

PROTESTANTISM AS A CATHOLIC CONCERN

GUSTAVE WEIGEL, S.J.

Woodstock College

IN THE days of the First World War I was a grammar-school boy. The neighborhood manifested our characteristic American religious pluralism. Our preadolescent group was made up of Catholics and Protestants, roughly half and half. We went to different schools but after school hours we were together. My closest friend, to whom I was closely attached, was a Lutheran boy.

As a group we rarely talked about religion or church. It is hard today to explain this reticence, but I suspect that boys do not discuss religion much, and besides we were unconsciously shrewd enough not to raise questions which would divide us; for our union was strong and happy. Yet I remember talking once about religion with my Lutheran friend, and he mentioned that in his church the minister wore vestments like our Catholic priests. I doubt if the vestments in that day were more than a Geneva gown and surplice. However, my friend pointed to a fact which was basic in our religious lives. There was a fundamental similarity in the two religions. He and I were both taught the Apostles' Creed, whose articles with the exception of the one on the Catholic Church we understood much in the same way. We were both taught by our respective churches that there was a transcendent God. We believed in the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth, Christ, our Lord. We believed in His virgin birth. We believed that Easter Sunday was the memorial of His rising from the tomb in the flesh, after His saving death for us. We were taught that there was a Holy Spirit, and the Father, Son, and Spirit were three distinct persons in one Godhead. We were prepared to look for the final judgement when we should rise bodily from the dead to enter into life everlasting.

Our morality was substantially the same. We were not supposed to lie; we had to respect our elders; it was wrong to steal or destroy other people's property; we were not to do "dirty things," concerning which our notions were disturbingly vague and hidden in silence. It was a matter of course that we should go to church on Sunday in our best clothes, which more than the holiness of the day prevented us from practicing the sports and games of week-days. There was at that time

a conscious and willed Catholic-Protestant division; but actually we were less divided in belief and conduct than today, when such divisions are strongly deprecated.

Since the First World War, Catholic and Protestant theologies have undergone changes. This is hardly noteworthy, because the human discipline of theology like all human disciplines develops and evolves. However, what is noteworthy is that in the Protestant grass-roots a change has taken place which is more than theological. It is in belief itself. The twenties saw the Protestants break into two very different and hostile camps. Fundamentalism pulled together and closed its ranks against the liberals. It was not sect against sect, but rather traditional belief against a reconstructed faith, and the same battle was fought in all the sects. That war is still going on, but one side is winning. In spite of strong visible fundamentalist militancy, in our metropolitan areas and to a lesser degree even in the rural areas liberalism is giving the tone to national church-doctrine.

The Protestant crisis is domestic to Protestantism. Catholics have no right nor desire to take part in the quarrel. However, the change of Protestantism produces a change in the environment in which the American Catholic lives. Protestant beliefs have repercussions on the Catholic believer, and Catholics have cause for intranquillity because of what they see about them.

It is paradoxical that the one article of the Creed which once clearly separated Protestant from Catholic, the article concerning the universal or Catholic Church, is no longer so divisive. Thanks to the ecumenical movement, so many Protestants are tentatively formulating a concept of the Church which timorously approaches the Catholic notion; but in the rest of the articles we are today worlds apart. In spite of the efforts of the neo-supernaturalists who stress the transcendence of God, so many Protestants, clerical and lay, theological and non-theological, identify God with something in man. For an ever increasing number Jesus of Nazareth is not really God. The Holy Ghost is not a person but only a divine name. Jesus died but did not rise from the dead, except in some mysterious symbolic sense. The Virgin Birth is a first-century legend, not true historically though rich in religious significance. So many Protestants hope there is a future life, but they are not committed to it by their faith. Except for the fundamentalists,

many contemporary Protestants have no clear meaning in mind when they say, "I believe in the resurrection of the body."

These reflections are the by-product of the study of three books indicative of American Protestant thought in our time. It is not for Catholics to decide whether the books genuinely depict the Protestant vision. Yet we cannot ignore the fact that these books reflect the religious visions of a rapidly expanding sector of our Protestant neighbors with whom we wish to and must live.

I

The first book I refer to is not new. It was written by a scholar, temperate and learned, dean of Drew Theological Seminary. The book is filled with a spirit of genuine but unobtrusive piety coupled with knowledge and high intelligence. The author has died since the book was published over ten years ago. I am speaking of Dean Clarence Tucker Craig's (1895-1953) *The Beginning of Christianity*.¹ How far this book expresses Dean Craig's final thought I cannot say, but it does reflect the mind of so many moderate Protestant scholars of our time.

