithful can understand. Since the early Renaissance (when a new, often thematically humanistic understanding of the university arose), sophisticated “Nicodemites” have been suggesting that there are two versions of the Christian faith, one for themselves and one for common people.²⁶ The catholic tradition has long recognized the problem, but handled it in a very different way. It has recognized how right Greek philosophers were when they taught that it takes “spiritual exercises” to attain to true knowledge, as Pierre Hadot has reminded us.²⁷ Also, in the footsteps of Paul and the authors of the Johannine letters, the Tradition has put a heavy burden of accountability on those who have claimed, implicitly or in so many words, to be “knowledgeable” (γνωστικοί): they are traditionally expected to verify their claims to higher understanding (or γνῶσις) by the practice of certain forms of asceticism, prayer and contemplation, and other-regarding love.

III. Essentially a Cosmological Miracle?

1. This essay will end up arguing that neither the New Testament nor the Church’s *magisterium* teach that Jesus’ virginal conception is a cosmological miracle. Put differently, it will be argued that calling the virginal conception and birth a miracle is a conclusion from the data of the faith, not an article of faith in and of itself.

Still, this does not imply that thinking or even saying (preferably modestly) that the virginal birth is a cosmological (“physical,” “natural,” “biological,” “physiological”) miracle is irresponsible. Still, those who think or speak in this manner will do well to add that this is a responsible theological opinion, not the stated teaching of the Great Tradition. Why is this important? Answer: it is a mistake to think that the relevant passages in Matthew (1, 18-25) and Luke (1, 26-38) have one, *and only one*, perfectly certain point to make, namely, the physical virginity of the Virgin Mary. Why?

Faith-affirmations never have only one single, unequivocal point to make; their meaning is “always fuller”; like Godself, “the things of God” are “always greater.” In our case, over-affirmation runs the risk of reducing a mystery to one, and only one, simple, factual truth;

accordingly, overstating the virginal conception and birth of Christ runs the risk of stripping it of any fuller meaning.

It is, of course, far from irresponsible to say: “I (along with many others) cannot come up with a better interpretation; I am content to regard the virgin birth basically as a natural miracle.” All right, but (it will now be argued) theologically unsatisfactory. In other words, those among us who still wish, in today’s world, to treat the virginal conception as “simply, basically a cosmological miracle” must sit down and count the cost.

2. To begin with, “miracles” have long been known to happen, but it is wrong to regard them as common occurrences, let alone as incontrovertible ones. Besides, those who have decided to interpret the virginal conception and birth of Jesus as an obvious miracle should realize the following.

3. Firstly, they are dealing not with one miracle but with three:

a. Worldwide human experience teaches us that no pregnancy occurs without previous sexual intercourse (or one of the prosaic modern alternatives to it). This is ample reason to consider a virgin birth—any virgin birth—a miracle, in and of itself.

b. Question: can the conception of Jesus be accounted for by regarding it as a case of “parthenogenesis”? Did the Virgin produce a fertile ovum formed without meiosis? Answers: (1) in “explaining” miracles, we must take care not to explain them away;²⁸ (2) parthenogenesis, while passable as a biological hypothesis, has never been observed in the human species. Conclusion: human parthenogenesis is rare enough to qualify as a (cosmological) miracle, but only if properly attested to.

c. But there is something else here as well. A parthenogenetically conceived Jesus would be female. Why? The sex of a fetus is a function of the fact that (theoretically) half the gametes in any human male’s sperm carry the Y-chromosome, whose presence in a fertilized ovum causes the ovum to develop as a male, almost from the beginning of the embryo’s process of development on; the other half carry

the X-chromosome necessary for the fetus to turn out female. The parthenogenesis hypothesis implies that the Virgin produced a Y-chromosome which, being female, she did not naturally possess, thus enabling Jesus to be born male. This would have to be called another miracle, of the cosmological kind.²⁹

4. Secondly, even a quick look at Wendy Cotter’s recently published *Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook for the Study of New Testament Miracle Stories* will suffice to show that far from regarding wondrous phenomena as puzzling, the ancient world positively anticipated them in connection with persons and situations in which the supernatural and the superhuman were involved—an attitude both the synoptics and the fourth gospel depict Jesus as being critical of (cf. Mk 8, 11-12; Mt 12, 38-39; 16, 1-4; Lk 11, 16. 29-32; Jn 2, 18; 6, 30).³⁰ Accordingly, medieval Christianity both East and West were inclined not to demand miracles, yet if and when they occurred or were said to have occurred they knew how to welcome and interpret them.

Only just over three or four centuries ago did the notion of natural (“cosmological”) miracle take shape, slowly. This development was the result of the scientific understanding of exceptional occurrences as events in which the “laws of nature” are suspended by virtue of a direct intervention by the omnipotent God in the course of cosmic events. The far-sighted Pope Benedict XIV canonized this definition in the mid eighteenth century.³¹

However, modern theory of science (*Wissenschaftstheorie*) is a great deal more modest about the truth status of so-called “laws of nature.” Modern scientists agree that even our best scientific knowledge of natural regularities is substantially statistical; accordingly, freak occurrences can never be excluded in the cosmos. Thus modern science is far more conscious of its ignorance than the scientists of even a century ago. Modern scientists (as against many engineers) are far less surprised by “miracles.”

5. But, thirdly, it takes more than a freak event to make a miracle; freak events do occur and they are puzzling, yet by themselves they mean relatively little. Why? To call an unusual cosmic event a miracle, we must establish not only the absence of “natural” explanations for the

event, but also the presence of the event's appeal to the faith of certain believers. In other words, miracles are established by a combination of objective investigation/diagnosis and discerning personal or shared faith-interpretation.³²

6. The final point, fairly abstract and perhaps unsettling, but it has to be made: the virgin birth cannot be a necessary precondition for the divinity of Christ. Let me speak like a fool. God the Father could have been as fully the Father of Jesus if Joseph (or anyone else for that matter) had been Jesus' human Father. Why? Because God is "omnipotent." God is "the God of the powers."³³ In dealing with creation, God has no competitors to wrestle down or stand-in-the-ways to push aside.

Augustine, a newly ordained presbyter speaking at the Synod of Carthage in 393 A.D. explains this as follows:

I am confident that those who understand things spiritually will recognize that nothing can be the opposite of God. God is the One who is, and only of God can this verb be properly predicated. (For what truly is, remains without change, since what is subject to change was at one time what it no longer is, and will be some time what it is not yet.) But if this is so, then God has nothing opposite to him. If we should be asked what is opposite to white, we would answer, black. If we should be asked what is opposite to hot, we would answer, cold. If we should be asked what is opposite to quick, we would answer, slow, and thus we could go on and on. However, when it is asked what is opposite to what is, the right answer is that it is not.³⁴

Accordingly, suggesting that the biological paternity of Saint Joseph would have excluded the possibility of the Father's paternity implies that the Father is not truly God Almighty.³⁵

7. One notable Church Father, Gregory of Nyssa, appears to support the natural-miracle theory. In his *Great Catechetical Oration*, he first explains that all things have been created good; only evil is incompatible with God. But there is nothing evil in a human being's birth, upbringing, growth, natural advance to maturity, experience of death, and return from death.³⁶ Then he goes on:

but what preceded his birth and followed his death eludes the nature we share. When we look at the two limits of our human life, we know from where we begin and where we go to meet our end. Having begun existence as the result of involuntary passion [ἐκ πάθους], man involuntarily and passively [πάθει] brings his life to an end. But in this [=the Incarnate *Logos*’] case, neither did birth originate in involuntary passion [ἀπὸ πάθους], nor did death run into involuntary passivity [εἰς πάθος]. For neither did lust precede the birth, nor decomposition follow the death. You do not believe in this astounding thing [τῷ θαύματι]? I am happy with your unbelief! For in the very act of finding what I have just said too much to believe you are acknowledging that these astounding things are above nature.³⁷

What to make of this text? Two things jump off the page. Firstly, Gregory sees a double miracle: the virgin womb has a counterpart in the tidy tomb and must be interpreted accordingly.³⁸ Secondly, the “astounding thing” (miracle?) is the absence not of so much of sperm as of πάθος [Lat. *passio*].

What does πάθος mean? A contemporary theological author explains:

The Greek noun *pathos*, especially in its plural form *pathe* (“passions”), generally denotes all those affections by which an experiencing subject is unavoidably, and far from voluntarily, implicated in, and involved with, the object of the affection. This gives the noun *apatheia* (“passionlessness”) a broad, fairly imprecise range of significations: impassibility, incapability of suffering, incapacity for change, insensibility, freedom from emotion, freedom from self-interest, freedom from sin. Specifically in reference to human persons (and thus, eventually, in the idiom of Christian asceticism and mysticism), it conveys the (originally Stoic) ideal of “mastery over the passions, detachment, tranquillity, imperturbability, insensitivity to suffering”; it also denotes the Christian ideal of “contemplative peace.”

There is more here than meets the eye. Accordingly, our author goes on to explain not only how *pathos* is part of human life, but also just what it means to say, with the Great Tradition, that “there is no *pathos* in God”:

Our real capacity for spontaneous self-disclosure is tempered by at least some degree of dependence on the influence of outside agents. Much as we may be poised for spontaneity, whether for good or for ill, we also have to be “moved” into action. . . . No matter how much we are inclined, for better, for worse, to take initiatives, both in regard to ourselves and to our world, not even the most spontaneous and creative among us ever completely lose their dependence on change thrust upon them from outside.

Apatheia, when applied to God, conveys that God is wholly different in this regard. God is not waiting, whether impotently or impassively, for inducements to action in order to manifest the divine nature. God is transcendently free to be self-communicating. So if God does create, this is neither God’s predictable, conditioned response to the provocation of chaos, nor an enigmatic production, by an inscrutable God, of a collection of distant objects; it is the free self-expression of the divine goodness in meaningful and purposeful realities that are not God. And if God, having created, does show mercy, this is not a concession extorted from a feeble deity unable to face the misery of humanity and the world; nor is it an indulgence nonchalantly thrown at humanity and the world by a cryptic deity that remains impervious. For if and whenever God does self-manifest and self-communicate, God freely initiates, and freely allows those who receive the gift of the divine self-communication a glimpse of what is—must be—at the heart of God: transcendently free self-giving.³⁹

So this is how Gregory interprets the virgin womb and the tidy tomb: not as hard facts that prove some truth, but as “marvels” that betoken the wholly gracious freedom with which God’s Word goes in and out among us as he pleases. In writing this, Gregory is taking us back to Irenaeus, who explains that what the Word accomplished was

truly just.⁴⁰ He came into the world without breaking and entering, because he came into what was his own in the first place, from the beginning: “all things were made through him, and nothing at all was made apart from him,” even though when “he came into his own,” “his own did not receive him” (Jn 1, 3. 11).

8. We have moved from Gregory’s catechism to the fourth gospel. Hard on the heels of the lines just quoted, the author of this gospel avails himself of what was common knowledge about fertilization and conception. He does so in order to compare and contrast that knowledge with the Christians’ spiritual rebirth by God’s free gift of faith in Christ—the very thing he has Jesus tell Nicodemus later on (Jn 3, 3-6):

But all those who did receive him, to them he gave the freedom-and-power [ἐξουσίαν] to become God’s children—those who believe in his [=the *Logos*’s] name, and they were born, not out of a mass of blood [ἐξ αἱμάτων], nor from [a woman’s?] craving of the flesh [ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς], nor from a man’s craving [ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς], but from God.” (Jn 1, 12-13)

These references, right in the Prologue to the fourth Gospel, to physiological conditions associated with conception and to the passions involved in the acts that lead up to it invite a brief excursus into the ancient world’s interpretation of the process of conception.

IV. A Few Remarks on Ancient Physiology

1. Before we proceed any further, we must remember two things.

First, there is no progress to report (and thus, no ever-shifting “state of the art” to admire) in anatomical and physiological knowledge between, say, the late-second century A.D. and the mid-sixteenth century.⁴¹ Anatomy as we understand it today developed very slowly, as an art rather than as a form of knowledge, in the West as in the East. Only about the year 1300 A.D. did a native of Bologna, with its proud medical school, Raimondo (“Mondino”) de’ Liuzzi (c. 1260-1326) dare open and inspect human cadavers (chiefly of criminals executed by beheading or hanging), but, oddly, the accounts of what he claims to

have found are riddled with error.⁴² How so? Understandably, Mondino had not properly *looked*.⁴³ He had not been able yet to get away from Hippocrates and especially Galen,⁴⁴ whose treatise Περὶ χρείας μωρίων (“On the functioning of the body parts”) was to remain the authoritative medical text till well into the Renaissance.

Second, the first modern anatomical atlas, *De humani corporis fabrica* (“The Makeup of the Human Body”), by Andreas Vesalius (1514-64), appeared in 1543—five years after his fairly crude *Tabulae anatomicae sex* (“Six Anatomical Plates”).⁴⁵ It was the first anatomical atlas based on actual inspection. In the priceless phrase of J. H. van den Berg, before Vesalius, the anatomists’ and physiologists’ chief instrument had been not the scalpel but the pen; even a few of Vesalius’ discoveries, not just in the *Tabulae* but also in the *Fabrica*, came from not from ocular observation, but from books.⁴⁶ Anatomists took their time becoming sufficiently objective (and irreverent) to cut, look, and see.⁴⁷

2. Still, the ancients were far from naive. From common experience they knew that blood comes in two kinds: the dark red, heavy, trickling type, and the bright red, foaming,⁴⁸ pulsating type. The former came out of veins, the latter out of arteries.⁴⁹ Loss of the former rarely led to death, except if help was very slow in coming; in the case of the latter, there was no time to lose, so most of the time help arrived too late even to try to stop the bleeding. The slow type of blood was connected with the liver; butchers had long known that in the abdomen of animals tissues full of veins, and especially one large vessel known as the “portal vein,” linked the small intestine to the liver. One good look sufficed to reveal that the food in the intestine surrendered its most refined elements to the blood in those veins, which took them to the liver.

The conclusion was easy: the liver was the body’s nutrition center. In the liver, heavy, plodding, “cold” blood (alive only in the vegetative sense of the word) was loaded with nutrients and sent out to every part of the body to deliver its goods. By contrast, the heart was clearly the body’s life center: in the throbbing furnace of the heart (you could feel the hot exhaust fumes by breathing on the back of your hand!) some of the blood deriving from the intestine was filled with fresh, clean air from the lungs (hence the foam!), heated up, and especially, filled with

sentient, hot, passionate life, for the arteries to transport to every part of the body.⁵⁰

3. Besides the blood carrying vital spirit and nutriment to all parts of the body, to keep it alive and fed, the body had at its disposal blood with a more specialized mission: reproduction. In women, some highly refined blood was turned into a mass of fresh, non-sentient blood, stored in the womb; it stayed fresh only while its vegetative life lasted—one lunar cycle; left alone, it spoiled and had to be evacuated, to be replaced by a new mass. In men, leftover blood was turned into semen, which carried not just vegetative but properly sentient life—a quality derived not just from the male’s inherent vitality but also from the sun, plainly the origin of life and heat. Like the slow blood in the womb, it did not keep well, so it had to be regularly evacuated; yet unlike the woman’s blood mass (which was “cold,” given its affinity with the moon), it was periodically discharged with a passion, often in dreams.⁵¹

4. Now to beget a child, it was thought, it was the male’s function to actualize the woman’s *inherent* potential for motherhood, by enlivening, ordinarily by repeated (and preferably energetic) coital interventions, the refined but barely living blood passively waiting in the woman’s womb to be spurred into growth and development as an individual living being, and (in the case of human beings) a living being yet to be ensouled, in due time, by God. That is to say, until the mid-seventeenth century, Western medicine regarded the man as only the *catalyst* of conception, and not as a *contributor* to the physical make-up of the fetus.⁵²

5. The question was, of course, What makes the sperm capable of initiating the development of a human being? Thomas Aquinas, who came by almost all his physiological knowledge through Aristotle’s writings, devotes two careful questions in the third part of the *Summa theologiae* to this problem (qq. 118-19)—one he had treated many times before. He states, reflecting on experiences as old as humankind, that the male sperm is merely instrumental:

a saw or an ax does not actively possess the *forma* of a bed, but only some kind of “move” in the direction of that *forma*. In

the same way, *the active power* [that will bring about conception] *does not need an actual bodily organ to be effective*; instead, *this power resides in the* [vital] *spirit contained in the semen*, which is frothy, as is apparent from the fact that it is white; this spirit partly consists of heat coming from celestial bodies, by whose power inferior [cosmic] agents are brought to bear upon the formation of specific living beings. And because in such a [vital] “spirit” the power of [vital] soul combines with heavenly power, it is said: “man is born from man and sun.” Now elemental heat is related to vital power by way of instrumental causality . . .

. . . in the higher animals, which reproduce by intercourse, the *active power* resides in the male’s semen, as the Philosopher says . . . ; by contrast, the *matter* of the fetus is furnished by the female. In this matter [=“embryonic mass”], there resides, right from the beginning, a vegetative soul, not in full actuality, of course, but inchoatively, just as a soul resides in those who are asleep. But when it starts to attract nourishment, the [vegetative] soul is actually at work. Thus the mass undergoes a transmutation due to the power contained in the male’s semen. . . . Now as soon as, by the power of the active principle resident in the semen, the sentient soul arises in the mass (or [at least] in the chief part of it), then the sentient soul of the offspring starts to be active, so as to fashion a finished body of its own, by way of nutrition and growth. By contrast, the active power that once was in the semen ceases to exist: *the semen dissolves and its [vital] spirit evaporates*. And this is not inappropriate, in that the [vital] power is not an independent agent, but an instrumental one; and the work of an instrument ceases once the effect is achieved.⁵³

In other words, the only thing any father ever contributes to the conception of the fetus is “vital spirit” suspended in a viscous fluid; this spirit is needed to raise the merely vegetative blood in the mother’s womb to the level of sentient life.⁵⁴ Small wonder that whatever materials the husband, at the time of intercourse, has contributed to the development of “his” child simply cease to exist. How could Aquinas have made it more apparent that he was of the opinion, along with the

entire pre-scientific Western world, that physically speaking we are the children of our *mothers*?⁵⁵

6. But this leaves something unsaid. Aquinas does not spell it out, but it is implicit in his reasoning. If we receive our bodies exclusively from our mothers, and if God is the creator of our spiritual souls, then we are truly no different from the man Jesus as far as humanity is concerned. The difference between Jesus and other human beings turns out to lie neither in their bodies (they owe them to their mothers) nor in their souls (they are immediately created by God).⁵⁶ This very much diminishes the “human distance” (so to speak) between Jesus and all other human beings, at least to us moderns. We will have to come back to this.

7. What, then, is the vital role of the male in the lore of the premodern world? Answer: any father is responsible for the legitimation of his children; a father must “own up” to having initiated this child, which must now be a manifest individual with its own identity.⁵⁷ Fathers achieve this legitimation by publicly naming the child.⁵⁸

8. With this, we are at last ready to interpret the only two sources on which the Great Tradition relies for the doctrine of Jesus’ virginal conception and birth: the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke. By now, the question to be answered has become: What would Matthew and Luke have been able to mean in the infancy narratives, given the commonly available understanding of the physiological processes leading to conception in their day?

V. The Virgin Birth: A Theological Interpretation

1. Like any other story in the New Testament, the narratives of Jesus’ virginal conception are first and foremost matters of faith. If these source narratives are to be understood at all, we are to understand them by interpreting them as they desire and deserve to be understood. This means we must interpret them theologically before insisting on making sense of them as (would-be?) historians. In order to do so, we must begin by firmly suspending our modern scientific pre-judgment, whose chief element is that conception occurs only by the fusion of two genetically co-equal half-cells.

2. Matthew and Luke tell their virgin-birth stories not as miracle stories but as what might be called “missionary theophanies.”⁵⁹ This is vital to our interpretation. The two angelic annunciations are met with confusion and awe on the part of Joseph and Mary (cf. Mt 1, 20; Lk 1, 29-30); this is only proper at an encounter with the Living God by way of one of his messengers. Still, in neither narrative do we find even the slightest trace of amazement on the part of any third parties. That is to say, from the point of view of audience or reader response, whether real or presumed, we must say that the virginal conception regarded as a physiological event hardly raises an eyebrow: Jesus is conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, period. A few decades later, Ignatius of Antioch will agree, and write that Mary’s virginity is one of the “resounding mysteries, such as were wrought in God’s silence.”⁶⁰

3. The two annunciation stories are as different as the two “genealogies” of Jesus associated with them (Mt. 1, 1-17; Lk 3, 23-38).⁶¹ Matthew’s point of view is largely Jewish: Mary’s husband, Joseph, is of the House of David, so Jesus is entitled to the (messianic) title “Son of David.” Luke’s perspective is universalistic: by the time we get to his genealogy we know already that Gabriel has conveyed to Mary that Jesus “will be called holy, Son of God” (Lk 1, 35);⁶² no wonder he is called “Son of Adam, Son of God” (Lk 3, 38): he will be the fulfillment of the promises, even from the world’s origin forward.

4. Raymond Brown lists the details the two stories have in common.⁶³ But, uncharacteristically, he does not point out that there is one feature which these two otherwise very diverse stories literally—in the sense of *textually*—have in common, viz. the semitism, “You shall call his name Jesus” (καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν: Mt 1, 21 = Lk 1, 31). That is, *the Name Jesus comes from God*.

Could this be the cue to the interpretation of both passages? Matthew gives Mary’s legitimate husband, Joseph, the authority to name the Child, but in a dream he is told by an angel to name him Jesus. In the Lukan account of the annunciation to Mary, too, the name Jesus comes from God (Lk 1, 31), and the actual naming is narrated in the passive voice: “He was named (ἐκλήθη) Jesus” (Lk 2, 21)—conceivably a subtle pointer to an act of obedience to divine command.

5. We are ready to offer our conclusion. The infancy narratives employ the assumptions of ancient physiology as well of ancient legitimation practices. They propose that Jesus is truly the Son of God, who gives him his name and in so doing identifies himself as the (sole) true initiator of this child, who is the world’s Savior. Jesus is also truly a member of (the Jewish and) the human race; this he is by virtue of his human conception in Mary’s womb, without human initiative, by sheer divine initiative, without passion (and in that sense, “without seed”).⁶⁴

VI. Some Typically Modern Difficulties

1. It is often argued that the infancy narratives cannot be interpreted “literally,” since such an interpretation would concede that Jesus is not fully human. This approach to hermeneutics of any kind is misleading, for two reasons:

a. Using the word “literally” is nonsensical if we do not make an effort to find out what the “literal” meaning of the narratives may have been in the culture that produced the texts.

b. When interpreted “literally” in this sense, the texts precisely affirm Jesus’ full humanity, by squarely making him the child of his mother, Mary.

2. Citing parallels of promised children in the Jewish Scriptures (e.g., Isaac, Jacob, Samson) and in the New Testament (John the Baptist), in order to argue that Jesus, too, “must have been” conceived by sexual intercourse is intellectually dishonest. Such an interpretation disregards the obvious and distinctive difference between the parallels and the infancy narratives.

Still, there are contemporary Hellenistic parallels, which show that virgin births were neither unheard-of nor wholly unthinkable in the first century, as Raymond Brown (who lists a few of them) would seem to imply.⁶⁵ Thus we have Plutarch’s story of Romulus, who was said to have been conceived as a result of Zeus’s relations with a Vestal Virgin. There are the legends of Heracles: his mother Alcmene had refused to consummate her marriage until her husband had helped avenge the

murder of her brother, and how she had conceived Heracles from Zeus while her husband was away fighting the wars. Finally, there is Pseudo-Callisthenes' account of the birth of Alexander the Great (who had claimed descent from Heracles himself) from his mother Olympias, after she had relations with Zeus. It is, therefore, not foolish to imagine that in the towns and cities of the Greco-Roman world narratives about unique individuals having been born "virginally" may well have enjoyed a *prima facie* plausibility, if only "in the streets."

3. To argue, on the basis of modern anatomy and physiology, that Joseph and Mary "must have had intercourse" to produce Jesus is intolerable; it flies in the face of the only sources we have; it amounts to making assertions unsupported by verified data, and in the teeth of the only data we do have.

Things are slightly different with the oft-heard opinion that Jesus "must have been" illegitimate.⁶⁶ For one thing, Matthew's narrative drops a broad hint in this direction when it relates how Joseph, being a just man, decided not to take Mary to court on account of her pregnancy. The later Jewish charge that Jesus was illegitimate, therefore, does more justice to the data that we have than the claim that Jesus was simply the natural child of Joseph and Mary. This charge of illegitimacy was aimed, of course, at challenging the *Christians'* faith in Jesus Christ's uniqueness; but, as explained above, this overlooks the fact that nothing created can defeat God and God's purposes. Thus, theologically speaking, even a Jesus conceived out of wedlock (or worse, by rape) could be the Son of God.⁶⁷

4. It is better, therefore, and more honest, to say simply that the Gospels provide us with no answer to our specific historical-physiological questions about the origin of Jesus beyond the fact that Mary was his mother. Still, this is precisely the point at which we must read the texts properly hermeneutically (i.e., realistically as well as in an urbane, well-educated manner), as follows.

Is it really true that the issue of Jesus' physiological provenance is an historical question? It would seem it is not, as John Meier's phrase "a truth probably not accessible even to Jesus' contemporaries" would appear to imply.⁶⁸ In actual life, paternity questions are forensic, legal, judicial questions, raised only if paternity is doubtful.⁶⁹

Thus, no historical biography of a celebrated person begins with conception (let alone with parental intercourse). At the earliest, biographies start with family backgrounds and with conditions attending their subjects’ births.⁷⁰

5. Why, then, should anybody wish to insist on having “historical” (here meaning “biological”) information about Jesus’ origins?

Answer: we live in a historicist, rationalist culture, which tends to equate truth with factual truth and to associate figurative language with non-reality. This is an honest problem, so it deserves articulate correctives, e.g., pointing out that we use metaphors to deal with realities so real that we cannot quite handle them.

Yet there is a second answer to the question, too: demanding historical certainty about Jesus’ biological origin is a loaded move, with a theological agenda that is typically unacknowledged, even though it is part and parcel of the agenda that prompted the gospel narratives in the first place. This hidden agenda often represents a wholly justified concern about the genuineness of Jesus’ humanity. Far more often, however, while purporting to be an unassuming question, it is an effort to cast doubt on the truth of Jesus’ divine sonship, and so, indirectly, on the credibility of the Christian faith as such—an understandable move in its own right. But this kind of inquiry is best met not with overstatements but with a non-arrogant, friendly smile, a quiet eye-to-eye, and a pregnant, reverent silence.⁷¹

After all, being the setting of every kind of significant speech, it is unsurprising that *eloquent silence* has a part to play, too, in Christian *Sprachregelung*. Hence:

VII. Afterword: Rules of Speech for Ministry

1. Those of us who think of the virgin birth as a cosmological miracle act wisely if they honestly say so; in matters of faith, nothing is more unsettling than evasive language. However, they do well to add that the Gospel passages have a deeper meaning: in his loving mercy, God, and God alone, takes the initiative in having his Power and Wisdom dwell among us as one of us. To use an idiom of the Greek Church Fathers: in the person of Jesus, God’s Creative Word takes on

not just one among us, but all of us—the entire “lump of dough” (φύραμα)—to renew us all, together.⁷²

2. It is wise to explain the parallel between the gospel accounts of the virginal conception and the Baptism and Transfiguration narratives: the Father identifies his Son by naming him, just as human fathers in the not-too-distant past proudly went to city hall to register their children by name, the very day they were born.

3. It may well be a good idea to explain the idiom “born of woman” (Gal 4, 4; cf. Mt 11, 11 par. Lk 7, 28; Job 14, 1; 15, 14; 25, 4).⁷³

4. Let me end by acknowledging that it has taken me over twenty-five years of reflection to put all the bits and pieces (for that is what they are) of this essay together. While the limits of my intellectual powers have a lot to do with this, I do not think that the underlying attitude—an intellectual appreciation of mystery rooted in faith and fed by contemplation—is easy to acquire. Accordingly, part of reading and understanding this essay is, well, patience and habits of reverent, affective reflection. The pieces may fall in place. Or, to borrow an idiom of Ian Ramsey’s, “the penny may drop.”⁷⁴ A “fuller meaning” may well emerge.

Notes

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1. For a typical sampling, see the notes to Appendix iv in the new edition of Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1993), 697-712; henceforth cited as *BM2*.

2. Cited in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), x (italics added).

3. These few paragraphs could have been written in the technical, terminological language of language theory, starting with Fernand de Saussure’s

distinction between *langue* and *langage* (in English, “language” and “speech”). In the present context, however, it seems better to explain the matter in natural language, as biblical interpretation is now a major issue for all Christians.

4. In the Baha’i House of Worship in Wilmette, IL, the inspiring texts at the top of the bays of the polygon, which have nothing to do with the Christian Bible, are in the language of the King James Bible. This makes them sound sacred, presumably to Baha’i worshippers, but also to non-Baha’i ears. Connotation is as important here as the meaning of the printed words.

5. Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), esp. 148-64.

6. Gerald P. Fogarty, *American Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A History from the Early Republic to Vatican II* (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1989).

7. *Hom. in Act. Apost.* iii, 1.2.3 (PG 60, 38; cf. the Office of Readings on the feast of St. Mathias, May 14). The crucial quotation: Τᾶ γὰρ πρὸ τοῦτου οὐδεὶς ᾔδει μαθὼν, ἀλλὰ Πνεύματι ἐμάνθανον.

8. Raymond Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973); henceforth cited as *VC*.

9. Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979); henceforth cited as *BM*.

10. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 1991); henceforth cited as *MJ*.

11. *BM2*, 698; *VC*, 66-67; cf. *BM*, 527-28. Note that in *VC* Brown adds that biblical theologians should recognize their “pastoral responsibility.”

12. *BM*, 517. My hunch is that Bernard Lonergan might have called this a case of “undifferentiated consciousness.” See *BM2*, 698, where Brown writes he shares the common presumption about the theological note of the virginal conception: the doctrine is irreformable by reason of its having been consistently taught by the ordinary magisterium of the Catholic Church. The treatment offered here shares this presumption, as a matter of course.

13. *MJ*, 274, n. 75.

14. *MJ*, 229 (italics added).

15. I am in full agreement with the first part (698-700) of the treatment accorded to the historicity of Jesus’ virginal conception by Raymond Brown in Appendix iv of *BM2*, 697-712.

16. The genuinely historical question as to whether Jesus died on a cross is a different matter, of course; here, a negative answer would simply put an end to all Christian faith and theology.

17. See *BM2*, 700-08.

18. Heinrich Denzinger and Adolf Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum, Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum* (Barcinone: Herder, 1965), 62-63; hereafter *DS*. The Latin translations have *sine semine virili*. Interestingly, the original Coptic text uses the word *sperma*, borrowed from the Greek.

19. *DS*, 189: "Filius Dei, Deum, natum a Patre ante omni omnino principium . . . ex ea verum hominem, sine viri [virili?] generatum semine suscepisse."

20. See *DS*, 503. The Greek equivalent is ἀσπύρωζ.

21. *DS*, 368: "ut qui ante tempora erat Filius Dei, fieret Filius hominis et nasceretur ex tempore hominis more, matris vulvam natus aperiens et virginitatem matris deitatis virtute non solvens." Note the phrase *hominis more, matris vulvam natus aperiens*; Jesus' birth should make us wary of insisting on the Virgin's physical virginity (i.e., the condition of the hymen) *in partu*. On this subject, see also Willemien Otten, "Christ's Birth of a Virgin Who Became a Wife," *Vigiliae Christianae* 51 (1997): 247-60.

22. *DS*, 533: "nova autem nativitate est genitus, quia intacta virginitas virilem coitum nescivit et foecundatam per Spiritum Sanctum carnis materiam ministravit. Qui partus Virginis nec ratione colligitur nec exemplo monstratur; quod si ratione colligitur, non est mirabile; si exemplo monstratur, non erit singulare."

23. Raymond Brown offers the following list: (1) Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph, are legally married but have not cohabited; (2) Joseph is of David's stock; (3) Jesus' birth is announced by an angel; (4) Jesus' birth is not due to Mary having intercourse with her husband; (5) Jesus' conception is due to the Holy Spirit; (6) Jesus' name derives from an angelic directive; (7) Jesus is called Savior by the angel; (8) Jesus is born after his parents have started to live together; (9) Jesus is born in Bethlehem; (10) Jesus is born in the reign of Herod the Great; (11) Jesus is brought up in Nazareth (*BM*, 34-35)

24. On the bazaarful of "theological" and "historical" conclusions from these literary facts, see, once again, *BM2*, 697-712.

25. Recall that the extraordinary claims that the Christian faith involves invite, justify, and indeed demand, the utmost efforts of the honestly inquiring mind. Note, too, that the catholic theological tradition has insisted on making available to all, without exception or partiality, "the entire counsel of God" (Acts 20, 27).

26. Carlo Ginsburg's *Il nicodemismo: Simulazione e dissimulazione nell'Europa del '500* (Torino: Einaudi, 1970) is a classic study on this subject.

27. Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (2nd revised edition; Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1987).

28. An example. It is tempting to explain the multiplications of the loaves and fishes in the gospels as follows. Everyone in the crowd had brought food but was loath to show it, lest they might have to share it. When they saw that Jesus and the apostles started sharing what little food they had, all produced

theirs. Thus it became clear that there was more than enough to go round; worry had been unnecessary. An ingenious interpretation, but at best no more than a moral fable.

29. Raymond Brown writes, too casually in my judgment: “I see nothing contradictory in believing that Jesus was fully a man even when there was only one human parent—the issue of chromosomes can be left to the creator Spirit who brought him into human existence” (*MB2*, 702, n. 316). This is an example of the sort of reasoning this essay opposes. Why? What we have before us are two *redactionally* diverse stories—both involving an identifiable woman, Jesus’ mother, said to be a virgin. Now we are to establish the meaning of these narratives; it is not our task to find a philosophical-theological theorem of universal application that will account for one-parent children’s factual existence. The texts deserve a more careful treatment. So does God’s omnipotence.

30. Wendy Cotter, *Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook for the Study of New Testament Miracle Stories* (London, Routledge, 1999).

31. The man who developed the (then up-to-date) definition was Prospero Lorenzo Lambertini (1675-1758), a high curial official in Rome, in his massive work *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et Beatorum Canonizatione* (1734-38). It became the manual of the Congregation of Rites when Lambertini became Pope Benedict XIV in 1740.

32. On this subject, Louis Monden’s pioneering book *Signs and Wonders: A Study of the Miraculous Element in Religion* (New York: Desclee, 1966) remains a valuable text. The painstaking treatments offered by René Latourelle have refined Monden’s insights, but not essentially altered them. See his *De signis divinis* (Pars apologetica; Roma: Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1961); *Miracles de Jésus et théologie du miracle* (Montréal: Bellarmin; Paris: Cerf, 1986), translated into English as *The Miracles of Jesus and the Theology of Miracles* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988); and *Du prodige au miracle* (Montréal: Bellarmin, 1995).

33. On the meaning of “omnipotent,” see F.J. van Beeck, *God Encountered*, vol. Two/1, *The Revelation of the Glory*, Part 1, *Introduction and Fundamental Theology*, §60, 1, a-c.

34. *De fide et symbolo*, 7 (*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, 41, 11).

35. I know of only one place where Aquinas comes close to implying this. He writes (*In III Sent.*, d. 12, q. 3, a. 2, q. 2, sol. 1) that one reason why Jesus was conceived without sexual intercourse is that “it would not have been fitting in any way, in view of the Father’s dignity, for someone else to have been the father of his Son” (“nullo modo congruebat quod per commixtionem sexuum carnem assumeret . . . propter dignitatem Patris, ut non esset alius pater sui Filii”). “Not fitting” and “dignity” are not the same as “impossible” and “omnipotence.”

36. See *The Catechetical Oration of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. J.H. Srawley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903); translated into English as *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 268-325.

37. *Cat. Or.*, 13 (Srawley, 60; English translation, 89).

38. With a bow to my friend William E. Reiser's essay "The Case of the Tidy Tomb," *The Heythrop Journal* 14 (1973): 47-57.

39. F.J. van Beeck, *God Encountered: A Contemporary Systematic Theology*, vol. Two/2, *The Revelation of the Glory*, part II, *One God, Creator of All That Is*, §111, 2-4.

40. *Adv. Haer.* v, 11 (SC 153, 18-21).

41. We find this hard to imagine, witness a modern encyclopedia article on Galen (c. 130-c. 200), which informs us that "[h]is virtually undisputed authority discouraged original investigation and hampered medical progress until the 16th century."

42. On Mondino de' Liuzzi, cf. Ernest Wickersheimer, *Anatomies de Mondino dei Luzzi et de Guido de Vigevano*, Documents scientifiques du xv^e siècle, Tome III (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1977).

43. Mondino's *Anatomia* was first printed at Padova in 1475, and saw about forty reprints in sundry places. See Ernest Wickersheimer, *Anatomies de Mondino dei Luzzi et de Guido de Vigevano*, 1-64; see also Luigi Firpo, *Medicina medievale* (Torino: UTET, 1972), 20-22; Sebastiano Manilio's Italian translation (1494) is on 167-204.

44. Galen, born in Asia Minor, lived chiefly in Rome and was physician to several emperors. He is credited with some 500 treatises—the principal available in Teubner editions. Galen correlated earlier medical knowledge with his own findings, based on experiments and dissection of animals. See G.E.R. Lloyd's *Greek Science After Aristotle* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1973), 136-53.

45. For the plates and commentary on the plates in English, see *The Illustrations from the Works of Andreas Vesalius*, ed. J.B. de Saunders and Charles D. O'Malley (New York: Dover Publications, 1973).

46. The classic instance are the *meatus visum fugientes* ("pores eluding sight") in the heart's interventricular wall, which Vesalius claimed to have found. Since they are invisible, he must have found them in a book rather than the heart. Galen is the prime suspect here, and in fact the guilty party; see G.E.R. Lloyd, *Greek Science After Aristotle*, 147-50. For a precise account, cf. my *Christ Proclaimed: Christology as Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 523-34.

47. Anatomy professors always had "prosectors" to assist them; they prepared the cadaver for the anatomical lesson, and did the actual dissecting during the demonstration, enabling professors to keep their hands clean. Many ancient physicians used *prosectores*—professional torturers (cf. Tertullian, *De*

anima 25, 5)—to help them perform demonstrations on living people, usually criminals; cf. G.E.R. Lloyd, *Greek Science After Aristotle*, 76-77. One way to gauge the distance between ancient culture and the Christian Middle Ages is to note that the latter had considerable reluctance and resistance to overcome before they dared dissect human corpses. The frontispiece of J.H. van den Berg’s *Het menselijk lichaam: Een metabletisch onderzoek* (vol. 1; Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1965) is a color reproduction of a plate found in the manuscript anatomy codex (cod. 569, Musée Condé, Chantilly) of Mondino’s student Guido da Vigevano (c. 1270-135?); Wickersheimer offers a black-and-white reproduction. It shows what was known as “the first anatomical incision”—*a sterno ad pubem*. On the left, a youthful anatomist in academic attire has his friendly left arm around a large, naked, blueish corpse, standing (!) to his left and obviously not drawn from observation; the left hand is just visible on the far side of the dead man’s waist. With his right hand he holds a scalpel; with it, he is making the incision—furtively, as it were: his eyes are not on what he is doing, but on the closed eyes of the corpse, as if he were apologizing to the dead man for opening his abdomen, or asking his permission to do it.

48. The foaming was taken as a sign that besides heat there was air in the arterial blood—air being the “vital” element; its natural movement was upward. Thus it was clear the blood coming from the heart was carrying life to every member in the body, enabling it to keep itself alive, “up on its feet.”

49. For Galen’s ideas on this, see G.E.R. Lloyd, *Greek Science After Aristotle*, 140.

50. The cardio-pulmonary circulatory system was discovered around 1550, by the Spanish physician-theologian Michael Servet (1511-53), imprisoned by the Inquisition by reason of his denial of the Trinity. (After escaping to Geneva, he was put at the stake at the orders of the City Council of Geneva, without the consent of John Calvin.) Not until 1616 did William Harvey (1578-1657) conduct the experiments that proved how blood circulates in the whole body. He published his discovery in *De moto cordis et sanguinis in animalibus* (“The Movement of the Heart and the Blood in Living Beings”; Frankfurt am Main, 1628).

51. This is why Aquinas, following Aristotle, can explain that very large animals, which need a great deal of food, have relatively little semen, and that the same is true of *homines pingues*—fat people (*S. Th.* I, 119, 2, i.c.). An autobiographical detail?

52. Needless to say, there never was one single theoretical account of how these processes took place and why, as a quick reading of Aristotle’s *De anima* will show. The modern physiological account of fertilization began to take shape in the early to mid nineteenth century.

53. *S. Th.* I, 118, 1, *ad 3* and *ad 4*.

54. Galen treats these matters in Book xiv of *Περὶ χρείας μωρίων*; see *Galen De usu partium* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1909), 284-336. Conceptions like Galen's have been preserved, delicately, in the *Qur'an*. Cf. *Sura* 19 (16-22) and *Sura* 66 (12).

55. Thus the woman accounts for the child's being a member of the human race, of the tribe, etc.; cf. "born of woman" (Gk. γενόμενος ἐκ γυναικός; Gal 4, 4; Mt 11, 11 par. Lk 7, 28—equivalents of Heb. לֵילֹד אִשָּׁה: Job 14, 1; 15, 14; 25, 4). The idiom's meaning is "human individual," with connotations of transience and mortality.

56. Recall that it is part of the integrity of Christ's humanity that he possesses a spiritual soul, as Gregory Nazianzen argued, against Apollinarius.

57. Consequently, those unfortunate enough not to be legitimized by a father—mere mother's children—have no public identity.

58. Which is exactly what Zachary does when he names his son John in the Lukan infancy narrative (Lk 1, 63).

59. In fact, one sharp contrast between the Lukan stories of John the Baptist's birth and Jesus' is that the former causes amazement (Lk 1, 65-66); the latter does not.

60. *Ad Eph.* 18, 2-19, 1. *The Apostolic Fathers*, edited and translated by Kirsopp Lake, *The Loeb Classical Library*, 2 vols. (London: William Heinemann, 1930), I, 190-93.

61. Matthew calls his genealogy a "book of origin" (βιβλος γενέσεως; cf. Gen 2, 4; 5, 1). corresponds to Heb. תולדה, which is a cognate of the root לָדָה, "to bear."

62. The phrase raises the question, Called Son of God by whom? We do well to realize that the passive voice suggests that the chief answer to the question is "by God." This is the very point the pericopes of Jesus' Baptism and Transfiguration are making, each in their own way.

63. See above, n. 20.

64. See Leo the Great's letter to the Empress Pulcheria: being consubstantial with his Father, [the Lord] deigned to be consubstantial with his mother as well ("[ut] consubstantialis Patri, consubstantialis esse dignaretur et matri": *Litt.* 31, *PL* 54, 792B).

65. See *BM*, 522-24.

66. See *BM*, 534-42; *BM2*, 705-08.

67. See *supra*, II, 6.

68. *MJ*, 229; see n. 11 *supra*.

69. In fact, this is also implied in Matthew's account: Joseph does not wish to expose Mary to the rigors of the Law. Conceptions are historical facts only in the sense that men and women of historic significance must have been conceived.

70. At the earliest, they will start with the mother’s premonitions during pregnancy, but here we are passing from history to legend or hagiography. One instance among many is the life of the pious eleventh-century crusader Godfrey of Bouillon.

71. Incidentally, this is not a piece of “pastoral advice.” In two antiphons of great antiquity (second quarter of the fifth century), *O admirabile commercium* and *Quando natus es*, sung for centuries in the Latin West on the eve of the Feast of the Mother of God (January 1), the phrases *sine semine* (“without seed”) and *ineffabiliter* (“beyond words”) occur as parallels, suggesting dynamic equivalence and hence, a reverent silence.

72. On the notion of humanity as the “lump” (Gk. φύραμα, Lat. *massa*) assumed in its entirety by the Word, see *God Encountered*, vol. II/3 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), §115, 8, [*h*]. See also St. Andrew of Crete’s sermon on Palm Sunday: [Christ is on his way to heaven] “by way of the first batch of our lump of dough (*PG* 97, col. 993A). In 1 Cor 5, 7, φύραμα refers to the whole community.

73. See n. 52. Very much depending on situations, it might even be wise to explain a less proper, exclusively male analogue to “one born of woman”: “one passing water at the wall” (Heb. משתין בקיר cf. 1 Kings 14, 10; 21, 21; 2 Kings 9, 8).

74. Ian T. Ramsey, *Religious Language: An Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 25-26, 39.

Theologia: On Not “Dropping Out of the Trinity”

*In memory of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin,
and in support of his Common-Ground Initiative*

This essay is divided into seven parts. Its subject-matter is the nature of theology. It will also suggest, chiefly indirectly, that the faithful, the clergy, and the bishops of the Catholic Church in North America today, together with the faithful and the leadership of all Christian churches, could do worse than letting themselves be taught and indeed enlightened by the confused and confusing sixty-year period between the Councils of Nicaea (325 A.D.) and Constantinople (381 A.D.). In those decades, ruling families everywhere were learning, conservatively of course, how to live with an increasingly Christian (yet equally imperial) politico-religious establishment. Thus, the underlying proposal of this essay is to show that the chief merit of the Cappadocian Fathers is to have shown, on grounds both reasonable and scriptural, that the deity can be the True and Living God only if it is triune. Let us start with a quick historical sketch.

Christian Churches in an Age of Confusion

In the aftermath of Jesus’ ministry, execution and Resurrection, the New Testament writings show that Christian communities in various places around the Mediterranean began to move in the direction of an appreciation of what was ultimately implied in membership in the Christian Church—cosmically, anthropologically, and especially theologically. One of the bolder signs of this occurs in a late arrival to the New Testament canon known as Peter’s second letter: Christians “share in the divine nature.”¹ John’s Gospel puts this as boldly whenever it suggests that knowing the Son is knowing the Father—an understanding

not unknown in the Synoptics nor even in Paul, who reminded Christians that they were members of Christ’s body. In this, the Church was showing its understanding of its own life, and interpreting it as a life of actual participation in the life of the Triune God, Father, Son (or *Logos*), and Holy Spirit. It also began to term this life *theologia*, meaning “thinking, acting, and indeed existing in light of the One God Living and True.” This implies that *theologia* is holistic. While a matter of articulate learning, it means an integrated life whose integral elements (“moments”) are worship, conduct, and teaching.²

Quite importantly for present purposes, Yves Congar’s comprehensive article *Théologie*, intended for publication in the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, became available in an English translation under the title *A History of Theology*.³ Unsurprisingly, *theologia* is a pre-Christian Greek word, and the translation includes a brief account of the pre-Christian usage of *theologia*. But this observation leads to another, far more significant one. The history of the word “theology” is part of the substance of Catholic theology. For this reason, it makes little sense to give any account of the development, say, of christological doctrine in the wake of the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, without first walking down an important side street. In other words, if we professional theologians guided by the Great Tradition are to understand what we are doing in the catholic Church today, we may have to hold back and listen to fresh old, proven teachers first.

To make our restraint more fruitful, we must also quickly visit various topics: tradition and interpretation, and the representative capacity of single words⁴—one of the many issues implied in Newman’s observation that Christian Revelation must not be reduced to truths that are entirely manifest and thus, completely manageable.⁵

Fifteen centuries before Newman, a young bishop named Gregory, known as “Nazianzen” after his birthplace Karbala near Nazianzus in Cappadocia (329-89 A.D.), was invited to Constantinople to preach, with a pulpit of his own. He was a poetic, introspective, monkish man who had studied philosophy in Athens, along with his friend Basil—a man as monkish but quite ambitious and forceful as well, who after a falling-out with Gregory after seven years of study left Athens in pursuit of the monastic life.⁶ By 361 A.D., Gregory had found himself reluctantly ordained a priest by his father, a man of local influence, who had converted from a unitarian sect to the Catholic Church at the insistence

of his wife Nonna in the year of Nicaea (325 A.D.), only to be ordained bishop of Nazianzus three or four years later. After eleven years at home in Nazianzus trying to make peace between the local monks and his father, the local bishop, and on the road for a number of other conciliatory errands, Gregory found himself appointed bishop of Sasima and ordained by his difficult friend Basil in 372 A.D., but settled in Nazianzus as his elderly father's auxiliary; but his thirst for the life of prayer and study drew him back into seclusion, in faraway Seleucia this time, where he sojourned at St. Thecla's convent for a full three years (375-78 A.D.). Finally, in 379 A.D., he was invited to Constantinople as the "missionary bishop" for the small Nicene community in "the City."⁷ Gregory had found himself involuntarily involved in every controversy of the day and thus propelled into public life. Small wonder he was elected bishop of Constantinople late in the year before the first Council of that name (381 A.D.), at which he presided for three months, only to find himself pressured into retirement once again after six months in office, and taking shelter on his estate, near his home town. A gentle soul not made for politics or big-city life, he availed himself of his position to think and teach long enough to give the definition of "theology" a lot of thought, as his early nickname "the Theologian" demonstrates. He became what Newman was to be in his day: a private, hypersensitive, philosophic, literate Christian man very much in touch with the religious confusions of his age. What were they?

By the second half of the fourth century, the Christian Churches had become, so to speak, the victims of their own success. Politically, they had a future; under imperial warrant, the network of local churches pretty much retained the structures of the old empire. Bishops were generally influential politically, even if the emperors' favor could be counted on to remain fickle; theologically, their *Logos*-doctrine, both high-minded and neighborly, promised height and breadth of vision. The proclamation of the one universe created by God Omnipotent through Christ, God's consubstantial Word Incarnate, and forever to be unified in Him, the Crucified and Risen One, was not just a message for martyrs to die for, but also a summons for thoughtful men and women to live for. The *regula fidei* was unifying them in a flexible way. So did a thankful appreciation of the cultural fruits already gathered in the pre-Christian past, supported by the efforts of the civilized

(invariably, "us here") to draw even the insufferably heterogeneous savages "out there" into a common horizon by dint of imperial protection, letters, travel, and hospitality. Transcultural consensus was as yet unthinkable, let alone advocacy of "multiculturalism," but the Greek poets and thinkers were widely accepted—also on biblical grounds—as an authoritative beginning. No wonder Christians respected them, as Paul had done in his letters, especially in ethical matters.

Still, it took well over a half-century for three talented bishops finally to accomplish the task that Athanasius of Alexandria had left undone in the aftermath of Nicaea, except by suffering exile for its sake: forging an intellectually coherent account of the Christian faith as the accepted spiritual platform of the empire.⁸ Right in the teeth of the sophisticated doubletalk in the Greco-Roman academies (instanced by the multifarious disquisitions of Eunomius, the elusive bishop of Cyzicus, and his various followers), Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil (known as "the Great") kept thinking and teaching. To them, class and good taste came naturally. Their cultural aim was wide-ranging peace and unity commending themselves by good taste. They intimated that if we want to believe as Christians, we must cultivate intellectual integrity. If we are to live and die as reasonable, considerate living beings, "deriving our nobility from above," we must allow ourselves to be directed by the truth, not by deft quotation or opinion.

Why rehearse this today? Does it apply to us, and if so, how? It would appear it does.

In North America, the United States was the first country ever to adopt as its civil religion a modern, rational unitarian Deism of Scottish extraction. Without nominating René Descartes, John Locke, and David Hume for sainthood, we can say that faith in the existence of an omniscient and benevolent Creator-God has emancipated, thank heavens, the state-and-church-controlled social and individual conscience by dint of fairness and free speech. This Deism (and the equal dignity of each human individual which it implies) has by no means conquered the world, though it has been challenging existing religions everywhere. It is still helping us to today's blessed (if slow) growth in tolerance, and to the principles of human rights. Besides, the mechanization of the world picture implicit in modern, rationality-governed science and technology has been delivering to humanity countless life-enhancing benefits, despite the continuing global injustices.

More locally, even Catholics are now undeniably citizens of the United States. They became loyal citizens by serving in World War II and the Korean war; in the wake of the former, the G.I. Bill of Rights helped them ahead in their emancipation into the mainstream by at least a generation.¹⁰ Especially since the pontificate of Blessed Pope John XXIII and John F. Kennedy's election to the Presidency they have been significant participants in the American way and indeed, contributors to it—a development that is apt (but by no means certain) to continue, given the recent influx of the mostly Catholic Latin Americans.¹¹

But there is a limit to all good things—even the most rational. In fact, the rational approach to things and people produces moral and spiritual confusions all its own. The Austrian genius Ludwig Wittgenstein is a good case in point. He found himself forced to the conclusion that whenever rational logic is pushed to the limit it will lead to either meaningless action or a sense of mystery as irresistible as it is disarming. Beyond rationality, he showed, lies revelatory silence. But this is never assured; true reason and logic of the far-sighted sort are not always welcome in a busy society relying on clever artifice and on opinionate debate about truths that “work” and favor “progress.”

In this context, it is part of the Catholic theologian's task to observe that a similar wave of busy, opinionate rationality occurred before, even if the world was pre-technological and the scale considerably smaller. In fact, it just might be the task of the Catholic theological tradition to make it memorable. For it was Gregory Nazianzen who saw that in times of politico-religious equivocation and trendy twaddle, *any understanding of God must be rooted in silence*. He made the point in the first of his five *Theological Discourses*—delivered in the late summer of 380 A.D. and one of the classic (i.e., Catholic) accounts of the Christian faith.

Yet before hearing Gregory, we, people of the twenty-first century, must take ourselves through a few (admittedly impressionistic) sets of learned preliminaries. They concern issues in cultural history.

So the next question is, What is theology today?

“Theologia”

Cross's *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* gives a dispassionate, accurate Catholic description and definition of “theology”:

Theology (Gk. θεολογία). In its Christian sense it is the science of the Divinely revealed religious truths. Its theme is the Being and Nature of God and His creatures and the whole complex of the Divine dispensation from the Fall of Adam to the Redemption through Christ and its mediation to men by His Church, including the so-called natural truths of God, the soul, the moral law, &c., which are accessible to mere reason. Its purpose is the investigation of the contents of belief by means of reason enlightened by faith (*fides quaerens intellectum*) and the promotion of its deeper understanding. In the course of time theology has developed into several branches, among them dogmatic, historical, and practical theology. The methods of classification of the sub-disciplines, however, fluctuate in different theological systems.

Plainly, Cross’s text is accurate. It opens with a nominal definition of theology, also known to Aquinas.¹² It goes on to explain it as “the science of the Divinely revealed religious truths God” and detail it by recourse to the classical Christian topics; Aquinas might have called it *sacra doctrina* but explained it in the same way. Appropriately, the entry goes on to recognize Anselm’s classical definition of the underlying dynamic and purpose of theology: “faith seeking understanding.” It ends up by explaining that Christian theology has developed over time. It plainly has. Yet at this point there is a snake hiding in Cross’s well-trimmed grass. Theology has changed indeed, but not just by virtue of development “into several branches, among them dogmatic, historical, and practical theology.” In the past four centuries what has profoundly changed is the standing of theology as a discipline. Aquinas’s functional definitions and descriptions of theology in the opening *quaestio* of the *Summa theologiae* would not meet with general assent today.

