

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THEOLOGY IN ENCOUNTER WITH NON-CHRISTIANS: PROFESSION? PROTESTATION? SELF-MAINTENANCE? ABANDON?

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THIS ESSAY proposes to outline systematically, in twelve consecutive steps, a theologically responsible Christian posture in regard to non-Christian religions.¹ It differs from many other approaches in that it develops this posture entirely from within the Christian tradition; it makes no claims about other religions. It also operates in a distinctively catholic manner, combining dogmatic-theological themes and approaches with fundamental-theological ones. The central contention of this essay is that the attitude to be characterized by means of the term "receptiveness" has a squarely theological import all its own, so that the Christian posture in relation to the religions can ill afford to overlook it, let alone belittle it. This is argued by showing that in receptiveness, fundamental-theological intuitions of the most radical kind coincide with Christological intuitions of the most radical kind.

I

The Church preexists all Christians. Accordingly, all Christians profess a faith they have received. The matrix in which this reception occurs, which also determines the manner in which it occurs, is called "the Tradition." In the transmission and reception of the faith there are important elements of stability. One of them consists in traditional affirmations, ranging from fairly standardized catechetical forms of teaching and explanation, often of the homiletic kind, to precise statements of doctrine ("articles of faith," conciliar definitions). From the practical and strictly theological points of view, however, catechetical and doctrinal affirmations, while meaningful elements of the Christian faith-experience, are derivative, on the following grounds.

Viewed from the angle of praxis, doctrinal and catechetical affirmations occur only as part of a wider idiom, a shared usage. An idiom is the linguistic condensation of a community's shared commitments, as

¹ A first version of this paper, dedicated to my friend Tom Jacobs, a Jesuit in Indonesia since 1949 and a practitioner of biblical and systematic theology since 1964, was presented and discussed at a joint colloquium of the faculties of theology of Sanata Dharma University (Roman Catholic) and Duta Wacana University (Protestant) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, on September 20, 1993.

well as their continuing support; therefore, using the Christian idiom is always an act of implicit, habitual, presumably considered, and (at least ideally) deepening fidelity to a lived (and hence, authoritative) tradition of Christian conduct—a tradition radically warranted by Jesus' endorsement of Israel's legacy of active and patient faith and ultimately by his own call to faith and discipleship. Only against the backdrop of such fidelity can the use of catechetical affirmations represent a credible intellectual assent to truth. Thus Christian praxis—the lived life undertaken as imitation of Christ—is the proximate validation of Christian truth claims.² Accordingly, any interreligious discussion of the latter without reference to the former is a mistake, both methodologically and practically.

From the strictly theological angle, catechetical and doctrinal affirmations are rooted in the shared usage of a liturgical community. This community most distinctively comes into its identity in direct acts³ of praise, thanksgiving, and supplication offered to God through and in Jesus Christ risen, in Spirited celebration and observance, in which rehearsal of the old and the tested combines with discovery of the new and the untested to awaken the sense of the divine presence and keep it alive, in awe and intimacy, in utterance and silence. (Incidentally, in worship Christians also find themselves both called and empowered to embrace the community's shared commitments as a way of life both divinely mandated and divinely endorsed in Jesus Christ's resurrection.) Since the original point of catechetical and doctrinal affirmations is doxological, identifying one's convictions and commitments (and thus, indirectly, oneself) by the use of them is believable only to the extent that in some way it conveys intimacy with the God worshiped by the Christian community (or at least a familiarity with this God), supported, presumably, by the habitual practice of worship. In other words, the affirmation of, say, the articles of faith is plausible (or, alternatively, appropriately intriguing or infuriating) only if it echoes in some way the living tradition of Christian prayer.⁴ Thus interreli-

² The fact that verbal witness, both of the oral/acoustical and the written kind, is part of Christian praxis has consequences for the interpretation of doctrine. Cf. my "Rahner on *Sprachregelung*: Regulation of Language? of Speech?" *Oral Tradition* 2 (1987) 323–36.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the primacy of the *actus directus* of faith is relevant here. Cf. my *Christ Proclaimed: Christology as Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist, 1979) esp. 232–47; *God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology 1: Understanding the Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) nos. 34–35.

⁴ This is meant to imply that catechetical affirmations are pointless, both practically and theologically, if, lacking every echo of worship, they reflect nothing but (say) the voice of authority or the atmosphere of theological discussion.

gious discussion of the Christian faith-affirmations without reference to worship is a mistake as well, both methodologically and theologically.

II

Not surprisingly, relatively few Christians and Christian communities live in full appreciation of their privileged condition. In many cases, they are growing in it; in others, they are downright sluggish; in almost all cases, they mean well. In any case, as a result of immature faith, the Tradition is liable to show signs of degeneracy. The form of degeneracy most germane to the present argument consists in living by habit and clinging to custom—a problem not unknown in the early Church.⁵ While those devoted to custom are usually sincere when they appeal to (what they take to be) the tradition, the lack of deeper resonance in their affirmations causes such appeals to sound less than confident, and hence, not too convincing. Frequently, this lack of deep confidence is not lost on observers and listeners, both the interested and the skeptical. In such cases, concerned lest they profess too little, Christians are apt, on the rebound, to compensate for lack of substance by excess of emphasis; they will overstate their case. In this way, “to profess” becomes “to protest.” Now protesting is apt to lead one to protest too much, like Hamlet’s mother. The implicit agenda of protesting too much is (not faith but) self-maintenance. Neither theology nor theologians are exempt from this.

