

Christianity, in a Time-Bound Perspective

"Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die. . . . Remember how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. . . .

"Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: If anyone hears my voice, and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with me." —Revelations 3:2-3, 20

MY TITLE makes me uneasy. Christianity is a story of the here and now in the presence of the Beyond. "The Beyond" is a term for what is experienced beyond all that is, and can be, seen. Thus Christianity can have no perspective, for a perspective requires a vanishing point on a horizon, and a horizon is the furthest boundary of what is seen. But the Beyond transcends the reality that is seen, so one could not say, "a story of the here and now in the sight of the Beyond." It takes a horizon to establish a perspective, and a horizon is a matter of innercosmic perception. Still, it is the passing of the second and the coming of the third millennium and the attention to this particular point in time which brought to me the invitation to write this piece. Why? The frequently heard remark, "the third millennium is coming into sight," carries with it the kind of excitement touched off by Halley's Comet, or a spectacular coincidence of stellar eclipses. But Christianity, indeed, was responsible for the first excitement of this type when the year 1000 approached. What may have been foremost in people's mind then might have been the passage in the Book of Revelation which speaks of some future time of 1000 years during which "Satan will be bound, and Christ will reign with his saints." There is no reason, of course, that that period of a thousand years would

begin in the year 1000 and in fact nothing remarkable happened at that moment. So, the excitement of passing into the third millennium has ultimate religious roots which makes its recurrence in this areligious time of ours quite astonishing. Indeed, a year of three zeroes has the least relevance for the people of that Lord who said, "watch and pray, for ye know not when the time is. But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:22 f.).

As we reflect on Christianity at this moment of history, then, let us do it in the context of forces contending with each other for our hearts, souls, and minds. That there are such forces may in itself be a Christian assumption for which non-Christians have little sympathy. Still, this kind of discerning labor is required for an orientation in our time, and such orientation cannot be had at some first glance. Even more could the term "forces" cause raised eyebrows and the desire to end conversation abruptly. Let us say, then, that we focus on "opinion." Not this or that opinion, but opinion in general, in view of the enormously high ranking it enjoys today. Once, at the noon-day of philosophy, Parmenides and Plato agreed that to be able to distinguish between opinion and truth was crucial to human

life—truth belonging to being, opinion to non-being. Today the imagination of most people cannot even grasp the sense of this distinction. Our children are brought up on the dogma that everybody has a right to his opinion, from which as a premise is derived the other dogma that every opinion is as good as every other opinion. Here is an actual letter of a twelve-year old to his father, a letter I have before me in the original:

Dad I see what you meant about that opinion stuff. I wish it had never gotten taught to the kids at school, it's messing up their brains. One kid told me that I was an alien and I said does that make it true and he said no but IT'S MY OPINION. When I heard this I wanted to go over and strangle him. I thought so because it was silly and made no sense. Then I tried to straighten him out by telling him the rock story. I said if you saw a black rock and you said that the rock was red would that make the rock red? He said no but IT'S MY OPINION THAT THE ROCK IS RED. Someone has got to do something to get this opinion stuff out of our school. It's teaching the kids wrong.

The word "truth" has not disappeared from dictionaries but in daily life it functions no longer as the opposite of opinion, nor as something relevant in view of the multitude of opinions. I am turning a glance to the reader, with a silent "Is this not so?"

Behind the indifference to truth is a similar indifference to any concept of "reality." Yet the philosophical distinction between truth and opinion was created in response to a great paradigmatic experience of reality, the ultimate reality in which humans found themselves participating, a reality both constitutive and non-objective (in the sense of non-thingly). Today "reality" may connote pragmatic usefulness, or logical analysis, but there is no appreciation of higher reality. As a result there is both an inability and a refusal to acknowledge authority when one comes face-to-face with it, for there is no authority except in terms of higher reality. Thus, language appearing to invoke authority is barred, and systematic rejection of author-

ity is taught, curiously, as a dogma. One might think that a great enhancement of each particular person would result, but the exact opposite occurs. In the past, a human person could be seen as a "holiness," and in late Romanticism this would transform itself into that other, competing one, "superman." Today, our subjectivist, relativist culture deals with patterns of masses in which no personal reality can be discovered. In politics it becomes increasingly difficult to find a great personality; the same applies to business. In the universities we have the age of the group project. The place of personal greatness has been taken by "celebrity." There is, then, an organized world of appearance which has replaced reality, much as opinion has replaced truth.