What was Craig's conception of Christianity? That question is obviously primary, because he discussed its early history, and any discussion supposes some understanding of the terms involved. For Dean Craig Christianity is a complex. The complex is made up of two elements. One is the gospel which lies below the surface of the written Gospels; the other is the historical incarnation given to the genuine gospel message by the various cultures which received it. Christianity is a continuous movement of one basic thought. Whatever culture or historical moment achieves it as a dynamic guide for life, receives the message according to its own intellectual and social structure. In consequence, each age drops something and adds something of its own to the nucleus, thus transforming for itself the total formulation. Such transformations are quite legitimate and utterly inevitable; for only in this way can the nuclear simplex dynamically survive.

What is the dynamic simplex? Craig answers in italics: "Conduct is Christian when in response to God's forgiving grace men seek to solve

¹ Clarence Tucker Craig, *The Beginning of Christianity* (New York-Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1943).

their human problems according to the principle of love, using the guidance of Jesus, the best ethical experience of the race, and the fullest possible contemporary knowledge of facts.”² In accord with this definition and with the contents of the book in general we can draw the conclusion that questions concerning the divinity of Christ or His virgin birth or His resurrection are quite irrelevant to Christianity in an age when such elements, added in an earlier epoch, can no longer be maintained. These questions do not belong to the gospel as a simple, but only to the peripheral complex which is ever changing.

Here is a clear answer to the fundamentalists. To their fundamentals Craig opposes his. The fundamentalists suppose the inerrancy of the scriptural propositions taken individually and literally. Craig rejects such a postulate on the basis of “the fullest possible contemporary knowledge of facts.”

Dean Craig had a consistent theory wherewith he could admit both Christian continuity and Christian change. However, in order to construct the theory he had to postulate that Christianity is essentially a solution of the human problems of life. It is an ethics, rendered religious by the introduction of God as a factor; but of course the notion of God is not explained. Jesus is an ethical example, who acted out of a motive of *agape* bolstered by a trust in an ultimate righteous principle who (or which) can rectify our mistakes if only they are dynamised by some degree of unselfishness as their radical drive. In such a doctrine we find elements derived from all the modern leaders of Protestant theology—Barth, Bowne, Bultmann, Nygren, Temple, and Tillich.

Now this vision is naturalistic, though couched in the old consecrated supernaturalistic terms of forgiveness and grace. The supernatural in the classical understanding of that term has been gently washed out. Theology has become an ambiguous humanistic philosophy. Christ, though given a high place, has been lowered. In fact, one wonders how Craig could consistently give Him such a superlatively high place. If Christ is only an ethical example of heroic size, why should we raise Him above the Buddha? Gautama was an admirable moral example. Yet the perennial Christian missionary effort in Buddhist lands can only be explained by the hypothesis that Christians always believed that Jesus was superior to Moses, Gautama, and the angels.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 334–35.

It is at this point that the Catholic painfully feels concern. There is a growing danger that Catholics and Protestants will live in utterly different and alien dimensions. The words we both use have become so hopelessly equivocal that we have become unintelligible to each other. The modern Protestant in his ecumenicist zeal is anxious to talk to us about the Church; but the whole supernatural context which surrounds that word for us is so foreign to his way of thinking that he cannot conceive that we actually believe in it. He only knows that we are not fundamentalists and because of that fact he unwittingly comes to the conclusion that we are naturalists. Nevertheless, the fundamentalist, though far from the Catholic position, is much nearer to us than his liberal confrère who often enough expresses his belief in the very formulas we use. The fundamentalist still believes in the supernatural; the liberal, paleo- or neo-, does not.

This alarming confusion arises because contemporaneous Protestantism is still bedeviled by the false dilemma: either fundamentalism or liberalism. A Catholic thinks that it must be neither fundamentalism nor liberalism. But in the meantime the naturalism basic to liberalism and neo-orthodoxy are producing a cultural climate where the Catholic feels himself estranged from the men he lives with. For us this is a harrowing awareness; for we have been at home in the West since 313 A.D. Moreover, we have always been too sanguine in thinking that the rifts of the sixteenth century could somehow be welded; but now we find that a rapidly growing sector of Protestantism is effectively reducing the meeting ground in the Catholic substance which was preserved by the first Reformers. The Protestant must see that we have reason to be concerned, even though the Protestant crisis, absolutely speaking, is for Protestants alone.