That *quaestio* includes treatments of theology’s necessity, scholarliness, unity, practicality, excellence, sapientiality, its relationship to God as “object,” and its reliance on argument, imagery, and Scripture.¹³ Clearly, Aquinas approves of what he describes. Cross’s description, careful as it is, avoids even the semblance of approval or partiality in regard to the *value* of Christian theology and its *practice*. But most of all it stays away from the issue of the epistemological status of theology:

(i) how true are theological statements, and even more, (ii) just how *can* they be true, and in what context?

Here if anywhere, Cross's "objectivity" betrays the influence of modernity's scholarly—i.e., impartial—approach to the truth-claims implied in any theology. Put more pointedly, Cross is reticent on the relationship between theology and any form of faith-commitment. Ecumenically sound as it may look, it fails to ask today's overwhelming religious question, never mind answering it.

To tackle this point, let us go back to Aquinas. He is an epistemological realist; he thinks he "knows what he knows." Yet this does not make him "mediaeval" in the sense of "naïve" by a long shot.¹⁴ Why not? Answer: *Aquinas shows evidence of being aware of what he is doing when he finds himself knowing something.* In other words, his treatment of the nature of theology in the *Summa* shows that he has given himself an epistemological account not only of the nature and function of theology, but also of its limits. This enables him to write:

When we believe something and formulate our belief, the target (*terminus*) we have in mind is not what we say but the reality we are addressing. For in formulating propositions, we aim at *reality* [Lat. *rem*], and this applies *in both science and faith*.¹⁵

Precisely here lies Aquinas's realism: the point of what we say or write lies not so much in what we *say* as in what we *mean*. After all, the reality-out-there (which, so he implies, has induced us in the first place to think whatever it is we think and whatever it is we are saying about it) is the proper target of our effort to understand. Put differently, the *intentionality* on our part and the *intelligible object's being-there-for-us-to-know-it* jointly account for our mutual actuation, even if our understanding (which is not necessarily wholly mutual) remains less than wholly comprehensive.¹⁶ Is this a prejudice? Well, Yes and No. It does show, of course, that Aquinas is a man of the Middle Ages, and this means that he deems both faith and theology to lie inside the one realm of true knowledge—an assumption not widely held today, and for good reason.

What has just been explained implies that for us human beings times and places are characterized by shifts and changes in culture, including next-to-normative horizons of human understanding and

next-to-normative methods to give shape to that understanding. For example, in the century after Aquinas (when Europe’s dominant vernaculars were only just beginning to emerge as “polite” languages) the philosophical question *de significatione verborum* became a controlling issue: What do words mean, and how do they do it?

But here it must be recalled that this question was first discussed orally, in the schools, i.e., only in Latin. In due course, though, it got increasingly applied, again, to written Latin texts. No wonder nominalism became the normative climate of the life of learning, propped up by church and university Latin, often with scant reference to meaning-in-context, including faith-contexts.¹⁷

Thus, the almost purely notional type of learned theology exemplified by, e.g., Luther’s teacher Gabriel Biel (c. 1420-95) well illustrates the gap between late-mediaeval theology and Christian faith-cum-life. So do Erasmus’s (1469-1536) irritated dismissal of scholasticism and his insistence on the Greek and Hebrew originals of the Bible. So do Luther’s (1483-1546) attacks on scholasticism and his determination in regard to both Bible translations in the vernacular and his *sola scriptura*. Both are different-looking but equally tart fruits from the quaint old tree of Latin learning in need of existential renewal.

But the issue did not stop there. In the early sixteenth century, the printing press helped cause a veritable quantum leap in the normative intellectual climate, as the late Walter Ong has explained so well. At this point in our argument it suffices to repeat that the sixteenth century experienced the beginnings of *print literacy*. It helped create the impression that truth was real only if it was perpetual, stable, objective, and a potential object of acquisition; at the same time, knowledge looked real only if it meant the possession of at least some formulable truths. Besides, the unspoken assumption became that truths are best guaranteed when precisely formulated. Memory, understood as a bank full of distinct memorable assets, replaced the mind viewed as the distinctively *human* ability to understand what is both true and real.

In the park of theology this climate created what the French have called *la théologie savante*. It favored debate (and, usually, acrid mutual polemics) among the (mostly clerical) theologians. New forms of popular faith, often full of spiritual affect but not in every case inspired by the Great Tradition, came to be associated with pious religious associations encouraged or at least tolerated by ecclesiastical and political authorities;

by contrast, in the mostly militant seminaries, universities, or courts, theology was often practiced as a function of politics. This became especially the case in the seventeenth century, as the Roman Church increasingly defined itself and especially its unity by appeals to the Papacy as a monarchy as real as the “great monarchies,” and as the manifold offspring of the original Reformation were fanning out across a broad political and theological spectrum.¹⁸ By the century’s mid point, an exhausted Western and Central Europe, sick of religious warfare—yet often riled by calls for holy war, especially on paper—settled for an uneasy armistice, in which literalist dogmatic theologians, ranging from hedgerow preachers to professors of high repute, remained vociferous, quoting proof-texts, slogans, and extracts from printed “sources.” No wonder George Fox and his Quakers got tired, left, and quietly put their trust in God’s Spirit alone;¹⁹ and the amiable, conciliatory Puritan Richard Baxter (1615-91) stood alone—a tragic symbol of the failure of good intentions.²⁰

Thus, tragically, religious diligence in the framing and reading of texts as sources of authoritative unity in faith led to an accelerating theological languor. The seventeenth century became the epoch of a vastly overrated “freedom of theological opinion,” as distinct from the profession of faith. In the Protestant world, this bad habit became only worse as synodal agreements of great authority were revised to stem the tide of insufficiently acceptable tenets; as a result, synods themselves became increasingly divisive. By contrast, in the Catholic world, theology decayed into systems of doctrines taught by sixteenth-century commentators and upheld by the various recognized “schools” of theological learning—Augustinian, Franciscan, Dominican, even Jesuit—all of them theoretically (and even practically) subject to Roman arbitration, but rarely taking the spiritual measure of their *faith*.

Unsurprisingly, these opinionate and specious theological debates increasingly favored a Deism both practical and obstinate, which in turn encouraged theological rationalism and “useful knowledge.” Theology fed by living Catholic Faith and living Tradition receded—nightmares of past warfare. But another nightmare, Pascal’s, refused to go away; in retrospect, his prospect of the *esprit de finesse* getting lost in quantity of knowledge had become prophetic, even in theology. No wonder Yves Congar came to treat the seventeenth century as the effective low point in the history of Catholic theology.²¹

Contemporary Nominalism: Technical Terminology

All this shows that nominalism and scrutiny of the meaning of precise words has never entirely become a thing of the past. In fact, the opposite is true. For, over the centuries, the modern culture of learning has availed itself increasingly of such dominant vernaculars as have become usable, first regionally and now internationally. No longer is the international language of learning dependent on Latin (except for the dying cohort of those who dream of Latin as a living language). Instead, learning has come to rely on the artificial language of terminology—i.e., on cold, systemically interrelated, technical terms. But taken by itself, technical terminology creates only the presumption of thought; it does not guarantee it. Having been designed and understood only by experts capable of analyzing and diagnosing problems, terminology cannot be counted on to equip experts with the judgment, discernment, and especially the wisdom needed to bridge the widening gap between, on the one hand, technological learning and technical skills, and on the other hand, the requirements of humane, considerate interpersonal living.²²

Let us sum up. What late-mediaeval nominalism and modern scientism have largely overlooked is that language is a matter of distinctively human communicatory behavior before it ever becomes a relatively free-standing instrument of thought.²³ True, what lies at the basis of thought is a fascinating phenomenon. It is called the “representative capacity of words”—i.e., their ability to “mean the same” regardless of immediate communicatory situations. Words of all kinds—let us say, “exceedingly,” “appear,” “broken,” “bulk,” “soft,” “and,” “despite,” “no”—can be actually used in a multitude of possible contexts, but we also “know” somehow what they “mean” in and of themselves, regardless of any actual contexts. This captivating property of words-out-of-context tempts us to treat single words as if they somehow were stable objects.²⁴ In fully human contexts, though, they never are.

Now it is not difficult to imagine how the arts of writing (which came first) and reading (with which all of us now start) have amplified our sense of the representative capacity of words. Over the past half-century, the public (as well as far too many teachers at every level) have accepted dictionary definitions and entries in thesauruses as authoritative words, as if we could reliably use dictionaries without knowing the

language. If languages could be learned from vocabulary alone we would be able to be literate with encyclopedias alone. But what with the modern emphasis on “info” rather than thought, modern people will feel inadequate whenever they have to understand (never mind translate) what they read, or write down what they think. Thoughtless literacy is with us. And from a fully human perspective, thoughtless literacy is increasingly apt to cease being the gate to the palace of truth, and to become the discount store of quick opinion and not-so-hidden persuasion, concretized by that garrulous but amiable morning visitor requiring almost no attention, the newspaper. Nowadays his only competitors are the various “today” TV shows, but the competition is hardly serious. What do words mean any more, printed or not, moving or still, loud or silent? Are we to conclude that mindless, moody powers have become our rule of thumb?

Yet it would be historically shortsighted to stop here and despond. For in fact, the opposite of thoughtless literacy is with us, too. In the nineteen-fifties, in which the neopositivists were declaring religious language to be devoid of any identifiable reference, a sharp little volume appeared, written by a mixed circle of believers and unbelievers. We were also reminded that there are such things as religious situations—all too long overlooked since the fourteenth century; this in turn reminds us that language is at bottom a matter of behavior (“performance”) not concepts; soon after, it was shown that no speaker can stay entirely outside of what she or he says. Even theoretical physicists have been pointing out that the apparent victory of objectivity had been turned into defeat: Descartes’ atoms, Leibniz’s monads, and Newton’s unbreakable natural laws have become a thing of the past.²⁵

A Secular Prophet and Precursor: Ludwig Wittgenstein

Yet even more interestingly, at least theologically speaking, the most radical modern contributor to logic as the sole reliable way of thinking is also the discoverer of its defeat. His name was Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), an infrequent associate of an erudite group that made a point of living intelligently by logic alone: the Vienna Circle.²⁶ The son of a family recognized for wealth and talent, he set out to be an engineer; turned into a logician, he soon found himself irresistibly waylaid by his own thinking, exploring the limits of logic in his

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,²⁷ and facing the same rating of academic philosophy as Horatio got to hear from his friend Hamlet:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.²⁸

In his preface to the first English edition of the *Tractatus* (1922), Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), a friend of Wittgenstein's and the star of logical positivism, sums up his attempt in one brisk paragraph:

The essential business of language is to assert or deny facts.²⁹ Given the syntax of a language, the meaning of a sentence is determined as soon as the meaning of the component words is known. In order that a certain sentence should assert a certain fact there must, however the language may be constructed, be something in common between the sentence and the fact. This is perhaps the most fundamental thesis of Mr Wittgenstein's theory. That which is to be in common between the sentence and the fact, so he contends, cannot be itself in turn said in language. It can, in his phraseology, only be shown, not said, for whatever we may say will still need to have the same structure.³⁰

In his own preface, Wittgenstein gives his own, rather more colloquial-sounding summary, the latter half of which will return with a vengeance, at the very end of the book (as we will see in a moment):

The whole point of the book might be summarized as follows: Anything that allows itself to be said at all can be said clearly, and whatever one cannot speak of one has to be silent about.³¹

Put differently, verbal statements of fact, whether spoken or written, cannot be verified by means of other verbal statements, whether spoken or written.³² That is why in both speaking and writing (but especially in the latter) Wittgenstein would stress the importance of “hitting the nail on the head,”³³ lest the inaccuracy of anything that has been said or written should prompt the need for further explanation in words; and don't we know from experience that the latter is apt to be an exercise

in futility, and one sure way to lead to yet another *lis de voce*—a wrangle about the meaning of a word?

So even mere “statements of fact” depend on human acts of “*zeigen*”; that is, their actual meaning is a practical matter.³⁴ “Points” are “made,” manifested, shown, pointed out. Thus, the language of alleged objectivity remains dependent on the kind of human—i.e., intersubjective—behavior that cannot be adequately captured by statements in language.³⁵ No wonder that Wittgenstein was a stickler for words, who could write, in a letter to a friend:³⁶

Just one thing. If it you are going to write something, be ready to have it put you to a lot of trouble. Then there will be something to it for sure. And otherwise nothing, for sure.³⁷

At first blush, this is no more than a teacher’s warning to students learning how to write compositions. Yet Wittgenstein, that genius in logic, means more. He has found—precisely because he is so meticulous a logician—that no mere words will ever unmistakably state a matter of fact, and that words about words will make things not clearer but murkier. In other words, the very logician in him has become aware that what can be stated in words is necessarily deficient in relation to the unstatable that meets us everywhere. By dint of hunting for butterflies he has discovered that at the end of the day what he will be able to pin down for his collection is not the world of butterflies, but just a few samples, “wriggling on the wall” for a moment or two, then dead.³⁸ There is more to what we have to say than what we can say. So, in writing anything at all, count on it to be laborious, for there is always more to anything put in words. So, true to form, Wittgenstein can conclude his *Tractatus* with the single, marvelously ambiguous sentence, oft-quoted but just as often only half-understood: “What one cannot speak of one can only be silent about.”³⁹ Almost denotatively, he had written earlier on in the *Tractatus*: “Actually, there exists such a thing as the inexpressible. This reveals itself, it is the mystical.”⁴⁰

Wittgenstein was an acculturated Austrian Jew—that is to say, his sensibility was shaped by the cultural Catholicism of his native country. A Catholic from birth, he remained one all his life, though he never became a “practicing” one. But he understood the believer’s mind-set, and in articulating it, he could “hit the nail on the head”:

If the person who believes in God looks around & asks “Where does everything I see come from?” “Where does all this come from?”, he is expecting *no* (causal) explanation; and the funny part of his question is that it is the very expression of this expectation. He is expressing, then, a posture toward any and all explanations.—But in what way is this expressed in his life?

It is the posture that will take a particular matter seriously, but then *at a particular point in time* not take it seriously after all, & declare that something else is still more serious.

For instance, someone can say it is grievous that So & So died before he could finish a particular piece of work; & taken in another sense, there is no matter at all. This is a case of using the [same] words “in a deeper sense.”

What I would actually like to say is this: here too what is decisive is not the words we use or what we think while saying them, but the difference they make at different points in life. How can I tell that two people mean the same when each says he believes in God? And just the same thing holds for the 3 persons. Theology that insists on *certain particular* words & phrases & prohibits others makes nothing clearer (Karl Barth).

It [i.e., theology] gesticulates by means of words, as it were, because it wants to say something & does not know how to express it. Its words make points by virtue of *practice*.⁴¹

In other words, to borrow a term from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, doctrine is fundamentally gestural.

With this, we are ready at last to hear Gregory Nazianzen. He knows that the connection between teaching and faith depends on the manner in which the former is practiced.

Gregory Nazianzen on *θεολογία*

On the context in which Gregory wrote we can be brief. He is writing in opposition to fellow bishops, Eunomius (c. 330-94 A.D.) and his followers, most of them half-coherent Neo-Arians, yet conscious of their importance. Yet in the last resort Gregory is worried not about his fellow-Christians he so firmly disagrees with, but about the idolaters

still practicing their superstitious polytheistic busyness, and the polite, educated unbelievers—Platonists and Stoics alike. Why? To polytheists and (what we might call) “non-theists” alike, Christians fighting theological battles among each other are an amusing as well as perplexing spectacle. It is also a convenient one: it permits both ignorant idolators and mature, thinking human beings to hold themselves excused from proper inquiry—content to stay this side of the knowledge and love of the Living God.⁴² For Catholics fighting prove by the very thing they do that they are not talking of God. So Gregory says:

Gentlemen out there: Not just anybody—I repeat, not just anybody—is able to philosophize about God. Plainly, it is not something that comes cheap; it is not for those who hold on to what is down below. And, let me add, it is not something for just any moment, for just any people, and about just any theme, but rather, it is for certain *moments*, for certain *people*, and about certain *definite themes*. For what is most worthy of consideration is not just anybody’s taste, but only of those practiced and advanced in spirituality [*theoria*: “contemplation”]—that is, those who have got (or have been getting) themselves purified in both soul and body. The reason for this is the fact that for the impure to touch Purity Itself is neither a matter of course nor even a prudent thing to do—think of ailing eyes being exposed to direct sunlight.

So *which moments?* [Answer:] When we take time away from the impurity and confusion outside us, and when our higher faculties are not submerged in wretched and misleading images—think of elegant handwriting mixed up with ugly scrawls, or of the fragrance of perfume mixed up with the smell of the sewer. For we must really slow down and get to know God, and when we get the right moment, come to a just decision (cf. Ps 75, 3) regarding what is involved in the simple, forthright knowledge of God [*theologia*].

So *for whom?* [Answer:] For those who take the matter seriously, and not as one thing among many, and as a matter for small talk, say, after the horse races, the shows in the theater, the song festivals, the full bellies, and after what happens further down, below the belly. Think, too, of people who revel

[in theology] as a matter of banter or as a chance to show their valor in argument.

So *what* to philosophize about and to what extent? [Answer:] About what we succeed in comprehending, and to the extent the listeners' attitude and ability will allow them to comprehend. Careful now! Heavy noise or heavy foods have a way of harming the hearing or the body, or if you will, heavy burdens will bring down those who carry them, or heavy rains will ruin the land. In the same way there are those who will be brought down and overburdened by certain kinds of discourse that is hard to digest, so to speak; indeed, they might discover that such ability as they once had has been disabled.

Now I am not at all saying that we need not be mindful of God all the time—I do not care to be badgered again by the gentlemen who simply make a point of being facile and ready to talk! For obviously, we do have to be mindful of God more often than we need to draw a breath; and, in a sense, we have nothing else to do except just that! I am one of those who approve of the saying that recommends that we “meditate [on God] day and night” (Ps 1, 2), that we “dwell [on God] at nightfall, early in the morning, and at noon” (Ps 55, 17), and that we are to “bless the Lord at all times” (Ps 34, 1). We can also quote Moses where he says “when you lie down, when you get up, when you are on your way” (cf. Deut 6, 7). Mindfulness [of God] is exactly what stamps us on our way to purity. So I am not condemning unremitting mindfulness, but [unremitting] *talk* about God; nor am I criticizing talk about God as something irreverent, but its being done *out of season*; nor [am I criticizing] teaching [about God], but lack of *appropriate restraint* [in it]. A glut of honey to the point of surfeit will cause vomiting (cf. Prov 25, 27) even though it is genuine honey; and according to Solomon—and to me as well—there is a time for everything (cf. Eccles 3, 1). Also, something good is not good whenever it is done at the wrong time, and flowers are completely out of season in winter, and what suits men does not suit women and the other way round. Also, a death no more calls for mathematics than a drinking party calls for tears.

And really, are we likely to pass up a good time only when the perfect opportunity offers itself?

Of course not, my friends and brothers—note I am still calling you brothers, even though you do not act as brothers. Please let us not think this way of each other, and let us not, like hot and hard-to-handle horses that have thrown off their riders (which is Reason) and have spit out the bridle that rightly restrains them, rush on and on, only to run past the winning-pole by a long distance. No, let our philosophizing keep within our limits. Let us not get carried away to Egypt, nor let us get dragged off to Assyria, nor let us sing “the Lord’s song in a foreign land” (Ps 136, 4)—I mean, making it heard regardless, to audiences both foreign and our own, hostile and congenial, reflective and inconsiderate. [I am thinking of audiences] watching very carefully what is going on among us, and keen on seeing the spark of our iniquities burst into flame; in fact, they light it, they rekindle it, and raise it up to high heaven by their furtive blowing, and prompt the ever-mounting fire of Babylon to consume everything around (cf. Dan 3, 25 lxx). For since they are short of vigor in their own teachings, they attempt to acquire it by using our weaknesses as a foil, and for that reason, like flies on open wounds, they take advantage of what we have to call either our misfortunes or our sins.

But from now on, the least we can do is to stop doing an injustice to ourselves, and forsake our decorum in regard to these matters. At the same time, if it should be impossible to put an end to hostility, let us in any case agree with each other to be loud and clear in treating things mystical in a mystical manner, and holy things in a holy manner, and to stop throwing around, for all to hear, the things that are better not bandied about. And let us not create the impression that those who worship spirits and observe loathsome myths and practices are more honorable than ourselves—I mean the folks who had rather shed their blood than share secret lore with non-initiates. Instead, let us remember that just as there is such a thing as decorum in matters of dress, food, life style, laughing, and walking, there is in matters of speaking and

keeping silent as well. After all, we pay special reverence to the Word along with God’s other titles and powers; our taste for contentiousness should stay within limits, too.⁴³

If any conclusion can be drawn out of R.P.C. Hanson’s treatment of Eunomius and Eunomianism, it is that their literary remains are both clever and “fluid and almost chatty.” In fact, Hanson’s summary is worth quoting in full:

Finally we must classify Eunomius as an individualist, philosophically eclectic theologian, as many theologians of his day were philosophically eclectic. He was indeed enough of a child of his day to be soaked in Neo-Platonic thought. But his spirit and many of his doctrines were far from Neo-Platonic. He used Aristotelian logic to deploy his peculiar brand of rationalist Unitarianism. He took some of the ideas of what might be called mainstream Arianism and developed them in an eccentric and untypical direction. He is interesting for his own sake, but not because he was representative of the thought of the church of his day. It was no doubt the apparently strict logic of his arguments and the high-minded consistency of his conduct which attracted those who accepted his doctrine.⁴⁴

Still, where Hanson sees “doctrine,” “rationalist Unitarianism” and “eclecticism,” could “persuasive resourcefulness in answering each and every question” be a more practical diagnosis of the theological problem posed by Eunomius? After all, he is apt to quote from the Scriptures as dexterously as from Plato. He is irresistibly eclectic and versatile. He has a patch for every scratch, a text to fit any tune. Coherence, who needs it? Who can argue with a good, engaging bishop who is perhaps only a bit trendier (or loyal) than Thou? Why not let him talk as he can so he can half-agree with all and keep the Christian show on the road?

In this predicament, Gregory Nazianzen finds, first of all, that “having all the answers and giving them” is clearly a most sterile posture for Christian bishops to adopt. Equally clearly, he regards expert garrulousness as an affront to God’s Mystery, and thinks that the details of the Christian faith, delicate as they are, can wait. For now, he says, let

us try, in our habits of speech, to act as friends of God—first in how and when we speak up, and in front of whom.

Accordingly, Gregory uses the entire first *Theological Oration* to demonstrate the need for conversion in speech. Only after that will he spend the remaining four *Orations* explaining the fundamentals of the Catholic faith, implicitly offsetting them against the lack of integrity of the opinionated bishops, operating mainly politically. Quite interestingly, nowhere does he call for obedience to teaching authority, say, by referring to episcopal or even patriarchal authority or to the Council of Nicaea, or to the various rules of faith current in the early church. His argument is both philosophic and scriptural; that is to say, it is pastoral and theological, not disciplinary.

So, I wish to suggest, whether we are cardinals (whether in Rome or locally), bishops, priests, lay folk, concerned dilettantes or theological experts, our first common issue is: steeped as we are in the modern North American media culture,⁴⁵ we do not sound like people who know the living God—the One who has from eternity taken pleasure in being present to humanity, ever so subtly and unemphatically, but also ever so vulnerably, incarnately. Could this lead to “practical conclusions”? Let us start with the media—hypothesizing they are the contemporary analogue of the common culture and its bishops in the mid fourth century.

Intermezzo: A Twin Bill of Particulars for Today

“The connection between teaching and faith depends on the manner in which the former is practiced.” “Catholics fighting prove by the very thing they do that they are not talking of God.”

So let's leave it to the media to be clever and fluid and chatty and inconsistent. Using the media in the service of Catholic orthodoxy or conduct or both (or even against alleged “dissent”) amounts to forgetting that the media—not always enemies—are unreliable and often false friends. They are powers—ignorant of God's ways, often superciliously so. Something follows from this. Using the media to fight so-called “dissent” in the Church is ignoring the faith of the voiceless, who look to the bishops for pastoral guidance, not power. Besides, at least since the Donatist crisis, bishops (Augustine is one example) have insisted on treating opponents mercifully, as “brothers,” and encouraged their people not to shut them out as “dissenters.”⁴⁶

Here in the United States, a first misstep happened in the aftermath of *Humanae vitae* (1968): instead of showing pastoral care for the married, some bishops publicly suspended “dissenting” priests—celibates!⁴⁷ A second *faux pas* was the attempt by “senior East coast prelates” to stifle “dissent” and thwart dialogue of the use of condoms in Africa by counting on newspaper headlines to publish their rejection. Then there was the undiscerning hurry, first in Rome, then in Dallas, to meet the media’s demands for justice, for crying out loud! Misled by at most a dozen influential but pastorally and theologically inept figures, the bishops failed the married once again—this time by omission. Were they pressured into forced solidarity by some of their own, who had become criminally complicit with a tiny minority of pathological priests? In any case, in the end quite a few priests, accused of having taken sinful (but non-criminal) liberties in the past, were facing serious ecclesiastical punishments forced on the bishops by an unforgiving, zero-tolerance blackmailer—the media, conceivably aided by lawyers taking advantage of them and opening courtrooms to mere grudges. Worst of all, all this ended up further eroding the credibility of the bishops’ pastoral authority in sexual matters.

In 1992, Cardinal Bernardin put into place a plan to which (courtesy of the media) he was the first to have to submit. He did so without suspending himself while the investigation was going on. By the time he was cleared he sounded like a man who knew God and had let himself be known by God. But he got the common reward of virtue: “senior prelates,” making use of the media to oppose “dissent,” publicly disavowed his last pastoral effort, the Common Ground Project.

Another rather more different case in point. Protestations of loyalty are not always acts of faith. We have had a copious pontificate, and now Pope John Paul II is dead. But the Vatican courtiers have access to the media and have him speak; so do many others, among them an army of bishops, biographers, and experts. Yet none of those who employ the media to speak for (or against) the pope or interpret him deserve the faith of any of us; in the general confusion, they too plainly speak mainly to be heard. But the dead pope needs no admiration, no approval, no victory. He is still giving all he has left to give. He has largely become an author suffering the fate of authors: being half-understood by others with an ax to grind. And most of all, he himself still has met the Truth. None of us turn canonical till we die.⁴⁸

Finally, before returning to our theme, some food for meditation. Ever thought about the well-worn portrayal of Almighty God as a little old bearded guy in an outsized T-shirt on a cloud, with a halo over-head—"the man upstairs"? By contrast, ever thought of Gregory of Nyssa's definition of Christianity as the "portrayal of God's nature"?⁴⁹

"Not Dropping Out of the Trinity"

Unlike some modern deconstructionists fascinated by the many "fissures" in any text, the Cappadocians are not interested in silence for its own sake.⁵⁰ This holds for Gregory of Nyssa and his brother Basil the Great. By the time Gregory Nazianzen has set fort, in the extensive second *Theological Oration*, how God transcends any and all definitions, he has also gone, unsurprisingly, through a long list of particular created wonders baffling the human mind, witness not only the Scriptures of both Testaments, but also the writings of Greek philosophers, cosmographers, and mathematicians.⁵¹

The third and fourth *Orations* are both titled "Of the Son." Gregory starts by insisting that we have the mysterious order in the universe to account for—a given not explained by either atheism or polytheism, for either would have resulted into chaos. So if God is, God is One. Passages from Plato and Plotinus suggest that this One God is a transcendent fount of divinity, irresistibly overflowing into the universe. Bold as this image is, Gregory explains, it lacks the sovereign freedom that we cannot but attribute to the Divine. The sole remaining possibility, therefore, lies in what Nicaea saw: the everlasting God, the Father Almighty, has begotten the coeternal, ordering *Logos*, timelessly, and so has been creating the world of time. A series of eloquent philosophic consequences and clarifications follows, and the discourse is brought to a conclusion with dispatch, with appeals to christological proof texts in the New Testament. The fourth *Oration* is (to use a modern term) more soteriological; it takes the shape of a review of the titles of Jesus Christ, and leads to an obvious theological conclusion:

You have the Son's titles. Travel by all of them—by the transcendent in a godlike way, by the corporeal in a compassionate way. Or rather, go in a way altogether divine, so as to become God as you go up from down here, by the same way as the

One who for us came down here. Make a point of doing so in all things and above all things, and you are unlikely to get lost on your way by either the sublimer or the humbler titles— [for the way is] “Jesus Christ, yesterday and tomorrow,” in the Body “the same” as in the Spirit, and for ever and ever [cf. Heb 13, 8]. Amen.⁵²

Still, in many ways, Gregory does not show his hand till he is speaking, in the fifth *Oration*, of the Spirit. In every patristic textbook, we are told that the Cappadocians “proved the divinity of the Holy Spirit”—a fact as true as it is jejune. What they did was much more far-reaching. Let us read before we comment.

We, however, have so much confidence in the divinity of the Spirit we venerate that we will even start the *theologia* with it, and apply the same words to the Trinity—even if some may find this a bit much to take. “He always was the true light, which enlightens every human being coming into the world”—the Father [Jn 1, 9]. “He always was the true light, which enlightens every human being coming into the world”—the Son. “He always was the true light, which enlightens every human being coming into the world”—the other Advocate [Jn 14, 16, 26]. Always “was,” and “was,” and “was”; but what “was” “was” One.⁵³ Light, and Light, and Light; but One Light, and One God. That is what David intuited of old, in the words: “In your light we shall see light” [Ps 35, 10]. And now, we, too, have seen, and we, too, proclaim: from the Light-Father we grasp the Light-Son in the Light-Spirit—how’s that for a short and plain *theologia* of the Trinity! Say No, all who want to say No! Do wrong, all those who want to do wrong [cf. Rev 22, 11]. We proclaim what we have come to understand! We will “go up a high mountain and shout” even if nobody down below should hear us! We will exalt the Spirit “without fear” [Is 40, 9]. And even if we should let ourselves be frightened, we will rest assured, without proclaiming!

If there was a time when He—the Father—was not, then there was a time when He—the Son—was not. If there was a

time when He—the Son—was not, then there was a time when the Spirit was not. If the One [*to hen*] was “from the beginning” [1 Jn 1, 1], then the three [*ta tria*] were, too.⁵⁴ If you take down the One, let me be bold and tell you not to exalt the Two. For what is the use of an imperfect deity? Or rather, what is deity if not perfect? And how can anything be perfect if it lacks the thing that makes it so? *And something would be missing if there were nothing holy to It* [i.e., to the deity].⁵⁵

In other words,

Hold nothing of the Trinity to be of *your* stature, lest you should drop out of the Trinity.⁵⁶

Of this maxim, our common culture can make no substantial sense. Most unbelievers and agnostics put up with God-the-Father talk; they appreciate the historical Jesus; yet Holy-Spirit talk smacks of pious self-justification and hypocrisy—i.e., it refers not to so much to God as to human religiosity. By contrast, regular Orthodox, Catholics, and numerous Protestants think of God and Jesus Christ as somehow inseparable, yet are at least slightly embarrassed by fervent idioms like “gifts of the Spirit”: they sound like “Pentecostal,” evangelical, individual or prayer-group professions of piety, moral aspiration, or religious experience—alleged but unverifiable and worse, without appeal. That is to say, “we hold it to be of our [human] stature”; we put the things of God the Spirit at our level. To most, it conveys little of Godself. Might Gregory Nazianzen say that we—both non-Christians and Christians have “dropped out of the Trinity”?

How about Gregory’s observation, “Something would be missing if there were nothing holy to It”? First of all, this is the exact point where modern Catholic commentators will get nervous.⁵⁷ For Catholics and most classical Protestants, to think of God as not holy is impossible. Of course the Father is Holy. Of course the Son is holy. And the Spirit is the Holy Spirit. The Trinity as a whole is Holy. The Western preference for safe, objective, conceptual Sabellian Monarchianism is alive and well.

By contrast, for Gregory Nazianzen, *the Spirit is precisely what drives God’s Holiness home, in actuality, and the human awareness of*

*Holiness Present is a “responory direct-act phenomenon.”*⁵⁸ If creation, and especially humanity and its works, are sublime, God is—only absolutely more so. That is to say, wherever and whenever we human beings find ourselves grasped by an unmistakable, affective sense of Mystery out of proportion with the particular things or human beings that encounter us, making it impossible for us to put a finger on it, we must stop and notice what reveals itself.⁵⁹ Then we may conclude—usually in eloquent silence—that we are being touched by a Present Holiness which we do not manage, possess, evoke at will, or control; rather, if anything, It manages, possesses, calls to attention, compels us. And oddly, we are apt to feel all the freer for the discovery.

Still, “for practical purposes”—and their name is Legion—we can dismiss it, at least “for now.” On one occasion, the late Vice-President Spiro Agnew prophesied, “Let it never be said that there was something Americans could do, and they didn’t do it!” In North America, we will do whatever we can indeed; in fact, dismissing keeps us too busy for our own good as well as the world’s. We are not living thoughtfully—i.e., slowly—enough to notice God’s Spirit advising us to live by the long run. Even our charismatics, never in doubt about the Spirit, are too busy getting to experiencing *now*, in alleged fullness. In this regard, they resemble the huge commercial enterprises dealing in both goods and money: driven by quarterly—i.e., short-term profit, they cannot persuade themselves to meet any real future, marked by fairness to the environment, not to mention fairness to the exploited everywhere in the world. Justice takes time. To all leaders in the Churches, and in the interest of those still driven by either superstition or current philosophy, Gregory advises silence, and in that context, measured speech, at least “for now.” That’s how the Christian Church can show the world the way to go.

But how about the “forever” part? The simple Catholic answer is: Jesus Christ tells it all. Put descriptively, Christians claim that “Christ is risen” tells it all. Fair enough. But saying “Christ is risen” is an *eschatological* blessing exchanged between and among Christians before it is ever a substantive truth claim.⁶⁰ So, apparently unaware that Christ is “only” the first-fruits of the dead-and-risen, Orthodox, Catholics, and impatient Protestants of every stripe (including the fundamentalist evangelizers), suffer from measurement problems; in practice, our affirmed truths have a way of sounding overstated and impatient.

Surely the substance of the message “Christ is risen” is a matter of hope as against final possession?⁶¹ And so, it is imprudent to overstate the Catholic claim in the encounter with either Jews or Gentiles. Besides, are the Jews really unaware of the Holy Spirit, given that It appears together with God and God’s Creative Word at the head of the Torah? And as for Gentiles, is it so sure that they have been positively unresponsive to God’s Spirit?

So, all Christians have a lot to hear and see yet. If the *Logos* is to be discerned in Socrates and Heraclitus (as Justin Martyr saw), then we should not be surprised by the news that God’s Spirit has been felt to fill the world “from the beginning.” In other words, we Catholics are liable to drop out of the Trinity by claiming too much too fast on behalf of the Son;⁶² and if we conclude that the great religions have never felt God’s threefold encompassing Presence, we might find ourselves implying that we can put conditions on God’s universal salvific design. In fact, are we letting our trinitarian faith blind us to the possibility that the face of the earth is already being renewed, mysteriously because humanely, gently, gracefully, because “that’s the way it is”? If this should be true, then our bishops must learn the confidence to speak up in praise of God—i.e., also, the fine art of piping down, and leaving it to the media to be intemperate. And so must all of us.

Notes

Published here for the first time—a finger exercise for a new installment, to be devoted to christology and trinitarian theology, of the author’s systematic theology-in-process, *God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997-2001); henceforth *GE*, followed by volume and section numbers).

The following developments are not argued, but supposed. The high-mediaeval teaching that God’s Trinity is a matter of revelation (as distinguished, but not separated, from natural reason) goes back to Aquinas’s *Summa contra Gentiles*, written to equip Dominicans, sent out into the world of North African Islam, with a missionary strategy for peaceful dialogue on common ground: faith in the true God, and intellectual and practical acceptance of human nature. In the *Summa theologiae*, reason and revelation are again treated sequentially but not contrasted (*S. Th.* I, qq. 2-26; 27-43). Only by the end of the sixteenth century does a strictly philosophical approach to God

arise. This begets a separation between itself and the treatment of God in Christian faith and theology. In the mid-seventeenth century, with Leibniz as the chief intellectual agent, revelation and natural reason begin to be treated as adversaries. In the age of Enlightenment, with Christian Wolff as the typical instance, natural reason effectively becomes the norm of what can (and cannot) be believed. In the nineteenth-century Catholic philosophy and theology begin to converge again. Transcendental thinking (Blondel), transcendental neo-scholasticism (Rousselot, Maréchal, K. Rahner), and existential-phenomenological social theory (Plessner, Scheler, Jaspers) lead to a reintegration, which helps produce phenomenological personalism as a coherent intellectual climate. (Of this, Pope John Paul II is a key modern exponent.) Final thesis: Only in the force field created by conditioned and wounded human freedom and openness to God and a pliant but stubborn universe can humanity responsibly shape itself—in *hope*, i.e., with no definite end in view, short of the coming of Jesus Christ in glory to do justice to the living and the dead.

1. 2 Pet 1, 4: *θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως*.

2. See my *God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology* (Collegetown, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997-2001), I, §44, henceforth cited as *GE*, followed by volume and section numbers).

3. Yves M.-J. Congar, *A History of Theology*, translated by Hunter Guthrie (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968).

4. See *GE*, II/i, §56; II/3, §124, 3 [x].

5. See John Henry Newman, *Essays Critical and Historical*, (London, Basil Montagu Pickering, 1877), I, 40-42: “A Revelation is religious doctrine viewed on its illuminated side; a Mystery is the selfsame doctrine viewed on the side unilluminated. Thus Religious Truth is neither light nor darkness, but both together; it is like the dim view of a country seen in the twilight, with forms half extricated from the darkness, with broken lines and isolated masses. Revelation, in this way of considering it, is not a revealed *system*, but consists of a number of detached and incomplete truths belonging to a vast system unrevealed, of doctrines and injunctions mysteriously connected together; that is, connected by unknown media, and bearing upon unknown portions of the system.”

6. A fine autobiographical account of the friendship between these two almost-incompatible characters can be found as “On his Life” in Gregory of Nazianzus, *Autobiographical Poems* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). It is no longer possible to speak or write on Gregory Nazianzen without studying John McGuckin’s formidable *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001). In the present account, I am relying on vii-xi.

7. In the West, Rome was known simply as *urbs*: “the city.” In the East, the inhabitants of ancient Byzantium, renamed Constantinople by the emperor Constantine, would say they lived *stenpolin*: “in the city.” On Turkish lips, this became “Istanbul.”

8. Hanson’s careful account of Athanasius’s doctrine (*The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 417-48) rightly emphasizes that in Athanasius’ mind God needs no bridge to creation in order to be present to humanity. What Hanson might have profitably added is that Athanasius is here dependent on the understanding of God found throughout the Jewish Scriptures. For Nicaea implies that the Incarnation of the *Logos* took place not because the *Logos* is inferior enough to become Incarnate, but because Godself has from eternity taken pleasure in being with humanity (Prov 8, 31).

9. See Gregory Nazianzen’s *Theological Oration*, in *PG* 36, 20C (*Sources chrétiennes* [henceforth *SC*] 250, 88-89).

10. See James Hennesey, *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 280-331.

11. On this, see Peter Steinfelds, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), esp. 307-59.

12. *S.Th.* I, q. 1, a. 7 (*Sed contra*): “Sed in hac scientia principaliter fit sermo de Deo (dicitur enim theologia, *quasi sermo de Deo*).”

13. See *inter alia*, *S.Th.* I, q. 1, a. 1-10.

14. I find that my *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* lists an “informal” meaning of “mediaeval”: “old-fashioned; unlightened,” with the silly example: “parents with a medieval attitude toward dating.” By contrast, all the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definitions of “mediaeval” are strictly historical.

15. *S.Th.* II-II, 1, 2, *ad 2*: “Actus . . . credentis non terminatur ad enuntiabile, sed ad rem. Non enim formamus enuntiabilia, nisi ut per ea de rebus cognitionem habeamus, sicut in scientia, ita et in fide.”

16. See *GE* §8, 3-5; §142, 1.

17. I would suggest that the earliest expository prose works in a language other than Latin are the commentaries with which Dante (whose language of learned discourse was Latin) linked the sonnets of *La vita nuova*, composed in 1292-93 A.D.

18. On this, see Avery Dulles, *The Dimensions of the Church* (New York-Paramus: Newman Press, 1967), 4-6.

19. The underlying cultural tendencies have been instanced in splendid historical detail in two recent books by my friend Robert L. Bireley: *The Refashioning of Catholicism, 1450-1700: A Reassessment of the Counter*

Reformation (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press 1999), and *The Jesuits and the Thirty Years War: Kings, Courts, and Confessors* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

20. See *GE*, II, §72, 4, c.

21. Yves Congar, *A History of Theology*, esp. 170-82. Still, it is worth observing that without the work of "positive theologians" like the French Maurini, who prepared one reliable set of patristic texts after another, the nineteenth-century revivals of Catholic theology in Germany and France would have lacked a solid foundation.

22. It is the undying merit of Jürgen Habermas to have systematically elaborated this proposition, regardless of his rather more ideological conclusions from it.

23. Thus, Thomists have long agreed that truth resides in "judgments," not in single words. Hans-Georg Gadamer has persuasively and wisely retrieved this in *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); originally published as *Über die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit: Aufsätze und Vorträge* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993).

24. Let us use an example. When my friend looks up from his book, simply says to me "if," and leaves it at that, I will be perplexed. But when in conversation he says "That's a big 'if,'" I will be pretty much in the picture. How so? Because even a conjunction ("if") can be used as a noun ("if"), because the meaning of "if" is clear, if only somehow. Somehow? Yes! For by itself, "if" has no point to make!

25. See *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Anthony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (1955; rpt. New York: Macmillan, 1964); Ian Ramsey, *Religious Language* (London: SCM, 1957); Joseph Austin's 1955 Henry James Lectures at Harvard University, later published as *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975; Donald Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement* (1963; rpt. New York, Herder and Herder, 1969); Werner Heisenberg, *The Physicist's Conception of Nature* (London: Hutchinson, 1958).

26. Best represented in the English-speaking world by A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, first published in 1936 (London: V. Gollancz, 1946).

27. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963).

28. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark*, I, v, 166-67.

29. This prejudgment is Russell's. Wittgenstein discovered its incoherence.

30. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, x.

31. "Man könnte den ganzen Sinn des Buches etwas in die Worte fassen: Was sich überhaupt sagen läßt, läßt sich klar sagen; und wovon man nicht reden kann, darüber muß man schweigen" (*Tractatus*, 2-3). On the translation

of this famous quotation (see *Tractatus*, 150-51 [7]) offered here, two remarks may be useful. (a) German “Sinn” is here rendered, slightly more colloquially, by “point.” (b) Unlike German “soll,” “muß” implies natural ability or inability, not moral duty. Accordingly, in the second part of the second full sentence, “has to be,” not “should be.”

32. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel* §144, 26: “How a word is understood words alone will not tell.” (Gm. “Wie ein Wort verstanden wird, das sagen Worte allein nicht.”)

33. See Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 2-5.

34. See Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 50-51 [4.1212]: “Was gezeigt werden kann, kann nicht gesagt werden” (“What can be pointed out cannot be said”).

35. Elsewhere I have elaborated the observation that language use in speech, but especially in writing and reading, is *behavior*, and thus, a moral issue. See *GE* §132.

36. In this regard, the rhetorical effect of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* is reminiscent of Evagrius Ponticus’s “Chapters” on prayer and monasticism: see *GE* §143, 1-2; 5, a, [ll]; see §67, 2, [d]; §111, 5, a; §118, 2; §124, 13, a; §125, 5, [tt]; §139, 1, a.

37. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Public and Private Occasions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 296: “Wenn Du etwas schreibst, laß Dich viel kosten. Dann wird gewiß etwas daran sein. Und sonst gewiß nicht.”

38. See T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, 15. I suspect that Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* were dealing with the same cultural impasse: the burdens of modern self-consciousness.

39. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 150-51 [7]: “Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen.”

40. See Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 150-51 [6.522]: “Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches. Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische.” Note: The present treatment of Wittgenstein focuses on his step from logic to mysticism. The issue arises, of course, Where is the realm of ethics? Alas, that is a story for another day.

41. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 96-97e.

42. Times have changed a lot; human proclivities a lot less. Today’s media love to treat the “interesting” world of catholic Christianity (or indeed of any kind of “orthodoxy”) as an endless opportunity to engage in (a) both entertainment and public indignation, (b) offering free advice, approval, and censure, (c) indulging in self-justification, and (d) concealing the extent of their ignorance.

43. *Hom.* 27, 3-5; *MG* 36, 15C-17C; *Sources chrétiennes* (henceforth *SC*) 250 (Paris: Cerf, 1978), 76-85.

44. See R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381*, 611-36; cited at 619. For a detailed statement of

Eunomius’s Unitarianism, see *Gregor von Nazianz, Orationes theologicae: Theologische Reden (Fontes Christiani, 22)*, ed. Hermann Joseph Sieben; Freiburg: Herder, 1996), 30-44.

45. In a lucid essay, “Legalize Same-Sex Marriage: Why Law and Morality Can Part Company,” *Commonweal* cxxx, no. 18 (October 24, 2003): 10-14), Paul Griffiths has argued that the United States culture is now pagan, as against Catholic/Christian. I would add that this is the case because the prominent culture-shaping factors, viz., the media, are *de facto* unaccountable and unchecked, and impossible to balance.

46. By the way, “dissent” is not part of the Catholic family language, but a seventeenth-century term of abuse, pregnant with established-church connotations. Used today, especially by prelates exercising authority through the media, the word suggests not so much sound teaching as episcopal worry (and to the media, fodder).

47. I have argued that *Humanae vitae* upholds the “pluriseccular tradition” according to which enjoyment of sexual intimacy outside committed marriage is mortal sin in principle (i.e., in and of itself, apart from agents’ deliberation and freedom). It also upholds the modern tradition according to which contraception within marriage is (a) not a neutral issue (i.e., a matter of convenience) but a fully moral one, and so, (b) an “intrinsically dishonorable” practice within committed marriage. That is to say, *Humanae vitae* refuses to regard contraception as “a morally good thing to do.” Still, it stops short of calling its practice in Catholic marriage mortally sinful in principle. Various episcopal conferences, therefore, at once decided to refer the married to their consciences in this important pastoral matter. See *GE* II, §170.

48. So, theologically speaking, there is not much to be learned from cardinals quoting the Holy Father, bishops quoting a saying of his in support of canonical measures, political commentators doubling as theologians (and vice versa), incurable priests or church ladies and ditto gentlemen—many of them authoritatively telling us, by book or by crook, where we are to stand if we are to obey Pope John Paul II. Do their ever-partial opinions—whether considered or ill-considered—add to the Pope’s shown word and work? Logic suggests they don’t. They make the media, though.

49. See *GE*, II, §75.

50. See Willemien Otten, “In the Shadow of the Divine: Negative Theology and Negative Anthropology in Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius and Eriugena,” *Heythrop Journal* 40 (1999): 438-55.

51. A quick count reveals over 140 scriptural allusions and quotations, and over a dozen allusions to Plato, the Stoics, Aristophanes, and other ancient authors.

52. *PG* 36, 133A (*SC* 250, 274-75). In taking the New Testament titles of Jesus as the guide to Christian living, Gregory Nazianzen is doing what

Gregory of Nyssa elaborates in his treatise *On Perfection*, in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera ascetica*, ed. W. Jaeger, J.P. Cavanaugh, V. Woods Callahan (Leiden: Brill, 1952); translated into English as *Ascetical Works*, tr. Virginia Woods Callahan, in *The Fathers of the Church*, 58 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1967).

53. Gk. *ēn* (“was”). Unlike the past tense in English, the past tense in Greek connotes continued duration: hence, “always was.”

54. Note that “the One” and “the Three” are neuter. Gregory is speaking formally. Note also that Gregory is pinning his argument to the one of Arius’ earliest statements: “There was a time when he [= the *Logos*] was not” (Gk. *ēn hote ouk ēn*).

55. *PG* 36, 136B-137B (*SC* 250, 278-83).

56. *PG* 36, 148A (*SC* 250, 300-01).

57. See, for example, Paul Gallay’s notes in *SC* 250, 282-83, 300-01, 304, and Joseph Barbel’s in Gregorius von Nazianz, *Die fünf theologischen Reden*, in *Testimonia* iii (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1963), 224-25, 234-37.

58. On this subject, the opening chapters of Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958) are worth revisiting. So is Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003). On *actus directus*, see my *Christ Proclaimed: Christology as Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 232-62.

59. See William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 65-79.

60. See *Christ Proclaimed: Christology as Rhetoric*, 189-96.

61. See “What Can We Hope For, Really? Towards a Theological Anthropology of Hope,” *Gregorianum* 80 (1999): 489-524.

62. See my analysis of the “Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church” [*Dominus Iesus: Declaratio de Iesu Christi atque Ecclesiae unicitate et universalitate salvifica*] August 6, 2000, *AAS* 92 (2000): 742-65, in “Our Approach to Ecumenism, Especially in the Light of Contemporary Judaism,” in *Current Issues in Ecclesiology* (Rome: Secretariat for Interreligious Dialogue, 2003), 90-101. See also *GE* I, §35, 1, b.

*Christian Faith and Theology in
Encounter with Non-Christians: Profession?
Protestation? Self-Maintenance? Abandon?*

for Tom Jacobs, S.J.

This essay proposes, in twelve consecutive steps, to outline, in a systematic fashion, a theologically responsible Christian posture in regard to the religions. It differs from many other approaches in that it develops this posture entirely from within the Christian tradition; it makes no claims about the religions. It also operates in a distinctively Catholic manner: it combines dogmatic-theological themes and approaches with fundamental-theological ones. The central contention of this essay is identified in section VI; it is that the attitude to be termed “receptiveness” has a squarely theological import all its own, so much so that no Christian posture in relation to the religions can afford to overlook it, let alone to belittle it. This is argued by showing that in this posture, fundamental-theological intuitions of the most radical kind turn out to coincide with christological intuitions of the most radical kind.

I

The Church pre-exists all Christians. Accordingly, all Christians profess a faith they have received. The matrix in which this reception occurs, which also determines the manner in which it occurs, is called “the Tradition.” In the transmission and reception of the faith there is an important element of stability: traditional affirmations, ranging from precise statements of doctrine (“articles of faith,” conciliar definitions), to fairly standardized catechetical forms of teaching and explanation, often of the homiletic kind. From the practical and strictly theological points of view, however, doctrinal and catechetical affirmations, while

meaningful elements of the Christian faith-experience, are derivative, on the following grounds.

Viewed from the angle of praxis, the doctrinal and catechetical affirmations occur only as part of a wider idiom—a shared usage. An idiom is the linguistic condensation of a community's shared commitments, as well as their continuing support; therefore, using the Christian idiom is always an act of implicit, habitual, presumably considered, and (at least ideally) deepening fidelity to a lived (and hence, authoritative) tradition of Christian conduct—a tradition radically warranted by Jesus' endorsement of Israel's legacy of active and patient faith and, ultimately, by his own call to faith and discipleship. Only against the backdrop of such fidelity can the use of catechetical affirmations represent a credible intellectual assent to truth. Thus Christian *praxis*—the lived life undertaken as imitation of Christ—is the proximate verification of any Christian truth-claims.¹ Accordingly, any interreligious discussion of the latter without reference to the former is a mistake, both methodologically and practically.

From the strictly theological angle, doctrinal and catechetical affirmations are rooted in the shared usage of a *liturgical community*. This community most distinctively comes into its identity in direct acts² of praise, thanksgiving, and supplication offered to God through and in Jesus Christ risen, in Spirited celebration and observance, in which rehearsal of the old and the tested combines with discovery of the new and the untested to awaken the sense of the divine presence and keep it alive, in awe and intimacy, in utterance and silence. (Incidentally, in worship Christians also find themselves both called and empowered to embrace the community's shared commitments as a way of life both divinely mandated and divinely endorsed in Jesus Christ's Resurrection.) Since the original point of doctrinal and catechetical affirmations is doxological, identifying one's convictions and commitments (and thus, indirectly, oneself) by the use of them is believable only to the extent that it in some way conveys intimacy with the God worshiped by the Christian community (or at least a familiarity with this God), supported, presumably, by the habitual practice of worship. In other words, the affirmation of, say, the articles of faith is plausible (or, alternatively, appropriately intriguing or infuriating) only if it echoes in some way the living tradition of Christian prayer.³

Thus, interreligious discussion of the Christian faith-affirmations without reference to worship is a mistake, both methodologically and theologically.

II

Not surprisingly, relatively few Christians and Christian communities live in full appreciation of their privileged condition. In many cases, though, they are growing in it; but then again, in many other cases, they are downright sluggish; in almost all cases, they mean well. In any case, as a result of immature faith, the Tradition is liable to show signs of degeneracy. The form of degeneracy most germane to the present argument consists in living by habit and clinging to custom—a problem not unknown in the early Church.⁴ While those devoted to custom are usually sincere when they appeal to (what they take to be) the tradition, the shortage of deeper resonance in their declarations causes such appeals to sound less than confident, and hence, not too convincing. Frequently, this lack of deep confidence is not lost on observers and listeners, both the interested and the skeptical. In such cases, concerned lest they profess too little, Christians are apt, on the rebound, to compensate for lack of substance by excess of emphasis; they will overstate their case. In this way, professing becomes protesting; and protesting is apt to become protesting too much.⁵ The implicit agenda of protesting too much is (not faith but) self-maintenance. Neither theology nor theologians are necessarily exempt from this.

III

Christians must pursue both effectiveness and integrity in professing Christ; accordingly, while boldly professing their faith, they must take care not to protest too much. Faced with this delicate task, the great Tradition has tacitly (but quite often explicitly, too) regarded itself as a tradition of ongoing faith-discernment, guided by the Holy Spirit. Discernment characterizes the Christian approach to the world of human culture, and of religious culture in particular. Christians must give an account of themselves in a variety of situations; familiarity with, and critical appreciation of, the convictions and manners current among their non-Christian neighbors, but also in the culture at large, must enable Christians to overcome defensiveness in testifying; to the extent they succeed, they are likely to offer credible witness.

One example is Gregory of Nyssa's *Great Catechetical Oration* (c. 390 A.D.); it offers, without a hint of either apology or overstatement, a firmly catholic catechism reliably informed by a fair and articulate understanding of the notions about God, gods, the divine, and the human prevalent in the surrounding religious culture. Accordingly, John Henry Newman can explain, about 1450 years later, in the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1844 A.D.), that the organic integration (often combined with subtle, mostly tacit transformation) of foreign elements is the indication of living Tradition.⁶

Accordingly, Christians and Christian communities cannot come into their true selves without embracing the world in a discerning manner.