Mention has been made of such words as "truth," "reality," "nature," "authority," which had received meaning from exemplary experiences of a hierarchy of being, with higher being as the source of order, and, further, from the mystery of the Beyond, the mystic human awareness of the divine Absolute. By contrast, the equality of all opinions, the rejection of all authority, and the indifference concerning truth seem to derive from the politics of democracy, so that democracy can be said to have superseded the divine absolute. This was already remarked by Plato, in Book VIII of the *Republic*:

The democratic man will set all his pleasures on a footing of equality, denying to none its equal rights and maintenance, and allowing each in turn, as it presents itself, to succeed, as if by chance of the lot, to the government of his soul until it is satisfied. When he is told that some pleasures should be sought and valued as arising from desires of a higher order, others chastised and enslaved because the desires are base, he will shut the gates of the citadel against the messengers of truth, shaking his head and declaring that one appetite is as good as another and all must have equal rights. . . . His life is subject to no order or restraint, and he has no wish to change an existence which he calls pleasant, free, and happy (Cornford translation, VIII, 561).

The elevation of one particular political order or mode of existence to the rank of absolute is something that, in this case, democracy shares with the modern ideologies, communism, fascism, nazism, anarchism. Again, the absence of an adequate concept of reality is to blame. Exaltation to the absolute highest rank is rational only with regard to divine reality. Political existence occurs in the stream of history, so it deserves to be seen as passing and relative. The fallacious absolutization of historically relative modes of existence was the source of convulsions, wars, terror, violence, and armed ideological movements that filled the first half of this century. These extreme heresies may possibly be over, but the same fallacy continues now as the choice of the erstwhile liberal man. In either case, it is a choice of worship that is hostile to religious truth. The shift from the absolute of divine transcendence to American democracy as the new absolute may eventually be ranked as the salient religious event of the end of this millennium. The Episcopal Church has already furnished us with an heraldic symbol of this shift of absolutes, when it saw fit to set aside the two-thousand-year tradition of Christian ministry by elevating a female, Barbara Harris, to the rank of a bishop, justifying the step as progress in equality, the political equality of American democracy.

A new relation between Christianity and the state seems to be in the making. We already spoke of the armed mass movements which entered the political scene with the claim of representing the absolute of history. Still, their absolute was not political, even though they sought to realize it by political means. It was a new human existence, a new world, a new kind of man. Camus coined a name for this kind of worship: "horizontal transcendence," replacing, since Hegel, the only kind known before, "vertical transcendence." The non-political character of the totalitarianisms thus established was manifested by the fact that the rule of "the Party" replaced the rule of the state. Confering rank of absolute on American democ-

racy is a very different matter. Let us remember the Christian martyrs of old who died not because of general disobedience to the Roman state but because they refused to give to the emperor the honor which belongs to God alone. The Christian concept of political rule, articulated first by Augustine, moved the state down in rank because it was not, and could not be, an agency of human salvation. Pope Gelasius found the corresponding symbolism by proclaiming two rulers, one spiritual and one temporal. Of the two, the state was limited to the political function of keeping a peace of such kind as was possible in this world, while the Church was likewise limited to a higher ranking function of spiritual order. In one way or another this view has persisted right down to our century; it caused our profound sense of abomination at the sight of what appeared to us as the "total state."

