

A Layman and the New Theology

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Christianity is on the defensive throughout the Western world. Church attendance has fallen sharply in Western Europe and is declining in America. As the college population nears seven million, the atmosphere of most colleges is hostile to religious faith. (G. K. Chesterton rightly observed that "religious prejudice is the anti-Semitism of the intellectual.") The Gallup poll finds that most Americans believe religion is fading in this country. Everywhere we hear charges that the church is becoming "irrelevant." Our era is spoken of as the "post-Christian" era.

Many developments account for the falling prestige of the Christian church. Some of the most important are clearly connected with the growth of science and technology; growing affluence has something to do with the trend; there may be a cyclical factor at work; thoroughly secularized educational systems have made a contribution.

My concern is with the tendency of modern theologians to abandon central aspects of the Christian faith — partly because the theologians are the products of their age and partly in a desperate effort to rejuvenate that faith and increase its appeal to modern man.

Perhaps it is presumptuous of a layman to advise theologians about the practice of their profession. But if war is too important to leave to generals, Christianity may be too important to leave to religious professionals. I am emboldened by the knowledge that there are no "experts" on God — there are only those who are learned concerning the speculations and theories of other nonexperts. So although I am a political scientist rather than a theologian, I would like to comment on certain aspects of modern theology that strike me as rather remarkable. (After all, it *was* a child who observed that the emperor had no clothes on.)

In using the words "modern theology," I am aware that the term is most inexact. Since there are innumerable schools of contemporary theology, let me clarify by the explanation that I use the expression to refer to theologians who reject Christian supernaturalism, deny the traditional Christian view of a personal God, and instead call for church activism in pursuit of social justice.

I

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The modern theologians seemingly yield to none in their admiration of Jesus. His life supposedly exemplifies the best that man has achieved. His example and insights are a continuing source of inspiration and guidance to us. In an almost mystical sense, something almost Divine flashed through him — and continues to speak to us through him. He was indeed the matchless historical figure, the One upon which their faith (what remains of their faith) is based. He is central to their theology, and they insist that they are, if not traditional Christians, Christians nonetheless.

But even as they eulogize Christ and make him the pivotal figure in their religious structure, they regard his major theological premises as essentially crude, primitive, and simplistically naive compared with their own. They would never think of putting it so bluntly. They just imply it.

For example, Jesus believed in a personal, approachable God who creates life, hears prayer, forgives sins, asks our obedience, and offers us eternal life. Anyone who chooses to read the Four Gospels can confirm this for himself. But the modern theologian dismisses the idea of a personal God, who of necessity would have to be in some sense "out there." This, they say, is a rather childlike conception which was all right for an earlier day but will hardly pass muster with the more sophisticated intellects of today.

Modern man must categorically discard the supernatural. The supernatural derived from superstition and ignorance in the first place, and it does not mesh with the scientifically oriented modern mind. The inexplicable, the seemingly miraculous, awaits only the further revelation of scientific progress.

With the supernatural ruled out, one can dispose of miracles, challenge the literal resurrection of Jesus, and brush aside belief in life beyond death. It may be hard for us to abandon these treasured sentimentalities, but we are assured that the time has come for a realistic reexamination of our religious heritage. Supernaturalism in any form is no longer salable to educated modern man. It has run its course and is ready for the intellectual junkheap, and we must have the courage and honesty to cast it aside.

Perhaps modern man can believe in God as Being (rather than as *a* Being), or as the Ground of our Being, or as some form of Ultimate Reality, or as the Unconditional. But this is as far as we can hope to go unless we are prepared to lose touch with twentieth century man.

For the modern theologians, the acid test of any belief seems to be: is it hard for modern man to accept? If it is, scrap it and construct a new theory that is easier to believe. Above all, construct a theory that unbelieving intellectuals will view as progressive. Their accolade is the most coveted mark of success. This flexibility will ensure the intellectual respectability of modern theology and enable a staggering church to survive the twentieth century rather than waste away as an irrelevant relic of another era. Thus the modern theologians are rendering a great service by refashioning an old-fashioned Christianity into a model that even modern man may believe — or if not believe, at least speculate about as if it just *might* contain a partially valid approach to truth.

