

Eugen Biser and Richard Heinzmann  
in Dialogue

# Theology for the Future

*Eugen Biser*

*Richard Heinzmann*



Translated by  
Kenneth L. Plotnik



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## Foreword

Eugen Biser enjoys a special place among the prominent theologians of the period spanning the end of the Twentieth Century and the beginning of the Twenty-First. He succeeded in fulfilling the requirements to become a professor in both philosophy and theology. He began his career as a professor of fundamental theology and gradually extended his great competence to all the major areas of theology.

At one point in his career, Father Biser was invited to assume the Chair for Christian World-view and Philosophy of Religion—known as the Romano Guardini Chair—of the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Munich. By accepting this invitation, he left both the insularity of a theological faculty as well as the classical demarcations of the theological disciplines.

This meant freedom from the limitations imposed by a specific branch of theology with its specific requirements—a freedom from a tendency to become myopic. It allowed Father Biser to wholeheartedly direct his attention and his endeavors to the original vital source of Christianity. His subsequent wide-ranging explorations led him to discover anew the heart and identity of Christianity, and to see this as the source of understanding what it means to be a Christian.

It is particularly important to note that Eugen Biser does not pursue theology for its own sake, despite the rigorous theological discipline he imposes on himself. He is convinced that a pursuit of theology for its own sake is meaningless and unjustifiable. In Jesus Christ, God reaches out to humanity. In a similar way, every reflection on this mystery must speak to men and women in their daily lives. If theology is not to be an empty activity, it must be proclamation. This is a kerygmatic theology, or a theological kerygma, that does not address an abstract humanity, but rather addresses concrete men and women living in a particular historical period with their own existential challenges. Consequently, theology must be a reflection on the Christ event that will answer each person's existential questions. This is exactly what the theology of Eugen Biser does. Therefore it is natural—perhaps even imperative—to make his theology available to a wider public, and this is what this book endeavors to do.

These thoughts about a theology for the future and the future of Christianity were originally produced for the Cultural Channel of Bavarian Television, BR-alpha, and were retransmitted repeatedly.<sup>1</sup> The lively response to this program led the Eugen Biser Foundation to transform this dialogue between Eugen Biser and Richard Heinzmann into a book, now in its third edition.<sup>2</sup> It seemed that a translation was advisable for the English-speaking world, especially in the U.S.A., where there is an increasing interest in this work.

Munich, March 2021

Richard Heinzmann

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1 The conversations between Eugen Biser and Richard Heinzmann can be watched in the media library of the German public broadcast ARD: [www.ardmediathek.de/ard/suche/Eugen%20Biser/](http://www.ardmediathek.de/ard/suche/Eugen%20Biser/).

2 Originally published in German as *Theologie der Zukunft. Eugen Biser im Gespräch mit Richard Heinzmann*. Third Edition. Darmstadt: WBG, 2010. These and further conversations between Eugen Biser and Richard Heinzmann are summarized in the book: *Zukunft des Christentums. Eugen Biser und Richard Heinzmann im Gespräch*. Darmstadt: WBG academic, 2019.

## Acknowledgment

We are very thankful that we could win Dr. Kenneth Plotnik, his competence and qualifications both as translator and theologian—he took his doctor’s degree at the Catholic theological faculty of the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universitaet Muenchen, Munich—, in order to publish this English edition of “Theologie der Zukunft.” When Dr. Plotnik had read this book, he was so convinced of this work and its importance for Christian belief and for the future of Christianity that he generously offered to take on the demanding work of a translation. The Eugen Biser Foundation feels a profound debt of appreciation and gratitude to Dr. Kenneth Plotnik.

Dr. Kenneth Plotnik is currently working on a book on adoption and hopes to publish it in 2021. The book is entitled *Adoption Today: A Time of Tremendous Possibilities*.

Munich, March 2021

Eugen Biser Foundation

I.

Eugen Biser and Richard Heinzmann

in Dialogue:

Theology for the Future



## PART 1

### 1. The Crucial Question of Today

Richard: Eugen, we intend to speak about a “new theology” in a series of conversations. Your theology is truly something new for many of us raised with the traditional theology prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). We need to prevent any possible misunderstandings by saying right away that you are not proclaiming any sort of new faith. Rather, you are seeking to understand in the light of faith and transmit to others the original message of Jesus—a message that is actually identical with Jesus himself. In drawing from the wellspring of Christianity, it is in this sense that you are offering us a “new” theology, seeing it as a comprehensive and powerful theology for the future. What then is essentially the new, the future potential of your theology?