III

Christians must pursue both effectiveness and integrity in professing Christ; accordingly, while boldly professing their faith, they must take care not to protest too much. Faced with this delicate task, the great Tradition has tacitly (but quite often explicitly as well) regarded itself as a tradition of ongoing faith-discernment, guided by the Holy Spirit. Discernment, therefore, must characterize the Christian community’s pursuit of its own identity as well as its approach to the world of human culture, and of religious culture in particular. Christians must give an account of themselves in a variety of situations; familiarity with, and critical appreciation of, the convictions and manners current among their non-Christian neighbors, but also in the culture at large, must enable Christians to overcome defensiveness in testifying; to the extent they succeed, they are likely to offer credible witness. An example is Gregory of Nyssa’s *Great Catechetical Oration*

⁵ Even a traditionalist like Tertullian recognized this, declaring that “our Lord Christ gave himself the title ‘the Truth’ not ‘Custom’” (*veritatem, non consuetudinem*); see *De virginibus velandis* 1.1.

(ca. 390).⁶ Without a hint of either apology or overstatement, Gregory offers a firmly catholic catechism reliably informed by a fair and articulate understanding of the notions about God, gods, the divine, and the human prevalent in the surrounding religious culture. Accordingly, John Henry Newman, about 1450 years later, can explain that the organic integration (often combined with subtle, mostly tacit transformation) of foreign elements is the mark of a living Tradition.⁷ Neither Christians nor Christian communities can come into their true selves without embracing the world in a discerning manner.

IV

The foregoing implies that discernment in professing the Christian faith, and hence, the tradition itself, are a matter of mutuality. Accordingly, the structure of the discernment process is hermeneutical. Even as they interpret the other, interpreters will find themselves interpreted to themselves; familiarity with the unfamiliar other turns out to be inseparable from familiarization with a yet-unfamiliar self; discovery of the other turns out to be an exercise in distortion unless attended by the chastening and often delightful experience of self-discovery.⁸ Accordingly, Christian discernment will properly proceed (that is, it will truly advance the Tradition, as well as those who live by it) only on condition that the cyclical nature of the hermeneutical process ("the hermeneutical circle") is accepted and, indeed, respected.

Not surprisingly, therefore, discernment is borne on the wings of a dual dynamic—one which combines constructiveness and receptiveness.

V

The element of constructiveness typically manifests itself in positive affirmation. It is dominant whenever and wherever Christians confidently turn their faith in God and Jesus Christ by the gift of the Spirit into an authorization for a discerning, sympathetic interpretation of forms and elements of humanity and religion foreign to the Christian community, to the point of positively commending and even integrating them. Jesus' openness to all comers and his vocal appreci-

⁶ See the critical edition by J. H. Srawley, *Cambridge Patristic Texts*, 1909.

⁷ John Henry Newman, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1844), esp. chap. 5, sec. 3; and chap. 8.

⁸ Readers of Hans-Georg Gadamer will recognize my deep indebtedness to his thought. Cf. also my "Divine Revelation: Intervention or Self-Communication?" *TS* 52 (1991) 199–226, an essay which appears in final form in *God Encountered 2/1: The Revelation of the Glory: Introduction and Part I: Fundamental Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1993) nos. 94–95.

ation of the occurrence of true faith outside Israel (for which there is some precedent in late Jewish universalism of the sapiential kind) constitute prototypical warrants for this.

The constructive approach began to be vigorously adopted in the early second century, when Christian thinkers first engaged in serious, critical, yet appreciative encounter with contemporary non-Jewish philosophic thought. In this regard, Justin Martyr's writings (ca. 150) are a classical example—the first in a long tradition. They show an easy familiarity with contemporary life and thought, and, while firmly critical of many parts of it, explicitly commend non-Christian sages who lived by reason as manifestations of the *Logos*, "of whom all humankind has received a share." "Such were, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus and those like them and among the foreigners, Abraham, Elijah, Ananias, Azarias, Misael, and many others."⁹

This raises a problem. Because of their preference for affirmativeness, acts and habits of constructiveness have a largely unintended side effect: self-assertion. Of course, implicit self-affirmation is an inevitable ingredient of every act of affirmation human beings engage in. Yet even implicit self-affirmation is a form of self-assertion. And while self-assertion is often both healthy and proper, it *can* be self-serving; specifically, in relation to things different or alien, it has a capacity for aggression and outright hostility. Not every form or instance of affirmativeness is authorized by faith in God.

Questionable affirmativeness is far from unknown in the New Testament or in the writings produced in the Church of the first few centuries. Still, in fairness it must be noted that much of the inordinate assertiveness in the New Testament and many early-church documents is accounted for by their deep indebtedness to the culture they are part of. For all its literacy, Mediterranean intellectual and moral life in late antiquity and long thereafter continued to live and think by dint of oral performance. Orality has a tendency toward agonistic expression: it will indulge in extravagant praise and blame, and cherish adversarial rhetoric in polemical defense of truth-cum-loyalty.¹⁰ The early Church embraced this customary vehemence in argument. To us, in the twentieth century, it may be fairly clear that this style of en-

⁹ *Apology* 1.46.2–4.