IV

The foregoing implies that discernment in professing the Christian faith, and hence, the tradition itself, are a matter of *mutuality*. Accordingly, the structure of the discernment process is hermeneutical. Even as they interpret what is "other," interpreters will find themselves interpreted to themselves; familiarity with the unfamiliar other turns out to be inseparable from familiarization with a yet-unfamiliar self; discovery of the other turns out to be an exercise in distortion unless attended by the chastening and often delightful experience of self-discovery.⁷

Accordingly, Christian discernment will properly proceed (that is, it will genuinely advance the Tradition, as well as those who live by it), only on condition that the cyclical nature of the hermeneutical process ("the hermeneutical circle") is respected.

Not surprisingly, therefore, discernment is borne on the wings of a dual dynamic—that is, one which combines constructiveness and receptiveness.

V

The element of constructiveness typically manifests itself in positive affirmation. It is dominant whenever and wherever Christians confidently turn their faith in God and Jesus Christ by the gift of the Spirit into an authorization for a discerning, sympathetic appreciation of forms and elements of humanity and religion foreign to the Christian community, to the point of positively commending and even

integrating them. Jesus' openness to all comers and his vocal appreciation of the occurrence of true faith outside Israel (for which there is some precedent in late-Jewish universalism of the sapiential kind) constitute prototypical warrants for this.

The constructive approach began to be vigorously adopted in the late first and early second centuries, when Christian thinkers first engaged in thoughtful, appreciative encounter with contemporary philosophic thought. In this regard, Justin Martyr's writings (c. 150 A.D.) are a classical example—the first in a long tradition. They show an uncomplicated familiarity with contemporary thought, and explicitly praise sages living by reason, like “among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus and those like them, and among the foreigners, Abraham, Elijah, Ananias, Azarias, Misael, and many others,” as manifestations of the *Logos*, “of whom all humankind has received a share.”⁸

Because of its preference for affirmativeness, constructiveness has a largely unintended side-effect: *self-assertion*. Of course, implicit self-affirmation is an inevitable ingredient of every act of affirmation human beings engage in. Still, even implicit self-affirmation is a form of self-assertion. And while self-assertion is often both healthy and proper, it can be self-serving; specifically, in regard to things different or strange, it has a capacity for aggression and outright hostility. Not every form or instance of affirmativeness is authorized by faith in God.

Questionable affirmativeness is far from unknown in the New Testament or in the writings produced in the Church of the first few centuries. Still, in fairness it must be noted that much of the inordinate assertiveness in the New Testament and many early Church documents is accounted for by the fact that they are profoundly indebted to the surrounding culture. For all its literacy, Mediterranean intellectual and moral life in late antiquity (as well as long thereafter) continued to live and think by oral performance, which has a tendency towards agonistic expression: it will indulge in extravagant praise and blame, and cherish adversarial rhetoric in polemical defense of truth-*cum*-loyalty.⁹ It is, of course, only a matter of intellectual integrity to observe that this style of encounter with others cannot claim the support of the historical Jesus¹⁰—a fact whose theological and christological significance is insufficiently appreciated. Still, the fact remains that Jesus' example did not keep the early Church from embracing the customary vehemence

in argument; the record shows that it came to share and even cherish the surrounding cultures' rhetorical habits. But then again, vehemence in argument, often at the expense of others, did not keep the Church from embracing much of the wisdom of the cultures whose errors and sinful habits it rejected. All of this suggests that polemical defenses of the Christian faith, while widespread, did little serious harm, either to the Christian conscience or to non-Christians, at least as long as Christians were a minority—an easy target for harassment. Thus, Christian orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and reputation were in no position to set the public climate, intellectually, culturally, and politically.

The developments ushered in by Constantine's victory at the Milvian bridge (312 A.D.), which over time led to the establishment of the Christian church, are a different matter altogether. In fact, the contemporary Christian experience in the context of both non-Christian and post-Christian civilizations, demands that these early developments be critically reassessed, theologically and ecclesiologically. This judgment is not primarily based on the penitential acknowledgment of the fact that the dominance of Christianity has given rise to sinful excesses.¹¹ Rather, it is predicated on the realization that much of the doctrinal and theological tradition we continue to live by took shape, roughly, between the fifth and seventeenth centuries—the era that marks the emergence and establishment of Christianity as the normative intellectual, cultural and (eventually also) political climate, especially in the West. While this tradition, at its best, produced fine instances of constructiveness,¹² it suffered from never having to deal, systematically and from a position of equality (let alone subordination), with non-Christian religions as an actual phenomenon.¹³ Purely politically and culturally speaking, contemporary Christian thought about non-Christian religiosity and religions cannot afford a posture of highhandedness any more than Christian thought could in the second, third and fourth centuries.¹⁴

VI

Let us now turn to the element of receptiveness, which typically operates by openness, inquiry, and sympathetic interrogation rather than affirmation. First of all, though, let us observe that receptiveness is not simply antithetical to constructiveness. As already stated, much

theologically sound Christian affirmation rests on a careful, appreciative understanding of theologically valuable ingredients of the culture—the fruit of empathetic inquiry on the part of Christians. Elements of receptiveness, therefore, regularly undergird instances of constructiveness. Yet receptiveness has a theological significance in and of itself. Exploring and clarifying this is the chief aim of this essay.

As often as not (and more often according as the Christian community is less in control of the normative climate), non-Christian conceptions and practices do not lend themselves to easy interpretation and ready affirmation; rather, many of them will strike Christians as alien, hard to understand, intractable, practically unacceptable. No wonder Christians will find their own conceptions and practices, and indeed themselves, treated accordingly by others, whether rightly or wrongly. (But then again, in a pluralistic situation, who decides about right and wrong?) In this predicament of relative mutual incomprehension, it is tempting to jump to affirmation, and to take the risk of an overstatement or two into the bargain. In fact, this may be, at times, the only practical (that is, prudent) solution. It may even be imperative theologically: there are situations—*status crisis*—where the only practical witness to faith and identity available to Christians is to close ranks and say No to the culture and its religiosity. It stands to reason that such negative stances must not be adopted impulsively or as a matter of course; they are theologically sound only to the extent that, like the affirmative stances, they are gestures of discernment—not of defensiveness, let alone of righteous self-assertion.

This has an important implication. Even if, in particular situations, a Christian community's response to the culture should have to be negative, its profession of faith is still reinterpreted in the encounter. The dynamics of the hermeneutical process see to it that whenever Christians responsibly engage in interpretative encounters with others, their constitutive identity-experience (which is their faith in God) is tested; that is, it is reinterpreted. A church that says No in a discerning fashion is by that very fact developing a faith-experience (and hence, an identity-experience) substantially deeper than the faith-experience it enjoyed before the test, as (for example) those of us who recall the aftermath of the *bekennende Kirche* of the nineteen-thirties and 'forties will remember.

But this raises a crucial issue. How to take such a test? How are Christians to interpret theologically an encounter that produces, not a fusion of horizons that turns out constructive (and hence satisfying), but one that reveals a chasm in the landscape or even opens one, thus causing a standoff which, by prevailing standards, sets Christians back? Will they accept the embarrassment or even embrace it? Or will they take it only diffidently, grudgingly, resentfully?¹⁵ To resolve this painful question, we must refine our notion of the hermeneutical process, by exploring its properly theological dimensions.

VII

Constructiveness, with its tacit bias toward self-affirmation, could give the impression that the encounter between church and non-Christian religions, or between church and culture, is just that—a matter of straightforward mutuality. But this overlooks that when Christians offer their constructive faith-affirmations to the non-Christian world, they are not being simply self-affirming. The reason is that ultimately they do not represent themselves or their own faith. Here the doxological and practical roots of doctrinal and catechetical affirmations become crucially important. In the last analysis, Christians present their integral selves to others only to the extent that they succeed in communicating themselves as inseparable from Christ—a privilege (they profess) they owe to God and for which they are answerable to God. In giving an account of itself, therefore, the Church must convey that even its best-discerned doctrinal affirmations and most enlightened norms for conduct, embraced in the context of the most intelligent and appreciative encounter with others, are not authorized by self-possession, let alone by the desire for a comfortable settlement with the world at large. For Christian constructiveness is not an exercise in autonomy; rather, it must convey that the warrant for the Christian welcome extended to the culture lies with the God it worships. In other words, if Christians come into their true identity at all, this happens to them when, in imitation of Christ, they mediate between God and the culture along with its religiosity, dedicated to both and hence, tested by both. Or rather (since the two relationships are asymmetrical), they come into their true selves in the process of being appreciatively and lovingly (and hence, discriminatingly) devoted to the culture by virtue of thankful, loving (that is, exacting) devotion to God.¹⁶

VIII

This has consequences for the practice of Christian discernment. No Christian attempt at discerning encounter with other cultures or religions has ever been quickly productive; understanding and cherishing the world invariably comes at a price; this slows the pace; Christians cannot expect either to understand and appreciate quickly, or to be understood and appreciated quickly, let alone at cut rates. Specifically, in any post-Christian civilization, there is only one way in which Christians can convince others that their responses to non-Christian religions or cultures, whether of the constructive or the disappointing kind, are the fruit of discernment—that is to say, *serious*: they must leave no doubt about their preparedness to let others test their faith in God—that is, their very identity. Thus, whenever Christians encounter non-Christian religions and cultures, deep receptiveness must be in evidence if offers of Christian constructiveness are to be regarded as credible and thus appreciated as valuable. Consequently, the real danger in standoff situations lies not in the prospect of conflict or of a long, wearying impasse, but in the undisciplined, undiscerning desire to eliminate anxiety,¹⁷ to duck the demand for patience, to force issues, and (especially) to win—the vision of Constantinian Christians accustomed (in the wake of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*) to interpreting constructive relationships with the culture and its religiosity as proof positive of the truth of the Christian faith. It is the unchecked human craving for peace assured by victory that is at the heart of the tendency to trade discernment for overstatement. The temptation is always to gain the upper hand and try to settle things in one's favor, by protesting too much.

Protesting too much takes two forms. The first, accommodation, has affinities with modernism; it amounts to an overstatement of Christian openness. Accommodation occurs when Christians crave for constructive association with non-Christians to the point of jeopardizing the integrity of the faith. This, however, is in the long run bound to diminish, also in the eyes of non-Christians, the intrinsic value of association with Christianity; who cares to compromise sturdy, cherished traditional religious and cultural goods through association with something inclusive and tolerant but not really very distinctive? The second is accommodation's opposite, isolation; it has affinities with integralism and amounts to an overstatement of Christian identity. It

happens when Christians crave for certainty and assurance in believing to the point of jeopardizing their responsibility to the non-Christian world. This, too, is bound to diminish, in the eyes of non-Christians, the credibility of the Christian faith; who cares to submit sturdy, cherished traditional religious and cultural goods to the tribunal of an intolerant religious ghetto?¹⁸ Theologically speaking, both accommodation and isolation are forms of self-affirmation in the service of self-maintenance; they are failures in mediation.

In a post-Christian world even more than in a Christian one, therefore, Christians and Christian theologians must systematically rediscover that the Christian faith is measured, not by its success in winning the world over to the Church, but by its ability to mediate between the living God and the world. In all likelihood, mediation will have to take a variety of forms. What these forms will need to have in common is a quiet, unhurried, hopeful, deliberate insistence on symbolizing and conveying God's encompassing, long-suffering embrace (in christological terms, God's "assumption") of all of humanity, along with its burden of inhumanity, in Jesus Christ suffering and rising from the dead. That is, Christians must invite non-Christians to share in their own pursuit of conversion, away from idols, ideals, and ideologies that divide and kill, and toward the God who unites by holding out life to all at the expense of none. In this sense, the work of faith is the work of justice rooted in Transcendence.

Those who pursue this justice operate by faith-discernment. While deeply seeking to test everything in the light of God, with a view to constructive, responsible relations with others, they even more deeply seek to be tested themselves, sustained by faith in God, who tests and judges all. For only the tested are true to God. Here we have the heart of receptiveness.

IX

Thus far, the positions taken in this essay have been largely based on particular, thematically Christian warrants. Yet when interreligious and transcultural encounter is at issue, there usually arises a recurrent, neuralgic theme: the need for common ground.¹⁹ Few issues in theology nowadays raise this fundamental issue with similar urgency. If the profession of Christian faith in the world is a matter of ongoing mutual discernment about significant particulars, what is the basis for this

discernment? Is it possible to identify a universal condition for the possibility of theological hermeneutics?

This essay wishes to suggest that here if anywhere it is vital to cultivate patience. Let us clarify this by first elaborating patience's opposite: undiscerning zeal. Current discussion of interreligious encounter yields a steady supply of proposals for "inclusivist" or "pluralist" reinterpretations of the Christian faith. Most of these promise improved relationships between Christianity and other religions and cultures. The improvement is usually obtained, at least theoretically, by purging Christianity of "exclusivism" and placing it, together with all religions and religious cultures, under an attractively universalist umbrella.

One immediate problem with this is that the umbrella is so obviously manufactured in the liberal-Christian and post-Christian West—a West turned penitent and even friendly, but still residually imperialist in spite of itself, witness its tendency to fit other religions into categories that are the fruit of Western reflection.²⁰ However, the deeper mistake in most of the proposals lies in their gratuitousness. For first of all, in the shade of this liberal umbrella the positive elements of the religions—that is, all the colorful things that make religions "real, vigorous, and definite"²¹—are made to pale into relative insignificance. Vocal participants in this discussion are welcome to discourse, at little cost to themselves, on the affirmations of religions whose inconvenient details of conduct and liturgy they often have no intention of encountering and interpreting at close range, studiously or otherwise. But, secondly and more importantly, the cool, theoretical atmosphere of such parliaments where religions are reconciled free of charge suggests that the discussion is relevant only to an élite privileged "to view the whole world as like unto itself, and to keep its distance, even if it be a sympathetic distance, from the wretched of the earth."²² Where, in this type of interreligious understanding, is the work of justice?

Justice demands, not only that we respect the positive elements of non-Christian religions, but also that we curb our eagerness to offer universalist interpretations until we patiently ask basic questions about the work of interpretation itself. Is there such a thing as a fundamental precondition of all interpretation? The answer to this question turns out to be surprisingly simple.

First of all, we know from experience that human beings cannot *not* communicate. Human beings never cross each other's paths as

neutral facts; the simple givenness of a human being calls for encounter; human beings make moral and intellectual demands on each other by their very presence; even when encountering the most bewildering strangers, we implicitly recognize that they are in principle interpretable, by virtue of their communicative behavior, especially their speech. That is, both they and we have already been changed; the naked encounter was sufficient. Thus, secondly, we know from experience that the hermeneutical situation irresistibly involves the recognition of mutuality: constructive interpretation is reliable according as the interpreters allow themselves to be interpreted, both to each other and to themselves. Together, these two insights suggest that *interpretability is a more fundamental feature of humanity than its actual ability to interpret*. That is, what most deeply characterizes human beings is also what can unite them most deeply with others: openness to interpretation. Humanity, it turns out, lives more deeply by the grace of receptiveness than by the work of constructiveness. This conclusion is hardly surprising if we recall the bitter truth that constructive interpretation often divides, sometimes unnecessarily, especially when offered prematurely.

X

The insight just developed would seem to suggest a fresh sense of direction in the fundamental theological understanding of interreligious encounter. Remarkably (to turn from fundamental theology to positively Christian theology once again), it is reminiscent of two profound passages in the New Testament (1 Cor 8, 1-3; 13, 12b):

We know we all have knowledge. Knowledge inflates, but love builds up. All those who think they have knowledge do not yet know the way they should know. But all those who love, they are the ones who are known.²³

And:

As of now, my knowledge is partial, but then I shall know as I am known.

Here we are. We all dearly seek to understand, but even more dearly, we seek to be understood. We are all natively intelligent, but

even more natively, we are intelligible. We all deeply want to interpret, but even more deeply, we are interpretable. The true warrant for our understanding, and hence, its true measure, is our being understood by God; being aware of being thus understood is the mainspring of mature love of others.

Aquinas understood this. He anticipated that the truths accessible to universal reason would create the common ground on which non-Christians could be brought to understand much (but by no means all) of the Christian faith. Yet he could entertain that cheerful anticipation only because he knew that the experience of intelligence in us is an experience, not so much of fullness as of hollowness; not so much of power as of desire; not so much of attainment of actual knowledge as of a affinity with all that is potentially intelligible—that is, with all as it exists in God. This deep-seated affinity, he knew, is beyond our grasp; it is simply there, inescapably—a given ingredient of our sense of identity; yet it is the soul of our attunement to all that is, and in it and beyond it, to God. Its givenness invites our acceptance; it is by free receptiveness (so we discover) that we turn a given receptiveness to all reality and (in and beyond all reality) to God into a gift from God. Intelligence is privilege before it is power. So he wrote:

The human soul, in a way, becomes all things, by virtue of sense and intellect; in this manner, beings that have knowledge approximate, in some way, the likeness of God, in whom all things pre-exist.²⁴

Karl Rahner offers an analogous insight:

Is there anything more familiar and self-evident (whether explicitly or implicitly) to the self-aware human spirit than this: the wordless questioning that extends beyond all the things already conquered and mastered; the humble, loving sense (that sole origin of wisdom) of having more questions than answers? Down deep, there is nothing we know better than this: our knowledge (that is, what in our everyday lives we call knowledge) is but a small island in a measureless ocean of elements not traversed; it is a floating island, and much as we are more familiar with it than with this ocean, in the last

resort it is carried; and only because it is carried can it carry at all. Thus the existential question, put to all those who have knowledge, is this. Which will they love more: the little island of their so-called knowledge, or the sea of measureless mystery?²⁵

Understanding dwells in us, irresistibly; it urges us forward, toward affirmation and legitimate self-affirmation. Yet we understand better and more reliably according as we more deeply acknowledge and appreciate understanding in its hollow, empty form, where knowledge coincides with the consciousness of being known. This assurance will prevent us from being so dependent on actual knowledge that ignorance, incomprehension, and misinterpretation become devastating. In this way, it would appear, interreligious encounter understood as an exercise in mutual interpretability is apt to be more fundamentally theological than acts of mutual interpretation. It can be expected to place those participating in it, not in the shade of a universalist umbrella, but in the quiet clarity of Invisible Light.

Let us conclude. Christians profess their faith in encounter with non-Christian religions and cultures, which they are to interpret with discerning constructiveness. In fact, they are positively called to do so by virtue of the Christian responsibility for the world. But they will do well to reflect on the liabilities of constructiveness—on the self-assertiveness it can mask, on the injustice it can do to other religions and cultures. This reflection will also test their own readiness to pay the price of all reliable interpretation: *receptiveness to finding oneself interpreted by non-Christian others*. And we know, being interpreted takes the form of construals. Some of them will be misconstruals. Maybe even many.

XI

All of this leads to a final point. The profession of Christian faith is an encounter with others. It obviously demands interpretative moves, of the constructive and especially of the receptive kind; theologically speaking, our explorations have suggested that the latter is the basis of the more radical form of profession of faith. Now receptiveness takes the form of interrogation, and even more of interrogation's deeper precondition: readiness to be interrogated. Surprisingly perhaps, this last insight suggests a radical leap into New Testament christology.

In places too many to mention in the present context, the New Testament shows that the early Christians, powerless as they were by and large, were keenly aware that their reliance was not on human beings and their judgments and courts of law, nor on cultures, powers that be, or celestial elements with their incessant demands for submission; all of these had been disqualified, since, as Paul puts it, they had failed to recognize Jesus as the Lord of Glory (see 1 Cor 2, 8). In sum, their reliance was not on “this world” and its idols and authorities. Their ultimate (that is, their true) reliance was on God, who had raised Jesus to life, and so freed them from every enslavement. Characteristically, the fourth gospel presents Jesus as the prototype and source of this faith-attitude: Jesus knows enough not to entrust himself to others (Jn 2, 24), and draws his identity, his sense of mission, and the assurance with which he works from the Father alone. But far from isolating him from those around him, this supreme abandon to God—the true source of his identity—opens Jesus unconditionally to others.

Curiously, Mark’s gospel conveys this by means of an interrogation scene, set at its turning point, smack in the middle of the gospel viewed as a dramatic composition. Jesus faces his disciples with the question to which the whole gospel is composed to provide the answer (Mk 8, 29): “But who do *you* say that I am?” Is it fanciful to suggest that this unconditional invitation to interpret his person is also the ultimate, most universal, most radical form of Jesus’ profession of total abandon to the living God? In this scene as in the gospel as a whole, the invisible God who is the engine of Jesus’ life is the decisive and indeed the only presence that accounts for the Messianic secret—Jesus’ identity and mission. That is, who Jesus is is not revealed through any overt claims to distinction, of the kind that others (demons, disciples, pharisees and scribes, the crowds, high priests, Pilate) constantly dare Jesus to make. Matthew will put this in explicit words: the revelation of Jesus’ identity does not come from “flesh and blood” (Mt 16, 17). It is not even a matter of Jesus making something of himself: “I do not seek my own glory,” as the fourth gospel will put it (Jn 8, 50). The secret of Jesus’ person lies exclusively in what he trusts God to make of him. In the mean time, he himself only agrees to be “delivered up.” That is, he allows others “to make of him whatever they want” (see Mt 17, 12). But for Jesus, in the end, being interpreted means being misinterpreted—“misconstrued to death,” like the new Elijah, John the Baptizer, had

been. In this light, it is only natural that Mark should place Jesus' first prophetic prediction of his execution hard on the heels of Jesus' question to the disciples. And to drive home the depth of the paradox, Peter, the very one whom the Father had inspired to interpret Jesus' identity right, becomes the one who finds the way in which that divine identity is exercised humanly impossible to swallow (Mk 8, 31-33).

Touches like these help shed light on the New Testament picture of Jesus. Jesus welcomes all those around him, because he interprets them all as children of the living God, his Father dear, whom he trusts with his whole person. At this Father's kind mandate, Jesus is to accept all comers as his trust, without letting anyone get lost (see Jn 6, 37-39). In return for this welcome, Jesus suffers total misinterpretation and the worst available mistreatment: death by crucifixion.²⁶ The Fourth Gospel conveys this dramatically by having Pilate trot Jesus out to face the crowd as the picture of humanity (Jn 19, 5): the Just One mirrors in his person the injustice which a wayward humanity inflicts on itself. Yet the one who can thus silently accept and welcome being misconstrued and mistreated and executed is precisely the one who so trusts God that he can entrust all those who misinterpret him as well as themselves (that is, all who kill him as well as themselves), along with his dying self, to the God of Life. "He in person took our sins up on to the wood, in his own body, so that released from sin we might live for justice" (1 Pet 2, 24).²⁷ These are the themes summed up in a liturgical hymn old enough to enable Paul to quote it as a piece of Christian tradition and to turn it into an exhortation to self-effacing modesty in dealing with one another (Phil 2, 5-9):

Let this mentality prevail among you
which we also find in Christ Jesus:
He shared the condition of God,
yet did not consider equality with God
a matter of grasping, of seeking advantage.
Instead, he made himself empty—of no account;
he took on the condition of a slave.
Born in human likeness and found in human form,
he went on to lower himself:
he became obedient to the point of death—death on a cross.
That is why God exalted him above all,

and bestowed on him the name above all names.
 Thus, at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend,
 in heaven, on earth, and under the earth;
 and every tongue should confess,
 to the glory of God the Father:
 "Jesus Christ is Lord!"²⁸

This is radical mutuality brought to divine perfection. Jesus accepts being cast in the role of the other-made-stranger, forced into death by dint of human affirmativeness aggressively exercised at the expense of his integrity. Yet this fatal affirmativeness finds itself not rejected but quenched and absorbed and outsuffered in Jesus' receptiveness, which he patiently exercises on behalf of all others, trusting and glorifying God. This means life, for Jesus first, and then also for "the many" whom, by sheer receptiveness, he has reconciled with each other, with God and in God. The hermeneutical circle both respected and broken wide open.

XII

By way of envoi, an intriguing question, perhaps to stimulate the theological imagination. Let us assume we can learn from Origen's *Contra Celsum*, composed between 246 and 248 A.D., on the eve (as we now know) of the establishment of Christianity. By then, the Christian faith was a notable influence, yet its predominance was by no means assured, for the alternatives were real. In our day, Christianity is still a notable influence, but there are real alternatives once again. Origen's book represents the best of Christian thought in encounter with respected and confident non-Christian thought, about a century before Christianity's establishment; we live and think about a century after Christianity's disestablishment, at least in the Western world.

Unlike the tracts of, say, Irenaeus and Hippolytus, which had faced the painful divisions inside the Christian community, *Contra Celsum* is the ancient Church's first full-scale, coherent, eloquent, even voluble controversy with a total outsider: Celsus was a religious pagan philosopher, an Epicurean who had decided, after serious study, that he remained splendidly unimpressed, and who had explained himself in a tract entitled *Alethes Logos* ("True Reason"; c. 175 A.D.).

Incongruously, the preface to *Contra Celsum* is a commentary on the words: "But Jesus kept silence" (Mt 26, 63). The choice of text is

intriguing. Is it an instance of clever rhetorical posturing, or is there substance to it? Origen begins by declaring that these words are as true now as they ever were. Jesus is still keeping silence: present-day Christians evidence the truth of their faith by their lives rather than by word and argument. After that, however, the picture gets complicated, for Origen goes on to define his target audience. Since true Christians will not have been impressed by Celsus, he writes, the only readers he has in mind, besides people wholly unacquainted with Christianity, are Christians weak in the faith. This is an odd reading public. What could Christians, even Christians of dubious caliber, have in common with non-Christians? Could this statement, puzzling as it is, be the clue to the significance of Origen's choice of text?

Let us recall that Origen had first-hand experience of persecution, both as a youth and in old age. Eusebius²⁹ relates that as an ardent seventeen-year old he had presumed to write a letter to his father, imprisoned for the faith and about to be martyred in 202 A.D., to implore him to persevere; meanwhile his mother, worried that her son, the eldest of seven, might leave the house to seek martyrdom in the anti-Christian tumults that made the streets of Alexandria unsafe, had found it advisable to hide his clothes. *Contra Celsum* was written toward the end of Origen's life, when rumbles of persecution were in the air; he died about five years after completing the work, at the age of sixty-nine, of the effects of torture suffered for the faith in the persecution of Decius (250 A.D.). Origen, if anybody, had a right to commend martyrdom, as he in fact did in his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*. But he had first-hand experience of ecclesiastical worldliness and mediocrity as well, and he gave vent to his disillusionment with privilege and prelacy by furiously commending the ascetical and mystical life (of which he also had first-hand experience). Did he, on the threshold of protesting at length (and, on more than one occasion in *Contra Celsum*, protesting a bit much), recall the receptive (that is, ultimately, mystical) nature of the Christian faith-commitment? Did he, perhaps, sense that the Christian faith was on the verge of triumph, as the public, political victory of Christianity just short of a century later, would bear out? And precisely because of that, did he feel compelled to recall the inconvenient truth that Christianity is, in the last analysis, upheld not by protesting, but by the saintly lives of true Christians? Did he, in other words, feel torn between the Christianity

of the martyrs and a lesser type of Christianity, whose witness smacked of overstatement, yet many of whose instincts he shared? Was he, a martyr *manqué*, appalled at the prospect of success and its consequence—a church marked by crowd and compromise? Yet also, was he, a fastidious, irrepressible genius with a knack for public stances, worldly enough to want to beat the pagans at their own game, giving a sharp public account of the Christian faith? And thus, could the opening moves of *Contra Celsum* be an implicit apology—the gesture of an aspiring Christian ascetic, contemplating the silent Master in front of his judges and repenting in advance for the excessive (and obviously exciting) affirmativeness he was about to embark on in professing the Christian faith before the tribunal of contemporary learning? Did he intuit that the development of a lesser brand of Christianity was inevitable? A Christianity more assertive, yet less persuasive? A Christianity religiously devoted to a tradition of affirmativeness, often very discerning, yet not always very patient, and sometimes quite excessive—of the type his book was to exemplify?

Notes

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1. The fact that verbal witness, both of the oral/acoustical and the written kind, is part of Christian *praxis* has consequences for the interpretation of doctrine. See my “Rahner on *Sprachregelung*: Regulation of Language? of Speech?” *Oral Tradition* 2 (1987): 323-36; reprinted in the present volume.

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on the primacy of the *actus directus* of faith is relevant here. See my *Christ Proclaimed: Christology as Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist, 1979), esp. 232-47.

3. This is meant to imply that, if, instead of worship, catechetical affirmations echo nothing but, say, the voice of authority or the atmosphere of theological discussion, they are practically and theologically pointless.

4. Even a traditionalist like Tertullian saw this: “Sed Dominus noster Christus ueritatem se, non consuetudinem, cognominauit” (“But our Lord Christ gave himself the title ‘the Truth’ not ‘Custom’”) (*De Virg. Vel.* I, 1).

5. “The lady doth protest too much, methinks”: William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark*, III, ii, 240.

6. See esp. chap. v, section 3, and chap. viii.

7. Readers of Hans-Georg Gadamer will recognize my deep indebtedness to his thought. See also my “Divine Revelation: Intervention or Self-Communication?” *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 199-226.

8. Justin Martyr, *Apology* I, 46, 2-4.

9. On these issues, many of Walter J. Ong’s writings are illuminating, especially *Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), *The Presence of the Word* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), *Interfaces of the Word* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), *Fighting for Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), and *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Methuen, 1985).

10. But, it is only fair to add, neither can the sort of tolerance that insists on the avoidance of all confrontation and conflict in order to mask an underlying lack of commitment.

11. One serious blot on the history of the Catholic church in the Western hemisphere deserves specific mention, by way of example. Unlike the slave traders, who made only the feeblest attempts at offering a religious justification for their crimes against humanity, the leadership of the Spanish *Conquista* expressly used Christ’s victory over the demons as the rationale for the brutal treatment of the native Americans and the destruction of their culture. The protests of prophets like the Dominican friar and bishop Bartolomé de las Casas (1474-1566), the author of *The Only Way to Draw All People to a Living Faith* (New York: Paulist, 1992) and many other splendidly indignant writings, were largely disregarded. The problem, of course, could become so virulent because it was as widespread as Christendom itself. Thus the rise of Christian and post-Christian Deism must, to a significant extent, be laid at the door of the aggressive ecclesiastical triumphalism that once prevailed in Europe. And while it is unfair to exaggerate the links between colonialist imperialism and the Christian missionary endeavor in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is unwise to deny them altogether. The efforts of contemporary scholars like Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, and even Paul Knitter to reinterpret the Christian faith and its relationship to other religions in “inclusivist” or “pluralist” terms may well have to be judged theologically unsatisfactory in the end; what cannot be denied is that the blind spots and scandals of the past cry out for the kind of remedial theological reflection they offer.

12. Examples that come to mind are a few early medieval controversial encounters with Islam and contemporary Judaism, and Aquinas’s *Summa contra Gentiles* (see Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* [New York: Corpus;

Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971], 72-76), which are models of intellectual fairness, and early Jesuit attempts at principled inculturation, such as Matteo Ricci's in China and Roberto de Nobili's in India.

13. Aquinas points this out explicitly, and goes on to interpret it as an opportunity to develop a universalist apologetic based on reason (*Summa contra Gentiles*, i, 2). In the background of this analysis lies, of course, a sad fact: for all its devotion to the Old Testament, Western Christendom and its theology systematically ignored the actual presence of a non-Christian religious community right in its midst: the Jews. Andrew of Saint Victor is the rare exception here; see Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 112-95.

14. In light of fresh study, I am forced to qualify this. It is true that early Christianity was influential only as far as the emperor allowed. Still, public meekness was still far to seek except perhaps among the monks, and even they could be a formidable political force by dint of sheer numbers when displeased. *Libido dominandi* long prevailed as a norm in imperial days. Men in positions of influence were expected to be self-important, dominating, and intransigent. Accordingly, bragging about "famous men," usually military commanders, had long been a fact of life, especially in the Roman world, as Suetonius's and Cornelius Nepos's writings show; in the mid fourteenth century Petrarch, who dreamed of a new Roman republic, was to imitate the genre in his *De viris illustribus*. Jerome's *De viris inlustribus* was written to prove that many Christians were major writers, starting with the apostle Peter and ending with (of course) himself.

15. Readers familiar with the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45) will recall how he ended up quite sharply taking his distance from the *bekennende Kirche* in which he had been so active, and instead, began to associate with conscientious non-Christians. He did so when he realized that, instead of accepting the testing of its faith at the hands of the Nazis as part of the Christian vocation, the Church resented it, and became chiefly interested in reclaiming its former position of privilege. The most alarming aspect of this quest of self-maintenance was the Confessing Church's failure to condemn the Nazi treatment of the Jews and to help put an end to it. Not always does the traditional Christian reliance on a position of privilege take so crass a shape. I recently heard a respected Indonesian Jesuit of sixty who has spent his entire adult life teaching at a graduate-level institute of catechetics dedicated to the education of Catholic catechists appeal to the small number of Christians in Indonesia (approximately 8%) to raise the agonizing question: "Could it be that the Christian faith has failed to engage the South East Asian soul?" This disconsolate question overlooks the disturbing fact that to Constantinian Christianity it was increasingly the bodies that counted; the aspirations of souls

were a concern indeed, but one that could wait. So in the post-Christian world, the question invites a counter-question: "Does the Christian faith have to be the dominant cultural force for Christians to have the sense that they are supremely privileged?" The answer is obvious, but we may have to get accustomed both to it and to the question.

16. A phrase about the love of God and the love of neighbor in Jan van Ruusbroec's writings expresses this dual loyalty to perfection, except that the passage assumes, of course, that the church is set in a Christian society. Writing to motivated Christians (that is, to the effective church in the not-so-Christian culture of the later Middle Ages), Ruusbroec writes: "We must make our home between the love of God and of our fellow-Christian" ("Wi moten woenen tusschen die minne Goods ende ons evenkerstens"); see *Van den gheesteliken tabernakel* ("The Spiritual Tabernacle"), §1iv; *Werken* (Amsterdam: De Spiegel, 1932-34), ii, 125.

17. Hans Urs von Balthasar calls acceptance of anxiety a mark of catholicity: *Das Katholische tilgt nicht, aber verwandelt die Angst* ("Catholicity does not cancel anxiety, but transforms it"): *Katholisch* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1975), 12; see the English translation, *In the Fullness of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 20, where, however, *Angst* is unhappily translated as "fear."

18. On these issues, see my *God Encountered*, vol. 1, *Understanding the Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), §17-19.

19. It did for Aquinas, who saw the solution in "the need to have recourse to natural reason, to which all are forced to give their assent" (*necesse est ad naturalem rationem recurrere, cui omnes assentire coguntur*; *Summa c. Gent. i, 2*). Modern scholars like Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, and Paul Knitter are on a comparable search: they seek to identify a common ground on which all religions agree (or can be brought to agree).

20. Universalism of the Neo-Hinduist kind (which continues to hold such appeal in the West) is, of course, a product of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India. Still, it arose, not spontaneously, but as a universalist defense against Western pressure embodied in the forceful introduction of Christian churches, with their missionary programs.

21. "wirklich, kräftig und bestimmt": Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 186; see the English translation, *On Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 234.

22. Tom F. Driver, "The Case for Pluralism" in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 203-18; cited at 206. The present paragraph sums up a case made at length in my "Professing Christianity Among the World's Religions," *The Thomist* 55 (1991): 539-68, an essay which appears in final form as §61-64 in *God Encountered: A Contemporary*

Systematic Theology, vol. Two/1, *The Revelation of the Glory: Introduction and Part I: Fundamental Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993).

23. For verse 3, I am adopting the *lectio difficilior* found in the third-century papyrus known as P⁴⁶: *ei de tis agapai, houtos egnostai*.

24. "anima hominis fit omnia quodammodo secundum sensum et intellectum, in quo cognitionem habentia ad Dei similitudinem quodammodo appropinquant, in quo omnia præexistunt . . ." (*S. Th*, I, 80, 1, in c.).

25. "Was ist dem Geist, der zu sich selbst gekommen ist, thematisch oder unthematisch vertrauter and selbstverständlicher als das schweigende Fragen über alles schon Eroberte und Beherrschte hinaus, als das demütig liebende Überfragtsein, das allein weise macht? Nichts weiß der Mensch in der letzten Tiefe genauer als daß sein Wissen, d.h. das, was man im Alltag so nennt, nur eine kleine Insel in einem unendlichen Ozean des Undurchfahrenen ist, eine schwimmende Insel, die uns vertrauter sein mag als dieser Ozean, aber im letzten getragen und nur so tragend ist, so daß die existentielle Frage an den Erkennenden die ist, ob er die kleine Insel seines sogenannten Wissens oder das Meer des unendlichen Geheimnisses mehr liebe"; Karl Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976), 33; see the English translation, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 22.

26. Martin Hengel's *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), a book as scholarly as it is unsettling, offers the best explanation of what this means, at least to my knowledge.

27. Note that the Vulgate enhances this picture by adopting, at the end of the previous verse, a *varia lectio*, as follows: *tradebat autem iudicanti se iniuste* ("He entrusted himself to one who judged him unjustly").

28. For the translation of v. 6, see N.T. Wright, "harpagnos and the Meaning of Philippians 2, 5-11," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986): 321-52. On the whole hymn, see esp. Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 62-63.

29. *Hist. Eccl.*, vi, 2.

ABRAHAM'S FAITH AND ISRAEL'S DIGNITY

Two Kind Jewish Men: A Sermon in Memory of the *Shoah*

*for Paul Davidovits and Gene Borowitz,
two kind Jewish men*

Being no authority on either Judaism or the Holocaust, dear friends in God, I must ask you to let me fashion this sermon out of personal recollections and reflections. But what prompts me to speak at all is something else. Ever since I came to the United States, in 1968, in the course of twenty-four years in two Jesuit universities, several professional societies, and countless occasions of one kind or another, Jewish colleagues and friends have become a regular as well as a most enriching feature of my life. I would not be speaking to you today without that experience.

I

Before 1968, I had known only two Jews, but at least I had known them at close range. Their names were Samuel Schuijjer and Enrico Morpurgo.

Mr. Schuijjer, a Dutchman born in The Hague, was a fairly well-known, all-round musician. He became my first violin teacher in the spring of 1939, when I was eight years old; he was a firm, kind old man of sixty-six, who taught music in a bare room that had a few yellowed posters of past performances on the walls. There was also a grand piano and a puzzling little tin box on the door-post, which I now know was a *mezuzah*. Besides my violin lessons, I vividly remember that he once stopped by our home to cancel class; he was wearing, just below the left lapel of his overcoat, that awful yellow Star of David with the word “Jew” at the center. “I don’t want to get you into trouble,” he said, so he refused to come in, but my mother at least succeeded in getting him to have a cup of coffee with her at

the front door. (Not even that courtesy was wholly risk-free: a next-door neighbor's brother was a captain in the German army.) In late November of 1942, he was picked up. I will never forget the dreadful late afternoon of Wednesday, November 25, a few days before my father's birthday, when I found myself walking back home in tears, having discovered that the front door of Mr. Schuijjer's apartment, where I had gone for my weekly lesson, had been secured by means of a seal whose significance we had come to understand only too well. He had been taken to Westerbork (where Eddy Hillesum was just then writing her letters and diaries). In early December, one of those ominous cattle-car trains took him to Auschwitz, where he was killed on the day of his arrival, December 11, 1942. I was twelve by then.

I was more than twice that age when I first met Professor Morpurgo, an Italian Jew from Venice, who was an expert on the history of the clock; I was a Jesuit seminarian a little too emphatically attired in clerical black, doing doctoral studies in English and Italian literature at the University of Amsterdam. He was easily the most virtuoso teacher I have ever had; he never brought a book to class, and recited large swaths of prose and poetry by heart. He taught me the survey of Italian literature and sat on my comprehensives board. Unlike Mr. Schuijjer, Professor Morpurgo had survived the war. His life had been saved by a combination of kindness and shrewdness: he had spent the war studying, in a Catholic monastery in Italy, dressed as a Dominican priest. Those Italians. They are made neither for high principle nor for heroic action, except, perhaps, in the fantasy world of opera. But in those ugly war years, many of them quietly managed to overcome boundless evil by doing a lot of carefully aimed good, of the kind that succeeded in eliciting no further violence from the oppressor. Theirs was a courage of the everyday kind, but it did take care of the neighbor in need, like the giving of a drink of water to a weak person, of which Jesus says that those who do it will not forego their reward.

II

The very different destinies of these two very different men give rise to different responses. What I hope to suggest to you is that these responses meet in a common theme.

III

Let me start my meditations with Professor Morpurgo. The kindness that had saved his life—he told me about it some time in 1958 or 1959—had been instrumental in making a free, kind, compassionate man of him. One day, at the classroom door, he took me by the right sleeve and pulled me aside. *Lei mi pare stanco*, he said, you look tired. And before I could put together a coherent little answer in Italian, he continued, *Lo so, lo conosco, anche i Domenicani l'hanno; lavorano troppo*: “I know, I understand it, the Dominicans have it, too; they overwork.” End of conversation. From that moment on, I had an older professor-friend—an agnostic Jew who was both demanding and capable of conveying, in the most implicit of ways, a deep appreciation of my vocation. I remember wondering why he did not seem angry at the Holocaust, which had kept him confined for three or four years, in an alien, Catholic garb; if he had been, what could I have said by way of response? But he never brought it up; it probably did not occur to him to complain; for all his artistic intensity, he always struck me as a thankful, contented man.

Many years later, when I was going through Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, and even later, when I read some of Elie Wiesel's writings and especially Abel J. Herzberg's *Amor Fati*,¹ I began to wonder. What struck me then for the first time was a deep similarity in tone: Professor Morpurgo, who had been safely sheltered in a religious community, had sounded very much like these survivors, who had lived through the horror of the death-camps. Could it be that there is a capacity for human wisdom in us that can be activated both by Morpurgo's quiet dependence on the resourceful kindness of others and by Frankl's and Wiesel's and Herzberg's forced engagement with the murderous brutality of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen? Is there an affinity between humanity acquired by enduring human cruelty and humanity acquired by experiencing human compassion? And consequently, could it be that the unspeakable atrocity of the Shoa and the measureless suffering it inflicted is *not* in a class all by itself? That is, could the Shoa not be the last word? Let us probe further.

IV

We turn to Mr. Schuijjer. What was he like once he was in the transit camp, and on his way to death, in the train, and at Auschwitz? We

will never know. But Etty Hillesum's diary and letters from Westerbork have preserved for us a few infinitely touching sentences from one of its inmates, Philip Mechanicus:

I've grown softer here in this camp, everyone has become the same for me, they are all like blades of grass, bending to the storm, lying flat under the hurricane.

And:

If I survive this time, I shall emerge a more mature and deeper person, and if I die, then I shall die a more mature and deeper one.

Everyone has become the same, blades of grass in a hurricane. A softer, more mature, and deeper person. Friends, is this the still, exquisite voice of universal kindness—of a love that understands both goodness and evil and, as a result, does not try to defeat evil, just like God, who gives sun and rain to both the just and the unjust? Let's rub our eyes, my friends. Can kindness and mature humanity flower in the face of human heartlessness, even when it takes the mad proportions of genocide?

Before we indulge in theoretical speculation about the root of this unexpected, oh so delicate flower, let us observe that it is noticed and appreciated only from close up. None outside the camps knew of it. Inside the camps, a prisoner's deep humanity would occasionally infuriate the brutes that ran the camps, but it mostly escaped their notice. To this day, rage, fury, and indignation, no matter how principled and righteous, have no access to deep human maturity. It was and is and remains the secret—the tender secret—of the fellowship of the suffering and the long-suffering.

Abel Herzberg, who survived Bergen-Belsen, tells the story of Labi, the young schoolmaster from Benghazi in Libya. In 1942, about to lose the campaign in North-Africa, the Nazis had, with the idiocy of principle, moved the Jewish communities of Tripoli, Tobruk, and Benghazi, first to Italy and from there to the death-camps in Poland. Jews were not to be exterminated locally; they all had to be part of the Final Solution, and that was supposed to take place in the camps, not on the battlefield.

Being from North Africa, Labi is a Jew of the old stamp, older than any European Jew. No wonder he starts a harmless little school, where he teaches the children to sing, in Hebrew:

The people of Israel lives,
The people of Israel lives.

And:

Blessed we are, blessed we are!
How lovely is our lot,
How fair is our portion,
We are blessed, we are blessed!

Labi's fellow-prisoners explain to him that the food-laws are suspended in the camp. Labi still refuses to eat the only soup available—the one that has bits of horse-meat floating in it. He quietly whispers, “There is a difference between clean and unclean.”

Here we have it, my friends, in the midst of a hurricane of mercilessness and violence and death, the true Israel—the combination of the praise of God and the Law of God: *Todah* and *Torah*. Awe-filled faith in a God both faithful and inscrutable beyond compare—the faith that begets a quiet, assured humanity. That humanity does not demand that the world in which it finds itself be perfect; it knows and accepts, quietly and without drama, that we live in a mixed world, in which some things are (and always will be) *kosher* and some *tref*; in order to convey that some things are (and always will be) lawful and some forbidden, that some things are (and always will be) good and some perverse. A world, too, where the wheat is mixed in with the weeds, and the just are mixed in with the unjust, and the good people with the evil-doers, and where goodness and virtue will never quite succeed in being victorious, either in individuals or in communities. A world, therefore, in which unjust suffering borne in patience is not infrequently a sign of intimacy with God.

This kind of world needs mercy more than anything else; hence, it is measured by it. We discover the true measure of the shame involved in the Shoa, not in our rage and indignation at the crassness of human crime, but when we are struck by the pity of it all: such deep faith and

such quiet devotion to justice snuffed out! We kill the kindness we should cherish and cultivate!

V

Kindness can take incongruous shapes. Professor Morpurgo's survival through the kind, unobtrusive services of Italian friars who have remained anonymous is oddly (you might even say perversely) reminiscent of the "Schindler Jews" (the *Schindlerjuden*)—the people behind the story so memorably told by the Australian novelist Thomas Keneally, in his book *Schindler's List*.² A German born in 1908 in Zwittau, in the Czechoslovakian part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Oskar Schindler was an engineer by training. By the time the second World War began, he had become known for a well-advertised taste for the best in food and drink, in fast motorbikes, and, yes, in fast women. He was also running a few businesses of his own, but he was distinguishing himself mainly by an ability to move around central Europe with the dubious ease of the man who finds it impossible to imagine that somebody might not like him and not get along with him. The only trait that seems out of character with all of this was his marriage, at the age of twenty, to Emilie, the daughter of a nearby gentleman farmer, a quiet, dignified, infinitely patient person, whose love he treasured and who remained faithful to her roguish husband all her life.

Between 1939 and 1945, the criminal vulgarity of the Nazis met its match in the blatant, unprincipled opportunism of this irresistible *bon vivant*. By dint of extraordinary swagger and bravura, Schindler succeeded in employing, right under the noses of the Nazis whose company he cultivated, as many Jews as he could in his enamel factories near Krakow and elsewhere, which he got classified as Nazi labor camps. By an amalgam of braggadocio, astuteness, and daring he succeeded in turning high-ranking SS-officers, whose sinister passions he understood from almost daily association, into accomplices; he then proceeded to hire hundreds of Jews away from the death camps, especially Auschwitz, and to smuggle them out to freedom—many of them outside Europe.

"Schindler's camp in Brinnlitz," an international Jewish organization testified after the war, "was the only camp in the Nazi-occupied territories where a Jew was never killed, or even beaten, but was always treated as a human being." After the war, he was honored in Israel as

one of the Righteous, and invited to plant a carob tree along the Avenue of the Righteous at *Yad Vashem*. And in 1966, this cheerful double-dealer was recalled to West Germany to be awarded the Cross of Merit and a state pension by the German Federal Republic, and even a papal knighthood. For this, he had to be brought back from Argentina, where he had emigrated after the war to be a pelt farmer, along with twelve Jewish families, whose passage across the ocean he had paid. In 1974, he collapsed at his apartment in Frankfurt and died a few days later, mourned by Jews on every continent.

Some time after his death, his wife declared that her husband had done nothing remarkable before the war and nothing exceptional after. Yet within weeks of his death, this lifelong but undistinguished, seemingly unprincipled Catholic who had never lived without a mistress or two and who had become an ardent supporter of Hebrew University in Jerusalem got the wish he had shared with many of his *Schindlerjuden*: he was buried in the city of both War and Peace, Jerusalem, in the Catholic Cemetery just outside the South Wall. Deep down in his soul, he must have held on to something on which he refused to compromise: no high moral principle righteously professed, but a wordless faith maybe, and an un-self-conscious, un-self-righteous sense of justice, to support a practical conviction that Jews are not for abuse and killing any more than any other human beings.

VI

At this point, friends, allow me a few musings of my own. I have never been able to feel any violent rage or indignation at the Holocaust and its atrocity; I often used to wonder why. I do remember my revulsion when Rolf Hochhuth's play *The Deputy* hit the stage. Hochhuth makes an acceptable enough theoretical case for the thesis that a public protest against the treatment of the Jews on the part of Pope Pius XII might have made an enormous difference, given his position of influence in Europe and in Nazi Germany; but he goes on to suggest that such a protest was simply incumbent upon him as the deputy of Christ, and that his failure to protest was an act of cowardice as well as cold-blooded calculation. I have often been embarrassed at my own distaste for Hochhuth's thesis, and I used to wonder why. Incidentally, my problem has never been either an excessive devotion to the Papacy, or a poor sense of justice, or an incapacity for passion. Like any ordinary

Catholic, I know that some popes have been guilty of serious mistakes. I have always found Nazi-hunters like Simon Wiesenthal and, later on, Beate Klarsfeld fairly easy to understand and accept: the persistent search for criminals in hiding is part of our agreement to live in a world of laws, not expedience. And as for passion, I understand indignation. I was only fourteen when the war ended, but that made me old enough to have been affected for life. Now, fifty years after the war, I am still no stranger to rage. I confess that over the years I have uttered some harsh words to Germans who acted or sounded a little too much like the Germans we knew in the nineteen-forties, and just over twenty years ago, near the Heidelberg *Schloß*, a close friend had to restrain me physically to prevent me from jumping from behind the steering-wheel and taking after a hapless German parking guard who had needlessly yelled at me.

So I used to wonder, why have I never experienced any violent reaction to the *Shoah*? Over the years, I have come to a conclusion.

VII

Between them, I now think, kind, defenseless Mr. Schuijjer and kind, compassionate Professor Morpurgo have inoculated me against raw rage as well as against the kind of principled, righteous indignation at the *Shoah* that young Hochhuth's play celebrates and makes an effort to induce. Thanks to these two men, the *Shoah*, to me, for all its horror, has never become a cause. Thanks to them, it has remained a human fact; and human facts resist reduction to theory.

Why? Human facts are created and cherished and suffered in neighborliness, whereas causes and theories are made and upheld and refuted from a distance. There is an unholy affinity between distance and fury; absence obviously makes the heart grow, not only fonder, but also more enraged. I remember a difficult person I was friendly with at one time. A man of considerable talent and idealism, he was also discouragingly intolerant. He had a few preferred ways of countering those of us who even mildly questioned him and his doings. He would vehemently refer us to the writings of the young Marx (with which he had only a glancing acquaintance); he would go on about the murder of Allende (which had occurred in faraway Chile); and he would quote Nietzsche (whom he had scarcely read) to inveigh against what he called the prevailing "slave-mentality." That is, he availed himself of

faraway causes and theories of undisputed righteousness to browbeat people right in front of him, by implicitly accusing them of not caring about the wrongs of the world. Deep down, I guess, he must have felt impotent and lonely: as impotent as the powerless and the overwhelmed and the abandoned who see no option other than that of conveying their offended sense of justice by means of the threat of violence; as impotent as the many little people in a Germany humiliated by the Treaty of Versailles, ready to run after a small man with a shrill voice and a large ego and a murderous theory, who was ready to find fault and to pass the suffering on and to take the impotence—his own and a whole nation's—out on all of Europe, and above all on the Jews.

It is in human facts, my friends, that our thirst for violence and our appetite for faultfinding is quenched. For human facts are tender and make tender.

My personal link with the *Shoah*, I know, is flimsy indeed: what's two elderly Jewish men, one dead and one a survivor, in comparison with the *Shoah's* millions of silent Jewish dead and its twelve million anguished Jewish survivors, forced to be spectators at the Shoa from abroad or to remember it after the fact, many of whom have drawn the conclusion that it marks the end of any possibility of faith in Israel's God—my God—the Lord of history and the God of mercy?

And what are those two in comparison with the countless Jews who suffered violence before the *Shoah*? This year marks the fifth centennial, not only of Columbus's discovery of the New World in 1492, but also of the event that up until the Holocaust was regarded as the high point of Jewish suffering—the event that put an end to the most significant Jewish community of the Middle Ages: the expulsion of the Sephardis from Spain. There were Jews who stayed of course, but some hundred thousand of them were compelled to forswear their faith and adopt the Catholic religion. At the risk of their lives, many of these Jews continued to attend the synagogue in secret. To this day, every time the *Kol Nidrei* is sung or said before sundown during the service that opens Yom Kippur, to declare the annual dispensation from all vows, the Spanish persecution comes back to mind, when the Jews sang the *Kol Nidrei* text as a way of freeing themselves from the vows enjoined upon them by the Inquisition. And the evil did not stop there.

A cloud of suspicion continued to hang over the heads of the Jews (and, incidentally, of the many Moors who had not fled to North Africa before the armies of Ferdinand and Isabella) who had become Catholics and even their descendants, since they could not claim the purity of blood—the *limpieza de sangre*—that marked the true, “old” Christians. In this way, my friends, five hundred years ago, it was Spanish Jewry’s turn to be the field of blades of grass lying low in a hurricane of unkindness. Again, what’s two kind, elderly Jewish men in comparison with those hundreds of thousands?

The answer is that two kind Jewish men are a human bond, a tenuous bridge of human kindness delicately but firmly leading to further human kindness; through them, thank God, I have been placed close enough to the Shoa to make it impossible for me to get stuck in distant rage or to resort to high theory to support indignation or to insist on determining who is to blame. Thank God for human kindnesses—the kindness shown to Professor Morpurgo by a handful of obscure Dominican friars and to the *Schindlerjuden* by Oskar Schindler. Thank God, too, for the softness and the maturity and the depth of Philip Mechanicus and so many others in the camps, who never came back. They give us hope for a humanity renewed by kindness, in the name of the God whose self-revelation to Moses in chapters 33 and 34 in the Book of Exodus consists of two inseparable elements: the proclamation of the Ten Commandments calls us to responsibility, and the glorification of the divine Kindness and Compassion calls on us to be compassionate as our dear God is compassionate.