Eugen: “New theology” is, of course, a powerful expression, an expression full of promise. I would like to summarize it by saying that a new theology should be an answer, a Christian answer, to the questions of our time. We must show how new theology can do this. We will not be following the path of modernization, but rather we will be returning to the past and reflecting about the very center, the very heart of Christianity.

The heart of Christianity consists in two factors that are most intimately interconnected: the one is what Jesus discovered about God, and the other is his Resurrection. To conclude this short description, I would like to say that this center is not a rigid center, but rather a living, pulsating one. It wants to win us over, to take us into itself, to become the center of our life. Very briefly, this is the spirit of our new theology.

R: I believe this brief description brings up a question that must be answered right away. Do we still actually need religion today? Are we still open to a reality that transcends our everyday experience? For example, there are the achievements of the natural sciences, our fascination for modern technology, the slogan about the death of God, and widespread atheism. In view of these phenomena, perhaps religion is only a stage in the development of the human race and no longer relevant. Is there really any purpose to all the work you have done in your long life as theologian, philosopher, scientist, and pastor?

E: Richard, this is a good question. First of all, let us take a look at our existential situation. I said that new theology is the attempt to give an answer to the basic questions of our time. So the first question that confronts us is simply this: what is our actual historical situation?

I believe that most of us have not yet realized that we are living in the greatest hour of human history—which is also one of the most dangerous hours of entire human history. This is the first thing we need to consider.

We are living in a time where utopias are being actualized step by step. From eons ago we have always dreamed. We dreamed of heavenly fire, of a journey to the stars. We even dreamed about creating new, artificial humans.

And now, these dreams are being fulfilled one after the other! Atomic reactors have captured the heavenly fire of Prometheus. The journey to the stars became a reality when an American astronaut landed on the moon in 1969. These are very significant phenomena of our time. When

we further consider the advances of technology, then we would have to say that we are about to reproduce our very own self! In a way, we have ceased to be a creation of God—as it was once characterized—and have become a self-creation. This is clearly a tremendous change in the entire human situation. Now, what does all this mean for religion? There is a shrewd commentator on our present situation. We actually know him in quite a different context: as the founder of psychoanalysis. He is Sigmund Freud. In 1930 Freud wrote an essay about *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in which he analyzed these themes. He stated: “We live in an hour of darkness about God, for God is dead.” That saying alluded to Friedrich Nietzsche, who cried out these words in his parable about “madmen.” In an act of self-dispossession, humans had bestowed upon God the attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and justice. Through the death of God, we have freed up these attributes and reclaimed them. We can now say that Freud was perfectly right.

Through space flight, we are sharing in God’s omnipresence. Through techniques of communication, we are sharing in God’s omniscience. And through evolution techniques, we are sharing in God’s creativity. Thereby we are now overstepping our very selves.

But we are only doing this with great difficulty, because we must get used to these qualities like crippled persons must get used to their prosthesis. In his irony, Freud says that the human being has become a “prothetic God.”

Following the lead of Ludwig Feuerbach, Freud said that these capacities were originally human capacities. Humanity was omnipotent, omnipresent, and infinitely just. Then all this was projected onto God. Through the death of God, these capacities have come back into our control, and that is how we are now going beyond ourselves.

R: Let us look more deeply at what “the death of God” means. A God who exists cannot die nor be dead. I believe that Friedrich Nietzsche did not intend to say that God does not exist. It is not a question of the existence of God, but rather a question of God’s significance for us and for our society.

E: We have a definitive statement about this from a friend of Nietzsche’s, Franz Overbeck—who incidentally preserved Nietzsche from being committed to an Italian asylum after his breakdown. Overbeck apparently knew Nietzsche better than anyone else and said: “In his sane moments, Nietzsche never meant to say that God did not exist.” Rather, he wished to say something about the role of belief in God in our society and in our modern consciousness. It is only in contemporary consciousness that God is dead.

R: You are really saying, then, that new theology is confronting our current situation.

E: Absolutely. A special task of new theology will be to convey to our contemporaries “a taste for God,” as Friedrich Schleiermacher said so poetically. This is undoubtedly our goal. But I think that we also have to clarify how a religious sense has gone out of business.

This process had a long previous history, to which our Nietzsche referred. He said that, “Since Copernicus”—and everyone knows that Copernicus made us aware of the heliocentric concept of the world—“since Copernicus, human affairs left the straight and narrow.” God was pushed to the side. This meant that God was marginalized, which led to the declaration that God was dead. History has gone downhill.

I would like to say that today we are experiencing a remarkable restructuring. This belongs to the physiognomy of our time. Our time is not only one in which there has been this change in

the natural sciences, but also a time in which human affairs have changed as well. Sociologists today maintain that consumerism is over. We have passed through a time where human affairs were so confused and where humans were regarded in a one-dimensional way.