¹⁰ On these issues, many of Walter J. Ong's writings are illuminating, esp. *Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University, 1983); *The Presence of the Word* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970); *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1971); *Interfaces of the Word* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1977); *Fighting for Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1981); *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Methuen, 1985).

countering others cannot claim the support of the historical Jesus¹¹—a fact whose theological and Christological significance is insufficiently appreciated. Still, the record shows that Jesus' example did not keep the early Christian communities from sharing the Mediterranean cultures' rhetorical habits; they even came to admire and emulate them. In fact, vehemence in argument at the expense of others did not keep the early Church from embracing much of the wisdom of the cultures whose errors and sinful habits it rejected. All of this suggests that polemical defenses of the Christian faith, while widespread, did little serious harm, either to the Christian conscience or to non-Christians, at least as long as Christians were a minority and an easy target for harassment, and as long as Christian orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and reputation were in no position to set the public climate, intellectually, culturally, and politically.

The developments set off by Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge in 312, which over time led to the *establishment* of the Christian Church, are a different matter altogether. In fact, the contemporary Christian experience in the context of both non-Christian and post-Christian civilizations (which is an experience of disestablishment) demands that these early developments be critically reassessed, theologically. This judgment is not primarily based on the penitential acknowledgment of the fact that the dominance of Christianity has given rise to sinful excesses.¹² Rather, it is predicated on the realization that much of the doctrinal and theological tradition we continue to live by took shape, roughly, between the fifth and seventeenth centuries—the period that marks the emergence and establishment of Christianity as the normative intellectual, cultural and (eventually also) political climate, especially in the West. While this tradition, at its best, produced fine instances of constructiveness,¹³ it suffered from

¹¹ But, it is only fair to add, neither can the sort of unprincipled tolerance that insists on the avoidance of all confrontation and conflict in order to mask an underlying lack of commitment.

¹² One of the more notable instances of such excess is the way the leadership of the Spanish *Conquista* expressly used Christ's victory over the demons as a theological rationale for the brutal treatment of the native Americans and the destruction of their culture. The protests of prophets like the Dominican friar and bishop Bartolomé de las Casas (1474–1566), author of *The Only Way to Draw All People to a Living Faith* (New York: Paulist, 1992) and many other splendidly indignant writings, were largely disregarded. The efforts of contemporary scholars like Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, and even Paul Knitter to reinterpret the Christian faith and its relationship to other religions in "inclusivist" or "pluralist" terms may well have to be judged theologically unsatisfactory in the end; what cannot be denied is that the blind spots and scandals of the past cry out for the kind of remedial theological reflection they offer.

¹³ Examples that come to mind are a few early medieval controversial encounters with

never having to deal, systematically and *from a position of equality* (let alone subordination), with non-Christian religions as an actual phenomenon.¹⁴ Speaking purely politically and culturally, modern Christian thought about non-Christian religiosity and religions cannot afford a posture of highhandedness any more than Christian thought could in the second, third, or fourth centuries.

VI

Let us now turn to the element of receptiveness, which typically operates by openness, inquiry, and sympathetic interrogation rather than by affirmation. First of all, though, let us observe that receptiveness is not antithetical to constructiveness. In fact, the exact contrary is the case. As already stated, most theologically sound Christian affirmation rests on a careful, appreciative understanding of theologically valuable ingredients of the culture—the fruit of empathetic inquiry on the part of Christians. Significant elements of receptiveness, therefore, commonly undergird instances of constructiveness.

Yet receptiveness, in and of itself, has a theological significance regardless of its success in giving rise to acts and habits of constructiveness in the encounter with a culture. Exploring and clarifying this proposition is the chief aim of this essay.

Let us begin by remembering that the Christian community regularly finds itself on the receiving end of contradiction. As often as not (and more often according as the Christian community is less in control of the normative cultural climate), non-Christian conceptions and practices do not lend themselves to easy interpretation and ready affirmation; rather, many of them will strike Christians as alien, hard to understand, intractable, unacceptable in practice. No wonder Christians will find their own conceptions and practices, and indeed themselves, treated accordingly by others, whether rightly or wrongly. (But

Islam and contemporary Judaism, and Aquinas's *Summa contra gentiles* (cf. Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* [New York: Corpus; and Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971] 72–76), which are models of intellectual fairness, and early Jesuit attempts at principled inculturation, such as Matteo Ricci's in China and Roberto de Nobili's in India.

¹⁴ Aquinas points this out explicitly, and goes on to interpret it as an opportunity to develop a universalist apologetic based on reason (*Summa contra gentiles* 1.2). In the background of his analysis lies, of course, a sad fact: for all its devotion to the Old Testament, Western Christendom and its theology systematically ignored, with very few exceptions (Andrew of Saint Victor being a case in point; cf. Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1978], 112–95), the presence of a non-Christian religious community right in its midst: the Jews. But that is another story.

then again, in a pluralistic situation, who decides about right and wrong?) In this predicament of relative mutual incomprehension, it is tempting to jump to affirmation, and to take the risk of an overstatement or two into the bargain. In fact, this may be, at times, the only practical (that is, prudent) solution. It may even be theologically imperative: there are critical situations in which the only practical witness to faith and identity available to Christians is to close ranks and say "No" to the culture and its religiosity. It stands to reason that such negative stances must not be adopted impulsively or as a matter of course; they are theologically sound only to the extent that, like the affirmative stances, they are gestures of discernment—not of defensiveness, let alone of righteous self-assertion.

All of this has an important implication. Even if, in particular situations, a Christian community's response to the culture should have to be negative, its profession of faith is still reinterpreted in the encounter. The dynamics of the hermeneutical process see to it that whenever Christians responsibly engage in interpretative encounters with others, their constitutive identity-experience (which is their faith in God) is tested; that is, it is reinterpreted. A church that says "No" in a discerning fashion is by that very fact developing a faith-experience (and hence, an identity-experience) substantially deeper and more authentic than the faith-experience it enjoyed before the test, as (for example) those of us who recall the aftermath of the *bekennende Kirche* of the thirties and forties will remember.