Perhaps. But a series of questions keep recurring. They are uncomfortable questions, questions that the modern theologians do not want asked but that for this very reason need asking.

Why do they admire Jesus so extravagantly, even regard him with near adoration, while looking on his core beliefs as hopelessly outmoded? Most of us would find it a bit difficult to make a hero out of someone who, in the area in which he should have spoken with the most authority, was as abysmally wrong as was Jesus in his conception of God, his acceptance of the supernatural, and his belief in life after death. If Jesus was so grossly mistaken in his central theological premises, why regard him as such an incomparable religious figure?

Let us take, for example, the nature of God. I believe no one can closely examine the Four Gospels and conclude that the misty God of modern theology is the same God Jesus believed in, preached about, and prayed to. His God *was* real, personal, concerned, and “out there.” Of course there are many aspects of Jesus’ life and teachings that are subject to a variety of differing interpretations by honest, reasonable, and thoughtful men. But on some aspects of his message — surely including this one — there is clarity enough for those who care to read.

It will not do, as some theologians have done, to regard Jesus’ primary message as having been garbled by his overzealous followers. For if this be the case, why trust those other New Testament passages that cause even the modern theologians to characterize him as a singular and peerless religious figure?

If the account of Christ's teachings about God and man's relation to God has been subject to the erosions and distortions of time and wishful thinking and faulty memory, perhaps the Sermon on the Mount wasn't a faithful reflection of his teaching either. Or his famous parables. Or his exhortations to the Pharisees. And maybe his idolizing biographers chose to conceal some rather unpleasant features of his life in an effort to place him in the best possible light. Don't disciples have a way of doing these things? Perhaps his alleged victoriousness over sin is just another myth — an inspiring one, but a myth nonetheless.

These are serious questions, for if the Great Teacher was misquoted or misinterpreted or misremembered on the most vital points of his message, what confidence can be placed in the account of less important aspects of his life and ministry? Or is it convenient to attribute to him those statements and actions that suit our fancy but ignore or dismiss as unreliable those we find distasteful?

II

Let us suppose, however, for argument's sake, that we reject Christ's perception of God and of His own divinity while continuing to believe that he lived a sacrificial and dedicated life and taught an admirable system of ethics. This will not make him a sufficiently unique figure to merit our religious devotion. Others have advanced ethics as admirable as his; others have lived noble lives and died martyrs' deaths. No, if Jesus is worthy of being singled out from other men to become the cornerstone of a great religious faith, it is only because his portrayal of God, of his relationship to God, and of God's will for man was essentially authentic. If this portrayal is not fundamentally accurate, then Jesus was an admirable man — no more — whose faith was flawed by the fallacies of his age.

This is why the matter of Christ's resurrection is of supreme importance. Either Christ was resurrected in some special way, or he died like our fathers and is dead today. There is no way to evade this central proposition honestly. It *is* a Yes-or-No question, when faced squarely. If Christ lives on only through recorded memories and through the inspiration we receive from his life and example, he plays no essentially different role from that of others who lived inspiring lives. Only if Christ is alive today, alive as a conscious, thinking, loving, communicating Being, is Christianity a valid religious faith.

It is interesting to observe the verbal footwork of the modern theologians as they slide away from this question. A flood of erudite rhetorical jargon

pours forth; circumlocutions, evasions, and double-talk fill the air; every effort is made to becloud the issue, talk around it, philosophize about it, and do everything but meet it head on. For they shrink from admitting that Jesus is dead — dead as all men in their graves are dead — because modern theologians, too, are not quite satisfied with a dead Christ. But to concede his literal resurrection is to concede the supernatural — an even more distressing thought. Some try to wriggle out by saying, “Something happened which we can’t quite explain, something truly remarkable, which galvanized Jesus’ followers into a community of faith and produced the vision and dynamism of the early church.” What was that something? Well, they don’t know — but it was a most solemn occasion, and terribly significant.

Furthermore, some modern theologians believe that the Divine (whatever that may be) did speak through Christ in a special way. If this were true, of course, it would be just as much a manifestation of the supernatural as miracles and the resurrection. But if the rhetoric is sufficiently blurred, they can still maintain that indispensable posture of modernity by stoutly denying that they really believe in the supernatural.