We have woken up, perhaps because of the very difficult economic situation today. As we know, we always become awake when things go badly for us. Good times are never good for philosophy and for theology. Times of need teach us not only to pray, but also to think. That is why a new feeling for the stable things in life has come alive. Money and consumerism cannot give us security. There is only one factor that can give us complete security, and that factor is God.

R: Your task, then, is to convey knowledge of God to our contemporaries and in that way to reform society from within—a process that is of fundamental importance for the construction of a new Europe and a peaceful world.

E: Yes, indeed. A sociologist expressed this well: we live in a very promising moment, a moment in which “the death of God” is transforming itself into a new consciousness of God. As I said before, to speak about “the death of God” is not to question whether there is a God, or whether God exists. Rather, following Overbeck’s lead, the “death of God” is only a recognition that God no longer plays the central role in our world in terms of understanding and meaning—that we have shoved God out of our world.

However, we are experiencing—and I would like to stress this once again—the extraordinarily hopeful moment in which this situation is changing, and therefore it is clear that there must be a new theological reflection. This is the hour of our new theology as a theology for the future.

R: This would also mean that today’s atheism has had a long history. Now there is an extraordinary task for philosophy, theology, and Christianity. It is also clear that new theology must deal with this new situation. We cannot solve contemporary problems simply by restating old positions and formulations of belief.

E: Let us turn again to Nietzsche. The most controversial work of Nietzsche was his book Zarathustra—the best known of all his works. In this work there is a conversation between Zarathustra and the last pope. Because God is dead, the last pope says: “You are more pious than you realize—you with your disbelief. Some God in you converted you to your disbelief.” Actually, this means that faith in God is returning. God is acquiring meaning in our thinking. And it is evident that we must take up this approach theologically and develop it. This is what new theology is all about.

R: In other words, new theology has the central task of dealing with the meaning of human existence.

E: Exactly. Recently the leader of an opinions poll said that when faith in God disappears, so does the question of meaning. I have found this to be a very promising diagnosis. If we want to reawaken interest in God, we must first of all raise the question about the meaning of human life. We must seek the ways and means to help people examine the question of meaning—and how the question of meaning can truly be answered.

All this is the task of new theology. Old theology did not address the question in this way. But in our time we are experiencing the urgency to examine anew the connection between believing in God and finding meaning in life.

R: You are saying, then, that we are still raising the question about finding meaning in life today, and that this is actually a question about God.

However, before we can continue our discussion about a theology for the future, we need to address and clarify a problem that every “theo-logy”—that is every “speech about God”—considers to be of primary importance. That is, what should we understand by the word “God”?

At first glance, the answer appears to be self-evident. The word “God” belongs to everyday speech—not only in a religious context—even though it is used more and more in the negative context of “godlessness.” In its various translations, this word is found in all cultures. So it would seem that people know what they mean when they use the word God.

But when we examine this matter more closely, we see that it is not self-evident at all. Precisely because the word God is used in so many different contexts—both philosophically and theologically—we must ask what is meant by the word “God” in each case.

Generally speaking, the question of God arises from our experience of contingency. We quickly learn that all we experience—including ourselves—is finite and transitory. When we seek to discover the reason why there is finiteness, we look for a reality that transcends our world. This transcendent reality is usually called God and is used to explain the world. It is a reality that is the foundation for everything and yet depends on no foundation itself. In the Western world, this is more or less the explanation for the world we have received from Greek philosophy. Greek philosophy saw the world in its entirety as eternal, and every individual thing as contingent. The divine is the immanent ground of the world, not to be understood as a personal God. The divine is the “principle that is unmoved itself but moves everything else,” as Aristotle formulated it. And despite a sort of relative transcendence, this principle still remains within this world.

The Christian understanding of God is radically different. God is not a principle, nor is God subject to necessity. Rather, God has been revealed as an acting subject. In freedom and sovereignty, God brought the world into existence and thereby entered into a dialogue with us. Although we are finite, at the same time we are free dialogue partners with God.

These few comments indicate what is the central mystery of the Christian understanding of God, and how it differs from all the other possible ways of thinking about God. God is more than the necessary result of human reflection and is not a concept of human intellectual effort. God has revealed God’s self as love personified. This is an insight that surpasses all the insights of our human efforts.

We humans could not discover God’s self-revelation as love, but we can gain some insight into it. This happens when we try to understand the one, living God, as the personal fulfillment of life. This approach gives us access to the Trinity.

The understanding of God as a Trinity is essential for Christianity. At the same time, the doctrine of the Trinity poses a great problem. Critics would say that Christianity presents itself as a monotheistic religion, but in actuality teaches that there are three Gods. In other words, that Christianity supports a tritheism.

