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Honest to God,

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using the word 'God' for a generation, so impregnated has it become with a way of thinking we may have to discard if the Gospel is to signify anything.

For I am convinced that there is a growing gulf between the traditional orthodox supernaturalism in which our Faith has been framed and the categories which the 'lay' world (for want of a better term) finds meaningful today. And by that I do not mean there is an increasing gap between Christianity and pagan society. That may well be so, but this is not the divide of which I am speaking. For it is not a division on the truth of the Gospel itself. Indeed, many who are Christians find themselves on the same side as those who are not. And among one's intelligent non-Christian friends one discovers many who are far nearer to the Kingdom of heaven than they themselves can credit. For while they imagine they have rejected the Gospel, they have in fact largely been put off by a particular way of thinking about the world which quite legitimately they find incredible.

Moreover, the line to which I am referring runs right through the middle of myself, although as time goes on I find there is less and less of me left, as it were, to the right of it. Thus, not infrequently, as I watch or listen to a broadcast discussion between a Christian and a humanist, I catch myself realizing that most of my sympathies are on the humanist's side. This is not in the least because my faith or commitment is in doubt, but because I share instinctively with him his inability to accept the scheme of thought and mould of religion within which alone that Faith is being offered to him. I feel he is *right* to rebel against it, and I am increasingly uncomfortable that 'orthodoxy' should be identified with it.

What this structure is must be left for further designation

to the body of the book. My only concern here is to plead for the recognition that those who believe their share in the total apologetic task of the Church to be a radical questioning of the established 'religious frame' should be accepted no less as genuine and, in the long run equally necessary, defenders of the Faith.

But I am not sanguine. I am inclined to think that the gulf must grow wider before it is bridged and that there will be an increasing alienation, both within the ranks of the Church and outside it, between those whose basic recipe is the mixture as before (however revitalized) and those who feel compelled above all to be honest *wherever* it may lead them. I believe, regretfully, that Dr Alec Vidler's conclusion in a recent broadcast,¹ which was bitterly attacked, is only too true: 'We've got a very big leeway to make up, because there's been so much suppression of real, deep thought and intellectual alertness and integrity in the Church.' I am not in the least accusing of dishonesty those who find the traditional framework of metaphysics and morals entirely acceptable (I do so with a large part of myself). What dismays me is the vehemence—and at bottom the insecurity—of those who feel that the Faith can only be defended by branding as enemies within the camp those who do not.

I believe there are all too uncomfortable analogies to the ecclesiastical scene of a hundred years ago, when (as we now recognize) the guardians of traditional orthodoxy all but rendered impossible the true defence of the Gospel. When we consider the distance we have all moved since then,² we can see that almost everything said from within

¹ BBC/TV Sunday, November 4, 1962.

² Cf., e.g., P. O. G. White, 'The Colenso Controversy', *Theology*, lxxv (October 1962), pp. 402-8.

Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*.¹ I first encountered extracts from these in *The Ecumenical Review* for January 1952, shortly after their first publication in German. One felt at once that the Church was not yet ready for what Bonhoeffer was giving us as his last will and testament before he was hanged by the S.S.: indeed, it might be understood properly only a hundred years hence. But it seemed one of those trickles that must one day split rocks. Hitherto, Bonhoeffer was saying, the Church has based its preaching of the Gospel on the appeal to religious experience, to the fact that deep down every man feels the need for religion in some form, the need for a God to whom to give himself, a God in terms of whom to explain the world. But suppose men come to feel that they can get along perfectly well without 'religion', without any desire for personal salvation, without any sense of sin, without any need of 'that hypothesis'? Is Christianity to be confined to those who still have this sense of insufficiency, this 'God-shaped blank', or who can be induced to have it? Bonhoeffer's answer was to say that God is deliberately calling us in this twentieth century to a form of Christianity that does not depend on the premise of religion, just as St Paul was calling men in the first century to a form of Christianity that did not depend on the premise of circumcision.

What that meant I hardly began to understand. But I knew that this was something we must learn to assimilate: the system could not simply eject it. And now after a bare decade it feels as if we have been living with it for very much longer.