Because of Dean Craig's basic conception of Christianity much of the good to be achieved by the reading of his book loses its charm. His excellent use of the historical-form theory for the exposition of the Synoptic background does not overcome the feeling that he is using it to serve his naturalistic conception of Christianity. Must biblical criticism be a foe to supernaturalism? By its own theory and structure there is no such necessity. It has its own field and in that field it serves well. Were it not better to restrict it to that field, without allowing it

to intrude into theology itself, where it has no important place? After all, Dean Craig's conception of Christianity is a theological achievement, and theology has its own methods of operation.

II

But if Dean Craig's scholarly approach to Christianity is disturbing for a Catholic in spite of its scholarship, something short of dismay is evoked by the little book of Kenneth A. Holmes, a Protestant pastor in the Buffalo metropolitan area. The opusculum, *Foes of the Spirit*,³ is not set on the scholarly level of Dean Craig's book. It is for popular consumption, and is probably a revision of a series of pulpit addresses.

It is a kindly book, with malice toward none. Certainly no Catholic has a right to complain that Catholicism is harshly handled, for Mr. Holmes treats the Church very handsomely. Protestant scholars might wonder why this book is considered in a theological journal; for its theological content is neither new nor brilliant. Yet the book is significant for two reasons. First, Mr. Holmes proposes simple old-fashioned liberalism with the clarity and simplicity of a primer. The author's position is not clouded by double-talk. He is forthright and unequivocal, with the courage to accept the conclusions of the premises he believes in. Second, this is the doctrine given successfully to a Christian community in the name of the Gospel. This message will consequently seep out into larger areas of Protestant life, constituting for many the blueprint to live by.

Foes of the Spirit is another result of the Protestant dilemma, "either fundamentalism or liberalism." Mr. Holmes was a student of the Bob Jones University of Greenville, South Carolina (the school was named for Bob Jones, the dynamic Southern evangelist), at the same time that the contemporary evangelist, Billy Graham, studied there. His mid-West home environment was a fitting preparation for the teaching of the fundamentalism of his college, which in turn fitted him for the Baptist seminary he later attended. He became a Baptist minister at the conclusion of his seminary training. However, because of his reading while in the seminary his faith in fundamentalism was shaken,

³ Kenneth A. Holmes, *Foes of the Spirit: A Critique of Religious Formalism* (New York: Exposition Press, 1952).

and his study and experience in the ministry finally though painfully killed it altogether.⁴ With fundamentalism gone, the only alternative was liberalism. "Either—or."

Mr. Holmes is now the pastor of a non-denominational community church. But conversions are never totally transformative. Mr. Holmes brings much of his old evangelistic "witnessing" fervor to his new home. In fact, he wants to engender a prophetic zeal in liberalism, and he speaks of a "prophetic liberalism."⁵ It is doubtful if any liberal will welcome Mr. Holmes' suggestion. Liberals have a horror for evangelist pyrotechnics. Even Paul Tillich, who sees in the prophetic protest the very soul of Protestantism, will not wholly approve of the fusion of the gospeler's fire with the liberal's ice.

What is the theological content of Holmesian Christianity?

1) God is the "inner voice" in man. "God is in man, collectively and individually, continuously speaking His message."⁶ "... God dwells here and now in every human breast, ... within me there reside untold latent divine powers!"⁷ "I must simply unify myself to follow the highest and best within my own nature. If that is humanism, it is also theism; for the best in humanity is divinity."⁸ This latent human power pressing for realization is the Divine Spirit.

God must not be conceived according to the old theologies.

... the old theologies taught [that] there is an Almighty God, King of the Universe, seated upon a heavenly throne, Who can at will miraculously intervene in the affairs of men and nations to bring about His desired ends. Such a God died, or at least should have died, at the coming of the democratic era and the emergence of great nations governed by the people. The only Deity truly democratic people know is the God within and among them, the Voice that calls and the Finger that points to the highest and the best.⁹

2) This basic theology is the spirit and doctrine of Jesus. That "this historical person was born of a virgin, fulfilled numerous Old Testament prophecies, died as an atonement for men's sins, arose bodily from the grave, and ascended physically into heaven" is "myth."¹⁰ Jesus Himself "was a rebel and a heretic."¹¹ His spirit was humanistic and progressive.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 60-63, 83.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 67, 84.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

3) Jesus was not divine in the orthodox sense of the word. "Jesus of Nazareth himself is a symbol, not an object of worship. He is the symbol of the divine possibilities resident within every human creature."¹²