If we were to look at this question in only mathematical terms, then we would have to say that Christianity asks us to believe that one equals three.

One of the most difficult challenges for Christian theology is to present a teaching of the Trinity that does not contradict itself. Now, the first thing we must remember is that we can never

encompass God, not even in God's self-revelation through Jesus Christ. For Thomas Aquinas, the highest achievement of human understanding of God is the realization that God is beyond comprehension.

At the same time, this does not mean that we cannot say anything at all about God, and that agnosticism is inevitable. We are to be able to speak about God, but we must use the method of analogy. That is, we will use our experiences finiteness and of interpersonal relationships to speak about God, despite the fundamental incomprehensibility of God. In this analogical approach, the dissimilarity is always greater than the similarity. So this approach allows us to speak about a Trinitarian God without having to fear that we are presenting a full comprehension of God.

When God has made known God's self as love itself, then God cannot be thought of as a static, isolated reality. Love is a happening between two people, and therefore the one God must be thought of in a personal manner. The basic elements of personhood—knowledge, freedom, and the capacity for dialogue—must also be included when we speak about God. However, the restrictions that apply to human personhood, such as isolation, self-containment, and others, cannot be applied to God if we are to avoid the misunderstanding of tritheism.

These reflections will allow us to think about the axiomatic profession of “one God in three persons” in a way that will be free from contradictions by providing an analogical framework. The very nature of the one God is love. And love is a relatedness that is essential, not accidental. God and love are interchangeable “concepts.” Actually, they refer to the same reality. For the very nature of God is to exist in an interpersonal relatedness, while at the same time avoiding any splintering of the divine being. In its origin, this threefoldness is an inner divine happening. The one God is the Father in a personal relationship to the Son as the Word; the Word in God is a person in relationship to the Father. And the Spirit is the personal relationship between the Father and the Son.

This insight into the Trinitarian nature of the one God was achieved through the experience that God worked in history. It makes creation and redemption possible. As Father, God is the creator and lord of the world and of history. Through the Son, God enters into conversation with humanity and communicates with humanity. Finally, the Holy Spirit is God in the Spirit's creative and redeeming presence with humanity.

E: Hopefully, these broad strokes give us some idea of what the word “God” specifically means to the Christian. This understanding is the foundation for our new theology.

## 2. Old and New Theology

R: We are now speaking about your new theology. The very expression “new theology” raises a question about the “old theology?”

Christianity is over 2,000 years old. From the very beginning we have always had theology in the sense of reflection on the events of Jesus Christ. There are great theologians such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Martin Luther, and many others right up to the present. So can we really find anything new? The Church has clearly defined her beliefs in her dogmas. What is new theology then? Is it an alternative to the old theology? Is it a continuation of the old

theology? Or is it supposed to be a new beginning about something that in over 2,000 years we have not yet adequately discussed?

E: That is a question that I have often asked myself. Have not all the theological questions been answered long ago? Has not the old theology already resolved all the basic theological questions? Has not the theological enterprise all been completed? But the last possibility that you spoke about put me onto something.

I believe that a new theology is absolutely necessary, because the old theology has suffered from three deficiencies, despite all its marvelous accomplishments. First of all, it has turned the message of Jesus into a system of teachings.

But Jesus came forward with two great challenges when he said, “I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and I long for it to burn.” And then the warning: “You must not pour new wine into old wine skins; otherwise the wine will tear the wine skins, and both the wine and the wine skins will be lost.” But that is exactly what the old theology has done. This is not an accusation, but rather a fact from the history of culture.

In the triumphal march of Christianity through antiquity, the challenge was to present the Gospel to the people of the Greco-Roman world. As things stood, this could only happen in Platonic and Aristotelian ways of thinking.

Early theology found a remarkable confirmation of this in the beginning of the Gospel of John, which said, “In the beginning was the Word, the Logos.” From Heraclitus on, logos became the key word for Greek philosophy. What was more natural than to pour the wine of the Gospel into the wine-skins of these Greek thought patterns?

I would like to make two further remarks. Old theology was trapped in a world of anxiety, hatred, and violence. Despite its astonishing insights, old theology never fully caught up with the God of unconditional love revealed by Jesus. According to a key saying of Luke’s Sermon on the Mount, this God even shows love to ungrateful and wicked persons. It is now the time to catch up with the God of unconditional love. That is the chief goal of new theology.

Another important dimension was also lost. Old theology forgot that Jesus constantly was involved with all the people, especially those who were socially cast out. It also forgot that Paul clearly presented our becoming children of God as the highest calling of humanity. It seems that Greek thought saw a human being as only an example of humanity, not as a person. In this way, the message of the Gospel became an instrument for Greek thought. The wine of the Gospel was poured into the wine-skins that were already there.

