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: נַהֲרָי, 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 splen-
did 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, with-
out 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 tetra-
gram” 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.
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 out suffered 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


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.*

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 Mysterious. Toland argued that there is nothing essen-
tial 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 inter-
est to Christians are theologians’ opinions, so long as they feel blest in
their faith?” 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 develop-
ment, 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?
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.” 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 angle 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.”

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 tolerance 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); 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”). 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. 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, 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 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.
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. 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 bibli-cal 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.
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.
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 reverenced 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).
14. *S. Th.* I, q. 2, a. 3.

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 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 infiniété 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.” 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 jour-
nal; 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 some-
thing 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 ances-
tors, 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 incomparably 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 incomparableness!

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 ineffec-
tualness in the face of it, Lévinas suggests, are there to prove just that point.

So, Lévinas warns, instead of thinking of Judaism as the prefigura-
tion 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. 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.

Despite this frontal attack on my fundamental convictions, I
found Lévinas’s piece irresistible. Here I was, a graduate of the secular-
ization 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 uncondi-
tional 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 *Yossel* 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; 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. 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. 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 argu-
ment 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 prin-
cipal expansions I had found in the Yiddish text, while registering further
differences in the footnotes. 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 commen-
tary. 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.

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 Jeffry 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 trans-
lation 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, Jeffry 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*. 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. 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.

* * * *

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. Johann George Hamann, a pietist, yet a friend of Immanuel Kant’s, is nowadays best remembered for his odd-titled tract Golgatha und Scheblimini! Von einem Prediger in der Wüsten (“Golgotha and Sit-at-my-Right! By One Preaching in the Wilderness”), published in 1784. 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 Golgatha 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”). 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.  

* * * * *

The first concerns the Glory of God. In the name of the victims of the Holocaust and of their faith, Yossel 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.” 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; 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. 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 that 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. Kolitz’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 Kolitz’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? Kolitz’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
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


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


17. Johann George Hamann, *Golgatha 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 parr.; 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).


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.


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 Schuijer, 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 peripher-
ally, 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 unde-
ceived 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 conver-
sation, 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 admin-
istrator with no small responsibilities. A professor at the university in
Leipzig since 1939, he knew what it took to work with barbarians look-
ing 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 pre-
viously 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