4) The Jesus of Christianity is not so much an historical person as a high ideal. Because of the little we know of the historical Jesus we have attributed to Christ "the spirit of brotherhood and love . . . which we seek to follow, that spirit which we believe strives for realization in every human life and in the social order."¹³ The historical Jesus had His defects, e.g., He was a nationalist. "It is not in reality the words and works, the teachings and life, of Jesus that we set before ourselves as examples. Those things, great and good as they may have been in many respects, are too vaguely known, wrapped about as they are in the Gospels with supernaturalism and doctrine and mythology."¹⁴

5) "The Christian religion is independent of the Bible."¹⁵ This does not mean that the Bible is insignificant. It is helpful for Christian living; it is inspirational, provocative, stimulating. However, it contains much, both in the Old and New Testaments, which is "sub-Christian and even immoral."¹⁶ The doctrine of the fundamentalists, who teach the supernatural inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, is bibliolatry.

6) The Church in its ideal aspect is the body of Christ. "That term, if it means anything, suggests that the church is to be the expression and embodiment in all succeeding generations of the Divine Spirit which was seen in Jesus of Nazareth in the first century. The spirit of brotherhood and unity must be embodied in the church, not the spirit of bigotry and conservatism."¹⁷ However, the historical churches are far removed from this ideal. "Too often the church has been a foe of the spirit, a foe of progress."¹⁸ "The divided Christian Church is a major debacle on the religious scene. It is an appalling and tragic condition."¹⁹

7) What is the function of the Church? Obviously it is not to conserve thought-patterns of the past. The doctrines of the past, even if found in the Bible, are not normative; rather they are things pro-

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

gressively to be left behind. There are no final truths. The Church is here to evolve ever upwards toward the fulfillment of the purposes of the Spirit of God in man. These purposes are the actualization of the highest possibilities of human nature. The guiding ideas for Christian conduct are (a) the equalitarian and loving brotherhood of all men, regardless of race, color, or condition; (b) the supremacy of human values.²⁰

Whatever advances and deepens the brotherhood of man, whatever makes humanity happier and more creative, is good. These are the only goods to pursue. The moral norms given by the churches and society can be followed, but always subject to the primary guiding ideas. The codes of religion are only relative.

Any prohibition, be it deemed ever so sacred—the Decalogue's decree against stealing or adultery or murder, the nation's ban on espionage or treason, or society's disapproval of drunkenness or gambling—whatever it be, it must be considered relative. Should the breaching of such a rule, either directly or indirectly, be of more good than harm to mankind in some specific instance, as could quite conceivably be the case, it would be morally proper to break the law and bless the man.²¹

8) How is the Church to achieve its mission? By education. The only reason man does not realize his own potentialities is ignorance. He must therefore be instructed, and this instruction, achieved by science, should be stimulated and abetted by the Church in word and symbol. As man becomes more and more educated, he will by his activity produce on earth the Brotherhood of Man and the Kingdom of God, which will manifest themselves in a one-world society with a one-world government.

The doctrine of original sin is baneful to religion. Man is not corrupt, even though capable of evil through ignorance. Man is born in original virtue, because he is made to the image and likeness of God. There are no limits to what man can do; he can create the Kingdom of God here on earth, nor need he wait for some spectacular divine intervention for its accomplishment.

9) Faith in immortality does not threaten the primacy of the temporal. We only hope in a survival of the spirit after death, but we know

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 83–87. That there are no final truths, cf. p. 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

nothing about the modes of such survival. This hope can have no bearing on our life here, and when the future does come, it will take care of itself.²²

Any student of the history of philosophy confronted with the vision offered in the above scheme will immediately recognize it as the liberalism which died with the end of the First World War. The great Protestant theologians of our time have all rejected it with more or less contempt. Walter Horton, who has carefully and sympathetically watched movements in Protestant thought, declares this kind of theology *passé*.²³ Yet here it is again, offering immanence, relativism, humanistic naturalism, ethicism, the panacea of education, as the essence of Christianity. Mr. Holmes chides the neo-orthodox because they are only semi-liberals. He does not seem to appreciate that they reject fundamentalism no less than he; but they were compelled to reject liberalism as well, because they found it just as unsatisfactory. Mr. Holmes is going to have a formidable task to persuade our age to take up again what it but recently discarded. The "ever upwards and onwards" slogan of the Unitarians sounds hollow to our contemporary youth, and a childlike faith in the utopian potential of education is difficult for all who no longer believe in Santa Claus. Mr. Holmes learned his liberalism in a fundamentalist preserve.