But this raises a crucial issue in regard to receptiveness. How to take such a test while it is happening? How are Christians to interpret theologically an encounter that produces, not a fusion of horizons that turns out to be constructive (and hence satisfying), but one that reveals a chasm in the landscape or even opens one? One that causes a standoff which, by standards prevailing in the common culture, sets Christians back? Shall they accept the embarrassment or even embrace it? Or, absorbed with themselves, will they take it only diffidently, grudgingly, resentfully?¹⁵ To resolve this painful question, we must refine

¹⁵ Readers familiar with the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) will recall how he ended up quite sharply taking his distance from the *bekennende Kirche* in which he had been so active and began to associate instead with conscientious non-Christians. He did so when he realized that, instead of accepting the testing of its faith at the hands of the Nazis as part of the Christian vocation, the Church resented it and became chiefly interested in reclaiming its former position of privilege. The most alarming aspect of this quest of self-maintenance was the Confessing Church's failure to condemn the Nazi treatment of the Jews and to help put an end to it. Not always does the traditional Christian reliance on a position of privilege take so crass a shape. I recently heard a respected sixty-year-old Indonesian Jesuit who has spent his entire adult life teaching at

our notion of the hermeneutical process by exploring its properly theological dimensions.

VII

Constructiveness, with its tacit bias toward self-affirmation, could give the impression that the encounter between Christian Church and non-Christian religions, or between church and culture, is just that—a matter of straightforward mutuality. But this overlooks that when Christians offer their constructive faith-affirmations to the non-Christian world, they are not being simply self-affirming. The reason is that ultimately they do not represent themselves or their own faith. Here the doxological and practical roots of doctrinal and catechetical affirmations become crucially important. In the last analysis, Christians present their integral selves to others only to the extent that they succeed in communicating themselves as inseparable from Christ—a privilege (they profess) they owe to God and for which they are answerable to God. In giving an account of itself, therefore, the Church must convey that even its best-discerned doctrinal affirmations and most enlightened norms for conduct, embraced in the context of the most intelligent and appreciative encounter with others, are not authorized by self-possession, let alone by the desire for a comfortable settlement with the world at large. For Christians, constructiveness is an exercise in neither autonomy nor heteronomy. Rather, it is theonomous: it must convey that the warrant for the Christian welcome extended to the culture lies with the God it worships. In other words, whenever and wherever Christians come into their true identity at all, this happens to them when, in imitation of Christ, they mediate between God and the culture along with its religiosity, dedicated to both, and hence tested by both. Or rather (since the two relationships are asymmetrical), they come into their true selves in the process of being freely, appreciatively, and lovingly (and hence discriminatingly) devoted to the culture on the strength of thankful, loving (that is, exacting) devotion to God.¹⁶

a graduate-level institute of catechetics dedicated to the education of Catholic catechists appeal to the small number of Christians in Indonesia (about eight percent) to raise the agonizing question: "Could it be that the Christian faith has failed to engage the Southeast Asian soul?" This disconsolate question overlooks the disturbing fact that to Constantinian Christianity it was increasingly the bodies that counted; the aspirations of souls were a concern, but one that could wait. So in the post-Christian world, the question invites a counter-question: "Does the Christian faith *have* to be the dominant cultural force for Christians to have the sense that they are supremely privileged?" The answer is obvious, but we may have to get accustomed both to it and to the question.

¹⁶ A phrase about the love of God and the love of neighbor in Jan van Ruusbroec's

VIII

This has consequences for the practice of Christian discernment. No Christian attempt at discerning encounter with other cultures or religions has ever been quickly productive. Understanding and cherishing the world invariably comes at a price; this slows the pace. Christians cannot expect either to understand and appreciate quickly, or for that matter, to be understood and appreciated quickly, let alone at cut rates. Specifically, in any post-Christian civilization, there is only one way in which Christians can convince others that their responses to non-Christian religions or cultures, whether of the constructive or the disappointing kind, are the fruit of discernment—that is to say, serious: they must leave no doubt about their preparedness to let others test their faith in God—that is, their very identity. Thus, whenever Christians encounter non-Christian religions and cultures, deep receptiveness must be in evidence if offers of Christian constructiveness are to be regarded as credible and thus appreciated as valuable. Consequently, the real danger in standoff situations lies not in the prospect of conflict or of a long, wearying impasse, but in the undisciplined, undiscerning desire to eliminate anxiety,¹⁷ to duck the demand for patience, to force issues, and (especially) to win—that dream of Constantinian Christians accustomed (in the wake of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*) to interpreting constructive relationships with the culture and its religiosity as proof positive of the truth of the Christian faith. It is the unchecked human craving for peace assured by victory that is at the heart of the tendency to trade discernment for overstatement. The temptation is always to gain the upper hand and try to settle things in one's favor—by protesting too much.

Protesting too much takes two forms. The first, accommodation, has affinities with modernism; it amounts to an overstatement of Christian openness. Accommodation occurs when Christians crave constructive association with non-Christians to the point of jeopardizing the integrity of the faith. This, however, is in the long run bound to diminish, also in the eyes of non-Christians, the intrinsic value of

writings expresses this dual loyalty to perfection, except that the passage assumes, of course, that the Church is set in a Christian society. Writing to motivated Christians, i.e. to the effective Church in the not-so-Christian culture of the later Middle Ages, Ruusbroec declares that "we must make our home between the love of God and of our fellow-Christian" (*Van den Gheesteliken Tabernakel* [*The Spiritual Tabernacle*] no. liv, in *Werken* [Mechelen: Het Kompas; and Amsterdam: De Spiegel, 1932–34] 2.125).