III

Let us analyze some of these elements of the Christian faith that modern theologians find so intellectually disreputable.

Miracles? If God spoke through Christ in some special sense, this act surely partook of the miraculous. It cannot be explained any more than can the healing of a leper. And if Christ lived a sinless life (as many modern theologians still seem to believe), was this not as truly miraculous as the loaves and fishes?

No miracle is more incredible than the miracle of life itself. The intricacies, the complexities, the interrelationships within the human body, the synchronization of the myriad cunning forces that produce and sustain life, the creative capacities of man, the astonishing diversities of life on this planet — all of these involve enough mystery to make us cautious about denying other mysteries. Modern man can believe that the information coded into chromosomes one-millionth the size of a pinhead is the equivalent of the information in a thousand volumes of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* — but he will balk at believing the Son of God could perform a less spectacular miracle!¹

We are admonished not to assume that the Divine is a Being with characteristics like a person, or we drag the Divine down toward the level of man, thus sapping its mystery and transcendence. If dogs could think, we

are told, they would construct a god who was like a very superior dog; and if fishes could think, they would conceive a godly fish embodying every quality of fishy excellence. Let us be done with this anthropomorphic nonsense and reckon with the Divine as that which so far transcends our mortal concepts that it is essentially inconceivable.

This sounds very profound, but actually it is very sophomoric. Few thoughtful Christians think God has the same physical characteristics as man — that is, that he has a navel, tonsils, kidneys to screen out impurities, adrenal glands to help him meet emergencies, and a thyroid to regulate growth. But most Christians do agree with Jesus that God has *some* of the characteristics of man — albeit possessed in an infinitely more advanced form. That is, we believe God thinks, experiences compassion, appreciates beauty, loves truth, seeks justice, has a sense of humor, and is concerned with the fate of man. Does this pull God down toward man's level and shrink his stature? Would it not, on the contrary, dwarf the Divine if we were to deny that It possesses these qualities? Only because man shares some of God's nature, although in rudimentary form, is man able to conceive of God, worship him, and feel a kinship with him.

Another question comes to mind. Jesus said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:30, 31).

If God is only Being, or the Ground of our Being, or some shadowy entity or nonentity wholly removed from human experience, how are we supposed to love him with all of our heart and mind and soul? How does one love a non-being? It is quite possible to love a Supreme Being who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. But how do we love the species of God conceived by modern theologians? Will they deny that Jesus' exhortation to love God was of the most vital importance to him? Or was Jesus, alas, wrong here too?

IV

As I suggested to begin with, scientific developments seem to have contributed to the crisis of Christianity. Ours is an Age of Science, leading many to conclude that as science advances, disrobing the mysterious and probing ever deeper into the secrets of the universe, God fades a bit further with each new discovery. And if man should actually discover how to create life — not an impossibility — where then would God be?

Yet there is not the slightest valid reason for concluding that because man understands more about his world, and discerns more clearly the laws of life and process which Someone established, that this diminishes the Creator. To better understand God's ways of ordering the universe, to think God's thoughts after him, is not to diminish but to *reveal* him. Scientific discoveries ought to lead to an enhanced appreciation of the awesome Intellect which has conceived the grand drama of this planet and this universe.

Even if man should create simple forms of life, it would be an ultimate tribute to the power of God who could develop a creature with that fabulous network of nerve combinations that constitutes the brain of man. The supreme tribute to the Master Creator would be a created being that could use God's raw materials to produce life itself.²

We can agree with those who say we ought not to accept as true — theologically or otherwise — that which science can prove to be untrue. But this is not the question today. The hypotheses that modern theology attacks are neither provable nor disprovable. They are in a realm beyond the reach of science. We can neither prove nor disprove that God exists or is a Person or that Jesus is Divine or that he was resurrected. Evidence and logic can be adduced to support or challenge these propositions, but ultimate proof or disproof cannot be found. Both belief and unbelief are acts of faith. So let us be clear: the issue is not now, and never will be, the acceptance or rejection of the indisputable findings of science.³

For modern man there is also the problem of authority. We are loath these days to accept anything on "authority." From early adolescence, we are warned against accepting a theory or a value judgment just because so-and-so said it. In general, this is a sound and necessary caveat. Even in religion, intelligent Christians do not ask that confidence in their faith should rest, unexamined, on "the church says so," or "Saint Augustine said so," or "Father and Mother say so." It should rest on the most searching study that can be made of the matter, plus such insights as may come to us from the whole range of human experience.