Then, thirdly, there was an essay which created an almost immediate explosion when it appeared in 1941, though I

¹ Ed. E. Bethge (1953; 2nd ed.—to which all references are made—1956). The American edition is entitled *Prisoner for God*.

THE END OF THEISM?

Must Christianity be 'Supranaturalist'?

TRADITIONAL Christian theology has been based upon the proofs for the existence of God. The presupposition of these proofs, psychologically if not logically, is that God might or might not exist. They argue from something which everyone admits exists (the world) to a Being beyond it who could or could not be there. The purpose of the argument is to show that he must be there, that his being is 'necessary'; but the presupposition behind it is that there is an entity or being 'out there' whose existence is problematic and has to be demonstrated. Now such an entity, even if it could be proved beyond dispute, would not be God: it would merely be a further piece of existence, that might conceivably not have been there—or a demonstration would not have been required.

Rather, we must start the other way round. God is, by definition, ultimate reality. And one cannot argue whether ultimate reality *exists*. One can only ask what ultimate reality is like—whether, for instance, in the last analysis what lies at the heart of things and governs their working is to be described in personal or impersonal categories. Thus, the fundamental theological question consists not in establishing the 'existence' of God as a separate entity but in pressing through in ultimate concern to what Tillich calls 'the ground of our being'.

What he has to say at this point is most readily summarized in the opening pages of the second volume of his *Systematic*

But we think of him nevertheless as defined and marked off from other beings *as if* he did. And this is what is decisive. He is thought of as *a* Being whose separate existence over and above the sum of things has to be demonstrated and established.

It is difficult to criticize this way of thinking without appearing to threaten the entire fabric of Christianity—so interwoven is it in the warp and woof of our thinking. And, of course, it *is* criticized by those who reject this supra-naturalist position as a rejection of Christianity. Those who, in the famous words of Laplace to Napoleon, 'find no need of this hypothesis' attack it in the name of what they call the 'naturalist' position. The most influential exponent of this position in England today, Professor Julian Huxley, expressly contrasts 'dualistic supernaturalism' with 'unitary naturalism'.¹ The existence of God as a separate entity can, he says, be dismissed as superfluous; for the world may be explained just as adequately without positing such a Being.

The 'naturalist' view of the world identifies God, not indeed with the totality of things, the universe, *per se*, but with what gives meaning and direction to nature. In Tillich's words,

The phrase *deus sive natura*, used by people like Scotus Erigena and Spinoza, does not say that God is identical with nature but that he is identical with the *natura naturans*, the creative nature, the creative ground of all natural objects. In modern naturalism the religious quality of these affirmations has almost disappeared, especially among philosophising scientists who understand nature in terms of materialism and mechanism.²

Huxley himself has indeed argued movingly for religion³ as a necessity of the human spirit. But any notion that God

¹ *The Observer*, Sunday July 17, 1960, p. 17.

² *Systematic Theology*, vol. ii, p. 7.

³ *Religion without Revelation* (1927; 2nd ed. 1957).

really exists 'out there' must be dismissed: 'gods are peripheral phenomena produced by evolution'.¹ True religion (if that is not a contradiction in terms, as it would be for the Marxist) consists in harmonizing oneself with the evolutionary process as it develops ever higher forms of self-consciousness.

'Naturalism' as a philosophy of life is clearly and consciously an attack on Christianity. For it 'the term "God" becomes interchangeable with the term "universe" and therefore is semantically superfluous'.² But the God it is bowing out is the God of the 'supranaturalist' way of thinking. The real question is how far Christianity is identical with, or ultimately committed to, this way of thinking.

Must Christianity be 'Mythological' ?

Undoubtedly it has been identified with it, and somewhere deep down in ourselves it still is. The whole world-view of the Bible, to be sure, is unashamedly supranaturalistic. It thinks in terms of a three-storey universe with God up there, 'above' nature. But even when we have refined away what we should regard as the crudities and literalism of this construction, we are still left with what is essentially a mythological picture of God and his relation to the world. Behind such phrases as 'God created the heavens and the earth', or 'God came down from heaven', or 'God sent his only-begotten Son', lies a view of the world which portrays God as a person living in heaven, a God who is distinguished from the gods of the heathen by the fact that 'there is no god beside me'.