¹⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar calls acceptance of anxiety a mark of Catholicity: "Catholicity does not cancel anxiety, but transforms it" (*Katholisch* [Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1975] 12; cf. the English translation, *In the Fullness of Faith* [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988] 20, where, however, *Angst* is unhappily rendered by "fear").

association with Christianity. Who cares to compromise sturdy, cherished traditional religious and cultural goods through association with something inclusive and tolerant but not really very distinctive? The second is accommodation's opposite, isolation; it has affinities with integralism and amounts to an overstatement of Christian identity. It occurs when Christians crave for certainty and assurance in believing to the point of jeopardizing their responsibility to the non-Christian world. This, too, is bound to diminish, in the eyes of non-Christians, the credibility of the Christian faith. Who cares to submit sturdy, cherished traditional religious and cultural goods to the tribunal of an intolerant religious ghetto?¹⁸ Theologically speaking, both accommodation and isolation are forms of self-affirmation in the service of self-maintenance; they are failures in mediation.

Thus, in a post-Christian world even more than in a Christian one (and perhaps in a largely pre-Christian world as well), Christians and Christian theologians must systematically rediscover that the Christian faith is measured, not by its success in winning the world over to the Church, but by its ability to mediate between the living, loving God and the world. In all likelihood, mediation will have to take a variety of forms. What these forms will need to have in common is a quiet, unhurried, hopeful, deliberate insistence on symbolizing and conveying God's encompassing, long-suffering embrace (in Christological terms, God's "assumption") of all of humanity, along with its burden of inhumanity, in Jesus Christ suffering and rising from the dead. That is, Christians are to invite non-Christians to share in their own pursuit of conversion, away from idols, ideals, and ideologies that divide and kill, and toward the God who unites by holding out life to all at the expense of none. In this sense, the work of faith is the work of justice rooted in Transcendence.

Those who pursue this justice actively operate by faith-discernment. While deeply seeking to test everything in the light of God, with a view to constructive, responsible relations with others, they even more deeply agree to be tested themselves, sustained by faith in God, who tests and judges all. For only to the extent that they seek to be tested can those who believe in God be true to God. Here we have the heart of receptiveness.

IX

Thus far, the positions taken in this essay have been largely based on particular, professedly Christian warrants. Yet when interreligious and transcultural encounter is at issue, there usually arises a recur-

¹⁸ On these issues, cf. my *God Encountered* 1 nos. 17-19.

rent, neuralgic theme: the need for *common ground*.¹⁹ Few issues in theology nowadays raise this fundamental issue with similar urgency. If the profession of Christian faith in the world is a matter of ongoing mutual discernment about significant particulars, what is the basis for this discernment? Is it possible to identify a universal condition for the possibility of theological hermeneutics?

This essay wishes to suggest that here if anywhere it is vital to cultivate patience. Let us clarify this by first elaborating patience's opposite: undiscerning zeal. Current discussion of interreligious encounter has yielded a steady supply of proposals for "inclusivist" or "pluralist" reinterpretations of the Christian faith. Most of these promise improved relationships between Christianity and other religions and cultures. The improvement is usually obtained, at least theoretically, by purging Christianity of "exclusivism" and placing it, together with all religions and religious cultures, under an attractively universalist umbrella.

One immediate problem with this is that the umbrella is so obviously manufactured in the liberal-Christian and post-Christian West—a West turned penitent and even friendly, but still residually imperialist in spite of itself, witness its tendency to fit other religions into categories that are the fruit of Western reflection.²⁰ However, the deeper mistake in most of the proposals lies in their gratuitousness. For first of all, in the shade of this liberal umbrella the positive elements of the religions—that is, all the colorful things that make religions "real, vigorous, and definite"²¹—are made to pale into relative insignificance. Participants in the discussion are welcome to discourse, at little cost to themselves, on the affirmations of religions whose inconvenient details of conduct and liturgy they often have no intention of encountering and interpreting at close range, studiously or otherwise. But, second and more important, the cool, theoretical atmosphere of such parliaments where religions are reconciled free of charge sug-

¹⁹ It did for Aquinas, who saw the solution in "the need to have recourse to natural reason, to which all are forced to give their assent" (*Summa contra gentiles* 1.2). Modern scholars like Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, and Paul Knitter are on a comparable search: they seek to identify a common ground on which all religions agree (or can be brought to agree).

²⁰ Neo-Hinduist universalism of the kind represented by the Vedanta Society continues to hold a strong appeal in the West. Yet just how deeply this product of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century India is indebted to the West is often forgotten. It arose, not spontaneously, but as a universalist defense against Western pressure embodied in the forceful introduction of Christian churches, with their missionary programs.

²¹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967) 186; English translation, *On Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958) 234.

gests that the discussion is a form of class justice: it is relevant only to an elite privileged "to view the whole world as like unto itself, and to keep its distance, even if it be a sympathetic distance, from the wretched of the earth."²² Where, in this type of interreligious understanding, is the work of justice?

Justice demands, not only that we respect the positive elements of non-Christian religions, but also that we curb our eagerness to offer universalist interpretations until we patiently ask basic questions about the task of interpretation itself. Is there such a thing as a fundamental precondition of all interpretation? The answer to this question turns out to be surprisingly simple.