R: This is exactly what happened. But there wasn’t really any other choice. We can only think in the categories that we have at our disposal. At that time it was the categories of Greek philosophy—which were starkly different from the thought forms of the Gospel.

Greek metaphysics is concerned with the essence, with what is permanent in the constant changing of things. It is a static, closed system in which history has no meaning. It sees the individual human being only as an exemplar of a species that has no individual value in itself. What is general always takes precedence over the individual.

By way of contrast, from its very beginning Christianity is a historical event and therefore can only be adequately discussed in historical categories. Necessity and determination are not basic Christian concepts. Rather individuality, personhood, and freedom are.

Ultimately, the Greek and the Judeo-Christian approaches to the world cannot be reconciled. The theologians of early Christianity could not see these problems with the clarity that distance gives us. As a result, we desperately need to correct the classical theology of the past with its misplacement of emphasis and its erroneous developments. With your new theological approach, you are making an invaluable contribution.

**E:** I agree with you. The great achievement of Christianity—already anticipated in Judaism—is that it broke with the cyclical conception of the world, a position held by the Greek philosophers of antiquity.

For antiquity, there was only one entity, the cosmos that was divine and always meant the eternal return of the same. This eternal return was mirrored in the world. Christianity, as Judaism before it, broke with this cyclical model and replaced it with a linear model. Now the world has a goal, and the world has a history. Now there is development. To express the actual message of Jesus demands other categories.

Here is a second realization. Traditional theology was preeminently an abstract theology. Again, this is not an accusation. Traditional theology had to compete with philosophy and with the emerging sciences. In the domain of the university a problem arose about the rank-ordering of the faculties. If theology was to maintain its primacy, it could do nothing other than compete. To be successful, it had to rid itself of three essential components—actually, three whole dimensions.

First of all was the pictorial. Jesus had presented his message in images and parables, because you cannot argue with the pictorial. Therefore the pictorial was thrown overboard. Next came the therapeutic component. Jesus illustrated his message by giving sight to the blind, wholeness to those stricken with palsy, and healing to the lepers.

This therapeutic element was also discarded. Finally, there was the social component. Christianity is the religion where a person achieves self-actualization. But a person can only do this in a community of others where there is language and love. Consequently the social dimension is an integral element of the Christian message. So the social dimension was also tossed away.

Earlier you referred to some of the great names in theology. We always associate theology with individuals: with Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Karl Rahner, Rudolf Bultmann, Romano Guardini. It has become very individualistic, but in that way it gained the advantage of being able to compete with the sciences and with philosophy.

**R:** We can summarize this by saying that because of external historical conditions, Christianity was unfortunately transformed from a historically-embedded religion into static concepts and therefore essentially immobilized from having an impact on the world. In other words, your new theology has the task of liberating Christianity from the theoretical system in which it has become trapped and making it life-giving once again. And that indeed is what you meant earlier about returning to the center, to the heart of Christianity. Starting from this basis we must revision theology.

**E:** You have expressed my thought perfectly. I have already said that the heart, the center of Christianity, wants to become the center of human life. This did not happen in traditional theology. I would like to develop your insight about how philosophy and theology tend to build systems. I am thinking here about the great thinker, poet, and theologian, Søren Kierkegaard. He repeatedly criticized philosophical and theological systems. He compared the builder of a system

to an architect of a great palace with high arches. But the architect had only neglected one thing: he forgot to include a place for himself and therefore had to live in a nearby barn, or even in a dog house. Accordingly, a theological system is an edifice of thoughts, but not a dwelling in which a person can find lodging, security, and personal help. Therefore, above all else the task of new theology is to be a theology that engages people.

R: And it is exactly at this point that you begin. You begin by analyzing the needs of human beings today and show how revelation gives us answers.

E: This is absolutely the chief concern of this whole undertaking. We must show how the people of today are essentially open to something greater than that offered by society. Society often violates the individual. Today it is orientated towards consumerism and accomplishments. We see this above all in the misfortune of those who do not participate in the one or the other—who neither produce nor consume.

A renowned Munich physician once told me that medical research can now cure all the acute illnesses, but cannot master the chronic illnesses. This means that the persons who are chronically ill actually carry the illness for today's society, because after they have used up their money, they can neither buy nor consume. Because of their condition they are incapable of making contributions through their careers. This then makes them feel that they are useless, meaningless members of society. This state of affairs must change!