There is no need to review here the history of these two distinct functions of Church and State. Beginning with Henry IV and Richelieu, the distinction emerged into the full light of consciousness, e.g., the new concept, "*raison d'état*." What we are observing is an elevation of this still limited political function to absolute rank higher than that of the Church. The newness of the situation was demonstrated during the 1989 visit of the American hierarchy to Rome, when the Archbishop of St. Louis lectured the Holy Father on the right of America's political convictions to supersede the tradition of the Church. This, together with the 1989 elevation of an American woman to the traditional episcopate, seems to point toward a century, probably not before the death of John Paul II, that will see many Christians bow the worshipping knee before a divine majesty, American democracy. One is reminded of the lines in *Burnt Norton* by T. S. Eliot:

What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose garden.

It does seem as if we were about to "take the passage" which the martyrs gave their lives to avoid. Perhaps we are persuaded that the passage is not sacrilegious because American democracy is committed to human rights and thus can be holy in a way which the Roman Empire could never dream of. But, then again, human rights were not at issue for the martyrs. Rather it was the honor of God, who said, "I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have no other gods but me." On the other hand, when, today, we place political principles in a seat of surpassing holiness, do we not ultimately attribute divinity to our collective self?

The canonization of American democracy is the first element of crisis within contemporary Christianity. A second factor is modern Biblical interpretation, a danger increased by the post-Vatican II self-appointment of theologians to the rank of "Second Magisterium." I shall begin with Cardinal Ratzinger's Erasmus Lecture of 1988, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis," and go on to Eric Voegelin's criticism of Rudolf Bultmann. Ratzinger recalls the high hopes kindled by the new scientific-objective methods of biblical exegesis about one hundred years ago, when one hoped to hear again "the polyphony of history . . . rising from behind the monotone of traditional interpretations. As the human element in sacred history became more and more visible, the hand of God, too, seemed larger and closer."¹ Too soon, however, it turned out that modern theologians were no longer reading the Bible but dissecting it "into the various parts from which it had to have been composed." Basil the Great spoke of theology as something that issued from prayer and consisted of "words adequate to God." Of modern interpreters, Ratzinger observed: "Faith is not a component, nor is God a factor to be dealt with in historical events," since the method consists in unraveling the various threads of the narrative "so that in the end what one holds in one's hands [is] the 'really historical,' which means the purely human element in events."² Modern criticism thus obeys

the interpretive precept of Voltaire asserting that history consists of "what is probable," and the probable is whatever happens "the way things happen every day," so that history consists of nothing but the "purely human."

The critical exegete then proceeds to show how it comes about that the idea of God was interwoven with it all, so that in the end "one no longer learns what the text says, but what it should have said, and by which component parts this can be traced through the text." In spite of serious attempts to harmonize historical analysis and hermeneutical synthesis, Ratzinger says, things have worsened so that "materialist and feminist exegeses do not even claim to be an understanding of the text itself . . . but only whatever will serve their particular agenda." Ratzinger then offers a "self-criticism of the historical-critical method," focusing his remarks on Bultmann and Dibelius whose "basic methodological approaches continue even today to determine the methods and procedures of modern exegesis." The method pays primary attention not to the event but rather to what is preached about it. "Everything in the Bible develops from the proclamation . . . the word generates the scene." The result is Bultmann's principle of "discontinuity": "Not only is there no continuity between the pre-Easter Jesus and the formative period of the Church; discontinuity applies to all phases of the tradition." As to the criterion of sequence, it is asserted that "what is simple is original, and what is complex, must be later," a fallacious application of Darwin's theory of evolution.