This is a Protestant pastor's formulation of the Protestant conception of the Gospel message. Far be it from us to enter into a polemic or essay a refutation. The only complaint here registered is that Holmes is using the word Christianity in a sense utterly alien to the meanings attached to that word in the course of 2,000 years. "Our Father, who art in heaven," seems to indicate a God transcendental to man, something more than an inner voice. Without consulting Christian prayers, let Mr. Holmes consult the curse words used in western cultures. Those words will tell him what the accepted meaning of the words God, Christ, and the future life are, without edification, ambiguity, or equivocation. Of course, Mr. Holmes knows that he is not using the Christian words in their ordinary lexicographic definition, and he de-

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

²³ Cf. Walter M. Horton, "Systematic Theology: Liberalism Chastened by Tragedy," in *Protestant Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Arnold S. Nash (New York: Macmillan, 1951), pp. 117-19.

fends his right to use them differently.²⁴ His right is admitted; he can use the words any way he wishes. But would it not be more honest and more candid for him to say forthrightly that the historical religion of Christianity, based on the belief in a transcendental, commanding God, is a pitiable hoax deriving from an immature human tendency to personify forces which are intrinsic to nature and man? It seems more four-square to say flatly that Christianity, a well-defined historical reality, is a harmful delusion which must be liquidated and supplanted by a romantically naturalistic ethical-culture movement, which will incorporate into itself some of the valuable elements of the older tradition. This is what men like Mr. Holmes do not state but what they are actually doing. They undoubtedly have the civic right to do so. But to call their product Christianity is as honorable as selling a South Carolina Baptist a bottle of gin by the device of labeling it vegetable compound, and justifying the technique by pointing out that juniper berries are vegetable.

For Catholics this kind of Christianity is so different from what they understand by the name that they will be totally confused by the new usage of the term, "Christianity." For an ever larger group in our pluralistic society Christianity is a complete contradiction of all that the other group considers essential to the notion. A unifying common word has suddenly become a meaningless tag usable for any kind of thought or conduct. Any man who derives humanistic inspiration from some one or other New Testament concept, be he a Jew, Brahmin, or atheist, can be called a Christian, according to men like Mr. Holmes. In such a situation "Christian" says no more than "human being." But the epithet, "Christian," says more and always has said more. The Catholic has a right to protest against a usage of the word which sucks out of it all that is characteristic, and reduces a holy symbol to inanity.

III

Dean Craig and Mr. Holmes can be depressing for a Catholic, but this must be said for their work: it is an acceptance of the high task

²⁴ *Foes of the Spirit*, p. 34: "But I protest that there is nothing dishonest in using these terms with meanings different from those accepted by the fundamentalists. . . . Liberals feel that many of the traditional words of Christianity are good and expressive and should be retained in the more intelligible theology forever in the process of development."

of putting down what they conceive to be the ideas of Christianity. Each in his own fashion is interested in thought and reason. They make concepts and notions clear to the public. A Catholic may be nonplussed by their theology, but it is a theology, constructed in accord with definite principles and in obedience to logic. At least an intelligent analysis is possible, and even invited.

The scene changes utterly when we read *The Power of Positive Thinking*, by Dr. Norman Vincent Peale,²⁵ an ordained Methodist minister, though now pastor of the Marble Collegiate Reformed Church in New York. After reading this book the Catholic theologian gasps and goes limp. The opus does not read like a religious message at all. Rather it has all the aspects of modern high-pressure advertising for some patent medicine which cures every ill known to man. Not all Protestant thinkers look with a kindly eye on Dr. Peale's glad tidings, and Professor William Lee Miller of the religion department of Smith College has written a cleverly critical consideration of Dr. Peale's effort.²⁶ With

²⁵ Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952).

²⁶ William Lee Miller, "Some Negative Thinking about Norman Vincent Peale," *Reporter* 12 (Jan., 1955) 19-24. Concerning Peale's radio and television shows, Dean Liston Pope, of the Yale Divinity School, made some scathing remarks at the annual meeting of the Broadcasting and Film Commission of the National Council of Churches on March 1, 1955: "I would not have believed that anything could be stickier than some of the soap operas, but religion has outdone even Lever Brothers." The brotherhood theme is offered as a "nostrum to keep America strong, in the name of religion." "This kind of thing represents a prostitution of the Christian faith and a crucifixion anew of the Christ who put human brotherhood in the most terrible and demanding of all relationships, that of common Sonship under God. Let us have brotherhood, but not by all means." Dean Pope was also critical of the "peace of mind cult." "It is not likely that a few psychological gimmicks or changes of attitude will resolve tensions that are really significant. . . . In their effort to be appealing, they quickly become appalling from the standpoint of sincere and well-founded and full-ranging Christian faith" (*New York Times*, March 2, 1955, p. 25, col. 1).