First, we know from experience that human beings cannot *not* communicate. Human beings never cross each other's paths as neutral facts; the simple givenness of a human being calls for encounter. Human beings make moral and intellectual demands on each other by their very presence; even when encountering the most bewildering strangers, we implicitly recognize that they are in principle interpretable, by virtue of their communicative behavior, especially their speech, no matter how incomprehensible. That is, both they and we have already been changed; the naked encounter was sufficient. Thus, second, we know from experience that the hermeneutical situation irresistibly involves the recognition of mutuality: constructive interpretation is reliable according as the interpreters allow themselves to be interpreted, both to each other and to themselves. Together, these two insights suggest that *interpretability is a more fundamental feature of humanity than the actual ability of particular human beings to interpret others*. That is, what most deeply characterizes human beings is also what can unite them most deeply with others: openness to interpretation. Humanity, it turns out, lives more deeply by the grace of receptiveness than by the work of constructiveness. This conclusion is hardly surprising if we recall the bitter truth that even well-intentioned acts and habits of constructive interpretation often divide, sometimes unnecessarily, especially when offered prematurely.

X

The insight just developed would seem to suggest a fresh sense of direction in the fundamental theological understanding of interreli-

²² Tom F. Driver, "The Case for Pluralism," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987) 203-18, at 206. The present paragraph sums up a case made at length in my "Professing Christianity among the World's Religions" (*Thomist* 55 [1991] 539-68), an essay which appears in final form in *God Encountered* 2/1 nos. 61-64.

gious encounter. Remarkably (to turn from fundamental theology to positively Christian theology again), it is reminiscent of two profound observations in a letter of St. Paul:

We know we all have knowledge. Knowledge inflates, but love builds up. All those who think they have knowledge do not yet know the way they should know. But all those who love, they are the ones who are known. . . . [and:] As of now, my knowledge is partial, but then I shall know as I am known.²³

Here we are. We all dearly seek to understand, but even more dearly, we seek to be understood. We are all natively intelligent, but even more natively, we are intelligible. We all deeply want to interpret, but even more deeply, we are interpretable. The true warrant for our understanding, and hence, its true measure, is our being understood by God; being aware of being thus understood is the mainspring of mature love of others and openness to them.

Aquinas understood this. He anticipated that the truths accessible to universal reason would create the common ground on which non-Christians could be brought to understand much (but by no means all) of the Christian faith. Yet he could entertain that cheerful anticipation only because he knew that the experience of intelligence in us is an experience, not so much of fullness as of hollowness, not so much of power as of desire, not so much of attainment of actual knowledge as of a luminous affinity with all that is potentially intelligible—that is, with all as it exists in God. This deep-seated affinity, he knew, is beyond our grasp; it is simply there, inescapably, a given ingredient of our sense of identity; yet it is the soul of our attunement to all that is and, in it and beyond it, to God. Its givenness invites our acceptance; it is by free receptiveness (so we discover) that we turn a given receptiveness to all reality and (in and beyond all reality) to God into a gift from God. Intelligence is privilege before it is power. So he wrote:

The human soul, in a way, becomes all things, by virtue of sense and intellect; in this manner, beings that have knowledge approximate, in some way, the likeness of God, in whom all things pre-exist.²⁴

In our own day, Karl Rahner has offered an analogous insight:

Is there anything more familiar and self-evident (whether explicitly or implicitly) to the self-aware human spirit than this: the wordless questioning that extends beyond all the things already conquered and mastered; the humble, loving sense (that sole origin of wisdom) of having more questions than an-

²³ 1 Cor 8:1–3 and 13:12b. For 8:3, I adopt the *lectio difficilior* found in the third-century papyrus, P⁴⁶: *ei de tis agapē, houtos egnōstai*.

²⁴ *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 80, a. 1, c.

swers? Down deep, there is nothing we know better than this: our knowledge (that is, what in our everyday lives we call knowledge) is but a small island in a measureless ocean of elements not traversed; it is a floating island, and much as we are more familiar with it than with this ocean, in the last resort it is carried; and only because it is carried can it carry at all. Thus the existential question, put to all those who have knowledge, is this. Which will they love more: the little island of their so-called knowledge, or the sea of measureless mystery?²⁵

Understanding dwells in us, irresistibly; it urges us forward, toward affirmation and legitimate self-affirmation. Yet we understand better and more reliably according as we more deeply acknowledge and appreciate understanding in its hollow, empty form, where knowledge coincides with, and is tested by, the consciousness of being known. This assurance will prevent us from being so dependent on actual knowledge that ignorance, incomprehension, and misinterpretation become devastating. In this way, it would appear, interreligious encounter, understood as an exercise in mutual interpretability, is apt to be more fundamentally theological than acts of mutual interpretation. It can be expected to place those participating in it, not in the shade of a universalist umbrella, but in the quiet clarity of Invisible Light.

Let us sum up our argument so far. Christians profess their faith in encounter with non-Christian religions and cultures, which they are to interpret with discerning constructiveness. In fact, they are positively called to do so by virtue of the Christian responsibility for the world. But they will do well to reflect on the liabilities of constructiveness—on the self-assertiveness and the lack of self-interpretation and self-knowledge it can mask, on the injustice it can do to other religions and cultures. This reflection will also test their readiness to be themselves the ones to pay the price of all reliable interpretation: receptiveness to finding oneself interpreted by non-Christian others. And we know, that being interpreted, like interpreting, takes the form of construals. Some of them will be misconstruals. Maybe even many.