Ratzinger further complains that Bultmann considers everything in the spiritual superstructure as nothing but "eschatological." "Eschaton" means time's end. It thus differs from history which occurs within time. Ratzinger's basic characterization of Bultmann's message is a radical separation between historical events, on the one hand, and the development of other-worldly religious feelings, on the other. At this point Ratzinger's critique, it must be admitted, goes into details that

leave the reader somewhat confused. I thus prefer to continue the argument on the basis of another critique of Bultmann, by Eric Voegelin.³

Voegelin focuses on another example of Bultmann's discontinuity, his assertion that the Old Testament is irrelevant to Christianity. This cannot be proved with conventional historical methods, says Voegelin, since Christianity has emerged from the Israelite antecedents in a continuous stream of history. "And how can historical method justify the exclusion of history itself from theological exploration?" Bultmann, he shows, picks and chooses, but on the basis of a selective principle introduced "from elsewhere." Bultmann's thesis of a "changing conception of history," from the Greek intracosmic view, to the intramundane view of Israel, to the world-historical perspective of Daniel, and finally to the eschatological view of individual lives, asserts that "history is swallowed up by eschatology." This, Voegelin continues, "seems to Bultmann 'the true solution' of the problem: the Now receives eschatological character through the encounter with Christ, because in this encounter the world and history come to their end, and the believer as a new creature is *entweltlicht*." If we translate the elusive German word as "world-alienated," we find in this position of Bultmann the same elements as in ancient Gnosticism: a rejection of both world and history and a choice for radical escape from these realities.

Bultmann's position, says Voegelin, "is not developed through analysis from the sources itself but imposed from the outside," in other words, achieved through a *deus ex machina*, in this case, Heidegger's existentialism. "Since, furthermore, the existentialist conception of man . . . does not even faintly approach the fullness of the Bible's understanding of man, the definition of 'Christian faith' as the formal object of theology becomes both restrictive and destructive." A "Christian theologian of stature," Voegelin insists, "surrenders the autonomy of his science to one of the intellectual disrupt-

tions of a diseased age, which ironically takes its name from the denial of existence to everything but the moment of man's flight from existence toward an eschatological future." Some history is still left, but Bultmann dismisses it as mere "profane" history, while the individual experience "of each man by himself" is called "true, or decisive history." Voegelin's precise and penetrating analysis of Bultmann shows that the troubles facing Christian theologians today cannot be solved or even adequately assessed within the purview of theology. They require a critique of philosophy which is able to unravel the ideological element within them, in this case, Bultmann's gnosticism.

We are looking at causes of crisis *within* Christianity itself, for we do not want to fall into the error of modern ideologies, all of which center on blaming others, God included, for the defects of human existence in this world. This is a habit they share with the Gnostics of old. In contrast, Christians have believed that the order of being as created by God is good and that we humans are to blame. The third element I want to mention would seem to lie outside of Christianity, as it is represented by the work of a sociologist, Peter L. Berger, who is a firmly believing, active, and articulate Lutheran, and the title of his book, *A Rumor of Angels*, 1969, clearly invokes biblical language. Berger, moreover, describes himself as a man "whose self-understanding is not exhausted by the fact that [he is] a sociologist but [who] also considers himself a Christian." He deplores the sight of a Christian theologian who asserts that "we must realize [that] the death of God is an historical event, that God has died in our cosmos, in our history, in our existence," quoting from Thomas Altizer's *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (1966). Then, however, he proceeds entirely with sociological method and language, describing "the supernatural and the natural attitude" as two incompatible "cognitive structures" of which the first is "in demise." The sociologist in Peter Berger

formulates the conclusion that, "whether one sees the process in terms of the history of ideas [listing factors such as the growth of scientific rationalism or the latent secularity of biblical religion itself], or whether one prefers more sociologically oriented theories [with factors such as industrialization, urbanization, or the pluralism of social milieux], it is difficult to see why any of these elements should suddenly reverse themselves." This seems to be something of a last word, for "the supernatural elements of the religious traditions are more or less liquidated, and the traditional language is transferred from other-worldly to this-worldly referents."