Once again we must see people in their totality, especially the people who are suffering. It is particularly to the people who are suffering that we must show that suffering is not a catastrophe—no matter how painful it might be in certain situations—but also a great opportunity. A thinker in early Christianity—Dionysius the Areopagite—said: “God is known more through suffering than through research.” Following this thought, we can say to people who are suffering that suffering has meaning. That would be the help that new theology can offer them.

R: I am sure that we will examine these problems in greater detail later on.

### 3. System and History

R: Eugen, the traditional theology of the West is characterized by a tidy, well-constructed system. Now, each system has its own dynamic, including a certain inner compulsion. A person cannot be an authentic person in a system. Because it was a system, old theology led to many consequences that need to be remedied.

E: Richard, your remarks remind me of the title of a book: *Dogma and Compulsion*. This exactly expresses what you are saying. By way of contrast, new theology has an entirely different approach. We do not make any accusations against the old theology, but rather we seek to understand it in order to see the necessity for an alternative theology. Old theology was under the spell of a way of thinking that established an alliance between dogma and compulsion. The person who brought about this disastrous connection was one of the greatest thinkers of Christianity: Augustine.

Augustine believed that the “better people”—as he put it—could be brought to Christianity through conviction, but that the majority needed to be brought to Christianity through anxiety and

coercion. This was a terrible mistake. Contrary to the old principle that no directives could be derived from the parables, he took up the words of the master in the parable of the wedding feast: “force them to enter.” He used these words to justify the use of force against dissidents and rebels. The generations who came after him did not need to hear these words a second time. This led to the persecution of heretics, to the Albigensian war, to the Inquisition. As long as force is used or even condoned, it means that a shroud is placed over the Gospel, because force is diametrically opposed to what Jesus wanted and did.

Let us look at the situation in which Jesus lived. Jesus was confronted by a most difficult political situation. The majority of the people wanted a war of freedom against Rome because of the terrible way that the Romans were treating them. Jesus, however, knew that if such a war were to take place, not one stone would be left upon another. He wanted under all circumstances to protect the people from this catastrophe. He could only do this by promoting the principle of an absolute renunciation of force and having people understand this principle. But he was defeated in this.

**R:** Permit me to give a short explanation about Augustine. In his long life, Augustine passed through many stages. The position that you are talking about belongs to the older Augustine. The early and middle-aged Augustine said something different from the later Augustine. Unfortunately, it was the later Augustine who became authoritative for the subsequent history of the Church.

In Augustine’s later works, two central Christian elements were lost. The first is the dignity of the person: that faith must always be an act of personal freedom. The second is that no one can merit salvation from God, and salvation cannot be identified with the historical reality of the Church.

**E:** This is an important correction. I certainly do not want to diminish the greatness of Augustine through what I have just said. For example, he wrote his *Confessions*, the first great autobiographical book—that really could only come into existence because of the sayings of Jesus and the Apostle Paul. The *Confessions* have words of a truly overpowering beauty, beginning with the words: “The heart is restless until it rests in Thee” and coming to the cry: “Late have I loved Thee, ever old and ever new beauty, late have I loved Thee.” As I said, I do not want to diminish Augustine in any way. The tragedy of his life is that Augustine withdrew from these words. Under the influence of a life crisis about which we know nothing, he effected this disastrous change for the later development of the history of the Church. I believe that Augustine was responsible for placing a shroud over the Gospel through the various uses of force. We must remove this shroud and return to the center, to the heart, of Christianity.

Fundamentally, this liberation happened through the Second Vatican Council. It serves as a guide for all humanity when it stated that conflicts of a political, social, or religious kind can never be settled through force, but only through dialogue. Without doubt, this is one of the greatest accomplishments in the history of the Church, because it means that the Church has renounced the tradition of power.

Thereby the shroud has fallen off the Gospel, and we have the chance now to penetrate to the center, to the heart of the Gospel, and become aware of its meaning. This is what new theology is all about.

R: This basic impulse has many reverberations throughout the entire realm of theology. What is the most important point that you would like to pursue?

E: The most important thing is the discovery by Jesus. For me that is the true center and heart of Christianity. We have to be clear that every religion derives its reason for existence from its specific view of the mystery of God. It is its view of God that makes any religion possible at all, that gives each religion its privilege and its right to exist.

What is Christianity's specific view of God? Is this the same God whose existence is questioned by Buddhism, and is proclaimed by Judaism and Islam, or is this a new God? I certainly want to avoid misunderstandings. Naturally, there is only one God, and clearly all religions basically honor this God. But I believe that there is a fundamental difference how this God is seen, and whether this God is seen the same way in all the world religions.