In the last century a painful but decisive step forward was taken in the recognition that the Bible does contain 'myth',

¹ *The Observer*, *ibid.*

² Tillich, *ibid.*

exception. Christian apologetic has taken the most varying forms of opposition to this self-assurance. Efforts are made to prove to a world thus come of age that it cannot live without the tutelage of 'God'. Even though there has been surrender on all secular problems, there still remain the so-called ultimate questions—death, guilt—on which only 'God' can furnish an answer, and which are the reason why God and the Church and the pastor are needed. Thus we live, to some extent by these ultimate questions of humanity. But what if one day they no longer exist as such, if they too can be answered without 'God'? . . .

The attack by Christian apologetic upon the adulthood of the world I consider to be in the first place pointless, in the second ignoble, and in the third un-Christian. Pointless, because it looks to me like an attempt to put a grown-up man back into adolescence, i.e. to make him dependent on things on which he is not in fact dependent any more, thrusting him back into the midst of problems which are in fact not problems for him any more. Ignoble, because this amounts to an effort to exploit the weakness of man for purposes alien to him and not freely subscribed to by him. Un-Christian, because for Christ himself is being substituted one particular stage in the religiousness of man.¹

Bonhoeffer speaks of the God of 'religion' as a *deus ex machina*. He must be 'there' to provide the answers and explanations beyond the point at which our understanding or our capacities fail. But such a God is constantly pushed further and further back as the tide of secular studies advances. In science, in politics, in ethics the need is no longer felt for such a stop-gap or long-stop; he is not required in order to guarantee anything, to solve anything, or in any way to come to the rescue. In the same vein Julian Huxley writes:

The god hypothesis is no longer of any pragmatic value for the interpretation or comprehension of nature, and indeed often

¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 145-7.

intellectual framework of the home, in which 'Daddy' is always there in the background, 'God is teaching us that we must live as men who can get along very well without him'.¹

The God who makes us live in this world without using him as a working hypothesis is the God before whom we are ever standing. Before God and with him we live without God. God allows himself to be edged out of the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us and help us. . . . This is the decisive difference between Christianity and all religions. Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world; he uses God as a *Deus ex machina*. The Bible however directs him to the powerlessness and suffering of God; only a suffering God can help. To this extent we may say that the process we have described by which the world came of age was an abandonment of a false conception of God, and a clearing of the decks for the God of the Bible, who conquers power and space in the world by his weakness. This must be the starting point for our 'worldly' interpretation.²

Transcendence for Modern Man

Bonhoeffer here touches on what he would put in the place of what he has demolished, and to this we shall return in the chapters that follow. This chapter has been concerned with 'clearing the decks' and it has inevitably therefore been destructive. I have called it 'The End of Theism?', following Tillich's lead.³ For, as he says, theism as ordinarily understood 'has made God a heavenly, completely perfect person who resides above the world and mankind'.⁴ Classical Christian theology has not in fact spoken of God as 'a person'⁵ (partly because the term was already pre-empted for the

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 164.

² *Ibid.*

³ *The Courage to Be*, pp. 172-6.

⁴ *Systematic Theology*, vol. i (1953), p. 271.

⁵ Cf. C. C. J. Webb, *God and Personality* (1919).