In a moving paragraph on prayer Harry Emerson Fosdick may or may not have had Dr. Norman Vincent Peale in mind. At all events, Dr. Peale could profit by Fosdick's teaching. Cf. Leon and Elfrieda McCauley, eds., *The Book of Prayers* (New York: Dell, 1954); Introduction by Harry Emerson Fosdick, "The Strength of Personal Prayer," p. 10: "To be sure, there are misuses of prayer, and many souls have been estranged from praying and deprived of its consolations and reinforcements because they have seen so much superstition and self-seeking mingled with it. Prayer is not a magic way of getting things without fulfilling the conditions of getting them. Prayer is not a process by which mortal man turns eternal God into a bell-boy to run his errands. Prayer is not an emergency measure by which men who otherwise seldom think of God get themselves out of tight places. Prayer is not an ivory tower, a place of soft retreat, to which cowardly souls merely run

less sparkle but with sobriety and solidity the editor of the *Christian Century*, Paul Hutchinson, proposed his criticism of Dr. Peale's message in *Life* (38, no. 18 [April 11, 1955] 138-58). Many a Protestant theologian would urge us to overlook Dr. Peale by observing that Dr. Peale's dubious theology is unimportant.

But Dr. Peale is important. In February, 1955, the bookstores were selling copies of the fifteenth printing of the work, which first appeared in October, 1952. By May, 1955, over a million copies were sold. Millions have read the book, even though it has not yet been published in the pocket-book market. More millions have read the serialized publication in the Hearst papers. In addition Dr. Peale has a numerous radio and television following; his weekly syndicated column appears in many papers; he conducts a question-and-answer department in the pictorial fortnightly, *Look*; his magazine, *Guideposts*, his sermons and his tracts engage exclusively a publishing house established for this purpose; the *Reader's Digest* with its millions of readers gives him space. Dr. Peale, America's "Minister to the Millions," is important because he is highly significant as a barometer for contemporary Protestant religiosity.

What is Peale's theory of Christianity? *The Power of Positive Thinking* claims to be practical and consequently does not really wish to answer that question. Reading the book with concentration—a difficult thing to do—reveals some ideas, but there is no explicitly theological doctrine presented in the work. The only theological message conveyed by the book is through a produced impression that theology is quite unimportant and irrelevant to the real value of Christianity. The type of scholarship involved in the volume can perhaps be illustrated by the author's little excursus into philology, where we are told that "pastor" derives from a word meaning "cure of souls."²⁷ The ancient phrase, *cura animarum*, is blithely interpreted as soul-healing! This free and easy approach to etymology is paralleled by Dr. Peale's

away to escape from life. Such misuses of prayer are its perversions and caricatures. In the genuine Christian heritage, God, to those who knew the deep meanings of prayer, has been an unseen Friend, an invisible Companion. When they were alone, they were never alone. Then, when emergency came, they traveled an accustomed road, like Jesus in Gethsemane, to a familiar Presence for a brief colloquy, to emerge again ready to face the wrath of devils and the scorn of men."

²⁷ *Power of Positive Thinking*, p. 174.

slick use of Scripture quotations. Acts 17:28 is a Pauline borrowing of a phrase from the pagan poet, Epimenides. The text offers an exegete a double problem: (1) what is the meaning of the words in the mind of the original author, Epimenides? (2) how does Paul understand them in the light of his own theology? These questions cannot be easily satisfied. But Dr. Peale has no difficulty at all. He tells us: "In another statement the Bible describes the energizing and re-energizing process: ' . . . in Him we live (that is, have vitality), and move (have dynamic energy), and have our being (attain completeness).'"²⁸ Being of the American Protestant tradition, Dr. Peale offers us quotes from the 23rd (Vulgate 22nd) Psalm on all occasions. It means anything Dr. Peale wants it to mean. There is no need for Dr. Peale to go to the original Hebrew; for any English version is good enough for him, provided the words of the rendition can be used as apparent supports of Dr. Peale's happy message.

Just what does Christianity look like in the light of Dr. Peale's journalized gospel? It begins beyond doubt with a thorough belief in God. God is omnipotent, loving, and omnipresent. Whether God is a person or merely described by personal symbols is not at all clear. The mere use of personal pronouns when referring to God is no proof that the deity is personal. Certainly God is energy and power. In fact, that truth is about all we need to know. Man is surrounded by a boundless, benevolent energy which he can draw on for the realization of his dreams. I do not wish to be flippant, but it seems that Dr. Peale has reduced God to the status of an unlimited stockpile of free atomic energy. "Take three deep breaths—in and out slowly. Practice resting yourself in God. Practice depending on Him for His support and power. Believe He is giving it to you now and don't get out of touch with that power. Yield yourself to it—let it flow through you."²⁹

The great importance given to God in Peale's thought does not prevent his religion from being humanistic. God is something of which man can naturally avail himself. He is a public utility and Dr. Peale merely calls man's attention to its presence and urges the weary soul to make use of it.