In spite of these hopeless sounding statements, the sociologist claims to have found, within his own science, a future for Christianity. That is astonishing, after Berger has stated that the chief cause of Christianity's demise must be located not in the physical sciences, nor in historians' relativism, but rather in sociology, "the dismal science par excellence of our time, an intrinsically debunking discipline that should be most congenial to nihilists, cynics, and other fit subjects for police surveillance." Human religious experiences and beliefs are referred, ultimately, to "plausibility structures," so that "the magic of faith disappears as the mechanics of plausibility generation and plausibility maintenance become transparent." In other words, "history posits the problem of relativity as a fact, the sociology of knowledge *as a necessity of our condition*." It is precisely this premise of ubiquitous relativism that Berger thinks he can use as a rescue device. He applies this premise to the sociological knowers themselves, insisting that they who issue statements of relativity concerning others are not themselves immune from relativity's annihilation. He sees a way out in "that the entire view of religion as a human product or projection may once again be inverted, and that in such an inversion lies a veritable theological method in response to the challenge of sociology." In this way he hopes to discover that "'in, with, and under' the immense array of

human projections, there are indicators of a reality that is truly 'other' and that the religious imagination of man ultimately reflects."

I may unduly abbreviate Berger's effort by saying that he is tracing cases of "inductive faith," looking in them for "signals of transcendence." Now a sociologist cannot even hope to find such signals unless he first knows that there is something called "transcendence," and this he either knows through the traditional language, or else as another sociological "projection." Berger's hope of having found, in the "relativization of the relativizers" a "veritable theological method" has not been fulfilled. The negation of the negation has not delivered us from the octopus of the "dismally debunking science," even though it may have silenced a particular relativizer. Berger, obviously elated at having found "a veritable theological method" within sociology, feels safe, then, to pursue theological exploration on the basis of "inductive faith," a curious concept particularly if one tries to imagine what might be "deductive faith." He never raises systematically the question of the appropriateness of wedding theological concerns to sociological method, for philosophical purposes.

Voegelin, in his earlier reported critique of Bultmann, did object to Bultmann's characteristic use of philological method. "Bultmann's philological method," he says, "while deprecating scriptural proof and allegoresis, uses their very technique of relating successive positions in a continuum on the level of symbols, but since he recognizes only the compact surface of the earlier symbols and disregards the tension of experience pointing to future differentiation, the result is a separation of the history of Israel from that of Christianity."⁴ In view of this drastic result, he continues, we should become aware "that the historical process in which experiences and symbols differentiate requires more than philological methods for an adequate exploration. . . . It is time that prefiguration [Voegelin refers to the prefiguration of Christ in the

Old Testament which Bultmann had ignored] emerge from the twilight of benevolent acceptance into the full light of a science of experience and symbolization."⁵ Basil the Great had demanded that theology consist of "words adequate to God." The language of the modern social sciences, with their reductive premises, restrictive methods, and resulting destructive effects on spiritual awareness and sensitivity, is totally "inadequate to God." This fact is relevant far beyond Peter Berger's book; for the chief matter is the deplorable usage of sociological language and jargon in public documents of church leaders aiming at a Christian education of their flocks. The adequacy of method and language to be used in Christian thought and communication is not a subordinate problem in modern culture. In that it involves contention with the positivist tradition in the sciences of man, it is a philosophical question; in that it starts with the Logos as the basis of Christian philology, and the Incarnate Word as the paradigm of human language, it is also a responsibility of theologians.