It is precisely the identification of Christianity—and transcendence—with this conception of theism that I believe we must be prepared to question. Does the Gospel stand or fall with it? On the contrary, I am convinced that Tillich is right in saying that 'the protest of atheism against such a highest person is correct'.¹ And this protest, which today is made in the name of the 'meaninglessness' of any such metaphysical statement, has seemed to others a matter of much greater existential concern. And to understand them we should be prepared to see how it looks to them. Huxley contents himself with saying, 'For my own part, the sense of spiritual relief which comes from rejecting the idea of God as a supernatural being is enormous'.² But, earlier, men like Feuerbach and Nietzsche, whom Proudhon correctly described as 'antitheists' rather than atheists,³ saw such a supreme Person in heaven as the great enemy of man's coming of age. This was the God they must 'kill' if man was not to continue dispossessed and kept in strings. Few Christians have been able to understand the vehemence of their revolt because for them he has not been the tyrant they portrayed, who impoverishes, enslaves and annihilates man. Indeed, for most non-Christians also he has been more of a Grandfather in heaven, a kindly Old Man who could be pushed into one corner while they got on with the business of life. But the nature of his *character* is here secondary. What is important is whether such a Being represents even a distorted image of the Christian God. Can he be rehabilitated, or is the whole conception of that sort of a God, 'up there', 'out there', or however one likes to put it, a projection, an idol, that can and should be torn down?

¹ *Op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 271.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 24.

³ See H. de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (1949), Ch. I.

For an answer to that question I should like to end not with a theological analysis but with a personal testimony—from John Wren-Lewis, who believes that it was just such a superstition from which he was delivered in order to become a Christian:

I cannot emphasize too strongly that acceptance of the Christian faith became possible for me *only* because I found I did not have to go back on my wholesale rejection of the superstitious beliefs that had hitherto surrounded me. The faith I came to accept was not merely different from what I had hitherto believed Christianity to be—it was utterly opposed to it, and I still regard that sort of 'religion' as an unmitigated evil, far, far more anti-Christian than atheism. This is a truth to which I do not think religious apologists pay nearly enough attention. There is a misplaced sense of loyalty which makes many Christians feel reluctant to come out in open opposition to anything that calls itself by the same name, or uses words like 'God' and 'Christ'; even Christians who in practice dislike superstition as much as I do still often treat it as a minor aberration to be hushed up rather than a radical perversion to be denounced. For example, Christian writers whose positive views are, as far as I can judge, very similar to my own, even though they may use different language to express them, still feel constrained to produce 'refutations' of the Freudian case against religion, although in fact a very large proportion of what passes for religion in our society is exactly the sort of neurotic illness that Freud describes, and the first essential step in convincing people that Christianity can be true in spite of Freud is to assert outright that belief based on the projection-mechanisms he describes is false, however much it may say 'Lord, Lord'. It is not enough to describe such beliefs as childish or primitive, for this implies that the truth is *something* like them, even though much more 'refined' or 'enlightened', whereas in reality *nothing like* the 'God' and 'Christ' I was brought up to believe in can be true. It is not merely that the Old Man in the Sky is only a mythological symbol for the Infinite Mind behind the scenes, nor yet that this Being is benevolent rather than fearful: the truth is that this whole way

of thinking is wrong, and if such a Being did exist, he would be the very devil.¹

That, I believe, is an exaggeration. To speak thus one is in danger, like the Psalmist, of condemning a whole generation—indeed many, many generations—of God's children. It is still the language of most of his children—and particularly his older children. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with it, any more than there was with the symbolism of a localized heaven. There will be many—and indeed most of us most of the time—for whom it presents no serious difficulties and no insuperable barriers to belief. In fact, its demolition will be the greater shock to faith and will appear to leave many people bereft and 'without God in the world'. Nevertheless, I am firmly convinced that this whole way of thinking can be the greatest obstacle to an intelligent faith—and indeed will progressively be so to all except the 'religious' few. We shall eventually be no more able to convince men of the existence of a God 'out there' whom they must call in to order their lives than persuade them to take seriously the gods of Olympus. If Christianity is to survive, let alone to recapture 'secular' man, there is no time to lose in detaching it from this scheme of thought, from this particular theology or *logos* about *theos*, and thinking hard about what we should put in its place. We may not have a name yet with which to replace 'theism': indeed, it may not prove necessary or possible to dispense with the term (hence the query in the title of this chapter). But it is urgent that we should work away at framing a conception of God and the Christian Gospel which does not depend upon that projection. And to this, very tentatively, I now turn.