XI

As promised at the outset, we must now show that the radical fundamental-theological intuitions just elaborated are matched by Christological intuitions that are equally radical.

Professing the Christian faith, it has been argued, is inconceivable apart from encounters with others. For that reason it obviously demands interpretative moves of the constructive and especially the re-

²⁵ *Grundkurs des Glaubens* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976) 33 (my translation); cf. *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William V. Dych, S.J. (New York: Seabury, 1978) 22.

ceptive kind. Our explorations have suggested not only that the latter must undergird the former, but also that, theologically speaking, they represent the more radical form of the profession of faith. Now receptiveness takes the form of interrogation, and even more of interrogation's deeper precondition: readiness to be interrogated. Surprisingly, perhaps, this latter insight prompts a radical leap into New Testament Christology.

In places too many to mention in the present context, the New Testament shows that the early Christians, powerless as they were by and large, were keenly aware that their reliance was not on human beings and their judgments and courts of law, nor on cultures, powers that be, or celestial elements with their incessant demands for submission and compliance; all of these had been ultimately disqualified, since, as Paul puts it, they had failed to recognize Jesus as the Lord of Glory (1 Cor 2:8). In sum, the Christians' ultimate (that is, their true) reliance was not on "this world" and its authorities and idols, but on God, who had raised Jesus to life, and so freed them from every enslavement. Characteristically, the Fourth Gospel presents Jesus as the prototype and source of this faith-attitude: Jesus knows enough not to entrust himself to others (John 2:24); he draws his identity, his sense of mission, and the assurance with which he works from the Father alone. But far from isolating him from those around him, this supreme abandon to God, the true source of his identity, opens Jesus unconditionally to others.

Curiously, Mark's Gospel conveys this theme by means of an interrogation scene, set at its turning point, smack in the middle of the Gospel viewed as a dramatic composition. Jesus faces his disciples with the question to which the whole Gospel is composed to provide the answer: "But who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29). Is it fanciful to suggest that this unconditional invitation to interpret his person is also the ultimate, most universal, most radical form of Jesus' profession of total abandon to the living God? In this scene as in the Gospel as a whole, the invisible God who is the passion of Jesus' life is the decisive and indeed the only presence that accounts for the Messianic secret—Jesus' identity and mission. That is, who Jesus is is not revealed through any overt claims to distinction on his part, of the kind that others (demons, disciples, Pharisees and scribes, the crowds, high priests, Pilate) constantly dare Jesus to make. Matthew will put this in explicit words: the revelation of Jesus' identity does not come from "flesh and blood" (Matt 16:17). It is not even a matter of Jesus making something of himself: "I do not seek my own glory," as the Fourth Gospel puts it (John 8:50). The secret of Jesus' person lies exclusively in what he trusts God to make of him. In the meantime, he himself

only agrees to be “delivered up.” That is, he allows others “to make of him whatever they want.” But for Jesus, in the end, being interpreted amounts to being misinterpreted—misconstrued to death, as the new Elijah, John the Baptizer, had been (Matt 17:12). In this light, it is only natural that Mark should place Jesus’ first prophetic prediction of his execution hard on the heels of Jesus’ question to the disciples. And to drive home the depth of the paradox, Peter, the very one whom the Father had inspired to interpret Jesus’ identity right, becomes the one who finds the way in which that divine identity is exercised humanly impossible to swallow (Mark 8:31–33).

Touches like these help shed light on the New Testament picture of Jesus. Jesus welcomes all those around him, because he interprets them all as children of the living God, his Father dear, whom he trusts with his whole person. At this Father’s kind mandate, Jesus is to accept all comers as his trust, without letting anyone get lost (John 6:37–39). However, in return for this welcome, Jesus suffers total misinterpretation and the worst available mistreatment: death by crucifixion.²⁶ The Fourth Gospel conveys this dramatically by having Pilate trot Jesus out to face the crowd as the picture of humanity (John 19:5): the Just One mirrors in his person the injustice a wayward humanity inflicts on itself. Yet the one who can thus silently accept and welcome being misconstrued and mistreated and executed is precisely the one who so trusts God that he can entrust all who misinterpret him as well as themselves (that is, all who kill him as well as themselves) along with his own dying self, to the God of Life. “He in person took our sins up on to the wood, in his own body, so that released from sin we might live for justice” (1 Pet 2:24).²⁷ These are the themes summed up by a liturgical hymn old enough for Paul to quote it as a piece of Christian tradition and to turn it into an exhortation to self-effacing modesty in dealing with one another:

Let this mentality prevail among you
which we also find in Christ Jesus:
He shared the condition of God,
yet did not consider equality with God
a matter of grasping, of seeking advantage.
Instead, he made himself empty—of no account;
he took on the condition of a slave.

²⁶ Martin Hengel’s *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), a book as scholarly as it is unsettling, offers the best explanation of what this means, at least to my knowledge.

²⁷ Note that the Vulgate enhances this picture by adopting, at the end of the previous verse, a variant reading: *tradebat autem iudicanti se iniuste* (“He entrusted himself to one who judged him unjustly”).