We have dealt with three problems pertaining to what some like to call Christianity's sickness unto death. We looked for them not in external factors that might be pressing on Christianity with sheer force but, rather, within Christianity, in the minds of Christians. These modern problems do not resemble those of the early Church, where divergent christologies confronted each other, forcing the Church into a series of authoritative definitions of the faith. What, then, is the nature of these modern problems of Christians? If I may use biblical language, it seems to be a widespread difficulty to "discern spirits," as St. Paul puts it (I Cor. 12:10), *i.e.*, in spiritual matters to distinguish between what is from God and what evil. Curiously enough, in our modern culture this "discernment" should have been put in terms of philosophy, in other words, "to discern between sound and unsound philosophy," or "between philosophy and ideology." Earlier, I pointed out that Cardinal Ratzinger looks on Existentialism as a

bona fide philosophy, while Voegelin could rightly characterize it as a pseudo-rational mantle around an unphilosophical world view. Ideologies, basically irrational "causes" rather than philosophy born of "the desire to know," have during the last two hundred years likewise appeared in a disguise of apparently scientific thought. One needs only think of Marxism-Leninism which its adherents to this day seriously consider "a science." In the presence of a great number of non-philosophical idea structures, and given the destruction of philosophy by positivism, the modern educated man is characteristically gullible when confronted with any idea structure. Even if he had more education, he would probably be unable to distinguish Cartesian from classical philosophy, Kantian from Cartesian philosophy, and Hegelian again from all its predecessors. This inability to discern spirits had a fatal consequence when Neville Chamberlain sought to probe Hitler's mind and, without any power to grasp the nature of ideological thinking, decided that Hitler was basically a passionate German irredentist.

Since then, however, a remarkable burst of new and original philosophical thought has furnished us with penetrating analysis of the ideological passages where irrational fallacies can be clearly grasped. Christian leaders ought to familiarize themselves with the writings of Henri Lubac, Albert Camus, Bruno Snell, Eric Voegelin, Urs von Balthasar, and others, without which they will be defenseless against such powerful ideological thinking as that of C. G. Jung, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Herbert Marcuse, as well as that of those theologians who have inserted ideological elements into their systems.

What about Christianity in a time-bound perspective? The fashion to speak today of a "post-Christian age" may suggest to some that Christianity is finished. It might appear so to intellectual Westerners who have moved from a personally Christian past to modern nihilism or socialism. To them it looks as if they have passed a "point of no return." That impression

stands in need of being shorn of its apparent universality: A person's orientation in life may suffer some kind of collapse, but to call this definitive would be to have absolute foresight of the rest of one's life. This applies also to the future of a culture, or of humanity. Today, an African bishop, looking at the thousands of new Christians increasing by other thousands, may likewise speak of a "point of no return," which to him would mean the blessed expansion of Christian truth in his homeland. Christianity is still the world's largest religion. But in matters of the spirit, quantity is surely meaningless. To the rest of the world it may seem as if Christianity's spiritual fountains may have dried out in the West. But religion is ultimately not a matter of printed statements of faith but of experienced contact with God. Every religion traces its origin to a paradigmatic experience of this kind and continues in time as renewed experiences occur to spiritual giants in its ranks. This is the reason why I considered an analysis of the difficulties caused by external factors superfluous and turned wholly to internal difficulties of Christian thinking.

Of the three I analyzed, critical biblical interpretation affects the quality of Christian leadership in our time, so that leaders will give confused statements of the faith. The figure of John Paul II is clearly an exception, but the vigor and clarity of this voice must regrettably be placed in a defensive category. The voice of most other bishops sounds like a trumpet of uncertain sound, and what they have to say can likewise be heard from politicians. That is to say, they may feel that they speak in terms of absolutes, but they may have fallen under the sway of immanentist, political absolutes that are in fashion, be they American democracy, utopian or materialist socialism, Jung's "collective unconscious." The talk about a "post-Christian age" certainly must feed chiefly on such examples.