But before turning to it it will be well to say at once that

¹ *They Became Anglicans*, pp. 168 f. Quoted by kind permission of A. R. Mowbray and Co. Ltd.

that, within itself, the finite world points beyond itself. In other words, it is self-transcendent.¹

This, I believe, is Tillich's great contribution to theology—the reinterpretation of transcendence in a way which preserves its reality while detaching it from the projection of supernaturalism. 'The Divine, as he sees it, does not inhabit a transcendent world *above nature*; it is found in the "ecstatic" character of *this* world, as its transcendent Depth and Ground.'² Indeed, as a recent commentator has observed, supranaturalism for Tillich actually represents 'a loss of transcendence':

It is the attempt to understand and express God's relation to the world by a literalization of this-worldly categories. . . . The result is a God who *exists* as a being, *above* the world. . . . Thus God is described as an entity within the subject-object structures of the spatial-temporal world.³

Or, as Tillich puts it himself:

To criticise such a conditioning of the unconditional, even if it leads to atheistic consequences, is more religious, because it is more aware of the unconditional character of the divine, than a theism that bans God into the supernatural realm.⁴

Nevertheless, the abandonment of any idea of a God 'out there' will inevitably appear a denial of his 'otherness' and the negation of much in the Biblical assertion of what Kierkegaard called 'the infinite qualitative difference between God and man'. It will be valuable therefore to look again at what the Bible is saying about the nature of God

¹ *Systematic Theology*, vol. ii, p. 8.

² W. M. Horton, 'Tillich's Role in Contemporary Theology' in *The Theology of Paul Tillich* (ed. C. W. Kegley and R. W. Bretall, 1952, p. 37). In his 'Reply to Interpretation and Criticism' in the same volume, Tillich describes his own position as 'self-transcending or ecstatic naturalism' (p. 341).

³ E. Farley, *The Transcendence of God* (1962), p. 77.

⁴ *The Protestant Era*, p. 92.

creative wisdom. . . . There is a grace in life. Otherwise we could not live.¹

God as the ground, source and goal of our being cannot but be represented at one and the same time as removed from the shallow, sinful surface of our lives by infinite distance and depth, and yet as nearer to us than our own selves. This is the significance of the traditional categories of transcendence and immanence.

The same paradoxical relationship of our lives to the deepest ground of our being is presented in the New Testament by St Paul's language about the Spirit of God and our spirits. 'Spirit'—as opposed to 'flesh', which is life in its shallowness and superficiality—speaks of that level of being and perception where the divine depths are to be known.

The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.²

But, St Paul continues, it is precisely this level of comprehension which is open to Christians:

We have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. . . . The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. But we have the mind of Christ.³

And that this 'Spirit of God' is nothing alien to us but the very ground of our own true being is brought out in a further passage, for whose proper sense it is necessary to turn to the New English Bible:

In the same way the Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness. We do not even know how we ought to pray, but through our

¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 54 f.

² I Cor. 2.10 f.

³ I Cor. 2.12-16.

inarticulate groans the Spirit himself is pleading for us, and God who searches our inmost being knows what the Spirit means, because he pleads for God's own people in God's own way; and in everything, as we know, he cooperates for good with those who love God and are called according to his purpose.¹

In other words, the deepest groans of suffering of which the Apostle has been speaking,² so far from separating us from the source of our being in the love of God are in fact pointers to it, inarticulate sighs too deep for words, which the Spirit can take up and translate into prayer, because 'the Spirit' represents the link between the depths of our individual being (however shallow) and the unfathomable abyss of all being in God. God is not outside us, yet he is profoundly transcendent.

But for the Bible 'the deep things of God' cannot be plumbed, the transcendence of God cannot be understood, simply by searching the depths of the individual soul. God, since he is Love, is encountered in his fullness only 'between man and man'. And this is the burden of the whole Prophetic tradition—that it is only in response and obedience to the neighbour that the claims of God can be met and known. This message is focused in a passage to which I constantly find myself returning in the book of Jeremiah, where the prophet is addressing Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah:

Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. *Is not this to know me? says the Lord.*³

God, the unconditional, is to be found only in, with *and under* the conditioned relationships of this life: for he is their depth and ultimate significance.