This, according to Dr. Peale, is the true and essential message of the Bible—whose content is transparently clear in the old American

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

Standard version. And who is Jesus the Christ? A wonderful, wise man. It is neither affirmed nor denied anywhere that He is God, but He is depicted always as thoroughly human, and the impression is created that He is nothing else. Nor does He play an important part in Peale's message.

What is more, Jesus did just what Dr. Peale is doing—manifesting the enriching power of faith. In fact, not only Christ taught this but men whose belief in God was nil, or at best hazy. Thus Thomas Edison, Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Ralph W. Emerson, and Henry Thoreau are cited as witnesses to the religious message of Dr. Peale. (I was looking for a quote from Bob Ingersoll but I do not recall ever having found it.) Their witness does not seem to be much inferior to that of Jesus Christ. Dr. Peale says explicitly: "Every such person seems in harmony with nature and in contact with the Divine energy. They have not necessarily been pious people, but invariably they have been extraordinarily well organized from an emotional and psychological point of view."³⁰

It logically follows that Christianity is a practical scheme for the successful utilization of the powers of nature. We need not be surprised to hear that it really is a natural science.

Christianity may also be thought of as a science. It is a philosophy, a system of theology, a system of metaphysics, and a system of worship. It also works itself out in moral and ethical codes. But Christianity also has the characteristics of a science in that it is based upon a book which contains a system of techniques and formulas designed for the understanding and treatment of human nature. The laws are so precise and have been so often demonstrated when proper conditions of understanding, belief, and practice are applied that religion may be said to form an exact science.³¹

The Christianity utilized in this procedure is the undiluted teachings of Jesus Christ, Lord and Saviour of man's life. . . . Believe [in Christ]; believe in His system of thought and practice; believe and you will overcome all fear, hate, inferiority, guilt and every form and manner of defeat.³²

Peale's Christianity pretends to realize the limitless potential in man. There is no room for the doctrine of original sin, which in the classical Christian vision effectively constricts the human potential for good and renders it incapable of achieving happiness for humanity.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 221.

If man is to achieve happiness, it will be freely given to him by God working supernaturally and not naturally. This is the doctrine, in one form or other, of all the Christian traditions from the time of the Gospels to the days of Barth and Niebuhr. This continuous tradition Dr. Peale ignores, and if he attaches any meaning to the term, "original sin," he would mean by it an unawareness of the true method of exploiting our natural powers. This unawareness will be overcome by reading the "techniques," "formulas," "principles," "scientific suggestions" of the Bible according to Dr. Norman Vincent Peale.

Paul preached Christ and Him crucified. Peale preaches Christ successful like the innumerable business executives, well-known actors, popular football coaches, and radio impresarios who figure almost on every page of Dr. Peale's book. St. John of the Cross spoke movingly of the Dark Night of the Soul. Unfortunately for him, he never had the chance of reading Dr. Peale, who would have explained to him that by positive thinking he could have blown the darkness away.

Is there anything left of the Christian message as either the Protestant or Catholic traditions conserve it? Well, there is a belief in immortality. However, it is not conceived as a heaven-or-hell situation. Speaking of the dead, Dr. Peale says: "Where are they? What is their condition? What sort of body have they? These are questions that are difficult. The idea of a different dimension is probably the most tenable, or it may be more accurate to believe that they live in a different frequency cycle."³³ How did Dr. Peale come to this incredible belief in immortality?

These convictions are based upon sound foundations, the Bible for one. I believe that the Bible gives us a very subtle, and as will be proved ultimately, a scientific series of insights into the great question, "What happens when a man leaves this world?" Also the Bible very wisely tells us that we know these truths by faith. Henri Bergson, the philosopher, says the surest way to truth is by perception, by intuition, by reasoning to a certain point, then by taking a "mortal leap," and by intuition attaining the truth. You come to some glorious moment where you simply "know." That is the way it happened to me.³⁴

Neglecting all comment concerning this astounding epistemology, we can yet see that Dr. Peale is not a biblical literalist. The Bible gives

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 253-54.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

him only subtle hints and "scientific" insights. On the basis of such acquisitions he builds his Christian vision. By this method he can easily pass over the words "sin," "self-renunciation," "suffering," "hell," "punishment," and "the scandal of the cross."