The freedom to believe or not to believe in Christianity must be conceded, of course, if the concept of a just God seeking the uncoerced loyalty of men is maintained. But once one concludes that Jesus *was* the divine Son of God, one is no longer free to be selective about the teachings of Jesus. Where Jesus is unclear, or where he has not spoken, the Christian can decide for himself. But on such questions as the nature of God, the presence of sin, the need for prayer, Christ's mission on earth, life beyond death, et

cetera, where his message can hardly be misunderstood, the Christian is not free to substitute his own opinions for the knowledge of Christ. For a Christian to assume the right to determine the truth or falsity of Christ's words is a startling form of presumptuousness. It implicitly rejects the premise that Christ was a trustworthy spokesman for God. Even where Christ's teachings are hardest to believe, there the Christian has no choice but to accept them. In plain words, Christianity *is* an authoritarian religion. Christ *is* the authority, and his followers are not privileged to place their private judgment above his words.

It will not do to hedge, to say the challenge is not to the truth of Christ but only to the accuracy of the historical record — because no one (repeat, *no one*) can prove that a single sentence attributed to Jesus was actually spoken by him, or was not spoken by him. If one accepts the authenticity of a single phrase or idea, one does so on faith. To accept some of his statements, then, as valid and to reject others is a form either of pure capriciousness or an assertion of one's own ultimate wisdom. The only honest alternatives are to acknowledge the gospel accounts as reliable or test them, like the views of all men, by their intrinsic appeal to the individual judgment. In the latter case, the individual remains the highest authority on truth, a role presumably assigned to God.

This is a hard doctrine for modern man to accept, but it is the inescapable conclusion that must be drawn from the implicit and explicit premises of Christianity. Yet one will never, never find modern theologians quoting a statement or a series of statements of Christ as authority for anything. Jesus' recorded statements are to be weighed, dissected, evaluated, accepted, or rejected just as are those of your nextdoor neighbor. Well, almost! Except, of course, that few new theologians are uncouth enough to say plainly that on this or that point Christ was wrong. They can always find a way to reinterpret him to mean what they think he *should* mean.

V

Another factor in the current crisis, alas, has been brought on by the churches themselves. The traditional church has properly emphasized the primacy of its mission to kindle and strengthen the individual's faith in Christ and his words. However, it has often failed to impress on its members the necessity of acting as Christians when they confront the whole of life — in their business, racial relations, the affairs of their community, the problems of their nation, and the dilemmas of their planet. It was always shortsighted to limit Christianity's scope to the domain of private affairs.

If Christ's teachings were as bold and far-reaching as Christians have every right to regard them, they cannot be excluded from the ever-expanding political realm.

Harvey Cox is surely right, though hardly original, when he wrote: "To say that speaking of God must be political means that it must engage people at particular points, not just 'in general.' It must be a word about their own lives — their children, their job, their hopes or disappointments. It must be a word to the bewildering crises within which our personal troubles arise — a word which builds peace in a nuclear world, which hastens the day of freedom in a society stifled by segregation."⁴

In belaboring the church and churchmen for their myopia and timidity in applying the Christian vision to race discrimination, to the existence of needless poverty, to the frustrations and futilities of life in the central city, to the scandals of nationalism, modern theologians have performed a valuable service. But in heaven's name, why must they combine these insights with an insistence on gutting Christianity of those very truths which give the church its greatest vitality and its deepest meaning?

In their desire to "make Christianity relevant" they do not see man truly and see him whole. For men seek not only secular justice and material well-being; they hunger for that glimpse of the transcendent which modern theology so conspicuously lacks. It may be today that many men can know God as a living reality *only as they accept Christ's knowledge of him*. And the modern theologians reject that knowledge. They may be offering some intellectuals a half-loaf that appeals to their intellects (though hardly to their hearts), but it is a cold-crust for most men — especially for the common people "who heard him gladly" when Jesus was on the earth.