VIII

Friends, the *Shoah* urges us to be on guard against all unkindness. Violence of every kind inures us to further violence, and makes us forever enamored of the kind of heroism that stirs the ego but dries up the source of life in us. Self-righteousness encourages us to equate everyday human resourcefulness and shrewdness with cowardice and to despise ordinary virtue; the righteous forget that real cowards are seldom gracious and often violent. Most forms of rage and indignation will make us desperate to see some kind of justice harshly done—say, by a furious Pius XII inflicting a mortal wound on the monster that went around ravaging Europe and the Jews, thus goading it on to further senseless ravage. What a deadly mess it was. What a horrible

waste of human life and talent, knowingly inflicted. But if we are to dread the instincts that made the mess and caused the waste, we must also dread the murderous instinct in ourselves.

This means, among other things, that all of us are to dread the moment when we feel that we are in the right in regard to the Holocaust. Who is entitled to feel right in the face of unspeakable suffering? The *Shoah* is simply too appalling and painful an event for anyone to have a right to claim to be right about it. This kind of “being right” occurs, for instance, when we find ourselves coming to the conclusion that the only true virtue at the time of the *Shoah* was extraordinary virtue, and that particular persons other than those who practiced ordinary virtue should have practiced it. “Being right” also happens when we, today, inflict another indignity on the *Shoah* and its victims: overstatement with an air of finality. Liars make a habit of calling things unprecedented and historic only because they know neither precedent nor history. We must resist the rhetoric of those who use superlatives only because they are both ignorant and convinced they are right. The *Shoah* has horrors all its own, but it is neither better understood nor more deeply repented of by being called history’s worst sin. God knows what we may do next, or what has really happened in the past. And only God knows the ultimate sin.

IX

Kindness enables conversion. Conversion on the part of us Christians first. We cannot plead innocent. Our own unhealthy brothers and sisters committed the sinful crime, and we are members of the same body. We have to beg our Jewish brothers and sisters for mercy. Part of our penance will be that we endure their anger and agree to suffer whenever their despair about the Shoa should turn out to have robbed them of their historic faith in God. Part of our penance will also be that we will kindly but resolutely disagree with them when their anxiety drives them into the overstatement that the Shoa is the unique and final evil, the unforgivable sin.

Why? Among human persons, mercy given to people begging for it is mercy only if it softens and matures the people who give it. If we Christians do not implore the Jews for mercy, we will rob them of an opportunity to be kind, and so encourage them to feel justified in

giving us only wrath. Thus our prayer for mercy can give growth in kindness and maturity to Jews. They need it; after all, they now share with the nations the dubious privilege we Christians have had for centuries: that of wielding weaponry that can kill. Now that we are united by the capacity for institutional violence, kindness and forgiveness must unite us even more deeply.

X

In the Art Institute in Chicago, where I live, hangs Marc Chagall's *White Crucifixion*. It depicts Christ crucified surrounded by Jews killed, Jews hunted down, Jews driven around, synagogues burning, Torah-scrolls desecrated.

To a Jew, this is the world upside down: the cross, the traditional symbol of the pogroms, has become the emblem of compassion. For Christians, too, the tables are turned. Jesus is no longer (as even the Gospels depict him) the victim of Jewish rejection; he is on the side of the victims: the Jews. Naked and exposed, the picture of innocence, his only covering is the *talith*, the shawl worn by Jewish men at prayer; he has become the associate of the suffering Jews who have none but God to commit themselves to.

And so, my friends in God, may I end by suggesting that Jesus can unite us, Christians and Jews? We Christians think of his execution as history's worst sin. But we do not claim to understand this dreadful sin down to the bottom, and consequently, our faith does not entitle us to profess the ugliness of the killing of Jesus in such a way as to suggest that other appalling historic sins are less deplorable by comparison. And in any case, we profess above all that the dying Jesus embodies God's life-giving embrace of all of us sinners—an embrace that calls for universal reconciliation and kindness, not discrimination. Together, then, could we not all abandon ourselves, in worship, to the Compassionate God who has made us and who forever wishes to restore us? And together must we not recognize in one another the family features we have in common with all of humanity? Kind knows kind. Those who have eyes to see know the secret: humanity—all of humanity!—visibly, indelibly made in the image and likeness of the invisible God.

Notes

A sermon delivered at the Sage Chapel at Cornell University on May 3, 1992, as the annual sermon in commemoration of the *Shoah*. Published in *Cross Currents* 42 (1992): 174-84; it elicited an exchange of letters between Eugene B. Borowitz and the author, in the Fall issue of *Cross Currents* that same year: 42 (1992): 417-24. Lightly revised for the present collection.

1. Abel J. Herzberg, *Amor fati: zeven opstellen over Bergen-Belsen* (Amsterdam: Moussault, 1947); translated into English as *Amor Fati, Attachment to Fate: Seven Essays on Bergen-Belsen*, translated by Jack Santcross (Middlesex, England, 2001).

2. Thomas Keneally, *Schindler's List* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

Picking up the Cross—Whose? Christian Resources for Growth-by-Repentance

If Jesus, crucified, had remained gone and away, I would in all likelihood not have openly acknowledged the cross, for I would probably have covered it up, along with my Master. But with the resurrection coming after the cross, I am not ashamed to speak about it at length.¹

What is it to be a Jesuit? It is to know that one is a sinner, yet called to be a companion of Jesus was: Ignatius, who begged the Blessed Virgin to “place him with her Son,” and who then saw the Father himself ask Jesus, carrying his Cross, to take this pilgrim into his company.²

Preliminary: The Cross

Jews executed by stoning. In the Greek world, crucifixion was universally regarded as a barbarian import. For the Romans it became *summum supplicium*—the severest and worst form of execution.³

In the New Testament, the noun “cross” (Gk. *stauros*) occurs twenty-seven times.⁴ In twenty-two instances, a firm majority, the word is directly associated with Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ—an unsurprising fact given that the New Testament writings were produced by a far-flung network of small communities worshipping as alive, right in their midst, a Jew fairly recently executed by crucifixion.

Still, in the five remaining instances—all of them occurring in sayings attributed to Jesus—the noun is immediately associated not with Jesus, but with discipleship, and in a hypothetical sense: “if someone should wish to be a disciple, . . .” Of these five, three occur in synoptic parallels, combined with their apparent equivalents, “if someone should wish to save/lose his life, . . .,”—the latter phrase being also

found in the fourth gospel (Jn 12, 25). In the remaining two cases, presumably deriving from the sayings source known as Q, the cross is coupled with that other requisite of discipleship around Jesus: if you should wish to be a disciple of Jesus, 'leave everything behind and pick up your cross' (Mt 10, 38-39 par. Lk 24, 25-27).

It seems unlikely that Jesus actually—i.e., historically—picked up his own cross; Simon from Cyrene was forced to do that (Mk 15, 21); only in the fourth gospel does he carry it for himself (Jn 19, 17). Historically speaking, did he pronounce those five sayings? There are good reasons to assume he did not. But the historical fact of Jesus' crucifixion does make it easy to understand why "carrying one's cross" should have become a pregnant Christian phrase. In fact, the Pauline corpus shows a number of other, expressive, very quotable phrases, no two of them identical, most of which can be confidently dated between 50 and 90 A.D.— i.e., older than (or at least as old) the gospels as we have them. Here they are: the cross must not be "voided" or "nullified"; "talk of the cross" is hard to take;⁵ "the cross' scandal" has consequences; yet paradoxically, Christ's cross is also a "boast"; and while Christ was dying to do the Father's will to the point of "death on a cross," some people are "enemies of Christ's cross"; God has united two enemies of long standing—Jews and Gentiles—"in and by means of the cross"; thus, Christ's "bloodied cross" has created peace; God has "posted on the cross the writ listing the charges against us" (1 Cor 1, 17-18; Gal 5, 11; 6, 12, 14; Phil 2, 8; 3, 18; Eph 2, 16; Col 1, 20; 2, 14). In this context, the verb "crucify" (Gk. *stauro*) is relevant as well, especially in the form "letting oneself be crucified" (Gk. *staurthnai*): Christ (not Paul!) let himself "be crucified out of weakness."⁶ Even the author of the Book of Revelation can talk about the Evil City where the two Olive Trees were killed and left lying in the street and where "their Lord, too, let himself be crucified" (Rev 11, 8). Finally, the Letter to the Hebrews sums the meaning of the cross in a single word: shame.⁷ In Hebrew, "shame" (נִקְמָה) is the appalling contrary of God's Holy Name, meaning "Abomination," and used to avoid dignifying "Ba'al" with his proper name.

No wonder the theme of shame takes us back all the way to the "original shame" in the account of the Fall in Genesis. Adam and Eve are hiding from God, behind the bushes, ashamed because naked on account of having committed the one sin God had forbidden: eating

the food that will give them the powerful wisdom enabling them to hold others accountable for good and evil. Overwhelmed by shame, they now sit in judgment on themselves and overlook the most obvious thing they can do: emerge right into the presence of God, even if defeated by shame. Instead, they settle for what they have wished for: along with shame and miserable self-consciousness, ingrained preference for judging will be their doom; it will unmake their lives—with themselves and with others.

If Adam and Eve have lost their ability to enter into the Presence of God, Jesus of Nazareth does precisely that at his Baptism, right in the teeth of John the Baptizer's protest that he is turning the world upside down. By replying that this is the proper way "to fulfill all justice,"⁸ Jesus makes the saving difference. Still, eventually, his offensively kind approach to sinners turns out to be more than anyone can live with: he is forced out into death, once and for good, with the shame of human sin beaten into his innocent body—"made sin for all" (2 Cor 5, 21. Cf. 1 Pet 2, 24). At last, there he hangs, on "his" cross, put to the utmost test but found true to God, ready to get himself revealed as the sacrament of God's new creation, to the ever-greater glory of God's faithful, merciful Love.

Thus, if anything qualifies as a Christian means to help bring on conversion and repentance among the world religions it is the combination of the twin ingredients of true worship: giving glory to God by confession of human sin, and vice versa, taking responsibility for human sin in praise of God, as Augustine reminded his listeners.⁹ Our late pope, John Paul II, has been doing this time and again, whether the cardinals liked it or not, especially on his later journeys: acknowledging the Catholic Church's past sins and asking for forgiveness, and praising God in hopes of a humanity renewed by justice and peace based on mutual forgiveness and appreciation.

Let this be the opening thought for this essay. It is also found in the two epigraphs at the top of this essay.

Religions Crossing Borders: Surprises, Anxieties

In the city of Chicago, in the Art Institute, hangs Marc Chagall's *White Crucifixion*. In that remarkable painting, finished well before the *Shoah* and its horrors, the crucified Christ is surrounded by scenes from

East European pogroms—Jews harassed, hunted down, driven out of town, synagogues on fire, Torah-scrolls desecrated. What sense do Jewish eyes make of this? Surely, this must be the world upside down? Is the cross, the immemorial sign and symbol of persecution, becoming the emblem of God's compassion with the suffering Jews?

However, in any case, Chagall's painting turns the tables on us, Christians. Here, Jesus is not the victim of Jewish rejection, as he is portrayed even in the gospels; rather, naked and forlorn, he is on the Jewish—i.e., the victims'—side; his only covering is the *talith*, worn by Jewish men at prayer. He has become the exemplar of the suffering Jews on their endless way through "the desert of the nations" (Ez 20, 33-38), with only the Living God to abandon themselves to. The Exodus all over again, pictured by a Ukrainian Jew in the nineteen-thirties, when the worst was yet to come for the Jews in Europe.

Is Jesus Christ really scorned by Christians? In Chagall's painting the answer to this question is all the plainer for being wordless: Yes, those who acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as God's Messiah and their Savior do disavow him in the persons of the Jews they persecute systemically—i.e., as a matter of habit. But how can this be? Another Jew, Zvi Kolitz, in his famous short story *Yossel Rakover Speaks to God*, written in 1946, not only asks the question but also very explicitly answers it: in the figure of Yossel Rakover, about to die with the words of the dying Jesus on his lips, Jesus Christ is rejected by those who actively inflict violence on the Jews, but more insidiously, by all the self-absorbed, apathetic Christians who by their silence become accomplices to that injustice.¹⁰

A change of scene. What comes to mind is Chaim Potok's novel *My Name is Asher Lev*—the story of the Jewish painter whose *Brooklyn Crucifixion* gets him estranged from his Ladover Hasidic community, albeit with the tacit blessing of its mysterious rabbi.¹¹ There is also the voice of Hans-Georg Gadamer, born in 1900 and at the age of ninety-nine still asking questions raised by the future. He was also saying that he was now aware of "how often I have been wrong." But then again, he was also raising a theme he had always treated with agnostic (if respectful) silence, namely, the great religions' common responsibility. They must keep their differences from degenerating into violence, he said; only thus will they succeed in doing justice to the Mystery beyond all of our horizons. In Gadamer's eyes, this was the hermeneutical challenge of

our day. In saying this, was he repenting of his long silence on religion? Was he a prophet speaking up with a voice he had long heard inside? Was he both? Who knows? But does it matter?

Yet another scene. There is our Holy Father Pope John Paul II at prayer in Assisi, flanked by so many other people of the Spirit in positions of prophetic opportunity and responsibility in the religions. But on the rebound, I hear the panic-stricken laments, begun by fellow Catholics less than twenty-four hours after the prayer at Assisi and still heard as well as disseminated in print today, declaring that Pope John Paul II is a near-heretic misleading the whole world about the truths of the Catholic faith, that we Catholics are now being told to eat the bitter fruits of the apostasy authorized by *Nostra Ætate*, the second Vatican Council's decree on the Catholic Church's relations with the non-Christian religions, and even that the recent earthquakes at Assisi simply must be considered divine punishment for the iniquity committed there.¹²

In our day, what is befalling us? Let us go back to the other end of the spectrum. In August 2000, the Elijah School for the Study of Wisdom in World Religions in Jerusalem invited an international team of professors and students to raise the following questions: What is conversion? Is it conceivable for persons or even communities to be members of more than one great religion? Thus, could I, a committed Jesuit priest, be a Jew or a Hindu as well, recognizably, in a meaningful sense of those designations? The teaching team consisted of a Baptist Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a dean of a religious studies department at a North American university, an orthodox Jew, and a Jesuit priest, a Roman Catholic by both default and choice, not to mention election.

Something else. A few years ago, we have witnessed the publication of *Hindu Wisdom for All God's Children*, written by a Jesuit priest; could this be a promise of a new harvest—of peace?¹³ Some more facts. After centuries of oblivion, the writings of the sixteenth-century Dominican priest and bishop Bartolomé de las Casas (1474-1566) are being read again; they are the single most poignant indictment of the Spanish *Conquista* in what is now Northern Latin America.¹⁴ They decry the soldiers' and missionaries' tactic of demonizing the native Americans' deities and rituals in order to create pretexts for destroying the culture and seizing the people's lands. Six years ago, an old Jesuit friend who

has lived, learned, and taught theology in Indonesia for over fifty years, told me that the Portuguese (“who have never bothered to do anything for the indigenous peoples they colonized except bring them the faith”) are loved to this day by the natives everywhere, at least in the coastal areas they colonized—East Timor being one example. Hard to believe. But could it be true, at least to a degree? And to that degree, could it tell us something today?

So we could go on and on, especially in Jerusalem—still as pregnant with the Promise of Final Justice and Peace as it has been the scene of perpetual injustice and war, starting (arguably) with King David’s capture of Zion, the Jebusite stronghold that became the City of David, whose third millennium was commemorated at the Shalom Hartman Institute in 1991.¹⁵

What is happening to us, I suggest, is that the great religions are at last beginning to find it within themselves not only to affect other great religions—that has happened a lot, often with a vengeance—but also (and especially) to let themselves be affected by them. Are the mixed-up fortunes of past history really turning into today’s moral agenda? Is fated encounter at last occasioning human encounter? And will this encounter beget peace or war? My answer is provisional. It *may* lead to peace, if only we can stop living our religions politically and instead, let ourselves be fed at the wellsprings of repentance within each of our religions. Why repentance? Because it is the only way to create something new and gracious out of our centuries-old history of blaming and meting out punishment to each other. So what I will discuss with you is the following question: What are the inner resources for repentance in the Christian faith I find myself privileged to profess?

Universalism

In a prophetic essay, Karl Rahner explained years ago that the Catholic Church is now *empirically* catholic—i.e., universal—for the first time in history.¹⁶ It had always been universal by virtue of the Creed (“I believe in the Church, One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic”), but now there actually are Catholics everywhere, along with their nuns, catechists, deacons, priests, even bishops. This is a fact of elemental religious significance, and I wish to explain that it represents not a Catholic success, but a new Christian (and thus, Catholic) responsibility, one of

whose critical elements is *voluntary repentance*. Empirical universalism is here, and here to stay. So must repentance be. Why? Let me start with a few thoughts on *universalism*.

All the great religions are universalistic. One way or another, they have a world view; the universe is their horizon. Jews and Christians start their Scriptures with a God who creates “the heavens and the earth”; they know of eternal Wisdom, Word from the beginning, pre-existent Torah dwelling with God’s human children, which will bring humanity and the universe home to God, Holy, Faithful, and Just. Hindus know of the Lord Vishnu and his consubstantial Consort Sri—the Unity from which and to which flows all that lives and dies, in a perpetual quest for a Universal Self-Knowledge and Liberation (*moksa*). Buddhists know of the Nirvana—the Lightsome Nothing-of-any-Kind-in-Particular beyond all change and beyond all the passion change has caused, is causing, and will always cause. China knows of the Tao, the unchartable Road that invisibly maps all charts and roads—the everyday ones we think we know as much as the ones we do not know, or do not know yet. Muslims worship Allah Who is no less Merciful for being Great, and Who will judge the whole world accordingly: in Majesty and Mercy. And even the “little,” “local” religions—of the tribes, the clans, the nomads, the marginals—are “great”: for they, too, have their broad horizons and their intimations of a Transcendent Mystery that bears and carries and steers and judges all of us and the whole world as well.¹⁷

Yes, no human soul, and few if any human cultures, are without a taste for the Infinite, and thus, no world religion is without universalism. Wonderful. Entrancing. And so, the place where we can fall prey to great illusions. Let us see.

The Bewitchment of False Universalism

It is the height of irony that the cultural movement which first got interested in the world religions, namely, the early Enlightenment, not only put tolerance at the top of its agenda, but also ended up drawing the worst conclusion from these religions’ existence. How so? In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Western Europe and North America saw the rise of a new type of faith in God, now better known as Deism. It was residually Christian in that it did not altogether drop either the Bible or Jesus. Still, disgusted with the religious wars of

the recent past and enchanted by a largely implicit Platonism, it viewed worship and doctrine as root causes of hypocrisy and violence and wrote them off; instead, it put its faith in *ethics*. Accordingly, in Deism, *sincerity* and *reasonableness* became humanity's chief *religious* virtues, and the Living God became distant: on principle, God ceased to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and of Moses and the prophets, God the Father of Jesus Christ, and *Allah* Great and Merciful—the latter probably unbeknownst to most Muslims at the time Deism developed.

The first victims of Deist Enlightenment were the educated Jews, especially in the German-speaking countries. In *Jerusalem oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum* (1783), Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86) agreed that the truths of Judaism were none other than those which God had taught to all rational beings “by fact and idea”; hence, practices enjoined by the written Torah are a matter not of truth but (like all things in “organized religion”) of optional acceptance of special, non-universalist traditions.

On the rebound as it were, the new, enlightened cultural arbiters of the West decided they had now at last understood what religion really was, namely, humanity's natural religiosity, pure, unspoilt, and so, universal as well as tolerant on principle. Accordingly, Jews were considered “wise” people and nothing else—Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-81) wrote *Nathan der Weise* to show just that. In fact, all the religions of India, Japan, China, “Turkey” (i.e., the world of Islam), and Ethiopia (not to mention all the noble savages that the Enlightened thought they were seeing all over the world) were deemed fascinating as well as pure—far purer, in fact, than unenlightened European Christianity and ditto Judaism, both of which were largely mired in the darkness of custom and credulity, since they had mistaken worship and doctrine for something they were certainly not, namely, integral to religion.

I leave it to my Muslim friends to tell us if they agree that the Deist depiction of their religious observances as a matter of custom rather than reality is a compliment. Somehow I doubt it. Somehow, too, I doubt that Christian theologians like John Hick (whose thought was shaped by Vedanta neo-Hinduism, whose literature is entirely in English) have done us an enduring service.¹⁸ For in the real world, filled with resentment as it is, we cannot expect a peaceful future except if we agree in principle to settle our accounts with the past. But I am running ahead of myself.

Universalism and the Modern Study of the Religions

That all human beings and cultures live by a native, undeniable sense of Transcendence is one thing. But I wish to propose that the idealization of human religiosity as the common umbrella of principled tolerance, under which all actual religions can feel equally at home, amounts to a huge exercise in overlooking and forgetting—one of *laissez-faire* Western devising. Let me start with a few quick arguments.

I am an educated Christian believer, thank heavens; but precisely my education must teach me that I must be wary of thought-systems that authorize me to make positive truth statements about things I have never studied—matters I know just enough about to realize I do not really know about them at all. In my case, an example would be Hinduism. Let me put this in more general terms. It is clearly sound to distinguish between humanity's common, innate orientation to the Infinite on the one hand and the particular cults, codes, and creeds of the “positive” religions on the other. But it is equally clearly unsound to separate the two, and then to proceed to idealize the religious impulse at the expense of the great religious traditions. Idealizing the former is implicitly to declare that the religions' distinctive traits are of no religious (or, for that matter, human) significance.

Quite rightly, therefore, historians of religion have concluded that world religions must be studied in their particular manifestations if they are to be understood. Yet even here a caution is fitting: the religions must be studied not “neutrally” or “objectively” (as if they were mere folklore or social construction) but sympathetically—i.e., precisely as the distinctive traditions that enable the many members of actual religious communities to live in awe, docility, self-awareness, and intellectual integrity in the face of the Always-Greater Unknown Present in the Cosmos, and closer to home, somehow Present here and now, with, among, and in us. Here if anywhere, “God is in the details.”

This is where an eminent hermeneutical challenge meets us, at two levels of increasing ontological intensity.

False Universalism, Enlightened Irresponsibility

First off, the hermeneutical task involved in the study of the religions is in and of itself daunting. Friedrich Schleiermacher intuited this when over two centuries ago he wrote that

in those despised positive religions . . . everything proves to be real, vigorous and definite; there every single intuition has its definite consistency, and a connection, all its own, with the rest; there every feeling has its own sphere and its particular reference. There you will find every modification of religiosity somewhere, as well as every state of feeling to which only religion can transport a person; there you will find every part of religion cultivated somewhere, and each of its effects achieved somewhere; there all common institutions and every individual expression are proof of the high value placed on religion, even to the point of forgetting everything else. There the holy zeal with which religion is observed, shared, and enjoyed, and the childlike desire with which new revelations of heavenly powers are anticipated, are your guarantee that not a single one of religion's elements, which it was possible in any way to perceive from this standpoint, has been overlooked, and that not a single one of its moments has vanished without leaving a monument behind.¹⁹

So, understanding a religion other than one's own from within its own amazingly coherent world is a huge interpretive undertaking. Let me remember here with admiration the late Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000), a Christian missionary who came to love the Muslim subculture of India, and so came to understand it deeply. His works evidence both the blessings inherent in the task and its difficulty.²⁰ For great blessings are indeed attached to understanding religions different from one's own, and the great philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer has made it his life's work to explain how and why. Only by attempting to understand the unfamiliar "other" (Gadamer has shown) can we, familiar with ourselves but always to a degree prejudiced as well, come to refreshingly authentic self-discovery; *painstaking discovery of the other is the royal road to self-awareness*.²¹ And self-awareness— "*Know Thyself*"—purified by long-suffering has a way of turning us into serene and fair judges in all things human.

Please allow me to transpose this into the language of the Christian Creed. Only the one who comes down "for our sake and for the sake of our salvation" and is "crucified under Pontius Pilate" can be trusted to "come in glory to do justice to the living and the dead."

So far so good. We must turn to the second level. Schleiermacher is aware that religions often appear in “the form of a servant”;²² not only do they bear the marks of their limitations in time and space; they also bear the multifarious marks of their adherents’ human poverty. The religions, he implies, are not above criticism. But, so Schleiermacher goes on, if we are to criticize them correctly, we must make thoughtful efforts to interpret them as they deserve to be interpreted, namely, in light of what he calls the reverential feeling of absolute dependence on the Deity. This is what I just referred to as “humanity’s common, innate orientation to the Infinite.”

Now this is exactly where Deism has let us down. It has reduced religiosity to an exclusively human attribute and left the question of its reference to the Infinite to its own devices; in doing so, it can be said to have missed a major *theological* issue—one that it took geniuses like Maurice Blondel and Karl Rahner to develop: humanity’s “transcendental” orientation to an *actual* Infinite. But what concerns us at this point is something else: Deism’s proposal for an enlightened religiosity is an anthropological error. The Enlightened Few, basking in their enlightenment, and preaching a gospel of simplicity, sincerity, rationality, and tolerant optimism à la Voltaire’s *Candide*, took their leave of reality. Firstly, they did not dignify us, common humanity all over the world, with any informed interest in our diverse ways of being human; but secondly and far more importantly, by declaring us natively pure, they tacitly disavowed any association with failure, evil, and sin—ours and (presumably) their own. By thus treating humanity’s history of violence and discrimination *en bagatelle*, the Enlightenment did all of us an injustice in the very act of paying all of us a compliment: at first blush, what it told us about our original “pure” humanity was flattering, but the naiveté hidden in the compliment was sinfully misleading. For, by calling us unspoiled children, the Enlightenment and its aftermath came to wash its hands of moral responsibility and encouraged all of us to do the same. Schleiermacher did not make this mistake. He recognized “the human form” as “the form of a slave” when he saw it; dare I presume he saw it in Jesus to start with?

Blaming? Forgetting? Repenting?

All this raises a big theological issue. Let me begin by giving you fair warning: this issue cannot be raised without embarrassment, and

embarrassment is just that: embarrassing. Around the Mediterranean basin, embarrassment has long been one of the worst crimes against humanity: loss of face, *brutta figura*. “Thou shalt not embarrass” is regarded as a near-divine commandment—one (let me quickly add) far from unknown in other parts of the world. One of the characteristics of Pope John Paul II’s indubitable courage has been to fear neither embarrassment nor human judgment. Chagall did the same by portraying Jesus as the associate of the persecuted Jews; even while criticized by many Jews, he also faced the traditional Christian self-understanding with a major embarrassment, by suggesting that Christians could, or should, recognize the suffering Jesus in suffering Jewry.

So, can we Christians tolerate the embarrassment of being faced with the sins of a culture which we have played a principal part in shaping? Can Jews here in Israel learn how to do it? Can Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists? Or are we all doomed to at once remind all those who embarrass us by challenging us how wrong they are, or in any case, that they are at most only partially correct—something that typically applies to most of us?

Accordingly, can (or should) we Catholics see the suffering Jesus in the victims of the Crusades—many of them simple Muslims whose religion was defamed in the interest of a Holy War—a Christian one this time? Can we see Jesus in Jan Hus, burned at the stake for reasons that had far more to do with city-dwellers’ anti-peasant affect than with God? Can we see Jesus in Galileo, a testy man for sure, but silenced, imprisoned, and discredited for trying to understand what he had observed? Can we see him in wild souls like Giordano Bruno and Girolamo Savonarola and Michele Sozzini and Menocchio the miller,²³ a bit of an influential village particularist bullied by the Inquisition in Northern Italy in the late sixteenth century—all of them burned at the stake? Do we really owe it to ourselves to be ready first of all to resort to history or apologetics in the interest of at least partly excusing ourselves, by explaining that those things were due to “emergency situations” or “different times”?

Let us tighten our question. Pascal wrote that “Jésus sera en agonie jusqu’à la fin du monde: il ne faut pas dormir pendant ce temps-là.”²⁴ Could we Christians, Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants, agree that,

as a matter of habitual ecumenical effort, we will attempt to discern first of all—i.e., before we say anything else—in the measureless suffering in our world, the suffering Jesus? Will we try to listen before we get to profess the clarity of our consciences or to defend our reputation? Can we become more open to corrections ventured and charges brought by others and less interested in self-maintenance and self-assertion? Do we have an *habitually* open ear to the cries of the otherwise voiceless poor?²⁵ Can we suspend our habits of insisting on being our own judges, and try to determine the precise extent of our mistakes before we listen to others? Or will we let ourselves and our exploits be called into question only *after* we have come up with answers that show our past mistakes are “not so bad as they are being made to appear”? And are we ready to suffer embarrassment at least partly deserved? And if so, does this require of us Catholics and all other Christians, first, a change of imagination, and then, too, a *reinterpretation* of the Christian doctrine about the person of Jesus and his ministry of showing understanding for “the ignorant and the wayward”?²⁶ Will we undertake such a reinterpretation in the light of our past relationships with Jews, Muslims, Unitarians, with honest dissenters inside the Catholic Church, with pioneers in scholarship and science? We could go on. Will we try to follow Jesus in his silence when he was facing his judges, as Origen tried to do, witness the preface to his *Contra Celsum*?²⁷ Will our theologians? Will our bishops? Will the Roman curia?

Praise and Repentance

This essay has become more homiletic than readers can be expected to tolerate. In fact, the human frailty obvious even in such powerful communities as the Catholic Church or indeed, the Christian world, may make it hard even for those giants to tolerate it. So let us end by suggesting more articulately where in our own Tradition we Christians can go to repentance school.

Saint Augustine puts it quite tersely: *confessio* and *confiteor* mean both “praising God” and “accusing ourselves;” the two are but two sides of one and the same coin.²⁸ And we have his *Confessions* to prove it: they are the longest prayer of praise and thanksgiving offered to God in Christian history as well as the longest act of penitence for a sinful and

misguided past life—a life which, being incomplete, is apt to continue to be plagued by sin.

Augustine, original as he may be, is not the one who discovered what I just pointed out. He found this habit of praise and penitence in the Bible, and specifically in the Book of Psalms. “It is not surprising that the *Confessions*, suffused as they are with a dramatic sense of God’s interventions in Augustine’s life, are studded with the language of the Psalms.”²⁹ In ever so many Psalms, laments about one’s own weakness and sin, professions of innocence in God’s presence, indignation about the lack of fairness and justice in the world, denunciation of violent and cunning enemies all around, complaints about God’s apparent indifference to the just, and more than anything else, consternation at the prospect of losing one’s life are being shamelessly uttered, with a passion; yet, in the very act of being uttered they turn into the very stuff of praise and thanksgiving offered to God, “the Lord, Mighty, Merciful and Gracious, Longsuffering and Abundant in Love and Truth, keeping faith with thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty” (Ex 34, 6-7). The knowledge and acknowledgment of God and the profession of unworthiness are inseparable, witness Moses and Elijah.

Faith and Asking Questions

For Christians, faith in God through Jesus Christ is inseparable from what we call Jesus’ Resurrection. We are a habitually disconsolate humanity, often caught in failure and sin; yet like Adam and Eve, rather than appearing shamefaced before the Living One, we try to abscond in the underbrush and cover our nakedness in front of each other. But no cover-up will do; what we need is not a palliative but the truth: an image of the very snake that has bitten us, lifted up on high, a monument to our lostness for all of us gaze on (Num 21, 6-9); we need Jesus, trotted out by Pilate as the witness—bringing up the rear of a large cloud of witnesses to both our humanity and our inhumanity, all of them Jewish (Heb 12, 1)—to be lifted up on high and impaled (Jn 3, 14-15; 19, 5). Only that kind of encounter with wounded humanity will ready us for the revelation by God (and by God alone) of “the Faithful and True Witness” and “the Just and

Holy One” (Rev 3, 14; Acts 3, 14). He enables us to glory again, in God, in the world, in each other and thus in ourselves. Glorifying and glorifying and dignifying—in practice, how are they done? Let me end with a hint.

Smack at the midpoint of Mark’s gospel we have the scene of the recognition of Jesus, by Simon Peter, as God’s Anointed One—the Messiah (Mk 8, 27-33). The recognition happens in response not to a teaching proposed by Jesus but to a question he asks: “But you, who do you think I am?” In other words, to get his identity established, Jesus delivers himself up to others—fallible others, frail and sinful; they are liable to misinterpret him. In fact, Simon Peter at once does just that: he explains to Jesus that suffering and dying are the last thing he has in mind for the Messiah, and Jesus at once turns his back on him and tells him to get lost: “Go away, Satan.” So Jesus shows who he is by opening himself to others by means of a question; implicitly, however, he lives not on the strength of the human judgment he requests but by virtue of God’s assurance. In that assurance, he can also afford to live like the lamb led to the slaughter, confident that God is the God of Life. He can afford to lose his own life, for he is all trust in the Living God.

I once had a curious dream. Jesus and Gautama the Buddha actually met and conversed with each other. Neither had any ready answers to give; both had only questions to ask. Unsurprisingly, in my dream, Jesus ended up asking more questions than even the Buddha could answer. But *both Jesus and the Buddha began by asking questions*, one of the other, trying to understand each other’s wisdom and folly, disappointments and pains, fulfillments and joys. Thus, dignifying each other by questioning, probing, and searching, they were giving glory to the One to whom Glory is due, now and always and forever.

So let us Christians settle for a waking dream. Can we abandon ourselves into other’s hands, only to end up finding ourselves in the hands not of enemies but of lasting friends? Two things we will certainly need. First, the fortitude of those who bravely stay awake in the dark in hopes of Light—the watchmen commended in Psalm 130. And besides, for the time being, endless patience inspired by compassion—of the curious, questioning kind.

Notes

A revised version of a contribution to the *Festschrift* offered to an almost lifelong Jesuit friend, Tom Jacobs, *Di Jalan Terjal: Mewartakan Yesus yang Tersalib di Tengah Masyarakat Risiko*. Persembahat untuk Tom Jacobs, S.J., Teolog-Pewarta (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Kanisius 2004, 165-91). The piece was in its turn a rewritten and much expanded version of a paper titled *The Wisdom of Penitence, Praise, and Asking Questions: Inner Resources for Growth-by-Repentance in the Christian Faith*. That paper was read in Jerusalem, on March 21, 2000, at an Interfaith Conference under the title *Religions and Repentance: Growth in Religious Traditions, Facing a New Era*. It was sponsored by the Elijah Interfaith Institute, and held in honor of Pope John Paul II's visit to the Holy Land. In Jerusalem, the two other lecturers at the event were Rabbi René Shmuel Sirat, former Chief Rabbi of France and Vice President of the European Council of Rabbis, and Sheikh Professor Abdul Hadi Palazzi, Director of the Cultural Institute of the Italian Islamic Community, Rome, Italy.

1. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catech.* XIII, iv; *PG* 33, 777A.
2. General Congregation of the Society of Jesus 32, Decree 2, "Jesuits Today," 1.
3. See Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).
4. Unsurprisingly, the verb "crucify" occurs as many as 44 times.
5. See the English saying, "In the house of a hanged man you don't talk about rope."
6. 2 Cor 13, 4 *coll.* 1 Cor 1, 13. On the reflexive meaning of the passive aorist, see "'Lost and Found' in Luke 15: Biblical Interpretation and Self-Involvement," *The Expository Times* 114 (2003): 399-404.
7. *Stauron aischyms*—a so-called explicative genitive.
8. Mt 3, 15. Here lies the source of Irenaeus' later claim (*Adv. Haer.* 5, 2, 1-3; *SC* 153, 30-41), that God treated human sin justly, and not by eminent domain: "he did not . . . steal what belonged to another; rather, he regained what was his own, [and he did so] both justly and generously."
9. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 169, note 4. The reference is to *Sermo* 67, 2.
10. On the subject of Zvi Kolitz's Story, see Zvi Kolitz, "Yossel Rakover's Appeal to God," in *Yossel Rakover Speaks to God: Holocaust Challenges to Religious Faith* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1995), 13-26. See also, in this same volume, "My Encounter with Yossel Rakover," 41-63. Also, Zvi Kolitz, *Jossel Rakovers Wendung zu Gott* (Berlin: Verlag Volk & Welt, 1996); *Josl Rakover Talks to God* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999).
11. Chaim Potok, *My Name is Asher Lev* (New York: Knopf, 1972).

12. Latin original in *Sacrosanctum Oecumenicum Concilium Vaticanum II, Constitutiones Decreta Declarationes* (Vatican City, Secretaria Generalis Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II, 1966), 411-19; translated into English as *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Herder and Herder: 1966).

13. Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu Wisdom for All God's Children* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1998).

14. *Historia de las Indias* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1951); translated into English as *History of the Indies* (New York: Harper and Row: 1971). *Brevisima Relacion de la Destruccion De Africa: Preludio De La Destrucción De Indias: Primera Defensa de los Guanches y Negros Contra su Esclavización*, ed. Isacio Perez Fernandez (Salamanca: Editorial San Esteban, 1989); translated into English as *In defense of the Indians: The Defense of the Most Reverend Lord, Don Fray Bartolomé De Las Casas, of the Order of Preachers, Late Bishop of Chiapa, Against the Persecutors and Slanderers of the Peoples of the New World Discovered Across the Seas*, ed. Stafford Poole (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974). *The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). *The Only Way* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992). *Tears of the Indians, by Bartolomé de las Casas, and The life of Las Casas, by Sir Arthur Helps* (Williamstown, MA: J. Lilburne, 1970). *Witness: Writings of Bartolomé De Las Casas*, ed. George Sanderlin, intro. Gustavo Gutiérrez (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992).

15. F.J. van Beeck, "Israel's God, the Psalms, and the City of Jerusalem: Life Experience and the Sacrifice of Praise and Prayer," *Horizons* 19 (1992): 219-39.

16. Karl Rahner, "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 40 (1979): 716-27; see "Theologische Grundinterpretation des II. Vatikanischen Konzils," in *Schriften zur Theologie*, 14 (Zürich-Einsiedeln-Köln: Benziger Verlag, 1980), 287-302.

17. See *Nostra Ætate*, 2.

18. John Hick, *Problems of religious pluralism* (London: Macmillan, 1985); see also Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985); *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987); also Eric J. Lott, *Vedantic Approaches to God*, foreword by John Hick (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1980).

19. *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern*, ed. Rudolf Otto (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1967), 186-87: "Zurück also, wenn es Euch Ernst ist, die Religion in ihren bestimmten

Gestalten zu betrachten, von dieser erleuchteten zu den verachteten positiven Religionen, wo alles wirklich, kräftig und bestimmt erscheint, wo jede einzelne Anschauung ihren bestimmten Gehalt und ein eignes Verhältnis zu den übrigen, jedes Gefühl seinen eignen Kreis und seine besondere Beziehung hat; wo Ihr jede Modification der Religiosität irgendwo antrefft, und jeden Gemütszustand, in welchen nur die Religion den Menschen versetzen kann; wo ihr jeden Teil derselben irgendwo ausgebildet und jede ihrer Wirkungen irgendwo vollendet findet; wo alle gemeinschaftlichen Anstalten und alle einzelnen Äußerungen den hohen Wert beweisen, der auf die Religion gelegt wird bis zum Vergessen alles übrigen; wo der heilige Eifer, mit welchem sie betrachtet, mitgeteilt, genossen wird, und die kindliche Sehnsucht, mit welcher man neuen Offenbarungen himmlischer Kräfte entgegenseht, Euch dafür bürgen, daß keines von ihren Elementen, welches von diesem Punkt aus schon wahrgenommen werden konnte, übersehen worden und keiner von ihren Momenten verschwunden ist, ohne ein Denkmal zurückzulassen."

20. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957); *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York, New American Library, 1963); *Modern Islam in India: A Social Analysis* (New York, Russell & Russell, 1972); *On Understanding Islam: Selected Studies* (The Hague-New York: Mouton, 1981); *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1981); *What Is Scripture?: A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

21. See "Man of a Century: Hans-Georg Gadamer," *Pacifica* 13(2000): 84-89.

22. Schleiermacher uses the word *Knechtsgestalt*—a clear allusion to Phil 2, 7.

23. See Carlo Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi: il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500* (Torino: G. Einaudi, 1976); ET *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-century Miller* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). See also *Domenico Scandella detto Menocchio: i processi dell'Inquisizione (1583-1599)* (Pordenone: Edizioni Biblioteca dell'immagine, 1990).

24. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [919], in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1963), 620.

25. Tom F. Driver, "The Case for Pluralism" in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 203-18, esp. 206. The present paragraph sums up a case made at length in F.J. van Beeck, "Professing Christianity Among the World's Religions," *The Thomist* 55 (1991): 539-68.

26. Heb 5, 2, where Jesus is characterized by his μετριοπαθεία—his habit of suspending acting on one's own emotions, in the interest of showing compassion to others who are suffering.

27. See “Christian Faith and Theology in Encounter with Non-Christians: Profession? Protestation? Self-maintenance? Abandon?” *Theological Studies* 55 (1994): 46-65, esp. 63-65.

28. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 175.

29. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 174.

*Our Approach to Ecumenism,
Especially in the Light
of Contemporary Judaism*

In this essay, I intend to make four points. First, recently, in the context of the millennium Jubilee, we received from the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith a document titled *Dominus Iesus*;¹ I wish to explain why I am taking this document as the launching pad for my paper. On that basis, I will propose, secondly, that interreligious dialogue, to be fruitful, requires what I call “virtually unconditioned commitment” on the part of all participants. My third, brief point will be a huge contention: viz., that the sheer factual existence of Jewish people today has created a dynamic situation of historic proportions—one that requires of all Christians that they engage contemporary Jews, wherever they are, in dialogue and cooperation.² My fourth point, which is substantially autobiographical, will explain the considerable obstacles this requirement involves, yet also that it lies at the root of any Christian attempts at interreligious dialogue today.

Introduction: *Dominus Iesus*

Dominus Iesus leaves no doubt about its intentions. The two signatories, the well-known theologian Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI and Archbishop Tharcisius Bertone, now the Cardinal Archbishop of Genoa, a canonist, explain what they are going to offer and why. Interreligious dialogue is one of the things which the Church must do in representing Christ to the world. It is also a new issue in the Catholic Church, and many problems still remain to be identified. So in the encounter between the truths of the faith and non-Christian cultures there is a need for precision.

One wonders if this is true, and if it is true, how true it is; and even more importantly, how (i.e., in what manner) it is true. The late

Herbert McCabe, O.P., would probably say: We do need rules of the game, and players should know them, but they are chiefly for umpires; what players need, not so much just to play the game as to play it well, is “coach’s advice.”³ *Dominus Iesus* claims to state the rules of the game of Catholic participation in interreligious dialogue. Fair enough. The problem is that *Dominus Iesus* does not offer “coach’s advice” on *how* the game should actually be played *well*. Unhappily, it offers no strategies—just ground rules. Unsurprisingly, it adds that expository prose is the appropriate stylistic medium for this activity; rules of the game are invariably written in expository prose; they are non-negotiable. They are also unreadable. The fatal mistake of *Dominus Iesus* is that it does not help. It puts “Stop” signs at signed side streets while commending main street and leaving any side alleys unsigned.⁴ On the former you follow the rules; on the latter you travel at your own risk.

So, finally, *Dominus Iesus* is tedious. It seems to forget that playing the game is what counts; I know of no players who prefer reading rule books to playing the game. And the few umpires I have known are virtuoso former players, not theoreticians, let alone lawyers.

The document lists eight ground rules, and treats them under six headings. They are the following: (1) the revelation given in Iesus Christ is full and definitive; (2) the Holy Spirit and Iesus Christ are ever co-active in the work of salvation;⁵ (3) the salvific work of Christ Iesus is both of one piece and unique; (4) the Church of Christ is both unique and one;⁶ (5) the Church is inseparable from God’s Kingdom and the Reign of Christ; (6) as far as salvation is concerned, there are relations between the Church and the religions.

So far so good. Besides, I have found no positive inaccuracies or departures from Vatican II in these six sections of the declaration.⁷ The only thing that I miss is incentive toward interreligious dialogue.

It is common knowledge that *Dominus Iesus* ran into considerable reception problems. Pope John Paul II acknowledged as much by his many clarifications of *Dominus Iesus* in the weeks after its publication, delivered from his window; after all, the universal primacy of Iesus Christ has been the single most important theme of his pontificate. What happened? If I were a practicing Vaticanologist, I would say that the Pope was disappointed not with the theme but with the document that purported to broadcast it. Was he signaling that he had put up with the Declaration but decided he did not want to sign it?

Well, what the media I follow made of *Dominus Iesus* was theologically and spiritually meager: the Pope is a great and exciting man, but his message is, as usual, “conservative.” This is plainly untrue. For one thing, no pontiff has more frankly faced the troubled relations of the Catholic Church with other Christians. But as a former ecumenist and ecclesiologicalist, I profess I can see a few reasons for the umbrage taken at *Dominus Iesus* by irritated spokespersons for the Protestant Communion and even the Oriental Churches. Which are they?

First of all, speaking as a Catholic in the narrow sense of the word, the notion that *Dominus Iesus* is addressed to “Bishops [capital “B”], theologians (lower-case “t”), and “all the Catholic faithful” is both an illusion and a mistake.

As for “Bishops and theologians”—*transeat*. Let us address the illusion. Is *Dominus Iesus* written for “all the faithful”? Poppycock. Only theologically educated persons are capable of reading it. Still, mistakes in identifying audiences raise suspicions. Are Catholics-at-large being intimidated by distant, higher-up teaching authorities who imagine they can put the church as a body under orders?⁸ And, are the laity not entitled to truthfulness?

Now for *Dominus Iesus* as a mistake. Let me speak as a Catholic ecumenical theologian. Some developments in the Great Tradition and its teaching are historic and normative simply *because they happened*. The second Council of the Vatican happened in the presence of invited, recognized non-Catholic observers. It made a huge difference. From that experience on, it has become virtually impossible to limit Catholic discourse to Catholics alone. Non-Catholic Christians are now part of the conversation at least in the role of auditors and presumed commentators—a fact of enormous ecclesiological importance. *Ecumenism is no longer optional*. I suggest it would have been wise to write *Dominus Iesus* not only with Catholic Bishops and Catholic theologians in mind, but also the governing bodies of the non-Catholic churches and ecclesial communities. Like it or not, others are listening in on us these days, and Vatican II has taught us that we Catholics are to be happy that this is so. In all probability, a modification of the intended reading publics such as I propose would have led to a better document.

Thirdly, elsewhere I have elaborated, virtually without contradiction or correction from either fellow-theologians or from the teaching

office, the proposition that the Christian faith taken as a whole requires an understanding of its three fundamental, distinguishable but inseparable moments (or “components”): worship, life, and teaching, and that a dynamic hierarchy prevails among them—worship being the pinnacle,⁹ life the mediating element,¹⁰ and teaching the humblest.¹¹ I have also proposed, virtually without contradiction or correction, that “Roman Catholicism must be on guard against what may very well be its greatest weakness: a systemic affinity with sectarian, monolithic conceptions such as those favored by integralism,” though I did immediately add that “the mainstream catholic tradition agrees with Newman, and views the Christian faith as a fundamentally *open* (i.e., growing, developing) system.”¹²

Once again, with Herbert McCabe as my mentor, let me put this in a more positive manner. Catholics have a right to expect from the teaching office not just “rules of the game,” but also coach’s advice and encouragement as to how to play the Catholic game as a whole in actual life and how to play it well—in liturgy, in shared conduct, and in the understanding and teaching of the Catholic truth. If *Dominus Iesus* is indeed addressed to all the Catholic faithful (again, an illusion in my judgment), it is far too narrowly doctrinal to meet their expectation; the document itself admits this, but that does not take away the fact that legitimate expectations remain largely unmet by a highly visible Roman office. An honest, prudent acknowledgment of this limitation in the very text of *Dominus Iesus* might have helped alleviate the irritation of many Christians who want a life, and a life with God, both within the Catholic Church and outside it.

Finally, I want to take what I just said one step further. For good reasons, the document opposes cultural errors of the day—“relativism” being the principal culprit. But its authors never acknowledge that ever so many educated, practicing North American, European, and Asian Catholics find it very hard to understand, let alone explain, how the truths of the Catholic faith can be anything but relative. How so? The Roman document, like it or not, sounds absolutistic, and the repeated references to the requirement of “firmity of belief” scratch exactly where the itch is—not a helpful remedy. I am speaking not “pastorally” but as an ordinary Catholic theologian when I propose that the Catholic faithful are entitled to more than diagnosis and condemnation from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. There is such a

thing as theological balm, and Cardinal Ratzinger, who wrote a distinguished dissertation on Bonaventure, knows this. Thus, *Dominus Iesus* could have been far more prudent; as it is, it is at best correct and at worst intemperate.

Let me conclude this first section by making a suggestion. In any interfaith situation, including conversion-situations, framing the question determines the way in which you think about the “firm assent of faith” so forcefully commended by *Dominus Iesus* (7).¹³ How absolute and ultimate is it or can it be, what does it imply? For a moment, I wish to concentrate on the mystical aspects of both religious commitment and commitment to interfaith encounters—mystical aspects that have consequences in the park of logic. I propose that the assent of faith must be understood as a “virtually unconditioned commitment.” This is a truly ultimate matter, as follows.

“Virtually Unconditioned Commitment”

Just how committed can any convert to any religion (and thus, any Christian who has deliberately requested Baptism) claim to be? Or, for that matter, any believers who find themselves attempting to give themselves an account of their present religious commitment? Is it really possible to embrace any positive religion in an absolutely unconditioned manner? This question raises a terrifying dilemma, for the following reasons.

If we affirm that faith is “a wager,” an “individual choice,” or “a matter of personal taste for spirituality,” no convert to, say, Catholicism nor any Catholic believer can be expected to be unconditionally committed. But then things begin to look as if explicit religious relativism in the style of Neo-Hinduism,¹⁴ John Hick, or the Vedanta Society is our only reasonable alternative to stated Christian faith. The statement “All religions state and do virtually the same” is then apt to become the fundamental thesis of all religions, and interreligious dialogue will turn into an exercise in both harmlessness and ignorance.¹⁵ The problem is that this relativism—for that’s what it is—will eliminate, certainly in the long run, the ability of most of us to live our religious commitments as a matter of ultimate concern—of the kind that takes us outside ourselves, ecstatically, into God, into the Body of Christ, into the sacramental (i.e., mystical) Communion of the Church.

Now let us turn the coin to look at the other side. If a convert or believer must be unconditionally committed, how can we tell the difference between faith and fanaticism, not just within our church communities but also among outsiders? Human beings, both alone and with others, are essentially conditioned—i.e., “situated,” as the late Piet Schoonenberg used to explain so often; no storm-free zone is available to those who profess a religion that entertains truth claims. Like Christian marriage, the Christian’s religious life is a *tested* life, and at least part of the test of faith is a commitment to searching fidelity to the Church’s teaching.

What, then, is the nature of any religious conversions, commitments, and claims? Lonergan’s expression “virtually unconditioned assent” can be helpful here: it must be understood as the mystical protection against religious absolutism. Mystical in what sense? Should believers’ claims to be engaged in a formally (or absolutely) unconditioned assent, then they cannot help engaging in the kind of self-supporting, self-sufficient dogmatism in which faith loses every connection with a “transcendent object” and becomes an exercise in purely subjective *autarky*—graceless and thus, ungracious. But absolute assurance does not sum up a properly religious commitment; rather, it is a declaration of absolute religious independence (usually masking a deeper-seated dependence), be it individual or social. You know, the aggressively overstated catechism-and-bible quotations and the set jaw of the fanatic.

I once argued that faith in God cannot survive without a sense of privilege.¹⁶ Not until the Church’s teaching office makes a habit of conveying that a deep sense of privilege is a virtually indispensable prerequisite for the acceptance of definite doctrines, numerous modern Catholics will continue to feel they are mainly being told. Inner ease and harmony are the signs of God’s presence, not rigid orthodoxy and forced conviction.¹⁷

So, come on, Pope Benedict, come on, Archbishop Bertone, we know that “teaching with authority” (Mk 1, 27; Mt 7, 29) is a hard thing to do any day, but you can afford to drop some of your professorial and canonistic seriousness, at least once in a while. We’ll understand. In fact, we’ll understand better. For we will have no inter-religious dialogue until we become as well as meet dialogue partners who profess their faiths with a virtually unconditioned commitment to

them, i.e., with commitments based on a sense of privilege, not on alleged tradition or on whatever else is a pseudonym for fanaticism. They are those who are liable, as a matter of transcendental theological principle, to find the faith-commitments of actual neighbors admirable or curious enough to be intrigued and attracted by them—I mean, by the neighbors rather than by their faiths. Odds are this will happen not at the hierarchical top—but who knows?—but at the bottom, among God’s people, i.e., unpredictably.

I wish I could have stopped this paper here. I am an elderly man now, and finishing projects already started is plenty to keep me occupied; I am not looking for fresh trouble. Specifically, I do not expect to be an expert in Hebrew any time soon. Still, in my judgment, *Dominus Iesus* suffers from a most serious theological and ecclesiological error not committed by Vatican II, which has to be part of our ecumenical agenda. I am referring to the absence of any positive reference to the Jews.

“The Covenant Never Revoked”¹⁸

“God’s salvation begins with the Jews” (Jn 4, 22).¹⁹ After the Holocaust, none of us Christians can afford to continue to act and speak as if the history of salvation starts with Jesus Christ and as if the Jewish nation—which Paul expected to be saved in the end (Rom 9-11)—is extinct. The simple fact of contemporary Judaism’s existence demands of us, divided Christians, that we do justice to it. And the first step of this actual dialogue with actual Jews must start with the realization that we Christians worldwide are simply ignorant of contemporary Judaism; every time we rely on our (much-needed!) familiarity with the Jewish Bible to profess our openness to Judaism we forget that we have everything to learn about Jews today. Only to the extent that we become the disciples of modern Judaism can we Christians claim to enjoy the worldwide “game” of interreligious dialogue²⁰—Hippolytus of Rome hints it is really a playful dance, viz. “the dance of the Word Incarnate.”²¹ Why?

First of all, Jews are virtually everywhere in the world, in numbers. In the State of Israel, those who have returned “from the desert of the nations” (Ez 20, 35) are now living, as a very troubled, internally deeply fractured nation,²² not effectively living by faith, almost completely at the mercy of Jews elsewhere and everywhere. But, secondly as well as far

worse in my Christian view, only small is the number of Jews carrying out the mission entrusted to them by God in the Diaspora:

It is not enough that you should serve me to raise up Jacob's tribes, and to restore those of Israel left over; I have also appointed you as a light to the nations: you are to be the source of my salvation to the end of the earth. (Is 49, 6; Acts 13, 47)

But then again (as the Pentecostal movement has not ceased pointing out, mainly to Christians, but in places also to Jews), how large is the number of Christians shouldering their vocation in the Holy Spirit to bring the nations home to (in Blaise Pascal's words) the "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the men of learning"?²³

What is the history that gave rise to the picture I have just painted? First of all, there is no doubt that by the end of the second century Judaism and Christianity had become religions related to each other only by mutual disputes.²⁴ This dissociation of Jews and Christians was already underway in the City of Rome in the second half of the first century. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., only a small number of Christian Jews remained in Palestine, probably poor, and on speaking terms with the Aramaic-speaking Jews in the area. Eventually, they drifted out of communion with the Christian communities elsewhere around the Mediterranean.²⁵ On the other hand, Jews began to get reorganized, both in Palestine and in the diaspora, and by the turn of the first century Christians were no longer welcome in some synagogues, whether they spoke Greek or Hebrew or Aramaic. The process of independent development had started. For Paul, the mixed Jewish-Gentile community in Rome had still been a "dramatic" situation, forcing him to rethink what he had written in Galatians, especially since a good number of the Gentile Christians, attracted by the noble way of life of the Jews, had been proselytes before they became Christians.²⁶ But eventually, slowly but surely, the largely Gentile Church settled for the facts: Christians and Jews, while often not disrespectful, lost contact with each other. The segregated ghettos of the ancient city enhanced the estrangement, and, after Diocletian's persecution, positive imperial favor toward the Christians did the rest.