For some religions, God is always an ambivalent God, a God who vacillates between goodness and sternness, between love and anger, where we never know whether God will show us God's good side or threaten us with punishment and take us to court. Jesus went beyond this concept of God, and it will be the task of new theology to show what the consequences are.

R: Many colleagues are challenging this view of yours. They believe that your view of God makes God into something relative and arbitrary. With such a God, we can do what we want with impunity. How would you reply to this?

E: I share this concern with you. I heard that there was a whole group of colleagues who spent days discussing the so-called dark side of God. They produced a book that said that the unpopular theme of God's anger must be brought into consciousness again. There is actually a strong tendency in theology today to present God as the God of punishment, of judgment, of anger, because some people take only such a God seriously. I don't think that these colleagues have thought out the implications on humanity of such a view of God.

In fact, a criticism of these colleagues is anticipated in Nietzsche's *Antichrist*. This is the most belligerent of all his writings. Nietzsche asks: "What kind of a God would that be who did not show hatred, anger, and revenge? People could ignore and forget such a God." The theologians who take this view of God are falling into the trap that Nietzsche set long ago. This is a very questionable development. And what is even more questionable is that there is a regression here into a view of God that reigned before the view presented by Jesus.

R: Nonetheless, cannot such colleagues find grounds for such a view in the Old Testament and even in the New Testament? How are we to understand the New Testament and make sense of certain passages?

E: There is a basic answer to this: the actual revelation of Christianity is not to be found in the New Testament, but is to be found in the person who gave rise to the New Testament, and that person is Christ, the son of God. According to the Gospel of John, Christ came from the heart of God to give us knowledge about God and enlighten us about God. Because he comes from the heart of God, he comes from the source of love itself, and if he has been sent to teach us, that is an act of love. When we speak with another person, we are doing it out of concern and love.

Jesus could only have presented a message about love. The New Testament is only the record of his message, the result of its reception, the result of understanding and misunderstandings. Anyone who deals with questions of the New Testament knows that the early Church took the

opportunity to put their own words into the mouth of Jesus. For this reason we have to regain the center and heart of the Gospel and bring it to light.

R: This brings us to one of your central theses about Christianity, namely that Christianity is not primarily a written religion.

#### 4. The Christian Difference

R: Traditional theology sees the New Testament as the norm-setting document of Christianity. It arose from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and is consequently inerrant. Now, how can this fact be reconciled with your view that Christianity is a written religion in only a secondary sense? Would that not reduce our scriptures into something second class?

E: In a certain way, yes! But there is something fundamental to understand here. The writings of the great religions have very different meanings. For example, some religions are basically written religions, like Islam and the Mormons. Christianity is quite different.

First of all, this matter might seem more complicated than it really is. I am saying that Christianity became a written religion only gradually. Jesus himself neither wrote anything nor commissioned anyone to write down his teachings. How, then, did Christianity come up with a sacred scripture? There are several reasons for this. First of all, there was a sacred scripture that Christians were already using—the Old Testament. Further, Christianity was embedded in the cultural milieu of Greek and Roman literature, which had produced outstanding writings. Christianity was like an oral island in a literary world. This induced a basic impulse to respond in a literary way.

Also, other circumstances came into play, which Martin Luther pointed out. He said that “writing the books was responding to a need.” That was “a great rupture,” as he said, and an “affliction of the spirit,” for the Gospel was basically an oral preaching, not a written document.

This is starkly different from Islam and the Mormons. In the Islamic legend, the archangel Gabriel appeared to Mohammed with a silk cloth in his hand, covered all over with holy signs—it was the heavenly Qu’ran. He pressed this cloth against Mohammed’s face and commanded him to read it. Mohammed said that he could not read it. The archangel pressed even harder, and the third time he commanded him in the name of the merciful and almighty God to read it. Suddenly Mohammed could read it. According to another tradition, the archangel dictated the text to Mohammed, which he then wrote down. The Qu’ran arose as a primarily written religion.

Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormons, received golden plates with the text of the holy book from the angel Mormon. This is what happens with religions that are primarily written. Christianity became a written religion only later, secondarily.

Let us consider again what Luther said about the need that led to the writing of the New Testament. What is the need? First of all, the eye witnesses who had heard the message of Jesus were dying out. They were no longer available to be asked questions about the meaning. It was absolutely necessary to safeguard the message from error, distortion, and loss.

Then there was a second necessity: the tremendously expanding missionary activity of Paul. When difficulties arose in the individual communities, Paul could not travel to them immediately. Instead, he used the most modern means of communication of his time—written

communication—and wrote them letters. So the New Testament developed from the basis of Paul's letters, as a message of a secondarily written religion.