¹ Rom. 8.26-8.

² Rom. 8.18-23.

³ Jer. 22.15 f.

And this receives specifically Christian expression in the profoundly simple 'parable' of the Sheep and the Goats.¹ The only way in which Christ can be met, whether in acceptance or rejection, is through 'the least of his brethren'. The Son of Man can be known only in unconditional relationship to the son of man, to the one whose sole claim upon us is his common humanity. Whether one has 'known' God is tested by one question only, 'How deeply have you loved?'—for 'He who does not love does not know God; for God is love'.²

Now this links up with what Bonhoeffer was saying about a 'non-religious' understanding of God. For this ultimate and most searching question has nothing to do with 'religion'. It rests our eternal salvation upon nothing peculiarly religious. Encounter with the Son of Man is spelt out in terms of an entirely 'secular' concern for food, water supplies, housing, hospitals and prisons, just as Jeremiah had earlier defined the knowledge of God in terms of doing justice for the poor and needy. Indeed, in Macmurray's words, 'the great contribution of the Hebrew to religion was that he did away with it'.³ A right relationship to God depended on nothing religious: in fact religion could be the greatest barrier to it.⁴

The Way of the Irreligious

Our contention has been that God is to be met not by a 'religious' turning away from the world but in unconditional concern for 'the other' *seen through to its ultimate depths*, that God is, to quote Macmurray again, the 'personal ground

¹ Matt. 25.31-46.

² I John 4.8.

³ Quoted by G. Macleod, *Only One Way Left*, p. 67; cf. J. Macmurray, *The Clue to History* (1938), Ch. II.

⁴ E.g., Amos 5.21-5.

community. Anything that achieves this or assists towards it is Christian worship. Anything that fails to do this is not Christian worship, be it ever so 'religious'.

All this finds its focus, as I have already indicated, in *the* liturgy that forms the heart of Christian worship. Liturgy (a word which comes in origin from the world not of the cultus but of 'public works') is not for the Christian a 'religious' rite but the proclamation, the acknowledgement, the reception, the adoration, of the holy in, with and under the common. The bread and the wine that stand at the heart of the action and form its basis are samples only of all other common things and the focus of all other common relationships. The Holy Communion is the proclamation to the Church and to the world that the presence of Christ with his people is tied to a right receiving of the common, to a right relationship with one's neighbour. For it is given only in and through these things, both in church and out of it. What the action in church does is to set forth this truth in symbol and in power. And therefore the pattern of this action is formative for the whole of Christian living. It must be made to represent the truth that 'the beyond' is to be found 'at the centre of life', 'between man and man'. That is why the Prayer Book indicates that the bread to be used for Communion shall be 'such as is usual to be eaten'; that is why the deepest insights into the meaning of 'God's board' have come for many in our generation not in the 'glass case' of the sanctuary but at their own hearth; that is why the liturgical revival has expressed itself in the recovery of the central altar with the celebration *by* the whole people gathered *round* the table.¹

¹ I have deliberately not gone into details at this point, because I have already written extensively on it in my *Liturgy Coming to Life* (1960).

'done' according to the latest (or the oldest) models and which yet merely goes on side by side with real life. As Eric James puts it,

These actions will have an independent life of their own, an ecclesiastical life; something which belongs to the Church for its own sake; something which is neither natural nor necessarily supernatural. . . . The great danger is that liturgy creates a world of things over against the secular, instead of a vision of the sacredness of the secular.¹

The test of worship is how far it makes us *more sensitive* to 'the beyond in our midst', to the Christ in the hungry, the naked, the homeless and the prisoner. Only if we are *more likely* to recognize him there after attending an act of worship is that worship Christian rather than a piece of religiosity in Christian dress. That is what is implied in Jesus' saying that 'the sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath'.² The whole of our religious observance and church-going must be prepared to submit to its test. And we should have the courage to draw the consequences, as John Wren-Lewis has done in an article entitled, 'On Not Going to Church':³

If the general atmosphere prevailing in a particular church is one which reverses the order of Jesus' statement, and conveys the sense that people actually go to church to *find* God, to enter into a relationship with him which is not possible apart from specific acts of worship, then it would be a miracle if you *did* get the right thing out of going to such a church, and one has no business tempting God by asking for miracles. It is *much* better to stay away. Perhaps the ideal would be to try to revolutionize the church in question, by bringing its members to see the plain meaning of their own Gospel, but some kinds of church tradition are heavily protected against this, and one

¹ *The Roots of the Liturgy*, Prism Pamphlet No. 1 (1962), p. 5.