Obstacles Today

From this point on, please allow me to be substantially autobiographical—the privilege of the professional dilettante I have been all my life. The brief amateurish survey just completed leads to a most important conclusion for all of us Christians: much as we have had varying relationships with Jews for the past seventeen or eighteen centuries, we have remained ignorant of Judaism as an actual religion. In the interest of clarity, let me rephrase this: the only probable difference between me and some of you is that I have learned not to treat Judaism—and thus, contemporary Jews—as a religious phenomenon I somehow understand on the sole basis of my being a Catholic Christian, and despite the fact that the Jewish Scriptures are part of the air I breathe. This implies I admit that I am substantially ignorant of the world of contemporary Judaism—i.e., ignorant enough to want to learn at least the minimum. How has that happened to me? Incidentally, here the word “contemporary” in the title of this essay comes into its own.

Two early personal encounters helped me. The first was the elderly Jewish gentleman who was my violin teacher for about three years; he was arrested when I was twelve and murdered in Auschwitz. The second was a learned Italian Jew from Venice, my professor of Italian literature in graduate school, who was also one of the best lecturers I have ever had. He once said to me, as I walked into his lecture hall dressed in clerical suit, that I looked tired; while I was groping for an answer in decent Italian, he explained that the Dominicans had the same problem, as he had noticed during the three war years he had lived with them dressed up as a Dominican.²⁷ In this way, I was decisively taught by two emblematic Jews—one an observant Jew who would wear a torn jacket on Yom Kippur and had mezuzas on all the doorposts in his apartment, the other a mischievous agnostic humanist who was also an expert on the history of the pendulum clockwork and who enjoyed making fun of the Devil in front of Catholic students and (especially) Protestant ones. But what has helped me most was a triad of life-changing works by Jewish thinkers: Martin Buber’s *Ich und Du* (read when I was twenty-two or twenty-three), Abraham Heschel’s two-volume *The Prophets* (my first encounter with a non-Catholic reading of the Hebrew Scriptures), and most of all, Emmanuel Lévinas’s

roundly polemical radio address *Aimer la Torah plus que Dieu*.²⁸ Much later on, I was to remember

the consternation that invaded me as I read Lévinas's short, squarely polemical piece—originally a radio talk broadcast from Paris on Friday, April 29, 1955. Rereading only made things worse. There it was. Right under my nose I had the single most compelling intellectual and moral challenge to my Catholic and Christian faith I had ever experienced.²⁹

This is where I was really learning, from a contemporary Jew equally disappointed by the cheap Judaism among his modern fellow Jews as he was certain of the superiority of classical, tough, intellectual Jewish-Lithuanian³⁰ religiosity over Christianity as he had come to understand it. He saw a Christianity which (to use an insipid North American phrase in common use today to express approval) had grown “comfortable with God”—a “God” ratcheted down to the level at which he becomes “a God I can live with”; Lévinas was shocked at this “children’s God,” who saves softly, and lets human adults remain perpetual children, and allowing them to turn a majestic world into a nursery governed by mere indulgence. He had written:

The true humanity of Man and his virile tenderness come into the world along with the severe words of a demanding God; the spiritual becomes present, not by way of palpable presence, but by absence; God is concrete, not by means of incarnation, but by means of the Law; and his majesty is not the felt experience of his sacred mystery. His majesty does not provoke fear and trembling, but fills us with higher thoughts. To veil his countenance in order to demand—in a superhuman way—everything of Man, to have created Man capable of responding, of turning to his God as a creditor and not all the time as a debtor: *that* is truly divine majesty!³¹

An unpleasant anecdote. Over thirty years ago, a Jewish American woman born after 1945 insisted on telling me that I did not have the slightest idea what the Holocaust meant to Jews, so I did not have the right to disagree with her, even on points unrelated to the

Shoah. I told her that my excuse for treating her as an adult, without any guilt-feelings on my part, was something I had earned: I was there to find Mr. Sam Schuijjer's front door sealed the day after he was snatched from his bed; it gave me at least an opportunity to weep for him on my way home. Emmanuel Lévinas has made the same point, if in a very different context.³²

What I mean is this. One—I mean only *one*—of the most unfortunate things that has happened in the wake of the Holocaust is the rise of an aggressively complacent form of undifferentiated Judaism aimed at silencing non-Jews across the board. First and in my Catholic view worst of all, this form of global Judaism has few religious or theological claims to make, and so, few elements of an interreligious dialogue to offer. Secondly, miserably, it is apt to succeed only in reviving the broad anti-Semitism of the past; this is not a reason for condemnation, but for compassion. For thirdly, Judaism is miserably divided, and post-Holocaust Judaism has long done everything to conceal this fact. Too many Jewish congregations are little more than local benefit societies, and the present State of Israel is only the most visible instance of the calamitous and obstinate and often unprincipled divisions within Judaism. After a century of ecumenism, one thing that all Christians, must learn is this: how to forge, patiently, charitably, and with tough-minded intellectual integrity, as well as with a desire to learn, differentiated accounts of the truth of Judaism—many of them offered by contemporary Jews. This means: the only dialogue that may enlighten is a Christian dialogue with local Jewish communities less interested in Judaism as a cause than in God and in faith-*cum*-justice in God, within Judaism and outside it. It is also wise, and not any sign of anti-Semitism, to recognize that the continuing spate of Jewish expatiations upon the horrors of the Holocaust is an aggressive political cottage industry claiming the privilege of victimhood for all Jews by taking advantage of the wide-spread ignorance about Judaism among Christians and half-Christians. It aims to remind the world of selected past horrors inflicted on Jewry and stifle honest dialogue. North American culture has swallowed this fraudulent propaganda hook, line, and sinker.

Another point—a properly ecumenical one this time. Mainly (but far from exclusively) outside North America, it is often overlooked that Catholicism and Protestantism have had significantly different histories

with regard to Judaism. Needless to say, this influences our ecumenical relationships as well; an example is my discovery, years ago, that the card catalogue of the theological faculty at the University in Lund was chock full of New Testament items and surprisingly short on Old Testament. Does such crypto-Marcionism reflect Lutheranism's sharp distinction between Law and Gospel? If it does, it is hard to imagine it does not affect Lutheranism's relationships with Judaism. In fact, there is enough reason to think that much Jewish agnosticism of German stock is the bitter fruit of Moses Mendelssohn's decision to accede to the Enlightened version of Lutheranism current in eighteenth-century Prussia.³³ Complete ignorance forbids me to comment on the Jews in the Orthodox world picture.

Let us return to things Catholic. Numerous Catholics these days are aware only that Catholic relations with Jews have been conflicted at least since 1492 A.D., when Ferdinand and Isabella, the "Catholic Kings" of Spain, ordered the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. Nowadays this event is apt to be presented as the event that started modern Catholic anti-Semitism, which was to reach its hideous pinnacle in the Holocaust, and even more (at least since 1963, when Rolf Hochhuth's play *Der Stellvertreter* was first performed) in the very person of a calculating Pope, Pius XII. As a result, Western (and especially American) Catholics have become easy targets for modern Jewish anti-Catholicism, which is now all the harder to heal for being predicated on wide-spread liberal-agnostic affect on the part of "secularized" (i.e., non-religious) Jews. The latter have a way of regarding the Catholic Church largely as a political reality, as anybody who reads the *New York Times* knows. In parts of Western Europe negative moods among liberal Christians have led to a largely uninformed yet *obligato* philo-Semitic mood aimed at undoing, at least in appearance, the undifferentiated "anti-Semitism" of past centuries. Catholics shaped by these contemporary judgments and sentiments are largely unaware of the fact that from the mid-eleventh to the early sixteenth centuries the urban Jews were better integrated into the societal fabric of Western Europe than heretics and suspected heretics, including the worlds of learning, art, literature, and (most of all) banking and commerce.

Nevertheless, right in the teeth of our own ignorance, being a Catholic Christian after the Holocaust plainly means this: after close to eighteen centuries of separate development, we are to pick up where we

began to settle for a practically abstract affinity with the Jews. For it is part of Christian faith to believe that God's Covenants with Noah, with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with his friend Moses, and with the Second-Temple community can never be repealed—a theme declared by Pope John Paul II in his discourse in the Synagogue in Rome in 1986,³⁴ and capably elaborated by Jewish traditionalist David Novak in several notable books.³⁵ Today, Christians cannot be Christians without realizing that they have an essential feature of faith in God in common with those Jews who still insist on keeping Israel's divine election alive.³⁶ Emmanuel Lévinas rightly describes this Judaism as virtually unknown to Jews and Christians alike:

Over the past one hundred years, Hebrew learning has faded, and we have lost touch with our sources. What learning is still being produced is no longer based on an intellectual tradition: it remains self-taught and untutored, even when it is not improvised. And what worse corruption can befall an author than being read only by people who know less than he does! With none to check them, none to put them in their places, authors tend to mistake the lack of counter-pressure for freedom, and this freedom for the touch of genius. Small wonder that the reading public remains skeptical; for them, Judaism, with its few million unrepentant adherents left in the world, is no more than a matter of quibbling over religious observances—something uninteresting and unimportant.³⁷

Thus, we, Jews and Christians, find ourselves “dramatically together” once again, thank God, after centuries of impoverishing separation. What unites us most obviously is a common environment: the ignorance of nominal Jews and nominal Christians. This ignorance is all the more deceptive for being fatally predicated on the best of human intentions and a faith in the power of moral resolve that is being proved illusory every day. But what also unites us, less obviously, in the Spirit, is an identical eschatological mission: bringing the nations home to the Living God. *Both of us are awaiting the Messiah*, and in the mean time we are to speak of God. For that reason, the worldwide interreligious dialogue is not a hobby, let alone a luxury, but a way of life. For the foreseeable future, at least we Christians will

have our hands full learning the game, first with Jews, and then with all other non-Christians.

Dominus Iesus quite rightly emphasizes time and again that it is a mistake to separate Jesus Christ from God's Holy Spirit. Yet it is undeniable that Israel and Judaism have known of the Holy Spirit apart from God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and it is a theological mistake so to speak of the Spirit as to imply that the presence of the coeternal Spirit of God remains somehow less real without explicit reference to Jesus Christ Risen. To us Christians, of course, Christ's Resurrection has definitively enhanced the historic, attested presence of the Spirit in Israel and its Scriptures. In and among neither of us is God's Holy Spirit a stranger. We have no excuse for not talking with each other, or for that matter, to every believer in the world.

One conclusion of this essay should probably be: ecumenism and efforts in the direction of interreligious dialogue are now a lot more intertwined than they were as little as fifty years ago. But let me conclude on a far more Catholic note. As far as the rules of the game are concerned, they can wait, as long as the rulers can wait and let us be.

Notes

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1. "Declaration on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church *Dominus Iesus*" [*Declaratio de Iesu Christi atque Ecclesiae unicitate et universalitate salvifica*], August 6, 2000; *AAS* 92 (2000): 742-765.

2. Hans Urs von Balthasar would probably call it "dramatic."

3. Herbert McCabe, "Manuals and Rule Books," *The Tablet* 247 (1994): 1649-50.

4. The image was used at the press conference held on September 5, 2000 on the occasion of the official presentation of *Dominus Iesus*. Rev. (now Archbishop) Angelo Amato, S.D.B., stated that "the theological discussion remains open," and that "only the alleys that have proved blind have been barred ("Il dibattito teologico, cioè, resta aperto. Sono state chiuse solo quelle strade che portavano a vicoli ciechi.") He did so after stating that the theological

task ahead of us is the following: exploring what Vatican II was teaching when it wrote that “far from excluding various degrees of participative cooperation on the part of creatures, the Redeemer’s one and only mediation stimulates it (*Lumen Gentium* 62: “unica mediatio Redemptoris non excludit sed suscitatur variam apud creaturas participatam ex unico fonte cooperationem”). I suppose this is an encouragement of sorts, but it sounds bureaucratic.

5. Careful here! Surely the Scriptures of the Old Testament know of the Holy Spirit as active before Christ?

6. Here, it is fairly explained that “Christianity” is not the same as “Church,” as John Bossy has well set out in his *Christianity in the West, 1400-1700* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

7. Very concretely, the document repeats Vatican II’s teaching of that the Church of Christ “subsists in the Catholic church” and goes on to explain that precisely for this reason Catholics must expect to be judged more severely.

8. I am old enough to remember very specific instructions and prohibitions of the this has to “Stop!” variety appearing on the notice-boards of large religious communities; all the rector or his assistant needed to do is ask around quietly about who the real culprit(s) was/were. But that would have required a confrontation with actual people. As it was, all that happened was that everybody was put on notice, without effect other than a cynical shrug of the shoulders. Speaking more autobiographically, I vividly remember the veiled threats issued by the German commanders and publicized on billboards everywhere during the years 1940-45; looking like communications of general importance, they were *de facto* vulgar threats. We merely smiled and learned how to live.

9. Vatican II, Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7.

10. F.J. van Beeck, *God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology*, vol. 1: *Understanding the Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), esp. §23, 7; §43, 7; §49).

11. *God Encountered*, esp. §23, 7; §43, 7; §53.

12. *God Encountered*., §19, 1, e.

13. At a conference at the University of Chicago shortly after the promulgation of *Dominus Iesus*, my friend Paul J. Griffiths, who now holds the chair of Roman Catholic studies at the University of Illinois in Chicago, was of three presenters. He pointed out to us that the Creed in *Dominus Iesus* does not include the *filioque*. I am sure this is intentional, and it is a sound, generous gesture in the direction of the Orthodox. But it takes a trained theologian to notice it! He also took issue with the first chapter of *Dominus Iesus* by observing that if the completeness of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ means that (as he put it) this completeness is not only ontological but also epistemological, (i.e., that the Catholic Church has nothing left to learn, that would be

unacceptable. Both in the light of the history of doctrine and in light of the Church's need to keep on getting to know and appreciate and love ever more fully both Christ and God, and the world and the cosmos, in the Holy Spirit. In good American idiom, the Church's present knowledge, appreciation, and love of Jesus Christ is incomplete, and hence, relative to God's promised fulfillment. This is something the Catholic laity will readily understand, and it has the advantage of appealing to the eschatological sensibility of the Jews, too—no small matter for Catholic theology, especially in North America.

14. But remember, Neo-Hinduism arose as an attack on colonialist non-universalist Christianity by fairly agnostic culturally Hindu intellectuals writing in English.

15. The former comes from the fact that existing differences are ignored, the latter from the fact that one cannot make judgments on things one has not properly studied.

16. F.J. van Beeck, "One God: And Other Revelations," *Commonweal* 123, no. 6 (March 22, 1996): 15-19.

17. Gerard Manley Hopkins puts this in his own inimitable way (see *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Catherine Phillips [New York: Oxford University Press, 1986], "My own heart," 170):

Soul, self; come; come, poor Jackself, I do advise
 You, jaded, lét be; call off thoughts awhile
 Elsewhere; leave comfort root-room; let joy size
 God knows when to God knows what; whose smile
 'S not wrung, see you; unforeseen times rather—as skies
 Betweenpie mountains—lights a lovely mile.

18. See Norbert Lohfink, *Der niemals gekündigte Bund: Exegetische Gedanken zum christlich-jüdischen Gespräch* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1989); translated into English as *The Covenant Never Revoked: Biblical Reflections on Christian-jewish Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991). Lohfink takes his title from a discourse delivered by Pope John Paul II to a representative group of Jews in Mainz, as far back as 1980. Here is what the Pope said: "Die erste Dimension dieses Dialogs, nämlich die Begegnung zwischen dem Gottesvolk des von Gott nie gekündigten (vgl. Röm 11, 29) Alten Bundes und dem des Neuen Bundes, ist zugleich ein Dialog innerhalb unserer Kirche, gleichsam zwischen dem ersten und zweiten Teil ihrer Bibel" ("The first dimension of this dialogue, viz., the encounter between the People of God of the Old Covenant—the one never revoked by God—is at the same time a dialogue within our Church, between the first and second parts of its Bible, as it were."). See also Jared Wicks, "Pieter Smulders and *Dei Verbum* 3: Developing the Understanding of Revelation to Israel 1962-1963" *Gregorianum* 83 (2002), 225-267.

19. Gk. ὅτι ἡ σωτηρία ἐκ τῶν Ἰουδαίων. Note the definite article ἡ; accordingly, “salvation” does not denote a general well-being enjoyed by humanity, but the “actual salvation as God’s gracious gift; the traditional *acutus* ἐστὶν on confirms this.

20. I would be less than candid if I did not confess that my position is substantially (though negatively) predicated on Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s *Die Vielfalt der Religionen und der eine Bund* (Hagen: Urfeld, 1998)—a gift from my friend Rudolf Pesch. Unsurprisingly, Ratzinger’s is a learned book. My problem is that I cannot imagine that any of my Jewish friends would want to read it. It is a declaration of Catholic faith and openness throughout, but it does not touch on any existing theological or cultural Jewish issues that I am aware of. Nowhere in the book did I find evidence that the author was in actual dialogue with any actual Jews’ beliefs and practices. I admit this is a harsh judgment on a fine Catholic theologian of obviously good intentions, but a comparison of Ratzinger’s book with the consistently dialogical and illuminating writings on Hinduism by my unmistakably Catholic confrère Francis X. Clooney will illustrate what I mean. For my basic position on interreligious dialogue, see “Christian Faith and Theology in Encounter with Non-Christians: Profession? Protestation? Self-maintenance? Abandon?” *Theological Studies* 55 (1994): 46-65.

21. Hugo Rahner wrote: “Hippolytus . . . interpreted this [dance theme] with a view to the mysteries of the work of salvation, in words that mystical theology would be unable to forget, right down into the Middle Ages: What great, great mysteries! “See, my beloved (‘sister’s-boy’) has come skipping, he has arrived [see Song 2, 8].” What does ‘skipping’ imply? The swiftness of the Word! He skipped from heaven into a Virgin’s womb, [skipped] from a [sacred] womb onto the wood, [skipped] from the wood into Hades, [skipped] from Hades up to earth again in this [our] human flesh [Such good news: resurrection!], [then skipped] from the earth to heaven. [There he is seated at the Father’s right hand. And once again] from heaven [he will skip] to earth, [as he did] once to save, but this time to judge [offer the reward of recompense].” (*Der spielende Mensch*, [Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag 1952]; translated into English as *Man at Play, or, Did You Ever Practise Eutrapelia?* [London: Burns and Oates, 1965], 67-68.)

22. Christians wishing to face reality must learn to accept this most perplexing fact.

23. From Pascal’s *Mémorial*; text in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Jacques Chevalier, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 34 (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 618. Pascal’s words, of course, raise the whole issue of the continuity between the God of Israel and the “God” of modernity. On this, see my tentative

remarks in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. S. Davis, D. Kendall, and G. O'Collins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 320-24.

24. See Thomas H. Tobin, *Paul's Rhetoric in its Contexts: The Argument of Romans* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004); and Alan F. Segal, *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), esp. 163-81.

25. Writing around 150 A.D., Justin Martyr, born in Palestine, on the West Bank of the Jordan, in what is now Nablus, is still prepared to celebrate Eucharist with the Ebionite ("poor men's") Jewish-Christian communities around Jerusalem, in spite of their adoptionism; Jesus, they say, was born of Joseph and Mary. Less than half a century later, in Lyons, Irenaeus writes he is no longer prepared to do so; the Ebionites are no longer catholic; Jesus, they say, was not possessed by the heavenly Christ till his baptism. Besides, they reject Paul and limit the gospels to Matthew and parts of Luke.

26. In *Paul's Rhetoric in its Contexts*, Thomas H. Tobin, gives a full account of this.

27. See "Two Kind Jewish Men: A Sermon in Memory of the *Shoah*," *Cross Currents* 42 (1992): 174-84.

28. French original: "Aimer la Thora plus que Dieu," in Emanuel Lévinas, *Difficile liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme* (3rd ed., Paris: Albin Michel, 1976), 189-93; English translation and commentary in F.J. van Beeck, *Loving the Torah More than God? Toward a Catholic Appreciation of Judaism* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1989), 31-53.

29. Zvi Kolitz, *Yossel Rakover Speaks to God: Holocaust Challenges to Christian Faith* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1995), 43.

30. Zvi Kolitz was a born Lithuanian; Emmanuel Lévinas was of Lithuanian stock. Lévinas's recognition of Kolitz's story as a piece of authentically Jewish fiction must have been rooted in a deep-seated experience of kinship.

31. "La vraie humanité de l'homme et sa douceur virile entrent dans le monde avec les paroles sévères d'un Dieu exigeant; le spirituel ne se donne pas comme une substance sensible, mais par l'absence; Dieu est concret non pas par l'incarnation, mais par la Loi; et Sa grandeur n'est pas le souffle de son mystère sacré. Sa grandeur ne provoque pas crainte et tremblement, mais nous remplit de plus hautes pensées. Se voiler la face pour exiger de l'homme—surhumainement—tout, avoir créé un homme capable de répondre, capable d'aborder son Dieu en créancier et non point toujours en débiteur—quelle grandeur vraiment divine!" Emmanuel Lévinas, *Difficile liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1976), 192-93. Incidentally (but not entirely

so), we post-World War II Christians are apt to hear in Lévinas's words echoes of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's passionate rejection of "cheap grace"; see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, revised ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963), esp. 61-86.

32. See *Difficile liberté*, 190: "Nous n'allons pas raconter tout cela, bien que le monde n'ait rien appris et ait tout oublié. Nous nous refusons à offrir en spectacle la Passion des Passions et à tirer une quelconque gloriole d'auteur ou de metteur en scène de ces cris inhumains. Ils retentissent et se répercutent, inextinguibles, à travers les éternités. Écoutons seulement la pensée qui s'articule en eux." ("We are not going to recount that whole story, even though the world has learned nothing and forgotten everything. We pass when invited to stage the Passion of Passions as if it were a show; we refuse to derive even the smallest bit of author's or play-director's glory from those inhuman cries. They resound and reverberate, never to be silenced, through the everlasting ages. Let us listen only for the thought that articulates itself in them.")

33. See Moses Mendelssohn, "Israel's God, the Psalms, and the City of Jerusalem: Life Experience and the Sacrifice of Praise and Prayer," *Horizons* 19 (1992): 219-39.

34. He spoke as follows: "gli ebrei rimangono carissimi a Dio, che li ha chiamati con una vocazione irrevocabile" ('the Jews remain most dear to God; he gave them a vocation not to be revoked').

35. See esp. *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: An Historical and Constructive Study of the Noahide Laws* (New York: Edward Mellen Press, 1983), and *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

36. "Il primo è che la Chiesa di Cristo scopre il suo legame con l'Ebraismo scrutando il suo proprio mistero. La religione ebraica non ci è estrinseca, ma in un certo modo, è intrinseca alla nostra religione. Abbiamo quindi verso di essa dei rapporti che non abbiamo con nessun'altra religione. Siete i nostri fratelli prediletti e, in un certo modo, si potrebbe dire i nostri fratelli maggiori" ("Firstly. Christ's Church discovers its bond with Judaism by scrutinizing its own mystery. The Jewish religion is not foreign to us, but in some way intrinsic to our own religion. Thus, in regard to it, we have relationships that we do not have in regard to any other religion. You are our favorite brethren, and one could say you are in a way our elder brethren,")

37. "Le tarissement des études hébraïques, depuis cent ans, nous a éloignés des sources. Le savoir qui se produit encore, ne repose pas sur une tradition intellectuelle. Il demeure autodidacte, même quand il n'est pas improvisé. Et n'être lu que par de moins savants que soi, quelle corruption

pour un écrivain! Sans censeurs, ni sanctions, les auteurs confondent cette non-résistance avec la liberté et cette liberté avec le trait de génie. Faut-il s'étonner que des lecteurs n'y croient pas et voient dans le judaïsme, auquel dans le monde s'attachent encore quelques millions d'impénitents, un amas d'arguties charnelles sans intérêt ni importance?" (Lévinas, *Difficile liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme*, 189.)

CLOSE READING: EYE AND EAR

Hopkins: Cor ad Cor

for Richard E. Hughes
“counter, original, spare, strange”

Enough said, then, about Hopkins’s partiality to Scotus’s *haecceitas*, about inscape and instress and sake. Technical metaphysics and personal idiom do not a poet make. Terminology winds up after the fact what should have proved true in the doing; it does lend the color of intellectual legitimacy to what has been done, but if the deed has not made it on its own, no amount of terminological legitimation will avail. Only if it appears that Hopkins felt and thought and responded and expressed himself in terms of the particular will his professed partiality to Scotus’s concept be more than an interesting detail for academics to discuss.

The particular is never popular. It is more comfortable—and certainly more respectable—to be hand in glove with the prevailing ideology and the going concern, just as it would have been more comfortable for Hopkins to have named the Church, with the first Vatican Council, the “sign raised among the nations” than to have likened her to a cow ambling around the pasture-ground. Had Hopkins been less partial to the particular, Bridges would not have felt he had to apologize for his obscure friend’s “efforts to force emotion into theological or sectarian channels” and for “the naked encounter of sensualism and asceticism” of *The Golden Echo*. Just fancy: faith (not religious sentiment) in poetry!—how narrow-minded can you be? No, better to rhapsodize, explicitly or implicitly, on the Spirit of the Age, and thus experience yourself, poet that you are, as the privileged, oh-so-sensitive instrument that is in tune with what’s in the air. In that way you have all the benefits of being both able to boast your own “original” talent and capable of feeling concerned with the totality of life. It will get you to the high altar of the culture, whence you can pontificate; it

will make you Poet Laureate. Never will you have to pay attention to precious detail and feel its attractiveness and intractability in that “naked encounter”; never will you be forced to be so irrational as to profess partiality to something whose relevance cannot be demonstrated by cogent proof or general consensus; no, just paint the large canvas with Tennyson and Swinburne, mind the general weal with moral tone and coaxing phrase, and let the van Goghs and the Gauguins pay attention to old shoes, rush-seated chairs, and oddities in the Pacific. Be lofty, not precise. Edify or shock, but don’t encounter. Better for your reputation, to say nothing of your nerves. So be sweet, be reasonable, if necessary emphatically so; mind the general. Or be “against,” be unreasonable; mind the general by defying the established order, by becoming the prophet of the *fin de siècle*. Eschew the particular (except if you can fit it into a general frame of things), be impartial, never be “sectarian.” Don’t cultivate “things counter, original, spare, strange; whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)” Otherwise you may find yourself eventually put away in Dublin, obscurely correcting undergraduate compositions, and having to admit demurely: “Now it is the virtue of design, pattern, or inscape to be distinctive, and it is the vice of distinctiveness to become queer. This vice I cannot have escaped.”

Well, better be an honest neurotic buried in Dublin with no prospect of having your poetry published than aim for the cheap recognition that comes from putting the *cognoscenti* to sleep—Hopkins saw that twenty-three years before he died at age forty-five, and wrote it down with the deadly precision of a Martial:

Our swans are now of such remorseless quill,
Themselves live singing and their hearers kill.¹

For what if the particular—including the “sectarian”—is precisely the source of your awareness? If you find yourself moved, not by the general, but by the irrationally individual? If you find the broad sweep cheap? If totality and infinity happen to be, not your first order of business, but your last perspective? If you are the kind of person Martin Buber was to paint: suspicious of the autonomous construction of reality in the name of philosophy, imagination, creed, or psychology, and firmly basing yourself on encounter—doing justice

to the particular? If you find that reliable and durable speaking-about (“I-It”) is only won the hard way, by speaking-to and being spoken to (“I-Thou”)?

That may leave you forever “a lonely began,” praying for patience, casting for comfort; “my taste was me.” No soothing generalities for an anodyne. The heart, “hard at bay,” vulnerable, “not outward-steeled,” open to the touch of whatever strikes it, and compelled to speak, “never ask if meaning it, wanting it, warned of it.”

Heart of a Poem

Ah, touched in your bower of bone
 Are you! turned for an exquisite smart,
 Have you! make words break from me here all alone,
 Do you!—mother of being in me, heart.
 O unteachably after evil, but uttering truth,
 Why, tears! is it? tears; such a melting, a madrigal start!
 Never-eldering revel and river of youth,
 What can it be, this glee? the good you have there of your own?

This is stanza 18—the middle stanza of a series of thirty-five that make up Hopkins’s *The Wreck of the Deutschland*.

Six stanzas lead up to it (12-17), telling the story, from the sad but peaceable sailing on Saturday to the outcry of the nun in the midst of disaster. It is followed by (again) six stanzas “reading” the story to the core (19-24); its name becomes: Christ Crucified. The whole complex is held together, by the figure of style known as *inclusio*, by stanzas 11 and 25. The former is an evocation of a *dance macabre* on a theme of Isaiah, with “Life is Death” for a message (Is 40, 6). The latter conjures up the Spirit of God hovering over the primal *tohuwabohu* and Jesus in the midst of the storm surrounded by frantic disciples—“the God who makes the dead live and summons things that are not as if they were”—with “Death is Life” for a message (Rom 4, 17).

Preceding stanza 11 and following stanza 25 are again two sets of six stanzas each (5-10 and 26-31), affording another striking parallelism. In stanzas 5 and 26, Nature is recognized as a way to God, but with a *proviso*; “his mystery must be instressed, stressed” and “what by your measure is the heaven of desire”?

Stanzas 6 and 27 lead one step closer to the meeting-place with God, who encounters humanity not out of the blue, but in time. Whatever guilt-hushing, heart-flushing terror the powers of the universe may administer, the real locus of the heart's surrender is not universal but particular and dateable: "it rides time," "the jading and jar of the cart, time's tasking."

But the culmination-point is reached in stanzas 7-8 and 28-29: the suffering Christ draws all human hearts for himself in an ultimate decision: *Ipsa*, he is the name and the shape of present and past, heaven and earth. There is no obvious parallelism between stanzas 9-10 and 30-31, although the theme of God's ways with Man, leading to God's merciful mastery (9-10) rhymes with the "heart-throe, birth of a brain, Word, that heard and kept thee and uttered thee outright," and with the call issued to the "poor sheep" in the disaster through the nun's outcry (30-31). The encompassing theme of the two sets of stanzas (5-10 and 26-31) may thus be roughly characterized as "the particular encounter of God with Man."

Finally, there are the introduction and the coda of this poem, which so strikingly resembles the build-up of, say, César Franck's D-minor *Symphony*, or Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings*, whose codas also return to the opening motifs, only enriched and confirmed by the experience of what has happened in the course of the work. Both sets of four stanzas (1-4 and 32-35) deal with God's mastery experienced as a call to total surrender in and through and beyond the threat of disintegration and even death.

Put schematically, then, the course of *The Wreck of the Deutschland* runs as follows:

$$1-4 - 5-10 - 11 - 12-17 - 18 - 19-24 - 25 - 26-31 - 32-35$$

$$4 + 6 + 1 + 6 + 1 + 6 + 1 + 6 + 4$$

But the point is this: the entire *ricercare* is constructed around stanza 18: the experience of the heart that will not be domesticated. The heart, not to be reduced to system or ideology or principle or law. The heart, vulnerable and undefended. The heart that does not even try to beat the system. *Individuum est ineffabile*. The heart which yearns (irrationally, says the head; *Id*, says Freud) for the really-real in the oh-so-particular Other (arbitrary, says the head that has its norms and

systems pat). Yes, the tools of generalization are safe only in the hands of those who relish the particular. The hand's grasp kills by sheer comprehension unless it is sensitive enough to grope and touch, and prepared, in the last resort, to be pierced. Comprehensive concepts become tyrant killers unless they remember that originally they were conceptions born out of intercourse with the particular. The generally valid and the even number tend to repress the realization that they go back to partiality and the odd number, don't they?

But only the undefended heart knows this:

Áh, what the heart is! which, like carriers let fly —
 Doff darkness, homing nature knows the rest —
 To its own fine function, wild and self-instressed,
 Falls as light as lifelong schooled to what and why.
 (“The Handsome Heart”)

The appeal of the particular is unjustifiable before any tribunal. No system of thought, taste, orthodoxy, culture, or law will be able to account for that most fugitive, most human fact of all; the encounter with the Other out of which I gain identity and truth, not as property, but as gift. *Cor ad cor loquitur*. Indefensible? Yes, of course, as indefensible as Prince Myshkin in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. Yet this kind of defenselessness tends to show up the weakness of the systems and the powers that be. In comparison with Hopkins, who remembers Bridges?

One way of measuring Hopkins's reliance on the heart's response to the particular is to point to the enormous intellectual demands he makes on the language, and, through the language, on his readership. It is as if he trusts that people, once they have allowed themselves to be touched down to the bottom of their individuality, will be capable of great intellectual presence of mind in the face of the most diverse and varied allusions, associations, visions and ideas crammed into the language—in other words, that they will be capable of a really comprehensive world-view with plenty of room for everything and everybody. Since the human-potential movement and the writings of people like Carl Gustav Jung, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and Dr. Laing this trust on Hopkins's part may have become more credible to us. Not adaptability (nor its rebellious counterpart) but personal depth now appears to us to be the safeguard and the source of intellectual integrity.

Really “doing your own thing,” really “letting it be” is a far more reliable road to a coherent world-picture, including a commanding creed, than buying into the system. Here again Hopkins warns: “take breath and read it with the ears, as I always wish to be read, and my verse becomes all right.” Not the dissociative, cognitive, distasteful, objectifying approach to Hopkins’s poetry—which is: reading it with the eyes—but the associative, affective, interpersonal, “presential” approach—which is: trusting your ears (*Cor ad cor loquitur!*)—will give a person access to the ability to hold Hopkins’s thought together. Again, the general is anchored in the actuality of the particular.

In *The Wreck of the Deutschland* all that is comprehensive and all-encompassing, all that is total and infinite at the level of content, too, is unflinchingly anchored in the particular, without the slightest attempt on Hopkins’s part to justify, apologize, explain, or make palatable. Modern-day jargon would call this: critique of ideology. Except that in Hopkins we find, no elaborate critique of the repressive conventions, tastes, and agendas set by the religious and secular sensibilities he finds himself a part of, but simply the practical and unapologetic (if, understandably, somewhat self-conscious) start of a process that has time and again put dominant moods and metaphors and systems in their places: he delivers himself up to his perceptions of, and responses to, the particular, and allows himself to be shaped by them. The Impressionists had done something analogous a few years earlier, when their way of showing what things really looked like had put the so-called realisms of the previous century to shame. And in a world dominated by idealism Brentano and Husserl were trying to go “back to the things”—a rather unpopular move for the time being.

Hopkins is as much part of the late nineteenth-century Roman Catholic Church in England—though probably with some sound Tractarian reluctance—as he is part of the late Victorian literary world. Yet at the core he fits neither, because he undercuts, by personal depth of perception and responsiveness, the ideologies and systems and tastes any culture tends to inculcate.

At three points in *The Wreck of the Deutschland* this anchorage of the far-flung picture of God’s all-encompassing mastery and mercy is most obvious.

First, there is the unashamedly autobiographical start of the poem, crammed with the paradoxes that Rudolf Otto was to sum up under

the general rubrics of *tremendum* and *fascinans*, paradoxes that are resolved by an account of the particular heart's decision to go to the person of Christ:

I whirled out wings that spell
 And fled with a fling of the heart to the heart of the Host.
 My heart, but you were dove-winged, I can tell.
 Carrier-witted, I am bold to boast,
 To flash from the flame to the flame then, tower from the grace
 to the grace. (st. 3)

Second, there is the theological fulcrum of the poem in stanzas 6-8. The sense of God's presence, though available in "the world's splendor and wonder," stems, not from the experienced harmony of the world, but from surrender to a particular moment in time. *Le dieu des philosophes* is—for all his speculative attractiveness—not the living God, but a rationalization, which does not in the least mean that those who find the living God are cocksure in their surrender to the scandal of particularity:

But it rides time like riding a river
 (And here the faithful waver, the faithless fable and miss).
 (st. 6)

And once again we are faced with the picture of the particular heart's surrender to "the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4, 6):

What none would have known of it, only the heart, being hard at bay,

Is out with it! Oh,
 We lash with the best or worst
 Word last! (st. 7-8)

Eventually the large canvas does appear:

Make mercy in all of us, out of us all
 Mastery, but be adored, but be adored King. (st. 10)

But that large canvas comes forth out of the recognition of this very particular event: Jesus of Nazareth.

Third, there is the sweep of stanzas 12-17. The narrative of the ship's departure and sailing and wreck, and of the misadventures and despair of its crew and passengers is narrowed down, finally, to the one figure that becomes the key to the far-flung interpretation of the entire event's significance:

Till a lioness arose breasting the babble,
A prophetess towered in the tumult, a virginal tongue told.
(st. 17)

It is precisely at this point that the heart's response—the crucial stanza 18—is placed. Significantly, the imagery, both of the nun's outcry and of the heart's response, is consistently oral/acoustical: faith comes from hearing, and hearing is fiducial and interpersonal and "presential," whereas sight is objectifying and distantial.

Once the whole scene has been read and interpreted in terms of an ineffable (the *aposiopeses* of stanza 28) encounter with Christ, the far-reaching significance of the event can be stated in stanzas 32-35. The "comfortless unconfessed of them" function as the transition to the far-flung question of the end of stanza 31: "is the shipwreck then a harvest, does tempest carry the grain for thee?"

And Hopkins, going back to his own experience of the outset of the poem, sums up:

I admire thee, master of the tides,
Of the Yore-flood, of the year's fall;
The recurb and the recovery of the gulf's sides,
The girth of it and the wharf of it and the wall;
Stanching, quenching ocean of a motionable mind;
Ground of being, and granite of it: pást áll
Grásp Gód, thróned behind
Death with a sovereignty that heeds but hides, bodes but abides;

With a mercy that outrides
The all of water, an ark
For the listener; for the lingerer with a love glides

Lower than death and the dark;
 A vein for the visiting of the past-prayer, pent in prison,
 The last-breath penitent spirits—the uttermost mark
 Our passion-plungèd giant risen,
 The Christ of the Father compassionate, fetched in his storm
 of his strides. (st. 32-33)

The Particular Christ

There is a strict analogy between Hopkins's responsiveness to the particular and the critique of late-Victorian poetical sensibility implied in this on the one hand, and, on the other hand, his personal surrender to the person of Christ, which is the essence of Christianity—the search of which was such a neuralgic concern of the era he lived in, witness the series of books on *Das Wesen des Christentums* published in the nineteenth century. For Hopkins, the encounter with the particular is both the source and the abiding norm of any generalization, including the Church's Creed and the Spirit of the Age.

In August 1935, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (whose theology was to be discovered posthumously as much as Hopkins's poetry) was addressing a fraternity of assistant pastors of the Confessional Church of the Province of Saxony about the question: How can biblical texts be "re-presented," how can they come to life in the present, how can they be made relevant and of actual importance now? His answer: not by tailoring them to the dominant mood. Never must the scandal of particularity be subdued in favor of a facile consonance with the prevailing culture. Bonhoeffer said:

The question became acute in this form for the first time in the era of the emancipation of autonomous Reason, i.e., in Rationalism, and it has determined theology till now, up to and including German-Christian theology. Rationalism was nothing but the long-dormant human demand for an autonomous construction of life on the basis of the forces in the world as given, and to that extent the matter in hand is indeed a question that is contained in man's very demand for autonomy; that implies: autonomous man, if he wants to acknowledge to be a Christian, too, demands that the

Christian message should justify itself before the tribunal of his autonomy. Should the justification come off, then he will call himself a *Christian*; if it fails to come off, then he will call himself a *pagan*. It makes no difference that the tribunal before which the Christian message has to justify itself is called Reason in the eighteenth century or Culture in the nineteenth century or *Volkstum* in the twentieth century (or the year 1933, with all its implications). The question is exactly the same: Is Christianity justifiable before us the way we are—thank God? All those who want to lay claim to being called Christians for whatever reasons—whether rational, cultural, or political—have exactly the same urgent need, viz., to justify Christianity before the tribunal of the present. The assumption is exactly the same, viz., that the Archimedean point, the solid, unquestionable point of departure has already been established (whether in Reason, in Culture, or in *Volkstum*), and that the movable, questionable, fluid element is precisely the Christian message. The method is exactly the same, viz., to engage in re-presentation in such a way as to run the Christian message through the sieve of one's own knowledge—what does not go through is despised and thrown out; so to trim down and lop off the message as to make it fit the fixed framework; until the eagle can no longer raise itself and soar up into his true element, but becomes, his pinions clipped, one particular show-piece among the other tame, domesticated animals. Just as the farmer who needs a horse for his land leaves the fiery stallion in the market-place and buys himself a tame, spunkless workhorse, so domestication has produced a serviceable Christianity; and then it stands to reason that people will lose interest in this entire construction pretty soon and turn away from it. This type of re-presentation leads straight into paganism.²

There is, then, a deep affinity between Hopkins's fundamental option as a poet and his fundamental stance as a Christian: not serviceability to the dominant concerns, but truthfulness to the encounter is the norm, both for the poet and for the believer in him. It is ironical that this man, so very particular both as a poet and as a Christian, was summoned before the tribunal of ecclesiastical and cultural taste so

often, and treated so condescendingly by both: he was not an ideologue speaking from a covert or overt creed (his critics were!), but first and foremost one touched by the particular, to which he responded from the oh-so particular (and indeed somewhat fastidious) heart, not from the generalizing head. Did Hopkins realize that he could do justice to the particular, because in this man Jesus the particular had been taken up, converted, and turned into the bearer of an absolute perspective, one in whose light (fugitive though it may be, “as skies betweenpie mountains”) dominant moods appear far less powerful, and indeed downright transitory?

O then, weary then why should we tread? O why are we so
 haggard at the heart, so care-coiled, care-killed, so fagged,
 so fashed, so cogged, so cumbered,
 When the thing we freely fórfeit is kept with fonder a care,
 Fonder a care kept than we could have kept it, kept
 Far with fonder a care (and we, we should have lost it) finer,
 fonder
 A care kept.

(“The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo”)

If the particular is so absolutely kept, it is indeed worth doing justice to, never mind the Spirit of the Age. And well, should the alleging of *haecceitas* lend this attention to detail some intellectual respectability into the bargain, then more power to Scotus.

Notes

Published in *The Month* (Second New Series) 8 (1975): 340-45. This is the issue commemorating the hundredth anniversary of Hopkins’s return to poetry in 1875 and an act of posthumous reparation for the rejection of *The Wreck of the Deutschland* by the then editor of *The Month*. Lightly revised for the present collection.

1. *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Catherine Phillips. The Oxford Authors (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 33. All quotations from Hopkins’s poetry in this essay follow this edition, and are referred to in my text by stanza number or title.

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Vergegenwärtigung neutestamentlicher Texte," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1966), III, 303-24; cited at 303-05. *Volkstum* was Nazi shorthand for *gesundes Volksempfinden* ("the people's healthy sensibility") to promote political conformism on the basis of racial identity. The meaning of the word is close to what certain U.S. politicians have at certain times called "the silent majority," with the same undemocratic agenda in mind.

A Note on Ther in Curses and Blessings in Chaucer

for Pat, with respect and love

The purpose of this note is to make a statement on the use and the meaning of the word *ther* (“there”) in thirteen passages in the Chaucerian corpus. In these passages, it will be argued, *ther* functions, syntactically speaking, as the introductory adverb of a main clause involving a curse or blessing. Specifically, what will be denied is that it functions as a relative adverb, which would reduce the clause to a subclause. It will also be argued, semantically speaking, that this use of *ther*, while almost purely expletive, introduces connotations of what will be called “indeterminacy with theological or religious connotations.” The treatment offered here has no textual claims to make; hence, the use of Robinson’s text merely reflects the author’s personal preference. At the same time, in the interest of making the point clearly, Robinson’s punctuation will be modified in places; the appropriateness of the changes will be argued in the course of this note.

This note uses seven editions. The earliest is Robert Kilburn Root’s edition of *Troilus and Criseyde* of 1926 and Walter W. Skeat’s 1933 one-volume Oxford University Press edition of the entire corpus; the most recent is Fisher’s 1977 edition of the same corpus. No statement is implied in this selection other than the claim that this represents a fair sampling of editorial comment on the problem in hand.¹ The bracketed transpositions into modern English are Nevill Coghill’s.² The following passages to be discussed are numbered for easy reference. Uses of *ther* are highlighted by italics.

(1) *Troilus and Criseyde*, II, 586-588:

Ther were nevere two so wel ymet,
Whan ye ben his al hool, as he is youre.
Ther myghty God yet graunte us see that houre!

[Never were two so fortunately met
As you, when you are fully his, will be;
Almighty God! May I be there to see!]

(2) *Troilus and Criseyde*, III, 946-947:
That is wel seyde,” quod he, “my nece deere.
Ther Good Thrift on that wise gentil herte!

[Pandar replied: “That is well said, my dear,
A blessing on your wise and gentle heart!]

(3) *Troilus and Criseyde*, III, 964-966:
And with that word he for a quysshenn ran,
And seyde, “Kneleth now, while that you leste!
There God youre hertes brynge soon at reste!”

[He ran and fetched a cushion from the chest
“Now kneel away as long as you may please,
And may the Lord soon set your hearts at ease.”]

(4) *Troilus and Criseyde*, III, 1013-15:
Alas, that he, al hool, or of hym slyvere,
Shuld han his refut in so digne a place!
Ther Jove hym soone out of your herte arace!

[Alas that it — or even a small slice
Of it — should refuge in so fair a place!
May Jove uproot it, may it leave no trace!]

(5) *Troilus and Criseyde*, III, 1436-40:
Thow doost, allas, to shortly thyn office,
Thow racle nyght! *Ther* God, maker of kynde,
The, for thyn haste and thyn unkynde vice,
So faste ay to oure hemysperie bynde,
That nevere more under the ground thow wynde!”

[Alas, too briefly is thy business done,
Swift night! May God, the Lord of Nature, hear,

And for the malice of they downward run,
Curse thee, and bind thee to our hemisphere,
Never beneath the earth to reappear!]

(6) *Troilus and Criseyde*, III, 1455-56:
What hastow lost, why sekestow this place?
Ther God thi light so quenche, for his grace!

[What hast thou lost? What doest thou seek of us?
God quench the light in thee for doing thus!]

(7) *Troilus and Criseyde*, III, 1524-26:
And with swiche voys as though his herte bledde,
He seyde, "Farewel, dere herte swete!
Ther God us graunte sownde and soone to mete!"

[And with the voice of one whose spirit bled
He said "Farewell, my dearest heart, my sweet,
And may God grant us safe and soon to meet."]

(8) *Troilus and Criseyde*, v, 1525-26:
"Awey" quod he; "*ther* Joves yeve the sorwe!
Thow shalt be fals, peraunter, yet tomorwe!"

[Off with you! God's sorrow
Light upon you! I'll prove you false tomorrow!]

(9) *Troilus and Criseyde*, v, 1786-88:
Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye!
Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye,
So sende myght to make in some comedye!

[Go little book, go little tragedy,
Where God may send thy maker, ere he die,
The power to make a work of comedy.³

(10) *The Canterbury Tales*, I(A) 2815-16 (*The Knight's Tale*)
Arcite is coold, *ther* Mars his soule gye!
Now wol I speken forth of Emelye.

[Arcite is cold. Mars guide him on his way!
Something of Emily I have to say.]

- (11) *The Canterbury Tales*, II(B¹) 598-602 (*The Man of Law's Tale*)

This knyght, thurgh Sathanas temptaciouns,
Al softly is to the bed ygo,
And kitte the throte of Hermengyld atwo,
And leyde the bloody knyf by dame Custance,
And wente his wey; *ther* God yeve hym meschance!

[Little did she note
How he, o'ermastered by the Fiend's temptation,
Had softly come upon her; then he smote
The Lady Hermengild and slit her throat,
Then laying the bloody knife beside the bed
Of Constance went his way. God strike him dead!]

- (11) *The Canterbury Tales*, III(D)1561-62 (*The Friar's Tale*)

"Heyt now," quod he, "*ther* Ihesu Crist yow blesse,
And al his handwerk, bothe moore and lesse!"

["Hup, there!" he shouted, "Jesus bless you, love,
And all His handiwork!"]

- (13) *The Canterbury Tales*, IV(E)1307-08 (*The Merchant's Tale*)

This sentence, and an hundred thynges worse,
Writeth this man; *ther* God his bones curse!

[Opinions such as these and hundreds worse
This fellow wrote, God lay him under curse!]

Editorial Comments

The editorial comments on these texts cover a broad range. In terms of sheer frequency, Donaldson comments on the largest number of passages (all except 2, 6 and 8), whereas Skeat, in the Glossarial Index of his edition, interprets only three (1, 5 and 12). Pratt covers all four passages from *The Canterbury Tales* (10, 11, 12 and 13). Passages

10 and 12 have elicited the most numerous comments, with number 10 receiving attention from Robinson, Baugh, Pratt, Donaldson and Fisher, and number 12 from Skeat, Robinson, Baugh, Pratt and Donaldson. Passage 8 is the least commented upon: in fact, none of the editors surveyed explain it. The range of comments is wide, too. Some editors confine themselves to a simple explanation of the meaning, whereas others comment on the syntax of the turn of phrase, and some even volunteer hints at semantic development and derivation to explain its meaning. Our treatment of these editorial comments will follow this order.

Meaning

Pratt simply notes that *ther* in passages 10, 11, and 12 means "may," and that *ther God* in 13 means "may God." Donaldson, too, simply notes that *ther* in the passages he comments on means "may"; there is no reason to assume he would have made any different comments on passages 2, 6 and 8, had he chosen to do so. In his "Glossarial Index." Skeat provides us with three different meanings. In passage 1, *ther* means "as to which"; in passage 5, it means "wherefore"; these two interpretations have this in common that Skeat reads the clauses as dependent relative clauses in the optative subjunctive. The third passage explained by Skeat admits of no such interpretation; this, it seems, is what prompts him to supply the main clause by interpreting *ther* in passage 12 as "wherefore (I pray that)." Fisher, in the passages annotated by him, shows two distinct interpretations. In passages 5 and 6, he comments, *ther* means "may"; the same interpretation, slightly expanded, is given for passages 2 ("may prosperity be") and 9 ("may God"). But in passages 4, 10 and 11 Fisher sees quasi-local adverbs. In the case of passage 4, this results in a syntactic connection between Criseyde's prayer that Jove may remove the viper of jealousy from Troilus's heart and her complaint at the viper's having taken shelter there in the first place; but this construction is stylistically cumbersome on account of the presence, in the same sub-clause, of the relative adverb as well as the adverbial adjunct ("where . . . out of your heart"). Fisher's reading of passage 10 is curious, too: if *ther* indeed means "wherever," the modern English rendering would run: "Arcite is cold, wherever Mars may lead his soul." Not very satisfactory. Fisher's interpretation of passage 11 suffers from a similar lack of naturalness;

if *ther* does indeed mean “where (i.e., may),” the rendering would be: “And he went his way, where God may give him ill fortune.” If the curse were effective, where else could God give the evil young knight the bad fortune he deserved for his heinous deed? Such a truism hardly fits Chaucer’s ability as a story-teller. If we survey the thirteen passages at this point it would seem that both the force of analogy and the awkwardness of the interpretations of Fisher and, to some extent, Skeat already point in the direction of our contention that all the passages under consideration are best construed as main clauses expressing a religious wish.

Syntax

The syntax of these optative main clauses is well described by Root. He comments on the structure of the expression in his note on passage 5, which also refers to 2, 3, and 6, and simply points out that *ther* is used “to introduce a prayer or curse.”

Robinson’s comments are found in three main places. His glossary mentions “the idiomatic use [of *ther*] with optative clauses of blessing and cursing,” and refers the reader to his note on passage 10. A very similar note is found in his commentary on passage 2, with references to passages 3, 5 and 6. Notes on passages 9 and 12 give no new information; they simply refer the reader, once again, to the note on passage 10, which reinforces the impression that the latter note is meant to be understood as the place where Robinson will furnish the reader with his considered opinion. Robinson’s note on 10 is a curious blend. It seems to interpret *ther* both as a relative adverb and as an introductory expletive. Could it be that Robinson’s interpretation marks the half-way house between Skeat and the later commentators? The note runs:

2815 *ther* Mars hissoule gye, “where (or there) may Mars guide his soul.” For the use of *ther* as an expletive in optative clauses of blessing or cursing cf. *FrT*, III, 1561; *MerchT*, IV, 1308; *Tr* iii, 947, 966, 1437, 1456; v, 1787. The primary sense seems to have been “in that (or which) case,” “under which circumstances”; hence, “therewith,” “wherewith,” and perhaps “wherefore.”

Robinson's note is ambiguous on two scores. Firstly, it is not clear whether Robinson means to contrast the use of *ther* in 10 to its use in passages 2, 3, 5, 6, (9), 12 and 13, or to draw a parallel. The only resource left to decide this is punctuation. As in passage 10, *ther* in passages 3, 5, 6, 9, and 13 is preceded by a comma, thus creating the impression that we are dealing with a dependent clause—an impression reinforced by the reference, in the note, to the relative "primary sense" of *ther*. But in passage 2, *ther* is preceded by a period. Passage 12 leaves no real option for variety in punctuation to bring out the syntax.

Secondly, it is not clear whether Robinson is speaking diachronically or synchronically. Is *ther*, as Chaucer uses it, an expletive (hence, a word with neither denotative nor connotative meaning), or does it carry at least a vestigial meaning held over from its "primary sense"? The total picture of Robinson's note is one of irresolution.

Baugh offers us a variety of syntactical comments to interpret *ther* in passages 1, 2, 5, 10, 11, 12, and 13. In passage 1 (and, by summary reference, also in 2), *ther* is called "an exclamatory intensive introducing a wish or imprecation." In passage 5, it is explained as "introducing a curse." In passage 10, Baugh states, "the expletive use introducing a wish," while in 11, he calls it an "intensive." *Ther* in 12 is explained as a "hortatory adverb" and in 13 as "hortatory *ther*." Baugh's comments, however, for all their variety, have this in common that they appear to opt firmly for the main-clause interpretation of the idiom, and for the interpretation of *ther* as an introductory syntactic device.

This is confirmed by §73 of his introductory treatment, titled "The Language of Chaucer," to which Baugh refers in most of his notes on the texts. In this paragraph, *ther* gets company:

73. Hortatory *as* (*also*), *the*, *so*. An imperative or hortatory subjunctive of wish, imprecation. etc., is commonly introduced by *as*, *ther*, or *so*.