Born in human likeness and found in human form,
 he went on to lower himself:
 he became obedient to the point of death—death on a cross.
 That is why God exalted him above all,
 and bestowed on him the name above all names.
 Thus, at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend,
 in heaven, on earth, and under the earth;
 and every tongue should confess,
 to the glory of God the Father:
 “Jesus Christ is Lord!”²⁸

This is radical mutuality brought to divine perfection. In his encounter with others, Jesus accepts being cast in the role of the other-turned-into-the-complete-stranger, forced into a slave’s death by dint of human affirmativeness aggressively exercised at the expense of his human integrity. Yet this lethal affirmativeness finds itself not rejected or defeated, let alone repaid in kind, but quenched and absorbed and outsuffered in Jesus’ unconditional receptiveness,²⁹ which he patiently exercises on behalf of all others, trusting and glorifying God alone. This means life, for Jesus first of all, but then also for “the many,” whom by sheer receptiveness he has reconciled with God and in God and so with each other. The hermeneutical circle both respected and broken wide open.

XII

By way of *envoi*, an intriguing question, perhaps to stimulate the theological imagination. Let us assume we can learn from Origen’s *Contra Celsum*, composed between 246 and 248, on the eve (as we now know) of the establishment of Christianity. By then, the Christian faith was a notable influence, yet its predominance was by no means assured, for the alternatives were real. In our day, Christianity is still a notable influence, but there are real alternatives once again. Origen’s book represents the best of Christian thought in encounter with respected and confident non-Christian thought, about a century *before* Christianity’s establishment; we live and think about a century *after* Christianity’s disestablishment, at least in the Western world.

Unlike the tracts of, say, Irenaeus and Hippolytus, which had faced the painful divisions inside the Christian community, *Contra Celsum*

²⁸ Phil 2:5–11. For the translation of v. 6, see N. T. Wright, “*Harpagmos* and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5–11,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986) 321–52. On the hymn as a whole, see also Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* 62–63.

²⁹ Here I am indebted to passages in two novels of Iris Murdoch, as I explain in my recent article, “‘This Weakness of God’s is Stronger’ (1 Cor. 1:25): An Inquiry Beyond the Power of Being,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 9 (1993) 9–26, esp. 14–15 and n. 8.

is the ancient Church's first full-scale, coherent, eloquent, even voluble controversy with a total outsider. Kelsos was a religious pagan philosopher, an Epicurean who had decided, after serious study of Christianity, that he remained splendidly unimpressed, and who had explained himself about 175 in a tract entitled *Alēthēs Logos* ("True Reason").

Ironically, the preface to *Contra Celsum* is a commentary on the words, "But Jesus kept silence" (Matt 26:63). The choice of text is intriguing. Is it an instance of clever rhetorical posturing, or is there substance to it? Origen begins by declaring that these words are as true now as they ever were. Jesus is still keeping silence: present-day Christians evidence the truth of their faith by their lives rather than by word and argument. After that, however, the picture gets complicated, for Origen goes on to define his target audience. Since true Christians will not have been impressed by Celsus, he writes, the only readers he has in mind (besides people wholly unacquainted with Christianity) are Christians weak in the faith. This is an odd reading public. What could Christians, even Christians of dubious caliber, have in common with non-Christians? Could this statement, puzzling as it is, be the clue to the significance of Origen's choice of text?

Let us recall that Origen had first-hand experience of persecution, both as a youth and in old age. Eusebius relates that as an ardent seventeen-year old he had presumed to write a letter to his father, imprisoned for the faith and about to be martyred in 202, to implore him to persevere; meanwhile his mother, worried that her son, the eldest of seven, might leave the house to seek martyrdom in the anti-Christian tumults that made the streets of Alexandria unsafe, had found it advisable to hide his clothes.³⁰ *Contra Celsum* was written toward the end of Origen's life, when rumbles of fresh persecution were in the air; he died about five years after completing the work, at the age of sixty-nine, of the effects of torture suffered for the faith during the persecution of Decius in 250. Origen, if anybody, had a right to commend martyrdom, as in fact he did in his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*. But he had first-hand experience of ecclesiastical worldliness and mediocrity as well, and he gave vent to his disillusionment with privilege and prelacy by furiously commending the ascetical and mystical life, of which he also had first-hand experience. Did he, on the threshold of protesting at length (and, on more than one occasion in *Contra Celsum*, protesting a bit much), recall the receptive (that is, ultimately, mystical) nature of the Christian faith-commitment? Did he, perhaps, sense that the Christian faith was on the verge of triumph, as

³⁰ *Ecclesiastical History* 6.2.

the public, political victory of Christianity just short of a century later would bear out? And precisely because of that, did he feel compelled to recall the inconvenient truth that Christianity is, in the last analysis, upheld not by protesting, but by the saintly lives of true Christians? Did he, in other words, feel torn between the Christianity of the martyrs and a lesser type of Christianity, whose witness smacked of overstatement yet many of whose instincts he shared? Was he, a martyr *manqué*, appalled at the prospect of success and its consequence—a Church marked by crowd and compromise? Yet also, was he, a fastidious, irrepressible genius with a knack for public stances, worldly enough to want to beat the pagans at their own game, giving them a sharp public account of the Christian faith? And thus could the opening moves of *Contra Celsum* be an implicit apology—the gesture of an aspiring Christian ascetic, contemplating the silent Master in front of his judges and repenting in advance for the excessive (and obviously exciting) affirmativeness he was about to embark on in professing the Christian faith before the tribunal of contemporary learning? Did he intuit that the development of a lesser brand of Christianity was inevitable? A Christianity more assertive, yet less persuasive? A Christianity religiously devoted to a tradition of affirmativeness, often very discerning, yet not always very patient, and sometimes quite noisy and excessive—of the type his book was about to exemplify?