² Mark 2.27.

³ *Prism*, February 1962, p. 28.

or to deny its profound value for those who can benefit from it. Nor, as will appear, do I wish in any way to doubt the virtue, and indeed the absolute necessity, for withdrawal, disengagement, standing back. Nor, of course, should I be so foolish as to dispute the need in this field, as in every other, for experts; and it will become painfully obvious that I am not one. Nevertheless, I believe that some things need to be said on behalf of those who are not experts and who suffer for lack of a spokesman. And I speak with some feeling. For I believe the experts have induced in us a deep inferiority complex. They tell us that this is the way we ought to pray, and yet we find that we cannot maintain ourselves for any length of time even on the lowest rungs of the ladder, let alone climb it. If this is the *scala sacra*, then it seems it is not for us. We are evidently not 'the praying type'. And so we carry on with an unacknowledged sense of failure and guilt.

I can testify to this most strongly from the time I spent in a theological college, both as a student and as a teacher. Here was a laboratory for prayer. Here one ought to be able to pray, if ever one could. For here were all the conditions laid on—time, space, quiet. And here were the teachers, the classics of the spiritual life, and all the aids and manuals. If one failed in these circumstances what hope was there later on—when one was surrounded and sucked down by 'the world'? And yet I believe I am not alone in finding a theological college the most difficult rather than the easiest of places in which to pray. In fact I know I am not. For I discovered there what I can only describe as a freemasonry of silent, profoundly discouraged, underground opposition, which felt that all that was said and written about prayer was doubtless unexceptionable but simply did not speak to 'our' condition. It was a real relief

finding kindred spirits and slowly coming to the conviction from shared confession that we might not after all, as the evidence suggested, represent merely an 'unclubbable' remnant for whom not even the outer rooms seemed designed to cater. But nothing else was offered in its place, and to this day we have an inferiority complex. We dare not admit to others or to ourselves what non-starters we are. And yet I am persuaded that we have 'got something', and though, like the people in Chesterton's poem, we 'have not spoken yet', nevertheless our hour may be at hand. For one can detect a ground swell of dissatisfaction, and a murmuring for something more relevant in the way of what is styled a 'lay spirituality'.

But though we can all understand what is meant by such a phrase, I question whether it puts the distinction in the right place—on the assumption that 'lay' here means 'non-ordained'. Though there may be a difference of kind between the spirituality appropriate to the 'religious' (in the technical sense) and to the Christian set in the world (whether as a priest or as a layman), I am not convinced that there is more than a difference of degree between the 'secular' spirituality which is appropriate to the clergy and to the laity. I believe the yearning which is felt for something more 'earthed' reflects a more general discontent with the traditional types of spirituality and that we clergy cover up the uncomfortable knowledge that they have long been failing us, and that we have failed to communicate a relevant spirituality to our people, by saying that what we need is something new for 'the laity'.

The only writing on prayer I know which has the courage to ask whether we do not need an entirely new starting point is the chapter in George Macleod's prophetic book, *Only One Way Left*. It is significant that this is entitled, 'The

the answer, I believe, is in the direction he indicated. I suspect we have got to ask very seriously whether we should even begin our thinking about prayer in terms of the times we 'set aside', whether prayer is primarily something we do in the 'spaces', in the moments of disengagement from the world. I wonder whether Christian prayer, prayer in the light of the Incarnation, is not to be *defined* in terms of penetration through the world to God rather than of withdrawal from the world to God. For the moment of revelation is precisely so often, in my experience, the moment of meeting and unconditional *engagement*. How easily one finds oneself giving pious advice to a person faced with a decision to 'go away and pray about it'. But, if I am honest, what enlightenment I have had on decisions has almost always come not when I have gone away and stood back from them, but precisely as I have *wrestled through* all the most practical pros and cons, usually with other people. And this activity, undertaken by a Christian trusting and expecting that God is there, would seem to *be* prayer.