Among the examples cited, our passage 13 illustrates the use of *ther*.

The problem with Baugh's comments is, again, twofold. Firstly, in passages 6 and 9, neither of which elicits Baugh's comments, *ther* and *so* are found in the same sentence, which suggests that there are differences, too. Baugh, together with all the other editors surveyed in this note except Root, does not stress a feature of *ther* noticed by himself in

passages 1, 3 and 10, and in his own §73, viz., that it introduces a wish, whether of cursing or blessing. Incidentally, none of the editors point out that in every instance, *ther* is also immediately followed by the name of a deity—good thrift in 2 is something very closely akin to *Fortuna!*—which is the true subject of the sentence. Hence, among the adverbs listed by Baugh in §73, *ther* is not completely parallel to *as* and *so*: it must be considered in its own right.

The second problem is that “hortatory” is not the same as “exclamatory,” or, for that matter, as “intensive” or “expletive.” Moreover, there are differences between “hortatory” and “imperative” words and expressions, which in their turn are different from a “wish or imprecation.” Imperatives have this in common with hortatories that the person, or persons, addressed are also urged to be the subject of the action commanded or commended. In the case of imperatives, the addressee never includes the speaker; in the case of hortatories, the subject of the action commended often includes the speaker. Wishes and imprecations, however, express, in what is usually called an “optative,” a desire on the speaker’s part that some third party—in our passages, a deity—should accomplish something in relation to the person(s) addressed and/or to some other party or parties connected with the person(s) addressed. From Baugh’s examples in §73 it would appear that *as* and *so* can indeed function in hortatory, imperative and optative clauses (our passages 6 and 9 suggest that they are not always introductory), whereas our evidence suggests that *ther* has a much more limited use, viz., that of an introductory linguistic device of the syntactic kind, immediately followed by the name of a deity, in optative main clauses of cursing and blessing.

This finding prompts us to propose a change in punctuation. Hussey has rightly pointed out that “modern punctuation . . . is inevitably a form of interpretation.”⁴ Modern punctuation practices, by contrast with, say, seventeenth-century ones, tend to bring out syntax rather than diction; we tend to be analytic and visual in our approach to print rather than synthetic and oral-acoustical. In accord with this, I have changed Robinson’s colon in passage 1 into a period, his commas in passages 3, 4, 7 and 9 into exclamation marks; his comma in 6 has become a question mark, and his commas in passages 8, 10, 11 and 13 have been replaced by semicolons. Passage 2 did not require a change; passage 5, which now shows an exclamation mark after *nyght* (following Tatlock and Kennedy), could also have been repunctuated by putting

an exclamation mark at the end of the line preceding the line in which *ther* occurs.⁵ Passage 12 does not offer much opportunity for variation; I have omitted Robinson's exclamation mark after *Heyt*, if only to show that there are other factors besides syntax that determine punctuation, taste being perhaps the most important.

Semantic Development and Derivation and Meaning

Skeat and most probably Robinson detect a relative function in *ther*; Robinson suggests that, at any rate, its "primary sense" may be (or have been) relative. The first point to be made here is that etymological, diachronic approaches to present meaning are notoriously unreliable. It is, of course, true that *ther*, in Chaucer, can be relative as well as demonstrative, but it seems unnecessary and far-fetched to suggest that its function in the passages under discussion is detectably relative in synchronic terms. This observation is strengthened by the fact that, even if we were to allow that passages 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, and 11 could conceivably be construed as relative subclauses (though only at the cost of great strain on the meaning of the text), passages 2, 8, 12, and 13 do not permit this construal at all, since *ther*, in those passages, does not have any possible antecedent, and hence can only be construed as the introductory move to an optative main clause.

If, therefore, we take our cue from analogy and notice the identical syntactic of all our passages, we must say a firm goodbye to *ther* viewed as a relative adverb—that is to say, as a word with a clearly, or even dimly, denotative meaning. This is tantamount to saying that semantic development and derivation do not provide us with a clue to whatever meaning, if any, *ther* contributes to the passages under discussion.

Is it possible to go on to suggest any semantic function *ther* might have in synchronic terms? Both Robinson and Baugh use the term "expletive"; this suggests that no meaning, whether denotative or connotative, can be attributed to *ther*. Baugh, in addition, uses the terms "intensive" and "exclamatory," thus restricting whatever meaning *ther* may have to enhancement of the other elements in the sentences or to the speaker's affective stance.

Thus the question arises, Are we in a position to suggest any other contribution the word may have made to the meaning of our passages, in the ears and minds of Chaucer, his listeners and his readers? I think we are.

Impersonal “There”

“There” in modern English, like *er* and (archaic) *daar* in contemporary Dutch and *da* in modern German, frequently often introduces “impersonal” sentences—the most ordinary turn of phrase being: “there is/are/was/were/have been,” etc. + subject + (in English omisable) relative pronoun + verbal form: “There’s a man wants to see you.” To my knowledge, this usage has occurred in the languages mentioned throughout their known histories. The fact that, diachronically and etymologically speaking, “there” represents a “weakened” form of the demonstrative adverb of place is of no relevance to its real meaning in this kind of context. A closely analogous use of “there” is found in phrases like: “On a fine winter’s night, there arrived a stranger in the village.” When compared to its alternative, “On a fine winter’s day, a stranger arrived in the village,” it will be noticed that the former expression has a slight connotation of something impending, of an atmospheric, indeterminate quality surrounding the stranger’s arrival.

Many languages, including non-Indo-European ones like Hebrew, have linguistic devices to subdue the tone of determinacy inherent in the declarative sentence, and even in non-declarative sentences, if the subject of the sentence is God or a deity. Could it be that *ther* in the passages we have discussed is a linguistic device whose function it is to give the sentence a note of “indeterminacy”—i.e., a “numinous” connotation, in order to convey that neither God nor deities are agents in the same determinate way as mere mortals are, and to convey that, in regard to God or gods, all we can do is wish, not command, let alone control? If this should be the case, this would help seal the fate of the construal of *ther* as a relative adverb in the passages we have discussed.

A final note. Eleven of the thirteen passages were noticed by the author in the course of reading all of Chaucer’s works. A quick check of the Tatlock-Kennedy concordance, while confirming the incompleteness of the author’s findings beyond the shadow of a doubt, did turn up two more instances, viz. passages 8 and 11. Tatlock and Kennedy did not turn up contrary evidence—*ther God hire bones blesse!* I have not reread Chaucer to find more instances. The list of passages, therefore, is probably exhaustive, but not presented as such.

Notes

An early finger exercise in close reading, revived and published in *Neophilologus* 69 (1985): 276-83. Lightly edited.

1. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Book of Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Robert Kilburn Root (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1926-30); Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Complete Works*, ed. Walter W. Skeat (London: Oxford University Press, 1933); Geoffrey Chaucer, *Works*, ed. F.N. Robinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1957); Geoffrey Chaucer, *Major Poetry*, ed. Albert C. Baugh (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963); Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Tales of Canterbury*, ed. Robert A. Pratt (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974); Geoffrey Chaucer, *Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader*, sel. and ed. E.T. Donaldson (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975); Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, ed. John H. Fisher (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977).

2. *Troilus and Criseyde*, trans. Nevill Coghill (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971); *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. Nevill Coghill (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975).

3. Note that Coghill dexterously transposes the passage by treating *ther* as if it were the relative adverbial expression "there, where."

4. S.S. Hussey, *Chaucer: An Introduction* (New York: Methuen, 1981), 9.

5. John S.P. Tatlock and Arthur G. Kennedy, *A Concordance to the Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Washington: The Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1927), *s.v.* *ther*.

Rahner on Sprachregelung: Regulation of Language? Of Speech?

Introduction: Homage to Karl Rahner

The late Karl Rahner's elder Jesuit brother Hugo, a fine scholar as well as a fine stylist, is said to have quipped at one time that he hoped to become famous in his old age by translating Karl's work into German. Yet Karl's works did win for their author, in 1973, the Sigmund Freud Prize for Scholarly Prose of the German Academy for Language and Literature, with the citation stating: "The master of the literary word has succeeded in winning a new hearing for the word of religion."¹ What a striking contrast between two appraisals!

The first, humorous remark calls to mind the high degree of abstraction, formalism, and technicality in Rahner's theology, where terms have to be distinguished: *existentiell* is not identical with *existential*, and *formell* is not the same as *formal*, and the "transcendental" must be carefully told apart from the "categorical." This aspect of Rahner's works, if we apply Walter Ong's analysis, is associated with the visual, the objectifying, the analytical, the logical—in short, with the kind of literacy that is associated with reading, with concentration on, and analysis of, words and terms, and further down the road, with scientific method, along with its panoply of terminological tools.

There is a second aspect to Rahner's works—the one which the *Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung*, in awarding him the prize, must mainly have had in mind. Rahner's work has deep roots in the literary world, where the living word, the oral-acoustical, the interpersonal, the synthetic, and the rhetorical are predominant. In fact, the citation explicitly refers to this: Rahner has won a new hearing for the word of religion. After all, the German word *Sprache* in the name of the Academy that awarded the prize, conveys a concern not only with "language" and "usage," but also with "speech"—not only with *langue/language*, but also

with *parole*, in F. de Saussure's classical distinction. Rahner has indeed greatly enriched the German language and the usage of theology viewed as the stable, available linguistic equipment scholarly theology needs; in this way, he has succeeded in making large new areas of cultural and religious experience habitually amenable to theological expression and discussion. But this success is rooted in a more fundamental achievement in the area of live speech: once touched by Rahner, the language of theology and thus, the German language itself have *sounded* differently. Many of Rahner's formulas have rung a new note; a new excitement and a new eloquence have been brought to the international theological conversation.

This second, literary aspect of Rahner's work is most prominent in some of his more "popular" writings in the areas of pastoral practice and spirituality, and in his many interviews, recently published—all of them models of liveliness and depth. Still, it is by no means absent from the "heavier" writings, which is consistent with the fact that a large portion of Rahner's works, especially his essays in the many volumes of the *Theological Investigations*, were not *written* by him at all, but, of all things, dictated—second-order abstractions and periodic sentences and all. What we read, in other words, is very often live speech edited for the purposes of publication. Both Augustine preaching and Thomas Aquinas dictating come to mind, both with their scribes scribbling. Hans Urs von Balthasar, who has tended to claim the great aesthetic traditions of the Christian West as the principal source of his theology, once conceded in an interview that Rahner has been "the strongest theological power of our day"; but then proceeded to characterize the distinctive difference between himself and Rahner as follows:

our points of departure were always different, really. There is a book by Simmel, titled *Kant und Goethe*. Rahner opted for Kant, or Fichte, if you wish—the transcendental starting-point. And like the *Germanist* I am, I opted for Goethe.²

Let the last sentence of this confession pass; the one before that, in its baldness, does Rahner, a lifelong reader of poetry, and his written work, with its strong undertow of literary and theological passion, a serious injustice. Much to the point, a younger friend colleague wrote:

Much of what Rahner wrote may be stiff reading. But that is no reason to deny he had the gift of literary language-use.³

Noticing the coexistence of these two, the periodic sentence and the accouterments of second-order abstraction, is a good way to approach the literary complexity of Rahner's work. For all its high literacy, the periodic sentence hails from the world of rhetoric, with its cultivation of conviction, persuasion, and loyalty; it is a product of the tradition that has Cicero and Quintilian for its masters. The other ingredient, the abstractions, along with their daunting array of terminology, hail from the dispassionate world of methodical intellectual operations, aware—with a clarity that certainly goes back to the *Aufklärung*, but beyond that to scholasticism—of their uses, but also of their limitations. Walter Ong has explained that thought in a “preliterate,” that is to say, a *rhetorical* culture is bound up not with dispassionate observation, but with the dynamic world of interpersonal communication; once the world has been made “objective,” set off from the personal world as essentially neuter—in the best Kantian fashion—human thought is exercised no longer as *a response to the world* but as *an operation upon it*.⁴ One of the attractive features of Rahner's work is precisely the harmonious, yet tensile, coexistence of two styles of thought, along with their corresponding linguistic styles. On the one hand, we have faith seeking to address Church and World, as well as trying to respond to them, both with a passion; on the other hand, we have the same faith dispassionately seeking for its own foundation, and probing Church and World to find the core of their integrity: the periodic sentence and the terminological tool.

“*Sprachregelung*”

No wonder that Rahner, so eloquent and at the same time so formal a thinker, came to take a strong interest in the status of theological language. More particularly, he came to take a strong interest in what he called *Sprachregelung*, “linguistic ruling”: the communal, i.e., ecclesial, fixation of doctrine in *terminological* form. The word first occurs in an essay entitled “What is a Dogmatic Statement?” first

published, in German, in 1961.⁵ Over the next ten years, Rahner returned regularly to the subject, as appears from the lists of citations in the *Schriften zur Theologie*, which give the original dates and occasions of the individual essays.⁶ It appears that Rahner saw the need for a treatment of the meaning of terminological doctrine mainly in three related areas of theological inquiry, namely, (1) the relationship between kerygma and dogma, (2) ecumenical relations, and (3) the obligations imposed by magisterial definitions.

Sensitivity to the tension between the (“kerygmatic”) language of faith and the formal language of dogma, as well as their relative autonomy, became a fundamental feature of Rahner’s thought. His main emphasis came to be on the fact that the latter is an intellectual specialization, and hence a limitation, of the former, and one dependent on historical circumstances.

In treating ecumenical matters, Rahner came to apply this specialization-concept. It allowed him to explore the implications of pluralism, and thus to show the significance of dialogue—dialogue among Catholics and with other Christians, but also with non-Christians. This dialogue, Rahner argued, was not only possible as a matter of principle, given the partiality of divergent dogmatic expressions. It was also a downright requisite for the deeper understanding of one’s own faith-commitment; ultimately, it would remind all participants of the basic function of all theological and religious language—the *reductio in mysterium*.⁷

The authority of terminological dogma is not Rahner’s most fundamental theme, yet it appears to be the one he treats with the highest sense of urgency. It is never far to seek, not even when the first two areas are the principal subject of discussion. It was this issue which brought Rahner face to face with the issue of the unity of the Catholic Church in believing, and, in connection with this, with the functions of the *magisterium*. What is the effective authority of terminological dogma, and how is its interpretation to be regulated?⁸ The controversy surrounding Hans Küng’s *Infallible?* occasioned much pointed discussion along these lines.⁹ Still, we should not forget that the question had already come up much earlier, and in a far quieter, more speculative context, when Rahner was pleading for an alternative terminology in trinitarian theology.¹⁰

Terminological Dogma: From Meaning to Function

Now what is interesting—certainly from an “Ongian” point of view—is that Rahner, in treating the problems connected with terminological dogma, refers only to the problem of meaning involved. His theme is, invariably, that the meaning of these dogmatic expressions is *relative*: i.e., relative to the original kerygmatic expressions, to other approaches to the same mystery, to the ecclesiological issue of unity in believing, and ultimately to the mystery involved in and behind the proposition. Rahner is not by any means alone in treating the issue in this way. In fact, while his distinctive contribution lies in his particular conception of the “relativity” of doctrine, and in his reasons for it, he scarcely differs with any other theologian on the basic question as to what the issue is, namely, one of *meaning*: the interpretation of terminological doctrines is a *cognitive* matter. It is both interesting and a bit surprising to watch such a sensitive and eloquent stylist as Rahner agreeing with most of his colleagues, and even with the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on this basic point.

The observation just made is important. It involves the realization that terminological dogma is widely regarded, among theologians, as *regulated language*. Hence the standard practice of interpretation: one concentrates on a *fixed dogmatic text* (preferably set in its historical, and especially its literary, context) in order to establish what this particular doctrine *means*.

This essay is written to suggest that this focus on the cognitive (in Ongian terms, the chiefly visual) function of doctrine is incomplete. Dogmatic propositions, even the most terminological ones, can, and often do, also function in *affective* (that is to say, predominantly *oral-acoustical*) fashion. We will argue, therefore, that terminological dogma often involves the regulation of *speech*. To make this case, some preliminary observations of a general linguistic nature are in order.

Connotation in Natural Language

The distinction most frequently used to deal with the way words function is that between denotation and connotation: words “say” more than that which is amenable to our cognitive constructs. *Words connote*. That is part of their attractiveness: they are not only precise;

they are also eloquent. This applies not only to individual words, but also, and even more, to word-complexes: they say more than they say. This means, very concretely, that they betray, even in written or printed form, that they “address,” not only issues, but also *people in situations*: they create an *audience* in the very act of conveying *thought*. Much of the time, such situations and audiences are incidental: many utterances are *ad hoc*, fleeting, and impermanent; most language is the verbal accompaniment of the ways in which we do this, that, and the other thing with Tom, Dick, and Harry.

But there are situations that are more permanent, and they are characterized by stable patterns of connotative language-use, especially if those situations are “natural”: the family, the village, the tribe, even the school. These permanent human configurations are characterized, as Walter Ong has not tired of pointing out, by language-use that is strongly *formulary*: myths, epics, sagas, legends, proverbs, tribal histories, family stories, playground cant, and what have you. Notice that the term “connotation” is really too weak to convey all that is involved here; it is better to resort to a term like “function” to approach the issue. The formulary usages of more or less permanent natural human configurations function as the bearers of the group’s identity, and those who speak and listen in these situations react, not so much to *what* is said or heard, as to the way the words are *used appropriately*, i.e., as a function of the understanding and the loyalty that hold the group together. In joining such a group, *we learn the usage before we get the understanding*.

Meaning and Use of Terms

In what we have said so far, we have been dealing with the formulary use of natural language, whose constitutive elements are what we know as *words*—“regular” words. But our language, even our everyday language, employs not only words, but also terms: special words, usually (though by no means always) derived from foreign roots; words which you have to know how to pronounce and use right, because they tend to have very precise, usually abstract meanings laid down by definition. In other words, *terms are maximally denotative*, at least in intention; in fact, one definition of “term” is: a word without connotations, to be used exclusively in the service of rational discourse about objective realities. Yet at the same time, terms look and sound, certainly

to the non-initiated, a lot like *formulas*, and so the question arises: do terms also function as bearers of community loyalty?

The answer is obvious: yes. But we must be careful here. In natural language, there is a close, spontaneous connection between the meaning of a word and its appropriate use, between its cognitive meaning and its rhetorical impact. In the case of terms, no such close connection prevails. Terms mean what they are defined to mean, and hence, the rules for their appropriate use are rather more extrinsic to their meaning.¹¹ Armed with this knowledge, we can easily see how terms function as bearers of community loyalty: terms bestow “membership in the profession,” but only on those who both understand what they mean and have learned to use them appropriately.

“Displacement” of Terms

Now it is one of the characteristics of our technological, highly literate age that “sounding educated” often means “using technical terminology”; we associate knowledge with expertise, with a panoply of technical terms—that is to say, with cognitive meaning as it is shared among professionals. But this also means that we live in an age in which many terms are liable to revert, as it were, to the realm of natural language. Terms are born at one or more removes from natural language; then, on account of the spread of education, the popularization of professional knowledge, and the authority of such knowledge, hundreds of terms find their way back into natural language. This chain of events creates a very real problem, which is connected with the relatively loose link between the meaning of a term and its appropriate use. When a term is used *outside the sphere of rational discourse*, some of the normal ambiguity and vagueness of natural language comes back to it, but in an uncontrolled way, “through the back door, dragging along a number of implicit assumptions not always easily detected.”¹²

There is nothing necessarily sinister in this, though it is true that advertisers, mellow-speakers, and ideologues abuse precisely this quality of terms in the interest of “hidden persuasion”: lots of prejudice and unexamined loyalty is expressed and promoted by means of computerese, sociologese, journalese, economese, nationalese, theologese. The problem is not that the quasi-natural-language use of terms conveys and creates non-professional loyalties, but that these loyalties are hard

to examine. That is why operators, fast talkers, rhetoricians, and sophists—the well-intentioned as well as the unscrupulous, and also the merely mindless—love to use terms: there's no loyalty like unexamined loyalty.

Terminological Dogma and the Profession of Loyalty

Abusus non tollit usum is one of the many oral maxims once taught in seminaries: the fact that something is abused is no reason for its abolition. While it is right to conclude from the foregoing that terminological doctrine is likely to be *correctly understood and used* only by a small minority of professionals, it is wrong to conclude that only professionals *may* use it. The Christian tradition has, at any rate, encouraged the opposite. Terminology has become part of the ordinary, that is to say, the live, oral-acoustical profession of faith.¹³ What we should also conclude, however, is that the non-professional use of doctrinal terminology can be expected to involve not so much meaning or precise understanding as profession of loyalty, and that this will show in a certain lack of proportion between the term's (rhetorical) significance and its (cognitive) meaning.

This essay will test this hypothesis in the case of three terminological doctrinal definitions, viz., Jesus Christ's consubstantiality with the Father in Godhead; the change, by transubstantiation, of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ; and the infallibility of the ecclesiastical magisterium in matters of faith and morals.

Homoousios

Christ's "consubstantiality with the Father" occurs in the Creed promulgated at Nicaea in 325 A.D. It found its way into the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed: "And [we believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ, . . . of one substance [*homoousion*] with the Father." It is part of the tradition of the undivided Church. The term has a very precise meaning: every predicate attributable to the Father must also be attributed to Christ, except "Father"; Christ is the Son. However, several observations are in order.

First, this clarity is the product of hindsight. Anyone familiar with the Arian controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries knows how

long it took before this precise focus was a matter of consensus. That Arius was wrong was, perhaps, not too hard to establish, but at the time, many found the remedy worse than the disease: how prudent was it to commit the Churches to the mandatory use of a new, non-biblical and hence, suspect technical term—*homoousios*? While it took care of Arianism, it might well cause more undesirable problems in the future. And indeed, it took the best part of the fourth century to discover, in the course of much confusing debate and episcopal and imperial politicking, just how restricted—if crucial—the area of affirmation covered by *homoousios* really was. And this lack of precision has continued. I have met a theologian who was less than entirely clear on the point!

Secondly, this lack of precision in the fourth and fifth centuries did not prevent the term from being abundantly used—mainly as an ecclesiastical loyalty-flag. But since the fourth century also witnessed the gradual establishment of orthodox Christianity as the sole religion permitted in the Empire (Theodosius, *Cunctos populos*, 380 A.D.), the emperors, both of the West and of the East, developed a taste for applying *homoousios* as a *civil* loyalty test, too. Similarly, but on the other side, we have the professed Arianism of the Ostrogoths under Theodoric and his successors in the late fifth and early sixth centuries, over against the orthodoxy of the old Roman establishment, over which they held military sway. Thus, there is every reason to doubt the strictly theological significance of both.

This enormous disproportion between the (chiefly oral) use of *homoousios* as a loyalty-marker and its (literate) use to express orthodoxy is paralleled by the use of transubstantiation, albeit with a difference.

Transubstantiation

In the Latin church, “transubstantiation” defines the change of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ at the Eucharist. The dogma was first laid down by the fourth Lateran Council of 1215. More than three centuries later, in 1551, the Council of Trent picks up the terminology, stating that the substances of bread and wine are entirely changed into the substances of the Body and Blood of Christ, and adding that this change has been aptly and properly been called

transubstantiation. Now the question is, What is the reason for the aptness and propriety of the term? What, in other words, is the target of the affirmation? The question is of great ecumenical significance, for acceptance of transubstantiation separates the Catholic Church from the Reformation.

It turns out that the meaning of “transubstantiation” is surprisingly restricted. Around the time of the fourth Lateran Council, “transubstantiation” and the affirmation of the real presence were simply “two sides of a single coin,”¹⁴ with no affirmations implied about the way in which the real presence was thought (or imagined) to come about. In fact, authorities like Peter of Capua and Lothar of Segni (who as Pope Innocent III was to preside over Lateran IV), regarded the three prevalent theories about the coming about of the real presence (“consubstantiation,” “annihilation,” and “transubstantiation”) a matter of theological opinion,¹⁵ even though they themselves favored the third explanation. At this point in time, therefore, “transubstantiation” serves two purposes. In the conciliar definition of Lateran IV, it is a term used as a natural word; it simply affirms the real presence. By contrast, as a *term* among *theologians* it defines one of three ways in which the real presence was responsibly thought to come about. Not till a generation later does Aquinas argue that annihilation and consubstantiation are both illogical and heretical, and only transubstantiation orthodox; interestingly, though, he does not quote Lateran IV in support of his position. Fifty years later, Scotus and Ockam disagree with Aquinas: they find consubstantiation intellectually more attractive than transubstantiation, but since Lateran IV has made the latter an article of faith, they consider “transubstantiation” simply a matter of authoritative doctrine, *not of conceptual understanding*. This, of course, goes a long way towards explaining why the only claim Trent made in regard to the term “transubstantiation” was that the real change of the eucharistic elements is “aptly and properly so named.” It is as simple as that, and besides, stated in a relative clause as it is, it hardly passes the test of defined doctrine.

“Transubstantiation” is an intriguing term, a fact which helps to explain why it has functioned so prominently in theological debate and controversy, even down to our own day. At the same time, the *doctrine* of transubstantiation is *conceptually* feeble: while stating the real presence, it does not furnish any insight into its structure. This, however,

has not prevented it from being vigorously alleged as a mark of *loyalty*. In this regard, it both resembles *Homoousios*, and differs from it: like *homoousios*, “transubstantiation” functions as a loyalty-badge, but whereas *homoousios* can be shown to have a very precise logic, “transubstantiation” is little more than an authoritative term of considerable oral-acoustical weight to convey and commend the realism of the Catholic eucharistic tradition.

Infallible Magisterium

Infallibility expresses the freedom from error in teaching faith and morals enjoyed by the Church’s teaching office, whether papal or collegial-episcopal, under certain conditions. The exercise of infallible papal magisterium was defined at the first Vatican Council in 1870; episcopal-collegial infallibility, while made much of at Vatican II, has never been formally defined.

In a fairly recent book, the nature of magisterial authority, both of the “non-definitive” and the “definitive” (infallible) kind, has been explained with exquisite clarity.¹⁶ What is striking in the book, from a literary point of view, is the care with which its author argues the *limitations* of infallible *magisterium*—something which may worry some readers. What is especially striking is the way in which the author argues the limits of the object of infallibility. Thus, for instance, he denies that matters of natural law can ever be the object of infallible teaching by the ordinary universal magisterium—a position highly relevant to the interpretation of *Humanae vitae*.¹⁷ Yet while stressing the limits of infallibility, the book clearly shows a high esteem for the teaching office, and it does everything to commend a responsible, mature attitude of respect and obedience, on the part of the faithful, toward all authentic teaching in the Church, whether non-definitive or definitive.

The reason behind this apparently negative tendency in the book is not far to seek: while the target area of infallibility as a defined doctrine is very narrow—and relatively few theologians and bishops are so keenly aware of this as Francis Sullivan—its non-professional use as a loyalty-marker is extremely broad. The latter use really bears out the characteristic Catholic faith-attitude. This attitude is not so much concerned with the precise definition of the pope’s infallibility, as with a particular practice of universal papal *jurisdiction* and episcopal

governing authority, which is vastly more influential in everyday life in the Church than the infallibility-dogma. Again, as in the case of *homoousios* and *transubstantiation*, the term infallibility shows a big gap between its professional, literate use as a cognitive counter, and its natural-language, oral-acoustical use as a loyalty-marker.

Three Conclusions

This essay has been written to illustrate how Catholic theology has gained enormously from the two influences at work in Karl Rahner's theological achievement: the formal-literate and the rhetorical-literary. It has also been written to say that *in the latter area* theology stands to gain even more from the insights of scholars like Walter J. Ong if it wants to overcome its one-sidedly cognitive biases, which are noticeable even in so literary a theologian as Karl Rahner. Hence, three conclusions to wind up.

First, dogma is a determination, or normative regulation, not only of language, in the form of canonized pronouncements authoritatively taught, but also of *speech*, in the form of formulary professions of faith and loyalty couched in "displaced" terminological language. The two must be carefully distinguished, so that both may be truly appreciated.

Second, there tends to be a notable gap between the *meaning* of terminological dogmatic language and its *use* in the ordinary profession of faith. This realization should influence the practice of theological hermeneutics: theologians should ask not just what certain dogmatic formulas mean, or meant, *in cognitive terms*, to theological professionals, but also in the interest of what affective concerns they are, or were, regularly used.

Third, loyalty is fine, but the formulas that carry it are often the carriers of prejudice, too. This has special relevance to ecumenical theology. It is easier to change minds than habits of speech; different *ideas* can coexist, side by side, in the same space, while different *voices* are harmonious only if they are "in synch." In many areas of the faith, it is not *doctrine* that separates us, but *formulas*. They need not do so, provided the different formulas are given equal time, so that all involved can attune the ears of faith to them.

Notes

Paper presented at the symposium *Questions of Orality and Literacy: A Tribute to Walter J. Ong, S.J.*, held at Rockhurst College, 29 July-August 1, 1985, and published in *Oral Tradition* [*Festschrift* for Walter J. Ong, S.J.] 2 (1987): 323-36. Tuckpointed for the present collection.

1. Karl Heinz Weger, *An unsere Freunde* [Obituary notice for Karl Rahner], April, 1984, 7-9.

2. Michael Albus, "'Geist und Feuer': Ein Gespräch mit Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Herder-Korrespondenz* 30 (1976): 72-82; cited at 75-76.

3. Karl Heinz Weger, *An unsere Freunde*, 8.

4. Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 22ff.

5. Translated into English as Karl Rahner, "What is a Dogmatic Statement?" *Theological Investigations* (New York: DLT, Seabury, and Helicon, 1961), V, 42-66, esp. 54-58; henceforth cited as *TI*,

6. The concept of *Sprachregelung* is found even earlier, in an essay on the encyclical *Mystici Corporis*. There, in a footnote, Rahner uses the phrase *terminologische Festlegung*, which was less than felicitously translated into English as "determined terminology." See "Membership of the Church According to the Teaching of Pius XII's Encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*," *TI*, II, 1-88; cited at 66, n. 83. Volumes I-X of the original *Schriften zur Theologie* are covered by the *Rahner-Register*, ed. Karl H. Neufeld and Roman Bleistein (Zürich, Einsiedeln, and Köln: Benziger Verlag, 1974), presented to Rahner on the occasion of his 70th birthday. Volumes XI-XVI of the *Schriften zur Theologie* have (incomplete) indices; the word *Sprachregelung* does not occur in them. In a book review, John Galvin points out that in *TI*, XVIII (the English translation of most of *Schriften*, XIII), the phrase "linguistic usage" (25-28, 51, 110) reflects German *Sprachregelung*—an obvious mistranslation (see *The Heythrop Journal*, 25 (1984): 367.

7. See "A Small Fragment 'On the Collective Finding of Truth,'" *TI*, VI, 82-88, esp. 85-87; "On the Theology of the Ecumenical Discussion," *TI*, XI, 24-67, esp. 40-42; "The Sin of Adam," *TI*, XI, 247-62, esp. 251-52.

8. See "Pluralism in Theology and the Unity of the Creed in the Church," *TI*, XI, 3-23, esp. 14-17; "Reflections on Methodology in Theology," *TI*, XI, 68-114, esp. 112-13; "Heresies in the Church Today?" *TI*, XII, 116-41, esp. 131-32.

9. See "Does the Church Offer Any Ultimate Certainties?" *TI*, XIV, 47-66, esp. 62-65; "On the Concept of Infallibility in Catholic Theology," *TI*, XIV, 66-85, esp. 78-83.

10. See *The Trinity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 108: "regulation of language."

11. See J.W.M. Verhaar, *Some Relations Between Perception, Speech and Thought* (Assen: Van Gorcum and Co., 1963), 133-34.

12. "Language and Theological Method," *Continuum* 7 (1969): 3-29, esp. 22.

13. This live profession has taken two characteristically oral-acoustical shapes. The first is *liturgy*; the Creed, including its technical terms, is recited by heart and even sung at Sunday Eucharist. The second is *catechesis* (Gk. *katechesis*, meaning "oral instruction," etymologically connected with "echo"), which reflects ancient "repeat-after-me" and other question-and-answer teaching habits to cultivate loyalty as much as orthodoxy; cf. Lk 2, 46 and John 16, 30, where "questioning" means "teaching."

14. James F. McCue, "The Doctrine of Transubstantiation from Berengar Through the Council of Trent," in *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue*, ed. Paul Empie and T. Austin Murphy (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1967), III, 89-124, esp. 92.

15. "Consubstantiation" explains the real presence by holding that, after the consecration, the substances both of the Body and Blood of Christ and of the bread and wine coexist in union with each other. "Annihilation" explains it by positing a replacement of the substances of bread and wine—which are annihilated—by the substances of the Body and Blood of Christ. "Transubstantiation" explains it by stating that the substances of bread and wine are changed into the substances of Christ's Body and Blood.

16. Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983).

17. Sullivan, *Magisterium*, 119-52.

*“Lost and Found” in Luke 15:
Biblical Interpretation and Self-Involvement*

for Margy and Rick

We live in space and time. Even our two most sophisticated senses, sight and hearing, can work only in space and time, as Immanuel Kant well saw. Nevertheless, differentiation is the name of the sensory game. There exists a very sophisticated natural affinity between seeing, analysis, space, understanding, and ideas; analogously, an only slightly vaguer natural affinity prevails between hearing, synthesis, time, trust, and affectivity.¹ Yet for all its acuity of vision, the eye cannot say to the ear, “I do not need you.”² Let us apply this piece of wisdom about the twin steeples of the human sensorium, sight and hearing, together with a few items from Greek grammar, to the fifteenth chapter of the third gospel.

* * * * *

Let us begin with a translation of the chapter—at first blush, an unduly free one.

Now all the toll collectors and the sinners were crowding Jesus, listening to him; and the Pharisees as well as the Torah-experts were muttering among themselves: “This man keeps the company of sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable, as follows. “Which of you, owning a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine on their own in the desert and go after the one that got itself lost, until he finds it? And once he finds it, he is happy to put it on his own shoulders, and when he

gets home he calls his friends and his neighbors together and tells them, ‘Be happy with me, for I have found my sheep, which got itself lost.’ Let me tell you: this is how there will be joy in heaven because of one sinner converting, rather than because of ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of conversion.

Or take a woman who has ten drachmas: if she should lose one drachma, would she not fix a light and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And once she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, and tells them, ‘Be happy with me, for I have found the drachma I lost.’ Let me tell you: this is how there will be joy among God’s angels because of one sinner converting.”

But then he said: “Somebody had two sons. And the younger of the two told his father: ‘Father, give me my rightful portion of the estate.’ So he divided his estate for them. And a few days later the younger son got everything together and left home for a distant land, and there squandered everything he had, living it up beyond any possibility of recovery. But as he was spending away, a serious famine spread everywhere in that country, and he began to run out. And he took to the road and committed himself to some citizen in that country, and he sent him to his farmlands to tend the swine. And he would have loved to fill his belly with the pods the swine were eating; and nobody offered him anything. Then it was he came to himself. He said, ‘How many of my father’s day laborers have food aplenty, and here I am, getting myself starved to death. I will get up and travel to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against God and in your face; I am no longer fit to call myself your son; treat me as some day laborer of yours.’ And up and off he went, to his own father.

Now while he was still at a long distance his father saw him, and was filled with pity, and he ran out, fell around his neck, and covered him with kisses. But the son said to him: ‘Father, I have sinned against God and in your face; I am no longer fit to call myself your son.’ Yet the father told his servants: ‘Quick, get the best dress and put it on him, and put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet, and fetch the fatted calf,

slaughter it as the Law prescribes, and let us feast and make merry together. For this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and let himself be found.’ So they started making merry.

But his elder son was out in the field, and when on his way home he approached the house, he heard music-making and dancing going on. And he called some houseboy to himself and inquired just what might be going on. And he told him: ‘Your brother has arrived, and you father has had the fatted calf slaughtered, because he has gotten him back safe and sound.’ But he got angry and did not care to come in. So his father came out to plead with him. But he replied to his father: ‘Look, so many years have I been a servant to you, and I have never failed to follow any order, and you have never given me a kid to make merry with my friends. But now that this son of yours arrives, who has devoured the living you worked for in the company of lewd idolaters, you have slaughtered the fatted calf for him.’ But he told him: “Dear child, you are always with me, and everything that is mine is yours; but, by God, we are to make merry together and enjoy ourselves, since this brother of yours was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and let himself be found.”

Luke 15 is a literary composition in its own right, i.e., apart from any indebtedness to sources. As such, it invites analysis and intellectuality.³ Still, its unity resides not just in its written, visual form but also in its rhetoric; like every writing in the New Testament, it is written down only to be read out loud and heard, i.e., to be *performed* and received in one piece, synthetically, *affectively*.

The two opening verses are a Lucan favorite,⁴ defining both the occasion and the target audience: on the one hand, Jesus, crowded, typically, by “all the toll collectors and the sinners”—bad company, yet hanging on his words (ἀκούειν αὐτοῦ); on the other hand, “both the [οἱ τε] Pharisees and the [καὶ οἱ] Torah-experts (γραμματεῖς).”⁵ The two groups’ divergent attitudes toward Jesus are conveyed by a sample of that favorite figure of speech in pre-literate and early-literate cultures, the play upon words: ἐγγίζοντες-διογγύζοντες—an oral-acoustical contrastive parallel only awkwardly rendered by something

like “close company” and “carping complainers.” Lots of black preachers in North America could (and would) do better, on the spur of the moment (though in reality they have puns by the dozens in their memory stores, ready to go, to hold the happy pew’s smiling attention).

A second feature of Luke 15 (and one which must be remembered in the interpretation of any New Testament text) is *allusio*—literally, “indirectly playing with something.” Allusion is to be understood not so much as the practice of calculated quotation, whether “literal” or not, but oral-acoustically, i.e., as “biblical background music”—idioms perhaps only dimly familiar to the listener, yet somehow reminiscent of the whole wide world of faith created by God’s Word at work in the Tradition. In the case of Luke 15, Joseph A. Fitzmyer’s commentary offers instances of *allusio* as touching as they are illuminating. Thus, to mention only two instances, the younger son’s confession “Father, I have sinned against God and in your face” echo Pharaoh’s desperate words to Moses and Aaron; likewise, the portrayal of the father “falling around [his son’s] neck” recalls Jacob’s relief at his meeting with his dreaded brother Esau, and Joseph’s deep emotion at the encounter with Benjamin and his other brothers in Egypt.⁶

Another oral-acoustical feature of Luke 15 is a figure of speech often called *fortiora-fortia-fortissima*, as follows. In due time, three items get lost: a sheep, a coin, and a younger brother. They are, in order, a prized animal, a valued object, and a treasured person. The sequence squarely places the culmination of the series in the third story: the “prodigal son.” The effect is enhanced by the fact that Jesus’ direct speech is interrupted by “But then he said” (Ἐἶπεν δέ; v. 11).

A fourth figure of speech is *repetitio*: the return of identical words or turns of phrase throughout the passage even as it is heard. In this case, the turns of phrase are several, as we shall see. The words repeated are mainly verbs: “hear,” “lose” and “lost,” and “find” and “found.”

Yet there are differences. In the case of the lost drachma, the responsibility for the loss is emphatically placed on the woman: “if *she* should lose just one drachma” (v. 8; emphasis added) and “the drachma I lost” (v. 9); accordingly, the finite forms are simply in the active voice: ἀπολέσῃ, ἀπόλεσα. The case of the sheep is a bit different. The shepherd does lose (ἀπολέσας) the one sheep, but when he goes out (πορεύεται) to find the animal a note of sympathy is sounded: he goes out because of (ἐπὶ) the sheep, which becomes “the one that has gotten

itself completely lost”: τὸ ἀπολωλὸς—the middle participle of the resultative perfect tense. For its sake, he wanders all over till he finds it (ἕως εὕρη αὐτό), and willingly carries it home on his shoulders and calls “his friends and his neighbors” in to share in the joy (συγγάρητέ μοι). The story ends with another *repetitio*: the shepherd does almost literally the same as the woman will do after she recovers her coin (vv. 6, 9).⁷ After all, the point of both parables is God’s joy over “one repenting sinner” (ἐπὶ ἐνὶ ἁμαρτωλῷ μετανοοῦντι: vv. 7, 10). Unsurprisingly, neither the coin nor the sheep are invited; they are not company.

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In the case of the younger son, however, there is no question that he gets himself lost. He does so by first impudently claiming his share of his father’s property and leaving, to have a life of his own somewhere else, “living it up beyond possibility of recovery” (ζῶν ἀσώτως; v. 13): nobody at home knows where he is or what has become of him. His elder brother will not be exaggerating when he sums up the scrape his younger brother has gotten himself into by describing him to his father as “that son of yours who has devoured (ὁ καταφαγών) the living you worked for (σου τὸν βίον) in the company of lewd idolaters (μετὰ πορνῶν).”

The understanding that the younger son is acting on his own is implied throughout the narrative; he is the subject of the highest number of narrative sentences—about a dozen of them. He demands his share of the property. He leaves home and sets out on his disastrous journey. He wastes his fortune. When he feels the pinch, he picks up and commits himself (ἐκολλήθη) to some local citizen, who puts him in charge of his swine—to Jewish ears, godforsaken dirty work in every sense of the word. Being without food, the boy is driven to extremes: he would even have loved to fill his belly with the pods the swine were eating (if only he could have gotten himself to do so),⁸ and nobody offers him anything in the way of (human) food. He comes to his senses. He realizes he is getting himself totally lost (ἀπόλλυμαι). He decides to “let on”—i.e., to “up and travel (ἀναστὰς πορεύομαι)”⁹ to his father, with a prepared speech: “Father, I have sinned against God and in your face (ἡμαρτον εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ ἐνώπιόν σου), I am

no longer fit (ἄξιος) to call myself (κληθῆναι) your son; treat me as some laborer of yours (ἕνα τῶν μισθίων σου).¹⁰ And he does up and go (ἀναστὰς ἦλθεν) to his own (ἑαυτοῦ) father, who, on the look-out, sights him from afar and filled with pity and love, comes running out, throws his arms around his neck, and covers him with kisses. He starts his prepared speech. The father does not even bother to hear him out; the boy never gets to beg for a place among the day laborers—the outsiders on the ancient homestead, working only for food or money. For the father is already issuing orders to his domestic servants (τοὺς δούλους αὐτοῦ) to get his boy dressed festively, and to fetch the fatted calf, kill it as the Torah prescribes (θύσατε), and join in the feasting and general merrymaking. The reason: “This child of mine was dead and has come back to life (ἀνέζησεν), he had gotten himself lost beyond retrieval (ἀπολωλῶς; cf. τὸ ἀπολωλῶς, said of the sheep) and is now found (εὐρέθη).” So the merrymaking begins. Obviously, it takes sinners and those who feel for them to enjoy company—a pointed reminder of the chapter’s opening line.

This sets the stage for the father’s encounter with his elder son—the counterpart of Jesus’ dissonant critics mentioned in the opening verses, as we will see. For now, however, one last grammatical-rhetorical feature in the first part of the parable requires our attention.

There is no doubt that the aorist passive ἐκολλήθη (v. 15) has a reflexive meaning: “he committed himself to someone.”¹¹ There is little or no doubt that the meaning of τὸ ἀπολωλῶς, ἀπόλλυμαι, and ἀπολωλῶς (vv. 6, 17, and 24, repeated at 32) is reflexive, too: both the sheep and the kid have gotten themselves lost—the former in the shepherd’s eyes, the latter in both his own eyes and his father’s. Besides, in the country where he is a nobody to start with, the boy decides he cannot proudly call himself (κληθῆναι) his father’s son any longer—another reflexive phrase, which he repeats even after his father has unmistakably welcomed him (v. 21). Even the father’s call for celebration shows this grammatical feature: the verbal form εὐφρανθῶμεν, a hortative passive-voice aorist, has once again a reflexive meaning: “let us make each other merry”—i.e., “let us be merry together”; the text gives us no grounds for assuming that the family servants—never mind others of even less consequence, say, the hired laborers—are excluded from the celebration.¹² Now in this context, is it not tempting

to interpret εὑρέθη (v. 24: “he was found”—another passive aorist) as “he let himself be found”? Let us see.

* * * * *

The account of the father’s encounter with his elder son begins with a startling *repetitio*: just as the toll collectors and the sinners are surrounding Jesus (ἐγγίζοντες) and hanging on his words (ἀκούειν αὐτοῦ), the elder boy comes close (ἤγγισεν) to the house and hears unexpected music-making and dancing going on (ἤκουσεν συμφωνίας καὶ χορῶν—no definite article). He “gets angry” (ὠργίσθη). Is this a faint echo of διοργύζοντες—i.e., another oral-acoustical contrastive parallel? It could be, especially if the reader should make a point of sounding it out that way. Also, does this passive aorist have a reflexive meaning, too? In other words, is he “getting himself angry”? Are we to understand that a latent preparedness to take offense is the elder brother’s first reaction to *any* merrymaking? No wonder, after arrogantly asking one of the “boys” (ἓνα τῶν παίδων) “just what might be going on” (τί ἂν εἶη ταῦτα)¹³ and learning that his brother is back “safe and sound” (ὕγιαίνοντα), he “did not care to come in” (οὐκ ἤθελεν εἰσελθεῖν), so his father comes outside to play the advocate (παρεκάλει). The elder son is unwilling; his refusal to join in the merrymaking is painfully matched by his resentful complaint to his father: he has never been given as much as a kid to “have a good time for myself with my friends” (ἵνα μετὰ τῶν φίλων μου εὐφρανθῶ). Εὐφρανθῶ[μεν] is the very word the father had used on his younger son’s arrival; the merrymaking which the elder son protests he never got to enjoy for himself is of the opposite kind: exclusive partying away from home—the kind that is apt to turn into something else.

The son’s implicit point—“I am the sole heir to this estate”—evokes an immediate counterpoint, which also serves to introduce the closing line of the chapter as a whole. The father says: “My child, you are always with me, and whatever is mine is yours. But by God, we had to (ἔδει) make merry together (εὐφρανθῆναι) and be joyful (χαρῆναι).”

* * * * *

In this way, the text ends on a note of consonance, with Jesus commending the cheerfulness of the chapter as a whole: the general

merrymaking after the younger son’s arrival and the common joy of the shepherd and the housewife with their friends and neighbors. Both are conveyed by two passive aorists, the latter chiming in with the invitations of the shepherd and the housewife (συγχάριτέ μοι). And finally, there is Jesus’ urgent invitation to his critics: “This brother of yours was dead and has come to life, and having gotten himself lost, he let himself be found (εὐρέθη; cf. v. 24)” —another passive aorist.

* * * * *

One last observation on the text of Luke’s fifteenth chapter. Strikingly, there is no mention of either recovery or return in the piece, even though both verbs are part of Luke’s vocabulary.¹⁵ Could it be that in the world of Luke 15, where the differences between losing and finding are obviously real, there is a wider horizon? Does the chapter imply that in the end both getting lost and getting found are occurring within the one universe accounted for by one and the same Father, who has no enemies and thus, will never agree to let either the world or humanity run their course apart from him? Do the words, “all that is mine is yours” imply “world without end”?

If it does, we can go to the Nicene creed for a parallel: “I believe in one God, Father, Sovereign Ruler of all that is” (Πιστεύω εἰς ἓνα Θεόν, Πατέρα παντοκράτορα). God is God of Gods and Lord of Lords: nothing lost or runaway can defeat God’s design for creation. The boy’s father is in no hurry; he is waiting. In the end, there will be joy.

* * * * *

Are we overinterpreting? Who knows? But there are moments in the New Testament that suggest we are not. The significant passive voice, for example, is not a grammatical quirk limited to Luke 15. A much older writing already shows it. Paul writes to the Galatians: “Now that you have come to know God (γνόντες θεόν)—but more importantly, now that you have come to be known by God (γνωσθέντες ὑπὸ θεοῦ)—how can you go back to the feeble and starveling powers to which you want to enslave yourselves again?” (Gal 4, 9a). It is inconceivable that Paul considers the new Christians to have not been known by God at all until recently; there has to be something new the matter

here, and it has to be a matter of actual, shared experience to the Galatians themselves, for Paul appeals to that experience throughout. So is it not wise to forget about the semi-Pelagian debates five centuries later and boldly translate, “now that you have let yourselves be known by God”? In other words, “Do you not realize that you have accepted yourselves as God’s own children, with the God-given freedom which this new self-acceptance involves?” In the first letter to the Corinthians a similar expression occurs, except that its underlying theme is not freedom but love—a theme hardly unknown in the letter to the Galatians.¹⁶ Paul writes, “All those who think they have come to know something do not yet know the way they are meant to know (εἴ τις δοκεῖ ἐγνωκέναι τι, οὐπω ἔγνω καθὼς δεῖ γινῶναι); but those who love—they are the ones who (show that they) are known by God” (εἰ δέ τις ἀγαπᾷ, οὗτος ἔγνωσται ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ).¹⁷ That is, by faith in Jesus Christ, they know who they are. Small wonder Paul acknowledges he regards himself as “known.”¹⁸ Liberated and loved, he can afford to “let on.” Paul uses the rhetoric of self-involvement—something the Church Fathers, for all their literary sophistication, were to continue.

* * * * *

Time to conclude. Why pay attention to rhetorical and oral-acoustical details and implied reflexives (both of them self-involving features) in a New Testament text? Let us pass over in silence one obvious reason already mentioned: all New Testament writings were written down to ensure reliable oral performance at community meetings. But for close to a century and a half now, the art of biblical interpretation has been largely a matter of cut-and-paste, with spectacular results.¹⁹ Yet this largely visual, academic, and (allegedly) theologically impartial approach has raised the question: is living faith now implicitly regarded an irritant to the objectifying mind reading and studying in silence? One would hope not.

But if not, then the written Word of God remains trenchant,²⁰ and Bible-scholars must learn how to listen. While it takes a robust head to study and teach, scholars, too, are not entirely unmoved by what happens in their chests: air, breath, affect. Obviously, here the question of controls becomes very difficult: it is much harder to establish whether what I “hear” is part of the biblical author’s intent or just the

result of my familiarity with the world of Scripture as a whole. But that ambiguity (and the scholarly duty to accept it) is the price of print literacy.²¹ For faith is the fruit of (affective) hearing,²² so sight is at least to some degree subject to affect: *ubi amor ibi oculus*.²³ So we theologians can do worse than systematically use our eyes and heads in the service of our chests, where (among many other things) the Spirit of Love urges us to speak, or rather, to say something—let’s say, “The Word.” He is alive in the Spirit, and has use for both our hearts and our voices (not to mention our ears). Thus, far from being the academic theologian’s poor relative, some form of live faith is his faithful, inspiring wife or her ditto husband. And we all know that around live spouses, we sense something live is going on, never mind the exact word for it; analogously, theology properly professed never turns a life into a neutral academic venture, not even at universities.

Notes

Published in *The Expository Times* 114 (2003): 399-404. Slightly touched up.

1. See F.J. van Beeck, *Christ Proclaimed: Christology as Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist, 1979), 274-86.

2. See 1 Cor 12, 21.

3. It combines a description of Jesus caught between sinners and righteous people, common to Mark and Q. See Mk 2, 15-17, parr. Mt 9, 10-13; Lk 5, 29-32; cf. 19, 7. 10. Of the three parables, the first hails from Q, whereas the second and third are single tradition in Lk. Synoptic comparison will lead to the conclusion that the final redactor’s contribution to Lk 15 is decisive, and so, vital to the chapter’s exegesis.

4. See Lk 5, 29-32; 19, 7. 10.

5. On “scribes” (γραμματεῖς) in the synoptics and specifically in Luke, see Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees: A Sociological Approach* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988), 174-82, 266-68.

6. See *The Gospel According to Luke* xx-xxiv, *The Anchor Bible*, vol. 28a (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1985), 1089. See Ex 10, 16; Gen 33, 4; 45, 14-15.

7. The only difference is that the shepherd invites “his friends and his neighbors” (τοὺς φίλους καὶ τοὺς γείτονας), while in the woman’s case the second definite article is omitted; she invites “her friends and neighbors” (τὰς

φίλας καὶ γείτονας)). Are we to understand that in the ancient women's world neighbors and friends coincide, while men were free to roam?

8. Gk. ἐπεθύμει. For the interpretation of ἐπιθυμέω as conveying an unfulfilled wish, see Joachim Jeremias, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*, 8th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1970), 183, nn. 1-3. Jeremias refers to four instances in the third gospel (Lk 15, 16; 16, 21; 17, 22; 22, 15), where ἐπιθυμέω has this meaning.

9. Note the absence of any allusion to *return*. He simply *goes*. It is a new beginning.

10. Two points. Unlike English “worthy,” which normally establishes a proper relationship on the part of an inferior term with regard to a superior (i.e., normative) one, Greek ἄξιος states a relationship of mutual “fit,” even between unequals. Secondly, in this case, since the boy is still away from home and at odds only with himself, it is wise to explain the aorist κληθῆναι as (in Moulton's phrase) a “formal passive with middle meaning” (i.e., as reflexive). Hence, “I am no longer fit to call myself your son.” Note that in Homeric and Hesiodic Greek, κληθῆναι (“proudly identifying oneself as”) is the near-equivalent of “being.”

11. Κολλέω (“to glue,” “to stick”) is a favorite verb in Luke-Acts: cf. Lk 10, 11 (said of dust); Acts 5, 13 (“getting involved”); 8, 29; 9, 26 (“join,” “get in with”); 10, 28 (“associate with”); 17, 34 (“stick with”). In all instances, a reflexive translation would be appropriate.

12. In this regard, the third parable differs most obviously from the first two: neither the sheep nor the coin are invited to the party; as already stated, they are not company.

13. Note the parallel ἕνα τῶν μισθίων σου — ἕνα τῶν παίδων. A day laborer (μισθίος) does not “belong”; he is a nameless outsider. When the runaway younger brother understood he was lost, he had found himself deserving of the contempt with which day laborers were routinely treated: “Treat me as some day laborer of yours.” Both by contrast and analogously, the elder boy is treating a trusted domestic servant with gratuitous disdain, calling him as one would routinely call “some houseboy.” Note also the optative + ἄν—archaic in Koine, and in the New Testament found solely in Lk-Acts (Lk 1, 62; 6, 11; 9, 46; 15, 26; 18, 36 [?]; Acts 5, 24; 8, 31; 10, 17). In every case except Lk 18, 36 (where the text is uncertain) the syntagma serves to express irritation in the face of surprise, ranging from puzzlement to acute annoyance. Here, it would appear to connote both caustic bluster and disdain. On a related point, is it conceivable that the phrase ἐνὶ τῶν πολιτῶν (“some citizen”; v. 15) implies disdain, too?

14. Note the tacit allusion to God's plan: cf. Lk 24, 26, *coll.* 2, 49; 9, 22 ().

15. Cf. also vv. 6, 18, 27, 30. For ἀνευρίσκω (“retrieve”), see Lk 2, 16; Acts 21, 4; its meaning is “to discover those who/that which you already know are/is

there for you to discover them/it.” For ἐπανέρομαι (“return”), see Lk 10, 35; 19, 15.