If the modern theologians preach traditional Christian doctrines which they disbelieve, their words will carry no conviction. On the other hand, if they preach what they do believe, their hearers, asking bread but given stones, will go unfed. The church may survive awhile as a social agency. But without a risen Christ and a living God, it becomes no more than a hybridized Red Cross/Community Chest/Civil Rights/Willing Worker society. We need societies like these. We need also a church. Above all, we need a faith — a faith that does not stutter when it confronts the central concerns of existence.

The hope of saving Christianity by emasculating it is the most tragic of delusions. Christianity has provided hope and faith and strength throughout the centuries because it has taught a living Christ, an accessible God, and a life after death. If you rob the church of these, you cut its heart away.

Sociologists Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark of the University of California at Berkeley completed a massive study of church activities and beliefs several years ago. Noting that “the leaders of today’s challenge to traditional beliefs are principally theologians,” they declare that “a demythologized modernism is overwhelming the traditional Christ-centered, mystical faith.” But they observe that the great majority of those who accept the new theology “have stopped attending church, stopped participating in church activities, stopped contributing funds and stopped praying.” They are either humanists or on the way to becoming humanists. Only those who hold to the traditional Christian views retain an active interest in the church. On the basis of solid empirical data, the sociologists predict the modern churches cannot survive, as viable organizations, the widespread adoption of a theology that rejects supernaturalism and rests its appeal solely on Christian ethics.⁵

I wish the custodians of the faith, now so busily engaged in altering that faith, would be more — a lot more — “honest to God.” Let them frankly say: “Jesus was a great guy but a product of his primitive times. His ethics were fine but his theology faulty. He needs updating, and we are the ones to do the job. Accordingly, we have tested the winds which blow and used them to winnow the wheat from the chaff. From the medley of truth, error, superstition, and insight which Christ originally taught, this remains that might be true.”

If they would openly say this, we could respect their candor if not their wisdom. But when they accept the Christian label while denying its major premises, they invite the indignation so many of us feel.

If Christianity is to survive, it must survive as its Founder framed it.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 To Christians — and many non-Christians — it seems more reasonable to believe that life appeared and developed because of the direction of a conscious, reasoning, willing, creative Being than as the result of blindly groping elements which somehow stumbled into a formula culminating in that dazzling symphony of life which sobers and humbles those who study it most.
- 2 If it takes intelligence to create life, what intelligence then produced God? No one has ever answered this question, of course, but it is as easy to believe that God always existed as to believe that matter always existed. If *something* always had to be present, it could as well be God as matter — particularly when matter contains the astonishing electrical properties and chemical combinations that we know atoms possess. Where did *they* come from?
- 3 Many persons today, particularly college students, seem to believe that faith in a personal God who guides and strengthens those who call on him is a crutch for those not strong enough to rely on their own resources, who need an escapist

illusion, who haven't the courage and independence and honesty to face the challenge of life, or who lack the nerve to face the bleak reality of death. Man hypothesizes the existence of a loving God to provide him with a comforting cocoon into which he can retreat when faced with the dilemmas of life and the prospect of annihilation.

I find the implication interesting that Jesus was a weak personality who needed faith because he lacked the courage to face life. I find the assumption interesting, too, when applied to the Apostles and numberless towering historic figures who held to a God-centered faith.

There is nothing weak about acknowledging man's imperfections, his fallibility, his limited insights, the frailties of his mind and spirit. This acknowledgment does not represent a shameful confession of weakness but only an elementary admission of the undeniable facts of life. Man really *is* pretty fragile, he really *cannot* know very much, he *is* frighteningly dependent on forces beyond his control, and he has no way of coping with the prospect of eternal extinction. That man, confronted with his limitations, should feel the need for faith in and help from a Supreme Being is evidence of a modicum of humility and an honest facing up to his precarious condition.

Furthermore, the conditions that lead to the construction of a hypothesis tell us nothing about the truth or falsity of that hypothesis. It may be true, regardless of what caused man to pose it. Asserting man's need for faith is not enough to discredit a hypothesis growing out of that need.

- 4 Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), p. 256.
- 5 Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark, The Changing Church: Will Ethics Kill Christianity? *Current* 99, 33-40 (1968).