Into this gap have moved the theologians of whom a well-known Catholic author remarks: "They are *a priori* opposed to being told by anyone what the

Church teaches. They bristle with pride at the suggestion that their faith has made them captives. They have become a *magisterium* unto themselves. . . . By and large, they consider themselves to be members of a professional academic group with no loyalties outside it. . . . And they seem to be in control."⁶ Great theologians "have been in control" before, *vide* St. Augustine, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, and, more recently, Karl Barth. They were towers of leadership in that they told a story, the story of Jesus Christ, the God-man, and fellowship between God and man. Today's theologians are not interested in telling a story that has a hero, they work on "problems" the "solution" of which redounds to the glory of their own minds. As for the story, they have split the text into countless small pieces, so that the object of their research is in each case a fragment and its particular structure. There is a variety of that sickness of modernity, the "mind being its own place." One can discover their remote influence as one picks up the countless teaching aids, seminar outlines, discussion workbooks, or study projects found on the church shelves of Christian education. It is all there, but reduced to a number of intellectual projects of critical discovery, each leading to a little piece of mastery of the mind. True, they are supposed to add up to Christian faith, but how can that be done when each bears only the stamp of a fragment rather than of a part of the whole?

After looking at two branches of Christian leadership and their respective weaknesses, we may feel that nothing more could be said about the vitality of the Christian faith. That, *mirabile dictu*, is not true. In the second half of the twentieth century an astonishing resurgence of spirituality has begun among the Christian laity and secondary echelon of leaders, with a veritable flood of excellent books and a multitude of personal witnesses. The books are mostly about prayer, particularly contemplative prayer, about healing, about communion, about individual conversion. Lest I be accused of talking in

general terms, here are a few of the many titles but without author's names for fear of doing an injustice to the many I could not mention here: *Opening to God; When the Well Runs Dry; Soul Friend; The Risk of Love; In the Stillness Dancing; Hind's Feet on High Places; Living Prayer; Healing Life's Hurts; Spirituality and the Gentle Life*. The character of these books is not traditionalist nostalgia; they report on new experiences of God's presence, new grounds for hope, new ways of living, new energies. There is no reason to assume that this spiritual resurgence is a short-lived phenomenon. It represents a genuine spiritual outburst articulating new spiritual experiences. True, there is a heretical fringe of this movement, but so did a heretical fringe attend not only the first few centuries of Christianity, but also past periods of strong Christian renewal. On those occasions, Christian authors eventually found out the nature of the heretical streaks and learned to separate them from the flow of genuine faith, an effort that led toward greater clarity of symbols and concepts.

Finally, even when top leadership appears to be waning, the great story remains. There is Jesus Christ the historical figure, forever pointing beyond history, forever raising the question of the meaning of his life and death. The question abides: "Who do you say that I am?" There is the great Christian liturgy of the Eucharist, "the taking, blessing, breaking, and giving of bread, and the taking, blessing, and giving of a cup of wine and water. . . . He had told friends to do this henceforward with the new meaning 'for the *anamnesis* of Him'. . . . Was ever a command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent

and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need. . . ." (Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 1978, p. 744).

There is still another recent phenomenon in the examples of strong personalities who, having passed through the wasteland of ideologies, nihilism, totalitarianism, finally discover that the Christian faith has better answers than all its rivals. These conversions seem to embody that ancient promise that the Christian faith will outlast all contrived alternatives. They are not romantic, these conversions, and as stories they are sober and rational. They give evidence that, between once alienated men and the reality they lost, new contact is possible just when one thought that all had come to a dead end.

The one phenomenon that might seem to contradict this finding is the astonishing growth of Satan-cult groups, unexpected in a scientifically sophisticated culture. To a mind more deeply aware of the mysteries of goodness and evil, however, the numerous cults of evil may well be seen as a confirmation of all the Christian faith has said about God and man, heaven and hell.

—Gerhart Niemeyer

¹*Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today* (Rockford, Ill., 1988), p. 3. ²*Ibid.*, p. 4. ³"History and Gnosis," *The Old Testament and Christian Faith*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson (New York, 1963). ⁴*Ibid.*, p. 87. ⁵*Ibid.*, p. 80. ⁶Ralph McInerny, "From the Publisher," *Crisis* (May 1989), p. 2. ⁷Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (New York, 1978), p. 744.