16. See, for example, Gal 5, 13-15.

17. 1 Cor 8, 3; I am adopting the *lectio difficilior* suggested by P⁴⁶. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, second ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/German Bible Society, 1994), 490-91.

18. Επεγνώσθη; 1 Cor 13, 12.

19. Cf. Hamish Swanson’s mischievous essay “The Revisers’ Communion,” in *Church Membership and Intercommunion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973), 93-120.

20. Cf. Heb 4, 12.

21. Here what comes to mind is William Empson’s provocative *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1949),

22. Cf. Rom 10, 17; Gal 3, 2. 5.

23. Aquinas, *In III Sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 2, r. [32].

OCCASIONAL COMMENTARY

Apophaticism, Liturgy, and Theology

for Geoffrey Wainwright

In a profound and perceptive article, later incorporated into a fine little book, Louis Dupré has given us much to think about.¹ He raises an issue which any liturgical theologian must face sooner or later: the correlation of silence and speech in the language of worship, and so, in the language of theology. He writes:

Those who enjoy the closest familiarity with God are the most reluctant to be loose-lipped about him. But sooner or later the question arises: How can we continue to use words at that point? Is silence the end? Is a purely negative theology itself not a “creaturely” approach to God? Should it not, at some point, abandon also its own creaturely reservations and in the absence of words of its own listen to the Word that God himself has spoken? . . . should we not say that in God’s silence I hear the Word, in his darkness I see the Light, in his rest I enjoy his active Love?²

In an article written by such a quintessentially Catholic philosopher of religion like Dupré, this is an unexpected thing to find. First of all, the very etymology of the noun “mystery” reminds us of the significance of deliberate, eloquent silence in liturgical celebrations;³ a scholar like Dupré, whose religious sensibilities were shaped by the Roman liturgy, must be presumed to appreciate the significance of silence in worship. Even more is it to be presumed that Dupré is aware that the philosophical and theological traditions of the West have found it imperative to have recourse to apophaticism in the service of speaking of God;⁴ Thomas Aquinas himself can close one of his treatises with a nearly literal quotation from a famous decree promulgated by the fourth Council of the Lateran (1215 A.D.), which goes so far as to suggest that the element of negativity enjoys pride of place in language about God:

the measure of human and divine perfection is not the same. *For no likeness, no matter how great, can obtain between the Creator and the creature, without there being found right there an unlikeness which is greater. This is so because the creature is at an infinite distance from God.*⁵

No wonder we find young Aquinas explaining, in his Commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, that

when we proceed towards God on the road of removal, we first deny everything corporeal of God. Then we deny everything spiritual as it is found in creatures, such as goodness and wisdom. *At that point*, all that is left in our minds is that God is, and nothing else; thus God is, in a kind of perplexing fashion, so to speak. *Last of all*, however, we remove from God even this very being according as it occurs in creatures. At that point, God is left to dwell in a kind of darkness of ignorance; yet *after the manner of this ignorance*—at least as long as we are on our present way—we *are best united with God*, as Dionysius says. It is a dark of sorts, in which God is said to dwell.⁶

Why, then, should Dupré wish to revise a tradition that goes back to the Cappadocians? Why does he want to commend what looks like naiveté in naming God?

The answer is as simple as it is profound. Dupré's suggestion raises the stunning possibility that our habit of imposing on ourselves an absolute silence in matters pertaining to the knowledge of God may be the very opposite of *docta ignorantia*; it may betray a residual intellectual self-regard that is inappropriate in the Presence of God.

Let us explain the implications of Dupré's proposal. Meister Eckhart insists that the definitive form of the knowledge of God is utter silence. If Dupré should be right, it would follow that Eckhart's position is all-too-human, since it would imply that human intelligence is the tribunal of last appeal to decide what language suits the living God and what doesn't.⁷ And as a matter of fact, it turns out that Dupré asks us to entertain the possibility that John Tauler, and even more Jan van Ruusbroec, are not just closer to the Great Tradition (which has boldly

spoken of God in explicitly trinitarian terms), but also superior to Eckhart in philosophical subtlety. Dupré writes:

John Tauler . . . shows how the Trinity inhabits the soul. . . .
 “We should learn to find the Trinity in ourselves and realize we are in a *real* way formed according to its image.” . . . Even in its natural state the soul, however imperfect, bears this divine image. Being a finite reflection of that perfect Image of God’s self-expression, *the soul participates in the divine life of the Son*. Spiritual progress consists “in recognizing this blessed image in ourselves above all things.”⁸

In sum, Dupré argues that Ruusbroec’s explicit, articulate trinitarianism is not so much the Christian stepping-stone toward apophatic theology as its inseparable, co-equal friend. The Christian tradition has tacitly endorsed this conviction by acting on it: it has not hesitated to speak of God in trinitarian terms, right in the teeth of its own insistence that God is essentially incomprehensible (ἀκατάληπτος). How can this be accounted for?

To understand this, we have to start by recalling that the undivided Jewish and Christian Tradition of faith in God is a tradition of glorification, from protological start to eschatological finish:

. . . in his temple the cry is: “Glory!” Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of powers: the whole earth is full of his Glory. (Ps 29, 9; Is 6, 3)

Holy, holy, holy is God the sovereign Lord of all . . . You are worthy, Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power . . . You are worthy to receive the scroll and break its seals . . . Praise and honor, glory and might, to the One who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb, forever! (Rev 4, 8. 11; 5, 9. 13)

Let us reflect. Praise and thanksgiving are abandon, not cultivation of self. They are ecstatic before they ever give rise to thought. They lift humanity to the peak of the cosmos and its worship, and in this very act of worship humanity finds its transcendental attunement to God (i.e., its radical participation in God) actualized to the fullest available

extent. Yet, *pace* the apophatic tradition, articulate cataphatic praise and thanksgiving very much drive home the realization that God is *semper maior*. In that sense, dedicated speech accomplishes the same as what is accomplished by the posture of speechless awe before God.

This leads to conclusions about apophatic theology. In the Christian tradition, apophaticism is first of all a response. Like glorification in words, it acknowledges: “God, You are God.” In other words, in the Christian tradition apophaticism is a form of worship; it is not a free-standing, autonomous, self-authenticating form of human religiosity. At root, apophaticism proceeds not so much from humanity’s realization of the inadequacy of its own conception of God as from its awe at finding itself placed before and encompassed by God. This awe is also the point made by articulate Jewish and Christian *cataphasis*:

We will say a lot, and we never arrive; the sum of what we say is: the All—He is it. Glorifying him, at what point will we be up to it? For he is the Great One; beyond compare, above all his works. The Lord is awesome and terribly great; wonderful is his sustained power. Glorify the Lord as much as you can, for he will always be higher. As you extol him, muster all your strength; be untiring, for you never arrive. (Sir 43, 27-30 [lxx])

Thus the inspiration to praise God affirmatively, in speech and not by silence alone, comes from awe; even as we utter God’s praises we realize that no matter how much we glorify God in explicit words, there will always be more to say. Apophaticism is built right into the explicit, expressive language of praise and thanksgiving.

Let us sum up. The Great Tradition tacitly claims that human language is capable of cataphatic affirmations that leave God’s incomprehensibility intact.

However, the claim just made raises a serious fundamental question. From a linguistic point of view, is it legitimate to propose that affirmative language leaves God’s incomprehensibility intact? Let us try.

We live in a culture which glorifies information and data. Large numbers of educated people tend to think you either know exactly “what you’re talking about” or you don’t. In latter case, you “hypothesize,” “do research,” and “collect data,” to find “solutions” and “answers”). The method is practical (or at least common practice). It is

hardly subtle. Why? We tend to overlook Aristotle's warning, to the effect that our knowledge

will be adequate if it has as much clearness *as the subject-matter admits of*; for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions.⁹

In such a denotative world, pleas for ethics (especially of the contractual, just-play-by-the-rules kind) can still be heard (if rarely followed *con amore*). By contrast, pleas in favor of value-driven ethics are seldom heard. Why? Because it takes a commitment to a shared system of moral values and priorities conscientiously endorsed to arrive at a moral consensus rather than a merely pragmatic one. Yet experience teaches us that appeals to conscience are invariably used to assert individual rights and justify individual decisions.

In this rational, contractual context, material value ethics are hard to come by. What is in even scarcer supply is agreement on the tacit foundation of any value-based ethic: the sense that the moral sense is not self-supporting. In the end, moral living is predicated on a sense of mystery. But in a world of denotation, appeals to "mystery" sound irrational and naive; they are "medieval," "vague" and not "practical." In other words, where denotation reigns supreme, wisdom and considered judgment are scarcely part of "objective" or "useful" learning, and prayer even less (not to mention contemplative prayer).¹⁰

What is far less well realized today is this: we use words symbolically, and we do so all the time, even today. We often speak and write to convey, with an odd immediacy, something different from what our words signify, denotatively or connotatively. Let us give a linguistic account of this.

We begin by recalling that meaning is not the prerogative of words taken singly. True, the fact that words taken by themselves can signify apart from context or particular situations is one of the marvels of language. But normally words convey meaning not by themselves, but in clusters; reading dictionaries from cover to cover is not a habit of the mentally healthy. Only together with other words do single words reliably refer to realities out-there. In that sense, too, "the meaning of words is determined by the company they keep" (Ludwig Wittgenstein). In religious language, clustering typically occurs in two

different (though related) “figures of speech”: metaphor and paradox. This invites clarification.

Those among us who have ever harbored, or muttered under our breath, or actually uttered sentiments like “A real toad!” or “A real honeybun!” know that these phrases not only connote a few exquisite feelings on their part, but also refer to an intensely-present reality out-there. However, they do not do so by ordinary denotation. Instead, “toad” and “honeybun” are metaphors.¹¹ Metaphors are “figures of speech,” but this makes them anything but meaningless, harmless, bloodless, or less able to refer to truths. For metaphors say more, not less. They help us refer to and deal with realities more compelling than mere denotation is apt or able to convey. Just think about “My shepherd is the Lord.”

Paradoxes have one thing in common with metaphors: they, too, refer to “compelling realities out-there.” But in paradoxes the reference results from the complete vacuum of denotative meaning created by the clash of opposites. One example is T.S. Eliot’s powerful evocation of Christ as the “wounded surgeon” plying “the steel that questions the distempered part” (*East Coker*, in *Four Quartets*, iv). Gerard Manley Hopkins, in addressing God, weds metaphor to paradox to create a sense of God’s mysterious presence:

Be adored among men,
 God, Three-numberèd form;

 Beyond saying sweet, past telling of tongue,
 Thou art lightning and love, I found it, a winter and warm;
 Father and fondler of heart Thou hast wrung;
 Hast thy dark descending and most art merciful then.
(*The Wreck of the Deutschland*, 9)

In light of such texts, why not consider it reasonable, even today, to join Hamlet, face to face with his father’s ghost? Caught between the Great Tradition (which knew of dreams and visions) and the New Learning (which had come to consider them purely mental) he said:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
 Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (I.v.166-67)

A twentieth-century American woman with a sharp pen, intensely Catholic instincts, a splendid love of the truth, and an uncanny flair for the difference between plain truth and learned humbug, Flannery O'Connor, puts it differently, but no less incisively. To an inquiring friend she writes:

Dogma can in no way limit a limitless God. The person outside the Church attaches a different meaning to it than the person in. For me a dogma is only *a gateway to contemplation* and is *an instrument of freedom* and not of restriction. It preserves mystery for the human mind.

And to drive the point home, she adds, with characteristic sassiness:

Henry James said the young woman of the future would know nothing of mystery or manners. He had no business to limit it to one sex.¹²

Point made. But in this case, the point made is not to add to what we have learned from Geoffrey Wainwright, but to honor what he has taught us. And to honor him.

Notes

Geoffrey Wainwright put himself squarely in the center of the ecumenical theological world by his book *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). This essay was first published in *Ecumenical Theology in Worship, Doctrine, and Life: Essays Presented to Geoffrey Wainwright on his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. David S. Cunningham, Ralph Del Colle, and Lucas Lamadrid (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33-39. Lightly revised.

1. Louis Dupré, "From Silence to Speech: Negative Theology and Trinitarian Spirituality," *Communio International Catholic Review* 9 (1984): 28-34. The book mentioned in the text is *The Common Life: The Origins of Trinitarian Mysticism and Its Development by Jan Ruusbroec* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).

2. Dupré, "From Silence to Speech," 32.

3. The Greek noun μυστήριον is derived from the verb μύω. Any good Greek dictionary will inform us that μύω means “to close one’s eyes” or “to close one’s mouth.” But what does that mean? Let us try. Μύω means: “observing the kind of silence that becomes so eloquent that it elicits the kind of speech that reveals the Truth (while at the same time veiling it), and thus creates room for a sacred silence once again, inclusive, pregnant with truth, and intolerant of falsehood.” This is not a translation, of course, but a periphrasis; it sins by prolixity, but it conveys the true meaning.

4. For an early treatment of affirmation and negation in modern thought, see Louis Dupré, *The Other Dimension: A Search for the Meaning of Religious Attitudes* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 323-76.

5. *Expositio super secundam Decretalem (Opuscula theologica I*, ed. Marietti, nr. 1198): “Non tamen est idem modus perfectionis humanae et divinae, quia non potest esse tanta similitudo inter Creatorem et creaturam, quin major inveniatur ibi dissimilitudo, propter hoc quod creatura in infinitum distat a Deo.” Cf. Denziger-Schönmetzer 806.

6. *In I Sent.*, 8, 1, 1, *ad 4*: “quando in Deum procedimus per viam remotionis, *primo* negamus ab eo corporalia; et *secundo* etiam intellectualia, secundum quod inveniuntur in creaturis, ut bonitas et sapientia; et *tunc remanet tantum* in intellectu nostro, quia est, et nihil amplius: unde est sicut in quadam confusione. *Ad ultimum* autem etiam hoc ipsum esse, secundum quod est in creaturis, ab ipso removemus; et tunc remanet in quadam tenebra ignorantiae, secundum quam ignorantiam, quantum ad statum viae pertinet, optime Deo jungimur . . . et haec est quaedam caligo, in qua Deus habitare dicitur.” The last phrase alludes to Solomon’s words at the temple dedication according to the Vulgate (2 Chron 6, 1): “Dominus pollicitus est, ut habitaret in caligine.”

7. Dupré adds that Eckhart runs the risk of placing God’s unity beyond the Father—i.e., beyond God’s trinity. He might have added that Eckhart also gives in to the West’s long-standing bias in the direction a philosophic, monistic, modalist monotheism in trinitarian theology. Strikingly (but not really surprisingly), this very conception of monotheism has been called into doubt in works by two great Jewish thinkers: Martin Buber’s *Ich und Du*, and (with splendid indignation) Emmanuel Lévinas’s *Totalité et infinité*.

8. Dupré, “From Silence to Speech,” 33 (italics added for emphasis). Readers familiar with Cappadocian theology will notice that Tauler here retrieves—intentionally or coincidentally—the understanding of the Son as “archetype” (ἀρχέτυπος; the stamped image on a coin).

9. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 3 (1094^b14-15) (italics added).

10. What has been explained can also be put as follows: we live in a culture that admires denotation. However, theologically and philosophically speaking, we cannot speak of God in denotative ways. We do not have any handles on

God; we have no purchase on God, which would allow us to speak denotatively. Yet the culture we live in loves denotation. No wonder many will say that knowing and speaking of God is a matter of feeling: they will suggest that we speak of God only by connotation, and in fact we often do. That connotation is a factor at every level of human communication is, of course, well known, and interpreting faith in God in terms of pure feeling has interesting credentials in Romanticism. The problem is that the feeling elements in language both spoken and written cannot so easily be separated from the rational elements. So when we are told connotation signifies the “irrational part” of human communication we are skating on thin ice; for feeling is a quality of what we say, not a “part.” Besides, believers claim that faith in God is not only deeply felt, but also reasonable, as well as a call to responsible action. To account for the “knowledge” of God on the basis of connotation alone is to ignore that all connotation is parasitical on denotation and performance. On “performative” language, see J.L. Austin’s classic *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

11. In terms of structural linguistics, what happens in metaphors is “the disjunctive (or selective) application of meaning-elements.” To clarify this, let us explain *ex contrario*. Take the two sample phrases, and assume that, instead of yourself, the speakers are, respectively, a zoologist and a pastry-baker. In their several contexts, odds are that the entire complex of meaning-elements of “toad” and “honeybun” would apply, respectively, to an (ungainly) little animal or to an (attractive) piece of confection. After all, amphibbiologists and pastry-bakers are apt to refer to an actual toad and a honeybun almost every day. In other words, they would use the two words denotatively; they would apply all the meaning-elements of “toad” or “honeybun” together (“conjunctively”) to the amphibian or the piece of pastry. In metaphors, however, only a few selected meaning-elements—the “relevant” ones—are applied, either to the unpleasant person or to the attractive one. But that application is all the more forceful for being selective. Less denotation means stronger reference. Would you not rather deal with a little unpleasant amphibian croaking *sotto voce* and scrambling around your office than with a colleague you cordially detest, and is a charming friend not infinitely better company than the sweetest bun?

12. Letter of 2 August 1955, in *Collected Works: Flannery O’Connor*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald, *The Library of America*, 39 (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988), 943-44.

Twenty-Three Points on the Ordination of Women

1

The issue of the ordination of women to the diaconate, the priesthood, and the episcopate is primarily not a doctrinal, but a discretionary one. Far from relegating the issue to a secondary status, the discretionary nature of the issue puts it at the heart of what the Church is all about.

2

None of the existing doctrinal justifications of the exclusion of women from Holy Orders are compelling; rather, they tend to appear, on closer hermeneutical inspection, to be nothing but doctrinal involutions of time-determined cultural habits.

3

In particular, the justification of the exclusion of women from Holy Orders on the basis of the christological argument (“By God’s own revealed will it takes a male to be the shepherd of the Church.”) is not just dubious, but downright close to heresy, since it places masculinity in a privileged position in the hypostatic union, contrary to the teaching of the Church, which has held, ever since the Cappadocians, that the Word assumed the human nature “without the individual characteristics.”

4

The only doctrine that applies is the doctrine of God’s all-inclusive love, as implied, e.g., in the baptismal formula of the letter to the Galatians: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is . . . neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3, 25). Hence, all human persons can become the bearers of Christ’s person and of his ministries. But then, doctrine is not everything.

5

Hence, the doctrinal arguments in favor of the exclusion of women from, or inclusion in, the ministry fail to convince. Therefore, if any reasons in favor of either are to be found, they will have to come from 'agapeic' considerations. These will appear in the form of discretionary judgments born out of the desire to show concern for the weak and the wronged. An analogy is afforded by Paul's treatment of the eating of meat offered to idols (1 Cor 8, 1-13; 10, 23-11, 1) in spite of his realization that "an idol has no real existence" (1 Cor 8,). Since "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor 8, 1), the issue of women's Orders, seen as an agapeic question, is part of the central concern of the Church.

6

There are good reasons to claim that the very *agap* which, in the tradition, provided some compelling arguments in favor of the exclusion of women from the ordained ministry, now favors their inclusion. However, it is possible to see this only if the tradition is viewed, not as culpably unaware of the fact that women were the object of discrimination, but as invincibly ignorant on this score. To appreciate this, two other assumptions are necessary.

7

The long-standing discrimination against women, justified by philosophical, anthropological, and psychological theories, and shown in such degenerative phenomena as the *Malleus Maleficarum* and the ensuing witch-hunts, is a cultural prejudice, and, as such, a concrete example of social sin. Social sin is not less sinful for being social, nor does it engage human responsibility less for its going undetected for ages. Its victims, in this case, are both women and men.

8

The raising of the issue of discrimination against women in the world as well as in the Church is, theologically speaking, an instance of historical revelation, and, to that extent, the work of the Holy Spirit in the world as well as in the Church. A parallel example is afforded by the nineteenth-century revelation of the immorality of slavery.

9

Discrimination against women has had profound consequences for the understanding and the practice of the ordained ministry. In the past, it led to the ministry developing into a clerical caste, the existence of which has been theologically rationalized, since the third century, by a mistaken appeal to the Old Testament priesthood, and by a (mostly tacit) reliance on the cultic sensibilities and structures of the late Roman Empire, the feudal society, and the monarchic state. The Rationalist perception of the male as rationally and functionally superior is not blameless either.

10

One of the essential features of a caste is: excessive reliance on objective powers, masking a lack of real integration of the person, and even impeding its growth in the future. Hence, the sacramental and preaching ministries, sanctioned by ordination, are often unsupported by personally undertaken “real” ministry. As a result, members of the clergy are frequently—and often only half-consciously—the prisoners of their caste.

11

Hence, one should be no more in favor of men’s ordinations than women’s. In other words: women as well as men could jeopardize their integrity in aspiring to the ordained ministry.

12

The recent process of erosion of the clerical caste must be welcomed, though without glee.

13

Ordained ministers who act in a caste-like fashion suffer from a social affliction, and hence, require understanding, compassion, and forgiveness. They do not know what they do. What looks like the awkward exercise of naked power is often a cloak for the experience of acute personal insufficiency.

14

Women who aspire to ordination in order to get where the power is suffer from the same social affliction, and hence require understanding,

compassion, and forgiveness. What looks like raw ambition is often a cloak for the experience of acute frustration.

15

In and of itself the aspiration to power or the actual exercise of it has no standing in the Church viewed as the Temple of God in the Spirit, the Body of Christ, the Servant of God in Christ Jesus. This is also true of the sacramental and preaching ministries, no matter how valid or authorized, and no matter how capably exercised.

16

Both ordained ministers and men and women aspiring to the ordained ministry must be encouraged, by hierarchy and faithful alike, to venture into the fears, doubts, and crudities of “real” ministry, so that they may also come to experience its rewards. These rewards are first and foremost the building of the Body of Christ as sinners and sufferers come to life, but also the discovery of the actual working of divine grace as an experienced reality in the process of one’s own integration into, and reconciliation with, the Body of Christ.

17

Real ministry includes all the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, and “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, whatever is excellent, whatever is worthy of praise” (Phil 8), done by apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, and others (Eph 11).

18

Putting the issue in terms of the “hyphenated priest” is fatal to the discussion and leads to a separation between the sacramental and the real ministries. Both mental health and an Incarnation-inspired theology demand that the issue be put in terms of the “integrated priest.” Hence, encouraging women to engage in real ministry with the intention of keeping them out of the ordained ministry, and encouraging men to engage in sacramental ministry while making it difficult for

them to engage in real ministry both offend against the reality of the Incarnation. Ordained ministry, therefore, is not fully Christian if it is not supported by real ministry.

19

Many Christians are not ready for real ministry extended to them by women. Some of them are not even ready for real ministry extended to them by men. The only way they will be delivered from this debilitating prejudice is by experiencing real ministry. The latter will have to reckon with the probability of rejection. The real minister who is rejected—if he or she does not turn self-righteous—is in excellent company.

20

Many Christians are ready for real ministry by both men and women, and hence, they are largely ready for the ordained ministry by both women and men. This does not mean that men do not need support for real ministry, nor does it mean that women do not need support for ordained ministry.

21

It is part of the mission of the authorities in the Church to do the supporting, especially if the ministers meet with rejection.

22

The issue of women's Orders, if set in the context of agape, should not become an ideology, especially when viewed against the background of the Church's badly needed agapeic concern with war and hunger in the world, with national and international injustice, etc. Yet, no issue becomes unimportant because there are more important issues. The Father also cares for the flowers and the sparrows (and the whales).

23

In the Roman Catholic Church it is psychologically hard to imagine that the admission of women to Holy Orders could be accomplished without compulsory celibacy becoming optional celibacy.

Notes

Discussion points at numerous clergy meetings in the northeastern United States, both Anglican-Episcopalian and Roman Catholic, in the 1970s, originally privately printed and distributed as "Some Theses in Connection with the Ordination of Women" by The Propers, Kansas City, Missouri. Published in German as "Thesen zur Ordination von Frauen," *Orientierung* 39 (1975): 153-55. Slightly rephrased in places.

Pushing or Pulling: One Theologian's Perspective

So Archbishop Raymond Burke of Saint Louis threw down the gauntlet to the Catholic politicians who have voted pro-choice in his former jurisdiction of Lacrosse, Wisconsin, where he also ordered his clergy to refuse Communion to them. For me, a bishop denying sacraments to Catholics was not a first. In February 1942, in the Dutch City of the Hague, I watched a Catholic gentleman, a pious daily communicant, being refused Holy Communion in a noisy scuffle at the communion rail. I was an eleven-year-old sixth grader, an altar boy in awe at the liturgy, and determined to be a priest.

The Sunday before, I was serving at the 7:00 A.M. mass, when our pastor, a short, feisty man, surprised us. He emerged from the sacristy, mounted the pulpit after the Gospel, and vigorously read to the congregation a pastoral letter from the Dutch bishops. In it, any Catholic directly or indirectly involved in checking the public registries anywhere in the Netherlands for names of ethnically Jewish citizens was excommunicated. The pastor repeated his performance at the other four liturgies; I was there. Later on I heard he did not want to get his associates arrested by the authorities.

One result of the bishops' letter was revenge. Within weeks, the SS were rounding up all Jews who were Catholic converts or somehow associated with Catholics; being Protestant or having Protestant associations became a lifesaver for some Jews. Nine months later, toward the end of November, I found the door of my violin teacher's apartment sealed shut; his common-law wife was a Catholic. He was killed in Auschwitz in early December. Three months before, a Carmelite nun best known as Edith Stein, arrested in the Netherlands, had also been killed there. Five years before, in 1938, she had fled Germany in the dead of night. Five years ago, in 1998, she was canonized as Saint Benedicta of the Cross.

* * * * *

No sooner had I learned about Archbishop Burke's measure in regard to Catholic politicians voting pro-choice on abortion and euthanasia than I recalled the Dutch bishops' letter. I also found the archbishop's measure out of proportion. On reflection, I found my reaction reasonable enough to put it in writing. This essay is the result.

A warning to the reader. This is a complex essay, but it has a dominant thesis: since *Humanae vitae* the Catholic bishops have suffered a painful loss of pastoral and magisterial authority among both laity and clergy on matters pertaining to marriage and human life, a loss decisively worsened by the recent crisis. To Catholic theologians this must raise the question to what extent this places the unity of the Catholic Church in the United States in jeopardy. Under the circumstances, I argue, it is imprudent for bishops to push the envelope by threatening Catholic politicians voting pro-choice with refusal of Holy Communion. For, arguably, the canonical grounds on which such a threat is based would not hold up even if the the bishops' pastoral authority were enjoying full acceptance. That is to say, here and now it is by no means evident that the bishops have a positive pastoral duty to utter this particular threat.

* * * * *

A Catholic theologian's pursuit of what Aquinas calls "sacred doctrine" involves responsibilities and privileges. The latter are wonderful but few in number; they do not include the right to call into question a bishop's authority or his motives. The former may involve questioning his pastoral-theological discernment in making particular decisions. Accordingly, my argument with Archbishop Burke's action is based on theological sources: the Catholic Tradition since at least the Middle Ages, and more recently, the Catholic way of doing things here in the United States. As Bernard Lonergan used to say, "It's not a short story." Not till the last third of this piece will I come to conclusions.

Let me start with some non-theological remarks. Firstly, I am not stating "my opinion"; in fact, I admit to being allergic to theologians' opinions. I have always agreed with Lonergan's caustic saying: "Good ideas are a dime a dozen."

I have greatly benefited from first amendment freedom of opinion in the U.S.A. Unlike the freedom of opinion in the Northern half of the Low Countries (where tolerance is a matter of régime rather than enjoyment), American freedom of opinion is key to free thought. Much as opinions enshrine neither truth nor sound judgment, an opinionate climate is intellectually stimulating; it encourages thought by inviting tough questioning. I find myself thankful for the many years I have lived and learned (and taught) in this Republic, which has constitutionally relied on Almighty God, has not opposed religion as a matter of principle, yet has refused to consider the support of particular religious establishments the duty of its elected government. What gives me pause these days is the North American habit of reveling in opinions to the point of pushing them as guiding truths, regardless of what “we the people” express democratically. Have habits of fighting two dangerous ideology-driven political establishments rubbed off? Are we now fighting the world?

* * * * *

But now for the matter in hand. In Archbishop Burke’s judgment, “the port of entry for the culture of death in our society has been the abandonment of the respect for the procreative meaning of the conjugal act.” I could not agree more. Still, let me add something. Before the appearance of Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae vitae* (1968), North-America’s public culture had long been moving toward enjoyment of sexual experience *per se*. It did so chiefly on social-psychological and developmental-psychological grounds, favored by the hidden persuaders of Madison Avenue and the media, and thus, lacking in humane depth. Accordingly, our public culture now accepts, commends, and indeed encourages sexual experience quite apart from any consequences for life, except (and it hurts to write this) for the life of those enjoying their allegedly “private” lives as they please.

I have more to confess. Ever since *Humanae vitae* (which I have never gotten myself to oppose) I have been listening to Catholic couples, both mature and less mature. It led to reflection, and more recently, to study and writing to develop my theological understanding of the encyclical. I regret to have taken this long, but then again, it took me thirty-two years to make up my theological mind on that most delicate of theological mysteries, the Virgin Birth. Such is the life of

learning: the body travels on horseback, the mind arrives on foot. The joining of catholic faith and intellectual integrity takes time; it is never self-assured. And patience and perseverance are not so much the result of effort as gifts found in one's knapsack at daybreak—a major theme not just in Luke's Gospel but also in Augustine's last writings. He wrote a treatise on it two years before he died: *On the Gift of Perseverance*.

* * * * *

Now let me, as promised, take up the longer Catholic Tradition. In its light, the single most important teaching of *Humanae vitae* is this: contraception is not a matter of convenience, but a fully human—i.e., moral—issue. In this regard it differs in kind from our choice of, say, medicine, furniture, or toothpaste. Paul VI gives us a coherent as well as traditional argument for this teaching. Contraception is a moral issue.

But here I also recall a classroom incident in my second semester at Boston College, in 1969. A sophomore, whose face and name I recall, told me in class that it was the teaching of the Catholic Church that people should go to confession before receiving Communion. When I explained to him that this was in fact mistaken, he bristled and took offense. It took me a moment to realize that he was resisting discussion. But in due course I did discover how widely it was assumed that an unmarried man was bound to have committed mortal sin, mostly of the sexual kind. Now every Catholic knew that genital gratification outside the context of marriage was mortal sin, period. Aquinas had taught it in his day, when it was pretty much agreed that important people, from the emperor (and the pope?) on down, were apt to have begotten bastard children, whom they felt obliged in conscience to provide for, as a matter of "honor." But I also found that Aquinas, in his original writings, never specifies sinful acts *within* marriage. And in the Oriental Tradition, sexual sins of married couples are never mentioned—as several Eastern prelates and theologians, both Orthodox and Catholic, have told me over the years. "Our moral theology stops at the door of the sanctuary which is the marriage-bed," one said.

By the early seventeenth century a more subtle question had arisen, possibly from habits of dalliance among younger folks in the growing upper middle class. Between unmarried partners, how sinful is playful intimacy that stops short of intercourse and orgasm? Let me make a

long story short. It started with a duty imposed on Jesuit teachers. They were obliged to teach that sexual play between unmarried erotic partners could never be, in and of itself, “a small matter.” Put differently, intentional extramarital genital gratification was mortal sin as a matter of principle. Let us phrase this in technical terms. The rule for Catholic teachers was: genital activity outside marriage deliberately pursued (*luxuria procurata*) does not recognize small matter (*parvitas materiae*). By contrast, in the area of theft, “small matter” was possible: stealing a dime is venial sin by reason of the quantity of the object; no such plea could be entered in the case of “fornication”; outside the setting of marriage genital activity must be regarded as in and of itself mortal. By 1647, this teaching was tightened to include sexual activity engaged in by unmarried persons not actively pursuing sex, but only acquiescing to it. This teaching, ratified by several Roman pontiffs, is still in force. An expert writes in his class notes distributed at the Gregorian University in Rome that “from at least the beginning of the eighteenth century it has been commonly taught by manuals and in seminaries that ‘outside marriage . . . intentional sexual gratification, even if incomplete, is mortal sin.’ ”

Accordingly, the sole ground on which in particular cases such pleasures could be taken to be venial sin was lack of due consciousness or freedom. Priests knew this well. In actual practice, sins against the sixth commandment are rarely black-and-white, and in the confessional, the typical unmarried youngsters’ dilemmas were also heard in the whispers of married women unable to resist their husbands.

In any case, it is fair to say that among North American Catholics (but not just among them), especially in immigrant communities influenced by Jansenism and Puritanism, all sexual activity was implicitly considered morally delinquent, except, conceivably, in the dark context of marriage. A total of five passages in Augustine were quoted regularly, out of context of course, to the effect that there was no such thing as intercourse without at least venial sin. But this was a departure from Catholic tradition; my bristling sophomore was only one out of countless scrupulous American Catholics anxious about sex. I had encountered this frenzied phenomenon in my own country, of course, but not to such an excessive pitch. Unsurprisingly, Vatican II felt it had to insist on the high human (i.e., moral) value of faithful sexual intimacy and love. Accordingly, in Pope John Paul II’s discourses and writings on

marriage, faithful sexual intimacy and love is the dominant philosophical and theological theme. (The media have kept insisting that the ban on contraception is; they won't have it any other way.)

After study and reflection, I came to this conclusion: *Humanae vitae* teaches that every act of sexual intimacy must be open to life, quite apart from the physiological issue whether life is likely to result or not. One way to put it is this: between committed partners, there is always more the matter than animal instinct. Hence, contraception cannot be commended as “a positively good and human thing to do.” At the same time, the encyclical stops short of teaching that every act of sexual intimacy blemished by contraception is mortal sin. Several bishops’ conferences saw this almost immediately. In an act of both collegiality with Pope Paul and pastoral guidance toward the married, they accepted the teaching of *Humanae vitae*, and referred the married not only to Confession and the Eucharist, but also to their consciences—a common Catholic way of suggesting that there is room for “small matter” in the practice of sexual intimacy of married people. Obviously, none of those bishops’ conferences wrote that contraception within marriage is “only” venial sin, as if it were all right to disappoint the Spirit of Love in small ways, furtively.

But here we must also remember the history of the contraception issue in the Catholic Church. After the acceptance of artificial birth control by the Anglican Communion, Pius XI made it clear in *Divini illius* (1928) and *Casti Connubii* (1930) that sexual liberation was abhorrent. But in the second half of Pius XII’s pontificate Catholics began to distinguish between the morality of genital activity and the morality of contraception. Unfortunately, one issue fell between the cracks: the gravity of sins against the sixth commandment within marriage. Pope Paul VI decided (prudently, I now think) to reserve that issue to himself, and at once set up a committee to advise him. The eventual result, intensely disappointing at the time, was *Humanae vitae*. In my judgment, this is precisely where the United States bishops overlooked an opportunity to show care for the laity.

* * * * *

Now let us focus on my second source: the Catholic way of living here in the United States. In my judgment, what occurred in the

United States was this: the bishops treated contraception not as a pastoral-theological issue (which it was), but as a doctrinal one. Several causes suggest themselves to account for this mistake. For one, American-style liberal Protestantism, especially of the Puritan, individualist kind, has long viewed the Catholic distinction between venial and mortal sin as a “typical instance of Roman hypocrisy”; after all, “true Christians don’t settle for mediocrity.” (Note: Flannery O’Connor lived to return the compliment: “Unfortunately,” she wrote, “the word Christian is no longer reliable. It has come to mean anybody with a golden heart.”) Also, some bishops may have been immobilized by the old phantom of “Americanism,” others by the fear of appearing less than entirely loyal to the Holy Father, others again by the simplified understanding, in many quarters, of contraception as an exclusively papal up-or-down issue. Habits of confusing the Catholic Church’s ethos with that of the Armed Forces may have played a role; so may the analogy between episcopacy and the task of a CEO—after all, most dioceses are incorporated this way. On the other hand, could it be that some bishops gave in to the very American, very un-Catholic temptation to equate religious faith with “being moral and doing the right thing”? Who knows?

In any case, in the teeth of both loyalty to “Rome” and North American civil religiosity and its righteousness, the wisdom of the Great Tradition is theological, not categorical; it makes room for God and God’s Mystery. This makes it subtle and merciful. Hence, almost nothing in the area of faithful intimacy is black and white. Is Christian marriage not a school of love? What students arrive fully formed? So I am suggesting that in focusing on doctrine thirty-five years ago, the United States bishops lost a key pastoral opportunity in behalf of the married laity in the Church. Rather than teaching the married about the opportunities for growth in love detailed in *Humanae vitae*, the bishops left them to their own devices (so to speak). The sad result of this was that the only Catholics who got to bear the brunt of the Church’s public, canonical rejection of contraception were the “dissenters”—at least those of them who were within the reach of canon law. Most of them were priests—celibates! Ever since, the media world—that unsubtle patron of freedom without responsibility—has been taunting Catholics with what it can only regard (and make merry over) as widespread lay and clerical insubordination to papal and episcopal authority.

Time for a quick sidestep. I hate to point out the structural analogy between the aftermath of *Humanae vitae* and the recent crisis. Still, it is hard to miss. The bishops again fell short of their pastoral responsibility to the married laity, only this time by omission. They appear to have done so under the probable “leadership” of a handful of influential but pastorally and theologically inept figures, even to the point where some of the latter had become criminally complicit with a small minority of pathological priests. This ended up further eroding the credibility of the bishops’ pastoral authority in sexual matters, and driving quite a few priests, accused of having permitted themselves sinful (but non-criminal) liberties in the past, into serious ecclesiastical punishments forced on the bishops by an unforgiving blackmailer—the media, quite possibly aided by lawyers taking advantage of them and opening the courtroom to mere grudges.

* * * * *

So where do I stand? Like all of us, I am a sinner, happy to be a servant of Jesus Christ in a Catholic Church full of fellow-sinners. I am a priest-theologian, but without worshiping the Church; indeed, I suffer with it, as family members will with family. Blaming is as old as the Garden of Eden; the Living Christian Tradition opposes it. My only authority is familiarity with this Tradition; I rarely show my hand on matters of current interest. Still, Archbishop Burke’s stand, politically brave as it may be, raises so many doubts about the fit between North American Catholicity and the Great Tradition that I have resolved to do a bit of theology in public. I have concluded that withholding the sacraments to Catholic politicians in the present situation is too severe a penalty. First, it is out of touch with the practice of Christian mercy vis-à-vis a wayward world wounded and steeped in sin, but not degenerate down to the root. Second, it comes perilously close to selective blaming. (Ignatius Loyola is said to have called a Jesuit priest on the carpet for criticizing the current pope’s sins from the pulpit; he told him that we do not publicly discuss the sins of individuals.) Third, human life is not the ultimate value—a point to which I will come back. But savage as abortion-on-demand is, it has an up-side, like everything sinful; so, some fifteen years after *Roe v. Wade* I found myself suggesting to students that the knowledge that they were wanted at

birth was a grace; and three years ago, in my hearing, a young religious volunteered that a physician had “cautioned” his mother while she was pregnant. Talk about thankfulness for the given gift of life!

As for euthanasia, have we Catholics not witnessed repeated episodes in which the medical and judicial establishments have colluded in order to prevent mostly older people suffering from terminal illness from dying in peace? Have they not also colluded in order to demand experimental surgery on babies with inoperable birth-defects? Here we go again, the very old and the very young must pay the piper at the contemporary dance of death!

So whenever we find ourselves saying, vehemently or piously, “No matter what, we should at least be doing something,” we are making a theological mistake. For in the last resort we Catholics should let on, unobtrusively, that all human life is in God’s hand, notably at the origin and at the end, as Gregory of Nyssa pointed out almost seventeen centuries ago, and not long after him, Augustine.

Finally, a minor point. Archbishop Burke would seem to overlook the sound canonical practice of restrictive application of laws imposing penalties and limiting freedoms, as well as the sound moral practice of distinguishing between formal and merely material cooperation. Being resigned to the world’s evil is not the same as approving of it, let alone promoting it; even logically, pro-choice is not the same as pro-abortion; neither cowardice nor dodging is evidence of positive malice, and so, not mortally sinful. Ignorant as I may be, I know of no Catholic politicians who have advisedly elected to advance abortion on demand or euthanasia; most of them are like Catholic judges handing down uncontested divorce decrees; they may “personally”—a bad choice of words—not approve of it, but (for better for worse) it is the law of the land.

* * * * *

I need not explain that the ready availability of abortion is a horror as well as a tragic miscarriage of the American system of just government. Bypassing any careful, patient, fair political process, it made its sudden entry by the judicial arrogance of a majority on the Supreme Court inspired (frightened?) by ideologies whose popular support was

far from majoritarian. But there is more. The general advertizing of contraceptives as the “solution” to a human “problem” strikes me as a malign intrusion into the human mystery of faithful affection. The blind distribution of free contraceptives to high-school students is, to borrow the late Cardinal Hume’s words, “a counsel of despair.” Accordingly, we Catholic Christians must now learn how to testify to our God and to our faith in God, but not by blaming the sower and rooting up the tares. In matters of life and death, we should keep the upper hand—hold the Sword of the Word by the handle, not the cutting edge, lest we ourselves come under its edge. No evil in our world is final, not even the “contraceptive mentality” so firmly identified as gravely (i.e., mortally) wrong by John Paul II. Our public culture is savage because its only goal seems to be pleasure without pregnancy; death-by-abortion now seems to be an acceptable tool to favor existing life over any future vexation; “mercy-killing” has become an alternative to tender loving care—a victory for those who seem to hold that all pain should be fought or simply removed. In this North-American world, it is now difficult to be a Catholic. But the *Catholic Catechism* explains that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the worst injustice ever, and that from it our omnipotent and merciful God has drawn the greatest good.

Poor Catholic politicians. They’re no heroes, but they are not censurable. They are sinners, but implausible candidates for canonical penalties; and equivalently calling their sin mortal is not a priestly ministry. Our “dissenters” (incidentally, not a Catholic term) are miles removed from the Donatists, who treated ordinary Catholics as schismatics. Yet Augustine insisted on calling them brothers, and taught his congregation to do the same. He did not refuse dialogue; he looked for it. As an old man, he did grow harder and harder on the Pelagians; but they equivalently proposed that faith was at least partly a human accomplishment, and hence, substantially a moral duty. The senior bishops who publicly opposed Cardinal Bernardin’s Common Ground Initiative were way out of touch with the Great Tradition. What they said did not sound like the Word of God.

In 1957, a tall, athletic, slightly mischievous Dutch Jesuit priest who is now eighty-nine and still pastorally active, asked a twenty-seven-year-old scholastic too intense for his own (and others’) good: “Can I

tell you something?” He replied, hesitantly, “Yes.” He smiled and said: “Don’t be so pushy with the kids; remember, God never pushes, He only pulls.” One of those teachable moments: *God’s people are not to be pushed about.*

Notes

A piece written for *Commonweal*, 131, no. 11 (June 4, 2004): 19-21). About half of it made it into print.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

Being a Catholic Theologian in the United States: A Preface That Got Out of Hand

*for John C. Haughey, S.J.
in fraternal admiration*

Emmanuel Lévinas, I am reliably told, once said that one's philosophy is set off by one's "formative experiences." No sooner had I begun to write this preface than I realized it was going to degenerate into a theological confession. The French (who, as everybody knows, have "a way of saying things"—as if we didn't) might call it a *prise de conscience*: taking stock of one's consciousness. It is just that. It is a reply to the customs officer's question: "Have you anything to declare?"

This is a hefty book. It explores the human habit of balking at both death and love, especially at the intimate love that accepts death as its measure. It also suggests the transformation of this habit offered us by God, with a pained love, of the kind that is in the end irresistible. Now that it is done, I realize that one of its hidden themes is the conciliation between the two chief formative experiences of my life: the Catholic Church in which I was born and bred in the Southern Netherlands, and the Catholic faith as I have come to profess it in my thirty-six years as a Jesuit priest-teacher in the United States. The reader is forewarned.

I remember the Catholicism of the eastern part of the Province of North Brabant. It still subsists in many of the elderly and the very old in the area today. It had one enormous advantage: never having been impugned, nobody was needed to jump to its defense. Neither the Calvinists of the Northern and Western Low Countries nor the Jansenists of Flanders had ever taken an interest in us; we were simply too poor to be interesting. Most of us lived happily in the knowledge that the Hollanders thought little of us. By the time I was old enough to be aware of this, economic and educational development was well underway. There was a handful of respected Catholic "colleges." Jews

like Jurgens, van den Bergh, and Anton Philips (a distant cousin of Karl Marx!) had gotten promising industries off the ground; farmers' cooperatives had been started, mostly by local intelligentsia and small factory owners who had learned how to draw on the dormant energies of a small army of assistant parish priests, many of them gentlemen-farmers' sons. What was notable, too, was the virtual absence of anticlericalism of the *laissez-faire* kind; but how could there be, since there was no clericalism to speak of? (I recall how I heard, at the age of nine or ten, one of my younger uncles call the assistant pastor "a cow" without meeting with any contradiction in the jam-packed kitchen.)

If our Catholic faith was unsophisticated (and heaven knows it was), it was also the quiet guiding light of the petty farmers, the hard-working peat diggers, the factory workers, the small shopkeepers, the local bureaucracy, and the handful of gentlemen-farmers. And I have not even mentioned the (largely resigned) faith of many Brabant women—farmers', small business owners', and especially factory workers' wives. Dedicated mothers of customarily large families, many of them had looked for home work in addition to their household tasks, to supplement the meager family income. Noisy we could be (the people of Asten, my mother's home village, had a reputation for being "shrill-spoken"), especially with the help of some beer and loud company from elsewhere; still, modesty, humility, good neighborliness, and deep faith were far from unknown. Most of all, God—*Zlieveeer*: "r-dea-Lord"—was quietly and without ado held to be real, loving, forgiving, and present.

Now comes the contrast experience. If there is anything I seem to have become familiar with in over thirty years of living in the United States, it is Deism—belief in the existence of a Supreme Being that from an enormous distance keeps the world moving and makes ethical demands on humanity, though without taking any active part in what human beings (or for that matter, Nature) do. Deism started in Europe, of course, especially in France, England, and Scotland; still, nowhere did it properly establish itself as the normative cultural climate, except maybe among the British intelligentsia; but even there the challenges offered by the still large membership of the Church of England, the Kirk, and the Free Churches were never feeble nor far to seek. Maybe this is why European Deism never became affable; it always remained too deliberate for that. By contrast, a full quarter century before the

French Revolution, Deism had made its friendly, largely peaceful home in the recently founded United States, spreading its obvious blessings across the federation, as well as its less obvious curses. Both are considerable, and for well over two centuries the former well outshone the latter, most noticeably in the direct aftermath of the horrors of the Civil War—a sensitive issue even today.

In the eighteen-thirties, Alexis de Tocqueville correctly observed that American-style Deism was genuinely tolerant, unlike its European counterpart. More than a century and a half later, I can say that nowhere else have I felt such a generous invitation extended to me to full participation in a culture by people proud of their national accomplishment yet invariably excited by things and people that are “different.” *Vive la différence* (pronounced without the slightest hint of a French accent) is an American saying. Even as they sing America’s praises, Americans will invite the rest of us “differents” to join their large, noisy family, managed somehow, in an unobtrusive yet always generous way, by what simply has to be a big Invisible Hand. Only in the United States have I found kind tolerance, in the form of the amicable willingness, sometimes to the point of ludicrousness, to treat each and every opinion as worthy of being entertained, and every individual “experience”—a key word in the United States idiom—as the potential bearer of a profound moral message of wide, if not general application. A Jewish-Scots convert to the Catholic Church—a woman novelist with a sharp eye and an even sharper pen—once wrote:

New York, home of the vivisectioners of the mind, and of the mentally vivisected still to be reassembled, of those who live intact, habitually wondering about their states of sanity, and home of those whose minds have been dead, bearing the scars of resurrection.

Touché, many Americans are apt to say to this. (Europeans are apt to bristle, or quail, or resort to ridicule, when their Europe is caricatured.) But in the quotation, please note the sardonic reference to the central theme of the Christian faith. Typically, Americans have no illusions of sanctity or morality, yet they are a proud and patriotic people, and they love ethical principle and their many, mostly Christian churches. But what is nearest and dearest to them are “the facts”; and,

more often than not, those facts—loss of “moral fiber” and sins of every weight and measure—can be trusted to see to it that humility remains a respected virtue in the United States. To this day, Machiavelli has few principled adherents here; in the teeth of daily evidence to the contrary, most citizens think that in the last resort a-moral political opportunism is wrong; there simply has to be a way of doing things right. Accordingly, hypocrisy meets with very little tolerance; and *faire comme si*—elsewhere considered the best way to learn civility, manners, and ethics—is suspect. “Be sincere” is the motto. At the same time, one way or another, freedom must rule. It’s a hard pair to hold together.

As Muriel Spark implies, freedom comes at a price. It is paid in the coinage of *stress*. I tell inquiring friends “abroad” (as I now call the rest of the world) that living in the United States is like having a lightly elevated temperature as a permanent condition. But then again, there is that sense of freedom: no self-impressed, self-anointed establishment has succeeded in imposing itself and forcing its style on the common culture without eventually being held accountable by a majority of one kind or another. Once, a gay and lesbian manifestation in dismal taste had interrupted the pontifical Sunday Eucharist in Saint Patrick’s Cathedral on Fifth Avenue. As it happened, Ed Koch, the unforgettable Jewish Mayor of New York City, had been in Saint Pat’s for his weekly visit to a “place of worship.” Right after the service, facing the TV cameras standing ready outside the cathedral, he declared, with a preacher’s pizzazz, “It’s not American. In America, if you don’t like your church you get out and start your own.” In Europe, this is liable to produce peals of laughter, mostly of the condescending kind. In New York or Chicago, if you show yourself horrified at theological pronouncements like Mayor Koch’s, well-educated Catholic friends will remind you that in the United States serious differences, including those among Catholics, are by and large stated publicly, and best addressed publicly as well; the better-traveled among them may even politely remind you, “In this country, there’s no church tax.” We have separation of church and state. And so, faith and public funds are separate as well.

This implies, of course, that reactionary Catholic groups and individuals, especially of the very wealthy kind, regularly engage in machinations to get a handle on “their” church. Wealthy Catholics have tried that for centuries. (Just look up the name of Paul of

Samosata in a decent Catholic dictionary, or read Acts of the Apostles 5:1–11.) Besides, there are authoritative parties in the Church, not only here, but also in Rome, who have the good of the Church Universal at heart and know the value of the dollar. They tend to be impressed by “expert” groups and individuals willing to throw millions at projects they expect will help make the church “*really* Catholic.” However, most Catholics find this sort of thing almost unpardonably disloyal. From experience we know that reactionaries occur everywhere, mostly behind the scenes, but every now and then in embarrassingly full view. Many American Catholics will occasionally call them unflattering names, but they will rarely read them out of the One, Holy, Catholic Church (let alone out of the Republic), and in any case, never by common consent; some Catholics *are* embarrassing, that’s all. By way of explanation they will say, “Well, it takes all kinds”—a phrase with religious overtones. In the offices of that very Catholic, very American biweekly, *Commonweal*, edited by thoughtful, intelligent Catholic lay people, the motto is, “It’s a *big* church.”

Thus, being a Catholic in the United States means: being a Catholic with no political advantage or privilege other than feeling you are generally welcome to make a difference. “Do your thing.” A number of years ago, there were voices objecting to the large amounts of public funds allegedly being spent on the construction of an altar with a canopy for a papal Mass. Almost immediately, a noted politician let it be known that “once you let the pope come for a visit you also agree to a mass Mass—that’s the kind of thing popes do.” One far less symbolic proof of accepted influence on public life is that American bishops and cardinals regularly testify before congressional committees not as dignitaries but as significant citizens. And if there should be such a thing as a negative symbol, the Catholic Church in the United States neither tithes nor levies church taxes, never mind getting them levied through public agencies. It needs a lot of money, not so much for its church buildings (which are by and large modest) as for its many schools (where non-Catholics have been made to feel more and more welcome, and now fairly often decide to join the Catholic Church without being exhorted to do so). It also runs fund-raising campaigns in behalf of a wide range of worthy causes at home and overseas, from the Vatican to the poor everywhere; in the Chicago archdiocese, two thirds of the aid furnished by Catholic Charities ends up in non-Catholic

hands—a barely advertised fact. Still, no matter how passionately the contributions are solicited, they are offered, not exacted, not even virtually.

Why am I distracting the reader with this outpouring of admiration and contentment? Well, let me detail my earlier confession. When I started to write this preface, in November 1998, I was in Rome, working for my university. I was surprising myself with what I wrote; long before I ever thought of any readers I found myself giving an account to myself of my having become a theologian. It boiled down to this: never having prayed for the grace of living during a watershed of historic proportions, I found myself thankful for having received precisely that favor. And if I have gone through any growth and development as a Catholic theologian innocent of doctoral studies in theology, it is unimaginable without the context of the United States. As early as 1964–65, during my tertianship—a virtually meaningless routine in Jesuit formation at the time—I had reworked my licentiate dissertation in theology, and offered it (if without my superiors' permission) to the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. I was underway.

I arrived in Boston for a one-year stint in 1968—a year of widespread unrest both here and “at home” (as I was still calling it) in Europe. By that time, the Catholic Church in the United States was still proving to itself and to the nation, even after the election of John F. Kennedy, that it was truly American; still, there were many signs indeed that the Catholic bid for national acceptance was spending itself. One of its last prominent symbols was Francis Cardinal Spellman, an antifascist and anticommunist once trusted by both Pius XI and Pius XII, as well as a supporter of the Vietnam war; he would celebrate Christmas surrounded by GIs near the front lines, in vestments put on right over his army fatigues. Still, he had also been a moving force behind Vatican II's promulgation of *Dignitatis Humanae*, the “liberal” Declaration on Religious Freedom.

Just what was Cardinal Spellman symbolizing? One of my friends, the Jesuit historian James Hennesey, one of Msgr. John Tracy Ellis's students at the Catholic University of America and the author of a large number of essays on American Catholicism, captures the complex situation in the sixties and seventies in the respective titles of the two final chapters of his book *American Catholics*. Spellman still personified the mentality of conciliation between “Cross and Flag”; however, in

endorsing John Courtney Murray's theories about religious freedom as a human right he helped support the "Revolutionary Moment" that saw the Catholic Church in the United States transformed into a community that fosters scriptural studies of international caliber, free, often critical yet also creative theological exploration, and what I like to term a "charismatic" stance in the doctrinal, practical, and liturgical-spiritual areas. Catholics of this kind by and large want to be "involved" on the basis of personal motives and abilities.