This can perhaps be put another way by saying that traditional spirituality has placed a premium upon 'the interior life', regarding this as the spiritual core of man. But Bonhoeffer points out that the Bible knows nothing of such a premium: 'The "heart" in the biblical sense is not the inward life, but the whole man in relation to God.'¹ And he goes on to make the telling remark that for the Bible 'man lives just as much from outwards to inwards as from inwards to outwards'.² This I believe to be profoundly true for great numbers of people, probably for the majority. For them 'real life is meeting'.³ They are, of course, subject to the rhythm of engagement and disengagement, just as

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 160; cf. p. 126.

² *Ibid.*

³ The title of a book by J. H. Oldham (1942).

the capacity of the body to function creatively depends upon the quality of its relaxation. Nevertheless, in so far as an assessment is made of our physical capacity and alertness, it is made on the evidence of our waking hours. And for such people, 'their prayer is in the practice of their trade'.¹ The need for times of withdrawal is accepted naturally, but with no pretension that these times are particularly 'holy': nor will they necessarily be more 'religious', in the sense that they are devoted to spiritual exercises. They are basically times of standing back, of consolidation, of letting love's roots grow. And these may be fertilized by many different processes of action or incantation.

I should be the last to say that periods of disengagement are not absolutely vital. In fact I have only been able to write this because of one such period. And this may be allowed to serve as an illustration of how, as it seems to me, they should be related to life. I am one of those who find that all my thinking and writing comes to me through immersion in what I have to *do*. Indeed, it is largely only literally by the activity of writing, with pen in hand, that I can think at all. And without the constant stimulus of problems to be solved, persons to be helped, pupils to be taught, nothing comes to the surface. Isolate myself from the world, and there is no grist to the mill. But it is equally clear that it is not only the mills of God that grind slowly. Time, space, withdrawal, if only from the telephone, is necessary if any fruit is to be brought to perfection.

I find that this is a paradigm also for prayer. It is certainly not that disengagement is unnecessary, but that the pentecostal point, as it were, is in the engagement. To try to clarify the difference, let me speak as a fool in contrast for a moment with my uncle Forbes Robinson, whose *Letters*

¹ Ecclus. 38.34.

to a third person, about him at all. The *Thou* addressed may be his own *Thou*, but it may be addressed and responded to at such a level that we can only speak of knowing him in God and God in him. It may not be specifically religious, it may not be consciously Christian: but it may be a meeting of Christ in that man, because his humanity is accepted 'without any reservation'. The way through to the vision of the Son of man and the knowledge of God, which is the heart of contemplative prayer, is by unconditional love of the neighbour, of 'the nearest *Thou* to hand'.

Prayer is the responsibility to meet others with *all* I have, to be ready to encounter the unconditional in the conditional, to expect to meet God in the way, not to turn aside from the way. All else is exercise towards that or reflection in depth upon it. It was on the Damascus road that Saul had his encounter with Christ: he was driven to Arabia by it. He did not have to go to Arabia to seek God; but equally from Arabia he returned deepened in the power of the Spirit. There is an inescapable dialectic of engagement and withdrawal. But much depends on which we regard as primary. There is no sense in which a Christian *has* to turn aside from the world in order to meet God—any more than the holy of holies is for him in the sanctuary. But there is a sense in which he *has* to go into the world, in unconditional love, in order to meet God; for 'God is love' and 'he who does not love does not know God'.

And this profoundly affects the 'matter' of his prayer. Let us listen again to George Macleod:

What debilitates our prayer life . . . is our presupposition that the pressures of life are on one side while God is on some other side: interested and concerned but on some other side. With this supposition, when evening comes with an ending to our pressures, we are apt to go eagerly to God—disconcertingly to

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