However, he still retains prayer and makes very much of it. But this is "scientific prayer."⁸⁵ It has nothing to do with mystical contemplation, but it is wonderful just the same. In its essence it is a verbalized recollection of the limitless energy at our disposal; it is the consoling recognition of the benevolent force which surrounds and sustains us. Its function is therapeutic and it works by itself. Nowhere is it mentioned that God may not answer the prayer, or that the key to successful prayer is found in the phrase, "Thy will be done, not mine." Though Dr. Peale does not say so, the psychologists would say that Peale's prayer is an immense effort at auto-suggestion. The psychologists warn their readers that auto-suggestion has limits of applicability, but Dr. Peale gives us no warnings. Pray and you will be able to achieve your ambitions, or perhaps even something better. Just pray and you will be spontaneously soothened and you will feel yourself drawing on the omnipresent, infinite energy which is called God.

Such is Dr. Peale's conception of Christianity. It has little of the Christianity taught by the Gospels and St. Paul, by Augustine and Aquinas, by Luther and Calvin. Where elements of traditional Christianity are retained, they are given a twist so that they emerge in a guise utterly alien to the sources. Dr. Peale's doctrine, in as far as any theory is involved, is a bubbling melange of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mary Baker Eddy, and Dr. Emile Coué. We need not lose our temper at the sight of this witch's broth, but we have the right and duty to protest bitterly when it is labeled as Christianity.

The thought-content of Dr. Peale's message is anemically thin. Moreover, his mode of expression is not wholly worthy. A dignity belongs to the religious message, because it deals with God, to whom the least we owe is reverence. Just because the stylized pomposity of the older preachers is *demodé*, we are not justified in approaching perilously close to the tawdry. The Negro Spirituals are not pompous but their dignity is palpable. Dr. Peale, on the other hand, exploits to the utmost the unesthetic jargon of commercial advertizing. When, speak-

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 53, 174.

ing of prayer, he tells us: "The formula is: (1) PRAYERIZE, (2) PICTURIZE, (3) ACTUALIZE,"³⁶ one does not think of the numinous but of an electric shaver.

It is also of questionable taste to load the text with testimonial letters in the form of quotations from Frank Hiller, the baseball pitcher; Knute Rockne, the football coach; Arthur Godfrey, the radio entertainer; Thomas Edison, the unbeliever; Grove Patterson, editor of the Toledo *Blade*; Hugh Fullerton, the sportswriter, and a host of other popular worthies. Nor is the reader edified by repeated "plugs" for other Peale publications and for the Marble Collegiate Church (which is more often identified by city, street, and number).³⁷ Perhaps the most annoying trick of all is the fawning use of the word, "scientific." Science in our day is revered, respected, and exalted. Dr. Peale wants these qualities for his message, and so he simply calls his message scientific. This is utterly misleading. There is no science in Dr. Peale's gospel, and it would be candid to say so simply. If the theologians long erred by attempting to subject science to theology, it is yet a greater error to subsume religion under science.

The reader of Dr. Peale's book cannot possibly avoid the impression that he is listening to a pitch-man, who uses every form of mass appeal to induce his hearers to acquire his wares. This is not the climate in which religious truth is either taught or learned.

In conclusion the Catholic voices his concern. It is well known that in the past the Protestant faithful were not deeply influenced by the destructive speculations of the historicist theologians of the nineteenth century. Moralistic naturalism flourished in the universities and orthodoxy was at home in the churches. Today, however, there is more orthodoxy in the universities than in the churches. Missouri Synod Lutherans and fundamentalists still strive to conserve the faith delivered to the saints, but the other churches have no sense of tradition at all. The air they breath is reconstructionism. Little by little the whole substance of Christianity is being leached out of the churches and nihilism is taking its place. God is anything you accept as absolute;

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

³⁷ On p. 210 Dr. Peale protests that he does not cite his magazine in order to advertise it, although he admits that he strongly recommends it because of the good it can do.

Christ is an ideal construct suggested by the man Jesus; the sacraments are ethical symbols; the Bible contains only moving insights. A Hindu can accept this and so can an atheist. You can call them Christians, if you wish, and perhaps they would not mind. However, in the whole course of Christianity the Christians did not believe that this was possible. They felt themselves to be a chosen people, set apart through their acceptance of the revelation of Jesus Christ, our Lord, God and Saviour.

“And Elijah came near to all the people, and said: ‘How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him’” (1 K 18:21).