Unsurprisingly, this was a huge irritant to a Catholic establishment whose primary features had been shaped by the "pistic" stance: unquestioning orthodoxy, dependence on clerical authority, traditional practices of sacramental and individual worship and especially piety, and an exaggerated emphasis on the afterlife. What is now known as the wars between the "liberals" and the "conservatives" had begun. They are still continuing in some form, witness the halfhearted and even downright negative reactions to the late Cardinal Bernardin's intensely constructive "Common Ground" project. In the United States, Vatican II has not fully entered the Catholic Church's bloodstream by a long shot.

In retrospect, though, it was of great symbolic significance that the frankest, most unvarnished account of what was happening, day by day, at the second Vatican Council in Rome should have been written by an American, and for a sophisticated magazine published right in Cardinal Spellman's metropolitan see, the *New Yorker*. His name was Xavier Rynne. While he was writing, his pen name became a household word, but his identity, thank heavens, remained a well-kept secret. While the Council lasted, Rynne was variously identified as "a disgruntled Catholic clergyman," "a Roman student who after failing his final exams criticized the Roman educational system," "a fellow named Wilfred Sheed, who used to write for *Jubilee*," "a mild Redemptorist professor of Church history," "an American bishop," "an English Dominican," "a New York Jesuit," and "a writer inspired by the Vatican Secretariat of State." Even Jack Kerouac made the list of suspects, as did (yes!) Phyllis McGinley (renamed "McGentley" for the occasion). After a year, Rynne's reports began to appear in weekly installments; they must have greatly swelled the *New Yorker's* Catholic readership; odds are only the then-editors knew by how much. At Council's end, they appeared in four volumes—one for each session. The author turned out

to be the mild early-church historian, a Redemptorist priest with that most Catholic of American names, Francis X. Murphy. I still make a point of exhorting young North American Catholic theologians, who have grown up with the Council's decrees, to read Rynne's story before the patina that comes with time dulls it for good. Maybe it has already come to that.

In many ways, American Catholics, especially those with a good education, went on, in the wake of the second Vatican Council, to show just how American they were, except they were much less deliberate about it. Polarization between traditionalists and liberals became both fierce and public, especially in the East and Northeast; in the Midwest, Catholicism was both franker and gentler, probably because it had never had natural enemies in positions of power before it arrived; a more relaxed, open, welcoming (and in that sense "liberal") climate prevailed, as I noticed when in 1985 I moved from Boston to Chicago. Still, the situation was far from quiet in the Midwest. If anyone felt the heat, it was Cardinal Bernardin.

How so? The best way I know how to put it is as follows. Below the superficial polarization, a far more profound crisis has been surfacing. In my view, it has everything to do with Catholic identity—something more profoundly rooted than we have been led to think in the United States thus far. Neither the tame fences of the traditional church nor the liberal removal of needless restrictions can guarantee *Catholicity*. Catholicity has been described by the dean of American Catholic theologians, Avery Dulles, S.J. (by now a cardinal, much to the satisfaction of both the right and the left), as "unity in diversity." A formula like this is, of course, just what fits the bill in the United States, with its motto *E pluribus unum*: "unity forged out of more than one unit." Catholic unity-in-diversity is a matter neither of being open nor of being closed, for openness without an inner focus is shapeless, and closedness without a world view is a prison. Faith in God is neither severe orthodoxy nor free-thinking tolerance. In essence, it is a discerning habit of loving the Living God and the neighbor—living, dying, or something in between—at least as much as oneself. It has more to do with persons looking out for persons than with self-made individuals, and more with growth in communication than with the increase or the dwindling of ecclesiastical bodies large or small.

This book will explore the reasons why the Deist culture of which we are part has little or no idea of what this means. We Catholics in the United States have experienced the blessings of Deism, but our awareness of its curses is still limited. Accordingly, many of our typical theological stances neglect a vital ingredient of the Catholic faith. (I was tempted to write “the vital ingredient,” but I do not want the reader to put this book to rest, unread, on a shelf, its back turned on its owner—the fate that has befallen many fat theological tomes.)

The present Archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Francis E. George, O.M.I., has often remarked, in private but also in public, “The Catholic liberal project is out of breath.” He has also made it clear that he does not commend a turn to traditionalism. What I am fairly sure he means is: having a good look at the Catholic Church now, in light of the Great Tradition embodied in the apostolic Scriptures first, but then also in actual, living witnesses to the Tradition; among the latter, the successors of the Apostles and their teachings, especially those laid down in Council decrees, enjoy pride of place.

However, this is pretty much the opposite of what Mayor Koch thought of the Church, and he still has the vast majority of American citizens in his corner. So, once again, the opinionated culture of which we are part has little or no idea what being a member of the Catholic Church means. Unsurprisingly, we Catholics in the United States have only a very partial understanding of what it means. The issue as I see it is this. Our Deist culture has given us the freedom of religion we need and want, but this is not to say that freedom of religion is the heart of Catholicity. So the issue becomes: do we Catholics now wish simply to continue enjoying our freedom, or will we try to return the favor by courteously offering to share with our Deist culture our central blessing: “the knowledge of God’s Glory in the Face of Christ” (2 Cor 2, 6)? And do we wish to do so—at least in principle—in front of all the people we meet, “alone or with others”: Catholics, disaffected Catholics, fearful Catholics, and non-Catholics, and to do so while giving evidence of our being participants in the Great Tradition of Christian worship, conduct, and teaching, in that order? This has a lot to do with what Pope John Paul II has called a “new evangelization,” by means of a fully Catholic pastoral-liturgical catechesis. This is not likely to be always and everywhere welcome any more than cod liver oil or the equally obsolete Baltimore Catechism, but it would seem to be

badly needed. Latinos now are one-quarter of the Catholics in the United States. They are Catholics to the bone, but also significantly unfamiliar with North American culture. Who knows if this is not going to be a decisive factor in the search for Catholic identity?

My mother was born and bred in Asten, not far from Eindhoven, today the hub of the multinational company known as Koninklijke Philips Electronics N.V. As a school child, she had learned by heart, and given back by heart, what was known as “the big catechism,” and not just the answers, but both the questions and the answers. In our home, the award for this achievement could be seen on a book shelf: a life of Godfrey of Bouillon, the Crusader, in “luxury binding.” “Sir Dean”—the chief priest of the deanery—had personally handed it to her. I mean, to *our* mother. As a small boy, I once asked her if I could read a bit in it. Of course, never mind the fact that we back then had had to learn by heart only the answers of the big catechism. Profoundly impressed, I opened the book. Right on the first page, slightly yellowed, I found strange things. The hero’s mother had seen unusual lights during her “pregnancy,” and once born, he himself had “refused his mother’s breast,” on Wednesdays and Fridays, if I recall. I immediately showed it to our mother. She read a bit, clearly for the first time—a move that it had apparently never occurred to the Very Reverend Dean Mossault to undertake almost thirty years earlier. Then she returned the book to its place of honor on the shelf. In those days, that’s the way things went in Catholic North Brabant.

Notes

An abortive attempt at a preface to volume Two/4B of the author’s *God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995).

1. Muriel Spark, *The Hothouse by the East River* (New York: Viking, 1973), chapter 1.

On Keeping Dogs and Strangers Out

Animals are by and large socially aware, even across different species. **A**To their own kind they readily respond, mostly positively, yet they are wary, so to speak, of birds of a different feather. But since wariness implies awareness, my opening gambit must be at least broadly true: *animals are by and large socially aware*. Still, the woodpecker I watched going about his loud business this morning did not seem concerned with other animals at all, except, I assume, the bugs he was knocking out of their primitive habitat for the purpose of eating them as detected. But actually, there are a lot of constructive things to report about trans-specific ventures in the animal kingdom. As a teenager I learned about an odd-shaped bird that eats the ticks that in turn feed themselves on whatever it is that makes a rhinoceros's back palatable to them—such fine cooperation! I likewise learned that the yellow meadow ant, a common denizen of the many meadows in the Low Countries, keeps lice the way the farmers who own the meadows keep cows on them: they nourish the lice and milk them of a delicious, healthy, sweet fluid which the lice exude from two minuscule glands on their hind quarters. It boggles the imagination, but it is not all that different from what we have done for thousands of years with cows, sheep, goats, and camels, not counting the mares whose milk is so popular—or so I was taught in fifth grade—in Hungary.

Actually, we humans ourselves practice symbiosis with a vengeance. If anyone were looking for proof positive for the correctness of Friedrich Nietzsche's characterization of the human species as *das noch nicht festgestellte Tier*—"the as-yet unstabilized animal"—our awareness of our pretty much completely *festgestellte* fellow-mammals and indeed fellow-vertebrates would amply suffice. All animals are specialized for better for worse, depending on your point of view. But they have nowhere else to go, really; still, they are awfully good at doing what they do and they bequeath their skills, narrow as they are, to their

brood. Lions are masters at frightening and killing. Hares and rabbits run as if their lives depended on it—which they actually do. The deer and the antelope are no different, except for their gait, of course. Ospreys are hell-bent on catching fish and eating it—strictly business, no bells and whistles. By contrast we humans have been going places; we have populated every known climate on earth; they're now talking of turning parts of the Sahara into arable land where some of us will learn how to live; and most efforts to get the Eskimos to live elsewhere have failed. No wonder we humans have favored, bred, cross-bred, used and gotten used to, and thrown in our lot with an immense variety of animals.

We cultivate bovine cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, ducks, chickens, peacocks, geese, monkeys, rabbits, cats, a wide array of dogs (Chihuahua to Saint Bernard), camels both Bactrian and Saharan, gerbils, horses, elephants, pet turtles, a snake or two, an alligator or two, fish, carrier pigeons, finches (sometimes blinded “for better musical results”), canaries, caged quail, bees, parrots, not to mention all the animals we keep in zoos. Some animals do not seem to mind providing us with three staples: various meats (let's not get into the particulars of that habit of ours), eggs, and milk, not counting everything we fabricate of that trio, like egg-beaters. But we also bring in harvests of plumes, bristles, hair, feathers, idioms (“clean as a hound's tooth”), horsepower at the plough and transportation on the byways, tortoise-shell spectacle-frames, target practice, song, expensive crocodile leather shoes, companionship, cod liver oil, invectives (“that toad!”), random occasions for sexual curiosity at a chaste distance, circus routines, safe conduct for the blind, excuses for hunting and giving chase, scrimshaw art, ivory napkin rings, visual entertainment (often of the brilliant kind, as bird watchers will tell us), and expensive adventures at animals' expense, like safaris. I will resist the temptation to delve into the poaching of African rhinoceros with the intent to sawing off their horns, grinding them up fine, and selling the powder to oil-millionaires allegedly availing themselves of it as an allegedly potent aphrodisiac. Nobody has ever explained to me how it is applied or taken, or whichever other verb applies.

Some animals seek us out, too, or at least our facilities. Our heads (used to) attract lice and our small intestines tapeworms; the special foods we take on our camping trips are utterly irresistible to bears, some

of them quite dangerous; our houses still invite shrews, mice, spiders, cockroaches, mosquitoes, and moths; swallows, owls, and urban pigeons find our roofs, window sills, sheds, barns, and railway bridges appealing, just as ants, flies, and roaches like our sugar bowls, our fruits, and the open pasta packages in our pantries—where I am sure they meet the mice, which quite probably find them a nuisance the way we do.

* * * * *

Still, when it comes to animals being attracted to us, dogs take the cake. The dog is our friend. “Man’s Best Friend.” Close to three hundred years ago, I am sure Carl von Linné was right when in his classification of the mammals he put the primates at the top, but when he proceeded to put the monkeys next, my admiration starts to wane. I have my doubts about his putting mandrills and baboons ahead of our friends, the canines. Why classify animals by the shape and number of their teeth rather than by their talent for compani-ability? Did the Greek philosopher whose name I forget not say that humanity is the measure of everything? In the last eight decades or so biologists have finally been studying animal behavior, but Linné’s system is presumably written in stone by now, so I will spare my readers an unwinnable war of words. But why in the world did the learned Swede see fit to place the felines (and thus, our house cats) ahead of our dogs? In my book, not even the noblest cat, whether Cheshire, Persian, Siamese, nor even a Manx, can hold a candle to a dog—any dog. My obvious reason: dogs live with us; cats at best live around us, with that inquisitorial look on their faces and ready to eat the canary when given a chance. After this, need I explain that the learned Swede completely discredited his own humanity by placing the dog—*canis*—between on the one hand the weasel and their sly and cowardly blood-sucking cousins and the filthy, gross hyenas (for crying out loud!), and on the other hand the bears? This shows you what injustices rational systems will produce. The *Dog, ipse*, between hyenas and bears. A scandal!

For the simple fact is, dogs are an existential human fact. I doubt that dogs know this, but for us humans the fact needs no proof. Human life is different in the company of dogs. The absence of a numbered section titled *Mensch und Hund: eigentliches oder uneigentliches Mitsein?* in

Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* is a philosophic failure. Why do we cultivate cemeteries for dogs?

Wherever we are, dogs are, and not just the way house sparrows and cardinals (I mean the birds) and humming-birds offer us their hungry companionship, sometimes shrill, sometimes deep-throated, never dull. But dogs empathize, welcome us beyond the call of duty, sympathize, console, watch out, defend, frighten or even attack outsiders, finish leftovers, lick our hands. They *love* us. They expect our attention even as they glower at us intruders—the pockmarked cur, the wide-ranging mutt, the scrawny stray, the archbeggar for attention living largely by his wet nose, the all-purpose trash can cleaner looking for something delicious, right down to the shameless, inconvenient public copulator raising pedagogical issues—am I supposed to pull the kids away from the love scene, or do the opposite and change the subject to the bees and birds?

Dogs are most like us in one highly moral respect. Like us humans, they come in an improbable array of races, where they are barely *festgestellt*. For example, I am convinced that the vast majority of dachshunds alive today have never ventured into a badger burrow to catch an actual badger, even though they are supposed to be past masters at that subtle skill, on which the higher-end shaving-brush industry relies. Note that whereas lions have no choice but to roar, kill, and eat flesh, dachshunds get along fine without practicing their specialty. Like human beings, there are enough huskies that show that they do not have to live in the Arctic regions to be the real thing. Setters go without setting to a crouch without protest, and retrievers can be happy without retrieving anything beyond a frisbee. German shepherds go without sheep without getting depressed. Dalmatians live outside the North West Adriatic coastal regions, and I am reliably informed that St. Bernard dogs do not insist on delivering hard liquor to forsaken alpinists. The biggest advantage dogs have over humans is that in the teeth of their multiple races they show no sign of racism. Only we do. This by itself is reason to consider dogs our “best friend.”

Dogs *are* a bit much. Small wonder we don't like them around when we get serious—really serious. Thus, I have steadfastly refused dogs admission to my classroom for the forty-three years I have taught; I know how wonderful they must be, yet they do not belong in my academic world. Shopkeepers, cash-register clerks, sextons, sacristans,

priests, preachers, hair dressers, department store managers, pharmacists, supermarket owners agree: No Dogs Allowed. Judges too: No Dogs in Court.

Now that's precisely where the deeper problem starts, though. (I apologize for not having explained that this is a theological essay.) At least from Roman times on, dogs have lived with us in all public locations, back yards, front yards, streets, even temple areas. In Indonesia today, they are still everywhere, enjoying the population density and happily contributing to it. It has been like this from time immemorial. They were a common sight in Roman basilicas; they still were in eighteenth-century churches, especially in the Catholic ones before they adopted pews—presumably to keep the people in their places. I imagine dogs vanished from our churches as pews came in; they know the difference between kennels that imprison you and big, friendly public spaces where all kinds of people and also dogs go to see (and be seen by) friends both human and canine.

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But now what is my problem? What's the point of writing this essay? It will take me a while to explain.

At the far end of every ancient pagan basilica there was an elevated area—the *bema*. That area was for serious business: lobbying, currying favors, conspiracies, stitching coalitions together, large commodities trading. Even more importantly, on the *bema*, the judges held court, starting at sunrise. Dogs Not Allowed *there*.

How to manage this efficiently? Simple. You put up wooden latticework fences, low brick walls, or even metal barriers to separate the court personnel from the crowd and from the dogs who love crowds. This was an essential requirement for serious business, for dogs are even more shameless than the most barefaced humans going about their business in court. Understandably, those separators were not named for the judges, the barristers, or the important people. (Until I set about editing this essay, I thought that they were named for the only creatures that didn't object to having fences named after them—the dogs. These fences, you see, were called *cancelli* in Latin, which at first blush sounds and looks like “doggies.” However, scholarly integrity compels me to confess that as a matter of plausible etymological fact

cancelli derives from the Latin word for a particular type of reed, used for the weaving of fences and baskets.) In any case, a minor official was posted at the place of entry: the *cancellarius*—the fence-keeper. He kept strangers and dogs out.

Now we know what happens when officialdom happens: *function* turns into *rank*. The guy who still fixes toilets at the university where I taught used to be Lavatory Lou or Bathroom Bob; he became first “the plumber on staff,” then “the sanitary engineer”; now, finally, he is the “sanitary engineering associate.” Analogously, “fence-keeper” became “chancellor.” (Was “barkeeper” a transitional semiotic phase in this steep ascent to sociological civilization?)

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What you have just finished reading is a brief history of the “chancel” in Anglican churches and the “communion rail” that marks off the “sanctuary” in Catholic ones. Originally designed to keep dogs and strangers out, they began to be used to keep “the people” out. While we still had dogs in our churches (just study antique engravings of church interiors!), dogs were refused admission near the altar, the font, and the lectern. Not, of course, that *they* felt out of place there; being friends, they feel at home wherever we are. (Years ago, at the annual commemoration of the war dead on Dam Square in Amsterdam on May 5, the late Queen Juliana had just finished putting the wreath at the foot of the National Monument, when, with everyone silent and at attention, a little black-and-white dog sidled up to the monument to take a leak. The nation saw it right on national TV. In the crowd, not a murmur was heard, not a laugh seen. Smiles everywhere, if interspersed with some purple-faced indignation among dignitaries. The mutt loped off, happily, back into the crowd. He felt at home, visibly. After all, *we* were there, so why not him? He just did not recognize *our* serious business.)

While we had dogs in our churches, one thing was clear: *the whole church was the sanctuary*. It was the common property of God’s people; they were often proud of it, pretty much the way we are now proud (sort of) of our oversize malls where we do *our* serious business. The church embraced the world; so did church buildings: churches were public places; dogs abounded; they were kept away only from where we were being serious in church: the altar and the font. We turned a more

serious corner when it was decided to get serious about church buildings as places set apart for matters of high purpose. The bitter fruit of this our seriousness were “real churches”—of the sort where you go only to pray, and where the ordained and their companions go about their serious business way up front, whether they are standing or (mysteriously) seated. That kind of church is also locked when nothing (i.e., no “service”) is going on. People were no longer welcome, except to “attend” religious services; dogs became pests. No chancel was needed any longer; instead, sanctuary barriers were canonized: they became communion rails—an object of devotion, and much later on, in the later twentieth century, of irritated discord between the standers and the kneelers at the Banquet of Unity.

What continued unabated was the fence-keeper’s instinct. Chancellors (now often called ushers) saw to it that the communion rail was a place where order prevailed, and where the non-ordained met the ordained across the good fences that we are told make good neighbors. Dogs were gone; their place was taken by the laity. The sanctuary became the area restricted to the ordained and their associates vested vaguely like them. Thank God for the renewal Vatican II gave us; in the Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, the council treated the unity of God’s People before ever raising the status of its ordained servants, who were relegated to the third chapter. Happily, many “ordinary” laity are once again where they belong: sanctuaries are for saints. The dogs might as well have tried to stage a comeback; in fact, I once found myself in a church that had a *crèche* for pet dogs in the back. Seeing-eye dogs, an ecologically correct plastic sign on the wall informed us, were welcome in the pews.

What is likely to continue, I think, is the fence-keeper’s instinct. Chancellors will continue to abound, especially in Rome, but also here at home, in places favoring canon law written in Rome. Lately, they have told us there are limits to promiscuity. For now that some people have made it to the *bema* to do serious business such as reading Scripture and offering prayers, the church brass have to remain where they belong, i.e., in the sanctuary: the ordained are not to join the people, to preach to them or (worse?) to exchange the kiss of peace with them. Dogs are no longer an issue nowadays; spayed as they now all seem to be, I imagine they have lost interest in churches, too. The fences are once again for *our* guidance. They have a vital job to do:

protecting the ordained from the danger of being mistaken for ordinary people.

I am an ordinary priest who has been a priest for forty-plus years—no more than a few weeks by the measure of the history of Christian worship. Yet I have never been mistaken for a layman while I have gone about Christ’s business in the Liturgy; I guess only a fool would vest like me. (I must confess, though, that I have heard a story about an informal “mass” informally presided over by a woman religious; as she went around to distribute the bread, the only priest in the room met her pious “Michael, the body of Christ” with a friendly “Wanna bet, Dorothy?” But then again, I have also heard of a cardinal who forbade a community of contemplative nuns to join the lay guests standing near the altar during the Eucharist; the reason (so the abbess told me): the faithful—never mind the nuns—might get the idea that the nuns are concelebrants. Now there’s a thought!)

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In any case, neither folly is likely to be fixed by keeping celebrants in any “sanctuary.” Vested in an unmistakable way, I don’t need a communion rail, and I very much doubt if the congregation does. I have not seen a dog in church for half a century, so chancels are now as little needed as chancellors. Unless we priests are now being encouraged to think of God’s people out there as dogs. Now *that* would be some renewal!

Notes

A previous version of this essay appeared as “God’s Best Friend” in *Commonweal* 128 (April 6, 2001), 31. The piece was originally provoked by an unnecessarily severe insistence in high places on the duty of ordained sacramental ministers not to venture out beyond the communion rail to preach or exchange the Kiss of Peace during the Eucharist. Revised in light of continuing, slightly irritated amusement.

*Not for the Kennel:
A Meditation*

Somewhere in a subclause in the Jesuit Constitutions, in the context of Ignatius's discussion of health care in the Society, one of his focal concerns emerges: "And even though it is part of our vocation to travel from place to place, and to lead our lives wherever in the world where there is hope of serving God better and helping souls better, it is still to be left to one's superior to determine . . . ," etc.

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I am by no means the sole Jesuit for whom the Society of Jesus is in the first place and very palpably something international. This has been the case for a long time. I have studied and worked in a fair number of places in the Society. Six years of graduate school in English while living at St. Ignatius College, Amsterdam (1954-60), with a one-year leave of absence from the university (1955-56) to study by myself at Manresa College, Roehampton, in the southwest part of London; three months in northern Italy to get fluent in Italian, just before doctoral comprehensives (1959); a year in the United States to round out my training in the Society in tertianship (1964-65), and two years, again in the United States, while I was working as a visiting lecturer in theology at Boston College, a two-year part-time study in applied behavioral study (1968-70). As a regular Jesuit priest, I have had three full-time jobs thus far: coordinator for our schools and director of our special students in the Netherlands (1965-68), lecturer and professor of theology at Boston College (1968-85), and professor of theology at Loyola University Chicago (1985-2003). But in the course of those years I spent five semesters living, studying, and working in Toronto (1973), Cambridge in England (1975), Yogyakarta in Indonesia (1976), and Amsterdam (1980, 1983). Add to this that I spent eight

years in study communities, two years in a Jesuit noviciate (as assistant novice director), and nine years in a community of university types. Never mind the number of summers spent in parishes and retreat houses (like that marvelous summer of 1980, in Java), or in the Jesuit part of my old school, St. Aloysius College in the Hague, for a recovery period. Also, by 1987 I had spent three Christmas seasons somewhere on the outer islands of the Bahamas, where I was to return for an additional seven years. Once, in 1974, I got an errand to run for the Provincial, which meant ten days in Egypt. Once, in 1978, I spent a summer month wandering around in Spain and Southern France, with a packsack and a book of Spanish lyrical poetry and a brief history of Spain. When I recall those weeks what comes to mind is a long, intense conversation with a fellow-Jesuit from Poland, in the apple orchard close by the cave of Manresa, in the sight of the little Cardoner river where Ignatius had his decisive moment of spiritual enlightenment in 1523. What also comes back is an two-and-a-half-hour impromptu after-dinner community conversation in French, with coffee and cognac of course, at our *college* in Avignon, about christology, after I told the friendly rector who was asking me questions during dinner that I had just completed a book on that topic.

Heavens, what an enumeration—almost a successful career. And I have not even mentioned the fact that I tend to find a lot of things interesting and that I have a good memory for people and situations and odd events. I do carry a lot of memories with me, and I keep a fair number of them alive, by way of a Christmas letter every year. Fellow Jesuits do ask me regularly just exactly where I am at home. Then it is time to confess that “home” for me is really nowhere, and more often than not I end with the comical confession, “This dog was made for the streets, not for the kennel.” But this street dog remembers very well the people he has met. I know a large number of Jesuits, from all over the world. In my bibles and breviaries, I come upon quite a few ordination cards of friends and former students. And when in May of 1983 I received the list of the members of the upcoming 33rd General Congregation, I was very happy to find that I knew 57 out of 214—34 of them from serious conversations and friendships. And at the actual Congregation it appeared that a number of these men had read something I had written. That Congregation is one of the most beautiful things that have ever come my way as a Jesuit. It became my richest

experience of our Society as an international event, what with things getting on my nerves every now and then, in the crossfire of all those different mentalities and traditions. Nevertheless, I felt entirely at home.

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In the fall of 1974 I was living in a community in an ethnic neighborhood in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where we were trying to live a little more socially committed, and hence, a bit more simply. Juan Luis Segundo, S. J., the liberation theologian from Uruguay, who was teaching at the Harvard Divinity School at the time, was living with us. He once observed that the Spanish Jesuits were better hospitality artists than any other European Jesuits. I remember making a mental note of that.

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So on Thursday, June 15, 1978, at a quarter to seven in the morning, my overnight train from Madrid rolls into the Seville railway station. Backpack strapped on, I walk across the empty square in front of the station, approach a street sweep, and ask him in crippled Spanish for directions to the *residencia de los padres Jesuitas*. He immediately understands: just straight ahead and then off to the left, you will see the *Calle de Jesus del gran poder*, the Jesuit church is on the right, a fifteen-minute walk. Everything works out. It is a quarter past seven when I push the door bell, introduce myself as a Dutch Jesuit teaching theology at a Jesuit university in the United States, and ask if I could come in and stay for a week. My Spanish barely makes it. Almost at once I find myself having breakfast in the refectory. After some enjoyable attempts at conversation it is made clear to me that it is unlikely there will be a room free, but someone is already calling the *colegio* just outside the city to find out if there is a spot there, and things will be decided when Father Minister returns from his daily Mass in a nearby convent. In the mean time I am already conversing in German: two serious elderly fathers who studied theology in the Netherlands, at the old German Jesuit theologate in Valkenburg, back in the good old days. I conclude it would be imprudent to allude to anything political with these old boys. The Minister walks in. He speaks English, and immediately explains to me that he did his tertianship in Cleveland, in the

United States. In no time we turn out to have friends in common. He tells me there is only one free room in the house, and tells me I have to go upstairs and see for myself before he will offer it to me. Yes, the attic: a rough wooden floor, an authentic straw mattress in a brass bed with curls, a small table, a straight-back chair, and a naked bulb hanging from the rafters on a crinkly cord. The small roof chamber with walls for the man of God in the second book of Kings, chapter four. I tell him I would like to take it. A wonderful week, with visits to Cordoba with its cathedral-mosque and its ghetto with statues of Maimonides the Jew and Averroës the Muslim facing each other across a little plaza, and to Granada, with its incomparable Alhambra, and the *Capilla real* where Ferdinand and Isabella, and Philip the Fair and Joan the Mad and their dead young children lie visibly buried in the dullest, blackest, most inexorable boxes. A flood of memories and associations surfaces.

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A little later, back in the Netherlands, my sister-in-law says to me: “That is lovely, you Jesuits can drop in everywhere in the world and feel at home. You never need to stay in hotels. You can have the real experience, not like the tourists who have to stay at a distance.” Well said, I think, it is not *that* simple, but she is right.

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About three days after leaving Seville I am staying in Madrid, at the Calle Almagro Jesuit community. Time for a day trip to the Escorial, the colossal building ordered by Philip II: monastery, school, church, palace, all in one. When you walk into the space behind the high altar, you suddenly find yourself in the severe world of Philip II: crucifixes, panels by Hieronymus Bosch depicting the Seven Deadly Sins, a cold brick floor, a wainscot of Talavera blue tiles, Brussels tapestries, some fine Flemish leaded stained-glass window panes. There is a throne as well, with a canopy and backcloth thickly embroidered with a crucifix and an *ojo de Dios*—God’s All-Seeing Eye—overhead. His Catholic Majesty. So this is where he lived and where he died, a Spaniard through and through, and over there, in the *chaise longue*, he lay reigning to the bitter end, his eyes fixed on the tabernacle in the

church, just visible through a paneled opening. Ruling, administering. *By mail*. Philip II was the architect of the first modern government, based on correspondence: folders, archives, portfolios. The written word as the nervous system of a global empire. At such a moment, a thought will occur to us Dutchmen, obviously: well, but in the end he lost us. Then it is time for us to think of the Philippines and Latin America.

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Something dawns on me. Did Ignatius have a similar insight? Franciscans and Dominicans are organized as provinces; their respective general superiors are not so much leaders as coordinators, presiding over federations of independent provinces. That just might be a relic of the age-old abbatial stability traditions. The preaching and mendicant friars do roam town and countryside, but they are at home in a province. *For Ignatius the Society is as one as the wide world is one*. Could it be he felt the same relationship between being worldwide and being literate? For him, at any rate, letters amounted to a lot more than tools to issue orders; his letters form the largest body of correspondence that has come to us from the sixteenth century—about eight thousand of them. He insisted that Jesuits keep each other posted as to what was going forward wherever they were. Writing letters, he thought, was something “constructive” or “edifying”—hence the name *litterae aedificantes*: letters of edification. No wonder Jesuits have always been enormous letter-writers; just look at the letters that fill the volumes of the *Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu*. Ever seen the *Relations*, that enormous series of letters, reports, and narratives of the seventeenth and eighteenth century Jesuit missionaries in *Nouvelle France*, which consisted in a long ribbon of settlements from Quebec to New Orleans? Thus, writing as they went, Jesuits have been experiencing the whole world as their world. In their own way, letters also accommodate the Ignatian culture of obedience: well-thought-out, balanced, realistic accounts of matters and of consciousnesses and consciences, followed by orders and recommendations that do justice to those data.

That leads me to another idea. A learned American Jesuit, the late Walter J. Ong, professor in the humanities at Saint Louis University, spent at least thirty of his years teaching the world that the modern Western mind largely goes back to literary developments in

the mid-sixteenth century. In those critical decades the Society, too, saw the light of day. This was when the Western world made the change-over from a largely speaking and dialoguing and remembering (“oral-acoustical”) culture to an evermore writing and reading and learning-by-accumulating (“visual”) culture. This, of course, had everything to do with the printing press. It enabled concentration on (largely printed) texts—a new phenomenon. It also enabled (to name only one thing) natural science; not even the best memory can keep up with the ever-accumulating scientific data—for that, you need books (and eventually computers), in which you can “literally” store your (objective!) truths in order to retrieve them again later.

But this new learned literacy also succeeded in putting enormous pressure on the whole world of inner human experience and stretching it to the utmost. Just think of all the classical authors newly edited by the humanists; all at once, it became impossible to read them the way the Christian Middle Ages had done. Even the Bible changed: the modern study of the Scriptures started, but at the same time every heretic started to find his own favorite text. Such an intensely developing world of reading demands the utmost in interpretation—i.e., an ever-developing inner world of imagination: the bigger and more brimful the libraries, the more massive the data to take into account and process and discern inside. Add to this, in due time, so sheer a quantity of news and information and products from distant parts as well as the distant past. The world blossomed into a fullness. To contend with this kind of new world, you have a lot of inside labor to go through. Increasingly, the New Learning began to regard as prejudice what an earlier, more naive world had accepted as faith and loyalty. The New Learning began to demand as much freedom of exploration as the voyagers of discovery did. Ever since the mid sixteenth century, research and study have demanded pride of place and gotten away with it. No wonder a tempest of discord and disharmony was the result. Now wonder the inside world turned troubled on the rebound. Inner openness to the whole world is a lot more challenging than staying at home—or (what really amounts to the same) tourism.

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All this becomes even more compelling when you begin to realize that the modern art of reading is based on habits of loneliness and

silence. The mediaeval *quaestio* is reminiscent of *disputatio*—studying was something you did as you listened and spoke, with others. Could there be an affinity between (a) the quiet loneliness of Jesuit prayer and examination of conscience and consciousness, in which the struggle for unconditional, unreserved abandon to God our Lord must take place, and (b) the course of studies demanded of Jesuits in view of the apostolate, and (c) the capacity for serviceable living anywhere and everywhere? I think there is, and it is not a foregone conclusion that the three will always be perfectly balanced. I myself, for instance, have always been good at studies, but I have always been quite a handful to myself as well, and not till relatively late in my life did the grace of interior prayer find me home, thanks to the re(dis)covery of spiritual direction in our Society over the past half-century. Thus the immediate occasion for the permission I received, in the spring of 1970, to stay away from the Netherlands for the time being and continue work at Boston College teaching theology was not my own decision—they had not even offered me a tenure-track job yet. No, my own cargo had shifted so badly that I did not have the courage to return to the Netherlands just yet; I had too much to come to terms with inside, and the Dutch Provincial agreed. Thus my international Jesuit life, I find, is only very partly supported by natural curiosity and enjoyment of study and quickness in adaptation. To me, it looks more like a taste for unsolicited inner adventure abroad. In this way, I have come to think, being an international Jesuit has far more to do with an inner quest for an inner at-homeness—with yourself, and with God.

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With this, another salamander comes up to the surface to breathe. My first “modern” spiritual director was the English Jesuit Paul Kennedy. (Now there’s somebody who from the tertianship house in St. Beuno’s, in Northern Wales, influenced the international Society!) I was almost twenty-five when I first saw him in his filthy room in Manresa College, Roehampton, in May, 1955. In the course of the conversation he suddenly told me, “Say, yesterday I was looking at you when to came into the refectory for dinner—you know, when I smiled at you. That’s when I said to myself, ‘Now this man doesn’t look as if he feels quite at home here yet, but more importantly, he doesn’t look

as if he feels quite at home with himself yet.” So that was the first move, and it is unforgettable. It was not till years later—and thank God, not too late—that I discovered what he meant. Inward peace is the fruit of inward struggle, and I now know that there is a deep linkage between the ability to come to terms with the world inside and the involvement with a world-wide set of companions. No heart as whole as a broken heart. Could this be the Ignatian variation on the opening salvo of the *Odyssey*: the inspiring story of the resourceful loner, driven hither and thither, got to see the strongholds of all kind of people and to understand how they thought, and so got a lot of inner experience to digest, all of it with the result that in the end he both got a grip on his own life and found a way to take his partners-in-destiny home?

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At least it seems that way. When, in 1539, the first, international group of Ignatius’s companions decided to stay together as a religious community, one of the decisive arguments in favor was the following. Their shared interior conversion and prayer experiences of the membership were so inextricably linked with the experience of finding each other united in Christ in the course of their vagaries in the religiously and politically fractured world of Europe that they were unable to miss the conclusion that the hand of God had been active in their shared experience. No wonder Ignatius was to write later on, in the Constitutions, that there were to be no preferences for the various parties and the shifting alliances into which the Christian princes were regularly dividing up the world of their day; that meant a lot for the international Jesuit communities at the time. Being impartial and yet engaged: the only way we can do this is by seeing through and inwardly—and thus together—digesting fragmentation and division everywhere, including the Church. This is quite demanding, as we Catholics have come to know by now.

Could it be that this is also at least part of the secret behind Ignatius’ reference to a Jesuit’s need for “a way with people”—*forma agendi cum hominibus*, i.e., a way of dealing with others of each and every sort? Does he expect of us that we come to terms with ourselves at least to such an extent that we can freely go in and out with ourselves and each other, so as to let others freely enter in and freely leave

again—without getting caught time and again on the barbed wire of our own undigested, unmortified ego, or interfering with others in the process? That as Jesuits we have to learn how to speak and otherwise act in public, but as far as possible on the basis of open, sensitive empathy, not of our own raw, undigested “experience”? So is it all about taking on and owning a lot of inner stuff and so getting a grip on our own lives, in order then to make our peace with ourselves and each other in the service of others?

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Now this takes me to another old song: Jesuits think they can handle everything. In the English province I once heard one of Ours ask another, “Hey, do you happen to know anything about chemistry?” The immediate answer was, “Heavens, no, I’ve never even taught it.” Yes, I do think that we have often postured as sharp boys with the gift of omnicompetence, and that we have paid for it by losing a lot of respect, not counting friendships. For competence is best acquired letting oneself normally trained and educated (and then by developing habits of study and letting one’s competence be tested in dialogue with competent others.) Still, there is more to say on this subject, too. Thus I have often asked myself a question that others have regularly asked me: so you are going to Indonesia to direct retreats—what makes you so sure you can do that? Now with that question you are liable to string yourself up quick. If you say “Yes,” you show how appallingly arrogant you are, because you obviously fail to appreciate the cultural chasm, and if you say “No,” the next question immediately follows: “Why do you do it all the same?” I have (over time!) come to the conclusion that I do it because I trust the Indonesian Jesuit brothers who know me, and who are at home in a world that I find largely unmanageable and unknown. If they think I am doing something right, I don’t need to “manage.” That means: I don’t have to overinvest energy in the enterprise. Thus disarmed by their trust in me, I can go about my business without panoply. And the reward is plain as pie: I invariably receive more than I give, because the emphasis is always on carefully shared experience, not on my expertise. Any remaining illusions of omnipo- tence wilt. The street dog, not the pedigree dog. Could this contribute to world peace?

By the way, I am not the first to evoke the image of the street dog in the context of my own life. The first time was on Sunday, September 1, 1963, in my parents' parish church—Our Lady of Seven Sorrows in Haarlem, about twelve miles west of Amsterdam, during my first solemn Eucharist. In his sermon, our unforgettable Father Jos. Daniëls referred to Francis Thompson's famous *The Hound of Heaven*, where God becomes the Heavenly Hunting Hound. In the middle of the homily he turned to me, looked me straight in the eyes from the lectern, and said in his high tenor voice: "Frans Jozef, that Hound of Heaven is not a pedigree dog, but a street dog. Will you always remember that?"

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Over forty years after hearing those words, I cannot say I have always remembered. But they have become true, in a slightly entertaining, slightly disconcerting way. I have encountered, befriended, been befriended by, admired, and been appreciated by, many hard-working, smart, learned, but especially, devoted and even devout, fellow Jesuits who have thought up, planned, designed, set up (or at least directed) splendid kennels for dogs of every kind of canine cause, whether pedigree, mixed, or mutt. Like them, I have labored like a dog—running, pulling, but not doing my best (for who knows what is one's best? Did Jesus do it?) but my uttermost, breathlessly but always half-awake, loyal as all hell, pushing, snarling, barking, with a bite or two thrown in. Unlike them, I have piloted little—but then again, dogs never ever initiate; they are company, not leadership, commentary, not main text. But I have never met a dog who ended up leaving nothing. I am ending up leaving nothing more permanent than writings on paper—the record of my street-dog's life, mainly disguised as Catholic theology. And I am not even done yet—my nose is still wet and my flair for both eye-openers and flinchers is still alive. In time, I guess I shall slink away like a street-dog, somehow leaving much of my digested life experience to my readers, to whose scent I will never wake up.

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A number of years ago, I read Martin Walser's novel *Seelenarbeit*—"Labor of the Soul." The principal character, Xaver, is the chauffeur of

the board limousine of a large company. He is the bottom drawer personified. The entire life of this calm, correct, silent back-row figure goes up into undergoing, tolerating, and digesting of the heavy presences of important others. There are millions like him, especially in the First World—poor like church mice in spirit, with never a free choice to make. His kind of people are waiting for felt empathy and mercy everywhere. Some one should offer it to them—people who know the inner struggle for justice and integrity out of their own experience, because they have voluntarily ventured into it, as Ignatius suggests in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

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Thus my meditation on my experience of our Society as an international community has returned me to the Heart of our Community, Jesus Christ the Lord. For the title of that novel comes straight from Isaiah 53, verse 11—the passage that combines inner digestion and comprehensive salvation in one prophetic vision: “He will see the fruit of the labor of his soul, and he will be satisfied; through his understanding, my just servant will make all others just, and he will bear their injustices.”

So saving empathy and mercy toward the whole world are guaranteed by perfect inner self-emptying. The two are made flesh and blood in the One who let himself be tested and tried and tempted, let nobody get lost and go to hell, and so gained true life for himself on behalf of all. He calls on us to follow him. More volumes could be written about the things he did than the whole world would ever be able to accommodate (John 21, 25)—never mind this one.

Notes

Translation of “Niet voor de kennel: een overweging” in *Jezuïeten in Nederland: Kiezen voor geloof en gerechtigheid*, ed. Paul Begheyn, Theo van Eijk, Jan van Mulken, Catharina Visser, Hans Luyten, in *Religieuzen en religieuze gemeenschappen*, 11 (Aalsmeer: Boekmakerij/uitgeverij Luyten, 1987), 53-63. Revised and updated, at least partly in the light of what feels like better self-knowledge and self-acceptance.

CONCLUDING DOXOLOGY

A Very Explicit Te Deum

From the beginning, we Christians¹ have believed ourselves to be
living, moving, and having being in
the threefold All-Encompassing, All-Penetrating PRESENCE:
GOD, INVISIBLE ORIGIN, FOUNTAINHEAD, BEGINNING ALL-HOLY;
GOD, ARCH-IMAGE, ARCH-LIKENESS, WORD ETERNAL ALL-HOLY;
GOD, FIRE OF MAJESTY, FLOW OF BOUNTY, GLOW OF LOVE ALL-HOLY.

And so we say, pray, profess:
YOU,
One God, One Alone, Living and True,
Loving and Faithful,
world without end.
Amen.

HIDDEN GOD
yet nowhere and never leaving yourself without witness,
HIDDEN GOD
and yet to Israel unveiled:
all the more hidden for being so manifest.

God of all gods, LORD of all lords,
God of the army of unalterable law,
all the more incomprehensible for being so present,
so close, so awesome, so demanding, so simple.

YOU
Nameless, yet knowing your children by name,
YOU
Lover, Father as dear as a Mother,
YOU

Difficult Friend
To us, difficult people:
You are Brothers and Sisters to us, and Houses galore,
You are infinitely more than we can take, yet never enough,
You make us proud, You make us conscious,
revealing to us,
darkly, as in a mirror,
our own immemorial depth, only faintly remembered;
Our dim inner light reflects You, dazzling, invisible Light.

GOD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH, GOD OF GODS

YOU ARE and YOU ARE and YOU ARE:

YOU ARE

Not a Lonely High and Dry Thing Everlasting,
Not a Deity privately sunning itself under the lamp of its own glory,
not a Cipher, a Monad, an Item, an Article, an Ace;

YOU ARE

GOD ALONE yet not Alone;
by dint of Eternal Communion

YOU ARE

Known and present to us here and now in your Word:

דבר, ΛΟΓΟΣ WORD;²

WORD of WISDOM:

BEING ITSELF,

in the Everlasting Act of seeking only Your Glory;

WORD:

Empty of Self, and thus Full of YOU;
From eternity Living off You, Living GOD;

WISDOM:

Projection of Love making measureless Room for LOVE—
for a Worldful of Eloquent Being;

WORD:

GOD, Your Silence Made Speech;
Word of no one but YOU

Word calling us out of Unbeing, into Being for YOU;

WORD:

not a mere echo,
vague, impotent, ineffective, losing itself in the void,

but SAY-IT-ALL ANSWER to YOU,
out of Your Silence kindly appealing to us,
making us, speaking of nothing but YOU,
Alive for us, out of YOU and with YOU,
world without end.
Amen.

WORD:

Word returning to YOU,
Response Everlasting;
and so,
GOD from YOU, GOD,
Light from YOU, Light,
Splendor, Reflection, Revelation, Intimation, and Symbol of YOU.

WORD:

WORD creative and ordering, WORD relieving and liberating,
WORD utterly spoken, WORD unheard, yet constantly speaking,
WORD written in time, in ink in the Book, yet with YOU before the ages,
WORD Key to Creation and Crown of it all,
WORD faithful Witness to YOU,
WORD with a Bang,
WORD running into billions,
WORD running like wildfire,
WORD irresistible as a grain of wheat,
WORD with a whisper,
WORD still as a painting, as a taste, as a whiff of perfume, a touch,
WORD going softly, delicately, “with trickling increment,”
from virtue to virtue,
in the Great Chain of Being,
in the cosmos and in all its invisible powers,
the rocks and the plants and the trees and the animals,
and finally,
in the first fullness of time,
in us,
humankind.

WORD OF GOD,
silent Voice,

voice swinging
between breathtaking majesty and breathtaking intimacy,
WORD
heard with a vengeance, caught in the wind, felt, ever so faintly surmised,
by Abraham in Aram,
by skeptical Sarah smiling in a dark tent corner,
by bright-eyed Rebecca at the sight of the camels,
at the stone set up at Bethel, by Jacob, the fighter, the limper,
by Moses in the desert, at Sinai, at the Tent of Meeting,
by Joshua at the Jordan and Jericho,
by Rahab the whore saved from the massacre,
by Elijah in the light breeze,
by David and Solomon, in all they were up to,
by Isaiah, awe-struck in the Temple,
by Jeremiah, pilloried in the Temple,
heard by prophets, singers, priests, and sages,
heard by pilgrims in droves, tired of talking to each other:
Word inside words, Song inside songs, heard
in ever so many words, ever so many ways,
by Israel's martyrs, lost, wearing sheepskins, famished, sawed in half,
by its poor, harassed, adrift in the mountains,
by its suffering wayfarers in search of GOD'S City,
JERUSALEM, vision of peace.

WORD undefined, yet defining,
WORD heard in the mind, in the crowd,
by Socrates,
by Heraclitus,
By Lao-Tze, by Gautama the Buddha,
by Moses ben Maimon, by his friend Ibn Rushd,
by Great Soul Gandhi and Great Soul Hammarskjöld,
by seekers and thinkers and just people and lovers of Mystery everywhere.

This All-Holy WORD,
always and everywhere present and calling for presence in return,
WORD "Come-to-me-all-of-you"
WORD "Come-and-see"
THIS WORD OF GOD

came to a head,
in the second fullness of time,
in JESUS THE CHRIST:
Temple, Torah, Word, Wisdom Incarnate,
Tent of the Meeting not made by human hands,
Temple at home in the Temple,
Questioning Child, hearing the lessons of teachers,
Question of God, manifest in the flesh,
Young blood, yes,
(yes,
flesh and blood are weak and frail,
susceptible to nervous shock,)
so young, so old,
JESUS GOD'S Child,
Kid, Lamb slain from the beginning of the world,
Man of Truth, of Service, of Sorrows,
Child of Mary the Virgin,
born of woman by the Spirit of Holiness,
yet given his Name by the FATHER, by a Messenger, in a Dream,
JESUS, SAVIOR,
plunged in the Jordan by John, a second-rate preacher

(an odd type, a loud man,
you know, a bit of a menace, brimstone and fire,
the frightening, self-diminishing type,
prepared to go down on his knees,
but let me tell you, a drawer of crowds, a critic of vice in high places;
it earned him both Herod's attention and a taste of his prison,
where he lost his head to the lily-livered king—
who, like the damn fool he was,
got himself mated, in front of the court, by a tart queen,
plying a girl too wise for her years as a pawn;
in any case, later on, they thought John had been Jesus' own cousin;
he might have been, Jesus himself
thought the world of him, called him a prophet),

Jesus, Savior,
אֵלֵּיט, Παῖς,³

like Moses a Servant, yet Key to Creation and Crown of it all,
 HOUSE-BOY, Key to the Household of GOD
 (a mere boy, a child, really),
 House-Boy, charged with the Housekeeping
 (“See Me, I’ll talk to the Owner”),
 House-Boy in charge of the Household
 (“Talk to ME, take my WORD, the FATHER himself loves you”),
 Child, Boy, House-Boy, Servant, Kid, Lamb of God,
 innocent as strawberries,
 inspired by the Spirit, at work by the Spirit—touch of the finger of God—
 healer powerless and wounded, truth-sayer slandered and silenced,
 worker of wonders,
 (in league with the devil?
 out of his mind?)
 talker, walker, walk-in guest at odd tables.

Toward the end, embarrassed with far too expensive a gift,
 in far too maudlin a mood,
 by a woman of poor taste, who loved and who knew
 that he was a dead man, as good as buried—
 nailed to a cross, a mere thirty years old,
 a slave, a blasphemous fool and a rebel,
 a snake on a pole, a dead wayward kid come to terrible grief,
 yet faithful and true (and we did not know it),
 true to his FATHER (whom we did not know);
 Witness Faithful and True, AMEN to God,
 free giver, in life, of the Bread of Life, of the Wine of the Wedding,
 free giver, in death, of the Spirit of Freedom,
 Messenger of Life to dead Adam and Eve (that is,
 to the countless held in suspended animation in the Cosmic Prison),
 vindicated in the Spirit,
 wrestler with all the powers that be,
 cracking for good their hold on the universe,
 opening for good the gateway to GOD,
 preached among the nations, received in the world as GOD’S SON,
 taken up in GOD’S Glory,
 now LORD, clearly, and manifest,
 SON OF GOD IN POWER

(final justice is coming at last)

ONE AND THE SAME, THE LORD, THE MAN JESUS CHRIST.

And so, LORD JESUS, LORD OF GLORY
You are present around us, among us, within us,
yet gone and away
till the third fullness of time;
we await YOU in prayer and watchfulness around the Table,
Bread of Life and Peace for the world,
Wine of abandon, drink of the Kingdom,
Vine of the tendrils, Shepherd of the sheep,
Door of the sheepfold, Head-stone of the building,
Head of the body, Writer in the sand,
Rock of the house, First Walker on water,
Justice of God for the living and the dead,
Assurance in person of the Kingdom to come,
God knows how, God knows when,
We in You, and You in us,
Now and forever.

And so,
DEAR FATHER, DEAR SON,
DEAR LOVER, dearly BELOVED,
God of the Word, God-Word of God:
YOU ARE.

YOU are here and now,
YOU are there and then,
YOU are here and there and everywhere,
YOU are now and then and always,
YOU ARE ONE,
inseparably One:
YOU are ONE in the Wild Exuberance of Majesty,
ONE in the little Flame, in the Kindling of Love Everlasting,
ONE in the Presence Untamed in the World YOU have fashioned,
ONE in the Barely Felt Touch of Affection,
ONE in the רוח הקודש, the Πνεῦμα ἁγίωσύνης, the SPIRIT OF HOLINESS.⁴

And so, ALL-HOLY SPIRIT,
as close as a lover's breath felt on the cheek
as wild as the wind, free to go where it goes,
SOVEREIGN LOVE:
YOU are and have been, from the beginning
hatching World out of Chaos,
coaxing words out of Prophets, by hook or by crook,
Giver of Breath, of Love,
Maker of God's Hidden Children:

Your whisper is Life, endless Life.

YOU

Protector of the Poor
Giver of Gifts
Light of Hearts
Best of Comforters
Cherished Guest of the Soul
Delicious refreshment
Respite in toil
Breath of fresh air in the heat of the day
Comfort amidst Tears:
Please wash what is dirty
Shower rain on dry grass
Heal what is wounded
Bend what is rigid
Fondle the frigid
Set straight what is crooked.

SPIRIT, YOU are

CHRIST and his FATHER around, round about us;

SPIRIT, YOU simply ARE

Our BROTHER CHRIST and his FATHER around, round about us.

You are in us, we are in YOU,

and so we are

alive to the FATHER as dear as a Mother,
alive to Jesus the LORD as dear as a Brother,
alive to each other

In YOU.

SPIRIT OF GOD,
Mother of Charity, Sister of Majesty,
Make us, remake us,
make of us a living offering to GOD,
Make us ONE, make us evermore ONE,
One, evermore ONE in the Body of Christ,
One, evermore One
in the shedding of our lives in the name of the Blood shed.

And so,
IN THE NAME OF † THE FATHER AND † THE SON AND † THE HOLY
SPIRIT.

We believe in the Church,
One and to be One,
Holy and to be Holy
Universal and to be Universal,
Sent out by the Son, forever to be Sent out by the Son.

In dread of the Fire, we acknowledge one Baptism in Water;
we await the forgiveness, once and for all, of our sins.

Headed for death, we hunger and thirst for justice,
final justice for all.

Still headed for death, we anticipate life beyond death,
the new heavens, the new earth, life of a world yet unseen.

And so,

כבוד! ΔΟΞΑ! GLORY!⁵
TO THE FATHER AND THE SON AND THE HOLY SPIRIT,
AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING, IS NOW, AND EVER SHALL BE,
WORLD WITHOUT END.
AMEN.

Too much, too much, enough said (though never really enough). Yet for now, enough, enough words. Time to be silent. Silence! At least half an hour (Rev 8,1). Let your words die into GOD; they will live.

For CHRIST'S sake, let us die into GOD. We will live. Hush now. Close your mouth, try not to talk. Close your eyes, do not try to see. Do not be afraid of tears. If you feel like a desert, stay there for a while. Contemplate. *See*. Trust the dark inner vision; live to see the Invisible. That's the SPIRIT. Hear the silent WORD. Love. You are being guided, shepherded, carried, seen, loved.

You *ARE*. *Are Mine*. I AM WHO I AM.
YOU WILL BE LIKE ME. IN ME.
IN MY BELOVED, MY SON,
MY ADORABLE
CHILD.

Amen, Marana tha.

LORD JESUS, come.
AMEN.
AMEN.
LORD JESUS, have mercy on me, a sinner.
AMEN.
LORD JESUS, come.
AMEN.
Come.

Notes

This is the second half of a piece published as "A Very Explicit *Te Deum*: A Spiritual Exercise, To Help Overcome Trinitarian Timidity." *Horizons* 25 (1998): 276–91.

1. Cf. Acts 11, 22–26: "Now word came to the ears of the church living in Jerusalem about these things, so they sent Barnabas to Antioch. On arrival he saw the grace of God at work, and was glad at it, and encouraged them all to stay with the Lord with loyal hearts. Yes, he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, so a fair crowd joined the Lord. Then he went to Tarsus to retrieve Saul; he found him and took him to Antioch. And what happened was this: they rejoined the church for as much as a year and got to teach a fair number; and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians."

2. Both Hebrew *dabbar* and Greek *logos* mean "word."

3. Aramaic *talya'* (cf. Heb טלה) means "tender, young person or animal," and so, "kid" (i.e., the young of a goat), "lamb" (i.e., the young of a sheep), "child," but also "boy" (also as used for a servant). Greek *pais* means "boy," both in the sense of "male child" and "servant" (cf. French *garçon*).

4. Hebrew *ruach haqqodeš* and Greek *pneuma hagiosyns* mean "spirit of holiness."

5. Hebrew *kabhod* and Greek *doxa* both mean "glory."

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