R: You have said something very important about the nature of this writing. Usually we speak about the New Testament as the “word of God”—something we always hear in the liturgy. Yet that is simply not true! We must come to a deeper understanding of this. That is, we must read the scriptures in the light of Christ. Then we understand what Christ meant. But can the ordinary Christian read the New Testament without some guidance?

E: Indeed the ordinary Christian can. The reader only needs to make present the center of the New Testament—Jesus Christ. According to our Christian understanding, Christ is the messenger of God, indeed God become man, who took the message from the heart of the Father and passed it on to humans. I understand the New Testament to be the authentic documentation of this message. That means that in these writings, and only in them, is the authenticity of the message present. At the same time, this does not mean that there are no human implications here. For the message could only be written down as it was understood, and there is no guarantee that misunderstandings did not slip into the understanding of the early Church. To the contrary: Jesus complains again and again about the lack of understanding by his disciples. Now, if this happened to the green wood, how could matters be better in the dry wood of succeeding generations?

So here is my idea for the ordinary reader of the Bible: take Jesus as the living key for every sentence of the New Testament. This is a corrective given by the very God become man himself. Speaking scientifically, this is the original interpreter's guide. When this happens, we experience a small miracle regarding passages that previously irritated and threatened us, passages that made us feel anxiety and fear.

These passages pale into insignificance, while others are suddenly illuminated! This is also true of the passages that perhaps we almost felt to be insignificant. We now see them as the central expressions of the message of Jesus!

Kierkegaard, the Danish existentialist, once saw on the pedestal of a statue of Christ in the Marian Church in Copenhagen the words: “Come to me, all you who are weary and down-trodden, and I will refresh you.” On the one hand, Kierkegaard doubted whether this was an actual saying of Jesus. On the other hand, he was nonetheless convinced that in the quiet eloquence of the life and behavior of Jesus, nothing expressed the message of Jesus with greater clarity than those words. And on them he built his magnificent book about Jesus, *Practice in Christianity*.

R: In other words, we need to understand the inerrancy of Scripture in this framework. Any attempt to establish a Biblical fundamentalism is impossible. Now, in your discussion of Christianity you brought forward a second characterization that seems to be extraordinarily important, namely that Christianity is not an ascetic religion. In our traditional understanding, asceticism plays a central role in Christianity. What are we to make of that?

E: The same as in our discussion above. In the previous discussion we differentiated Christianity from Islam. In view of the difficult relationship to this world religion, this is a matter that must be carefully considered.

Now let us differentiate Christianity from Buddhism. Romano Guardini believed that Christianity would face a great confrontation with Buddhism. Buddhism does indeed exercise a growing attraction over many Christians. Why is that?

Many Christians who are searching for spirituality believe that the churches have locked away the great treasury of mysticism from those who are longing for it. Buddhism, on the other hand, offers people the tremendous gift of meditation. This is the main reason why Guardini saw that the debate with Buddhism would be one of the central tasks of Christianity. In the meantime, circumstances have changed significantly. The events of September 11, 2001, have pushed Islam to the fore in a way no one would have imagined. We have to find a constructive relationship to Islam despite this trauma.

But let us come back to Buddhism. Buddhism is distinguished by a daring anthropology. Buddhism wants to free us of our cravings. In its view, the root of all conflicts, all enmities and wars come from cravings. From the craving to know, to be esteemed, to have possessions; from the craving for lust and victory. So craving itself must be overcome, and that is what is reached through nirvana. The goal of Buddhist meditation is a condition of absolute loss of consciousness and desires. When a person reaches that goal, the person ceases to be someone who is aggressive. This is undoubtedly a daring attempt to solve the problems between humans.

Christian asceticism follows a very different strategy. This strategy does not wish to suppress human drives and passions, but exactly the opposite: to concentrate all strivings and energies towards achieving the goal of the Gospel and to push aside all the obstacles. This is the cathartic meaning of Christian asceticism, which is the exact opposite of Buddhism.

**R:** In the history of Christianity, however, asceticism was often not practiced in this way. In fact, at times it contributed even to some form of self-destruction.

You also said that Christianity is not a moral religion. This sounds very provocative! But then you add that Christianity has a morality. This casts a whole new light upon Christianity in the context of speaking about Christianity as a religion.

**E:** This is undoubtedly true. However, a differentiation about morality is necessary, especially in regard to Judaism. Judaism is a genuinely moral religion. God placed divine law into the hand of Judaism, so to speak. Judaism has the honor of being called upon to contemplate God's law night and day in order to find ever new directives. For Judaism, law is central, whereas for Christianity it is secondary.

If we consider what Christianity actually emphasizes, it is mysticism. Karl Rahner concluded the great work of his lifetime by saying, "The Christian of the future will either be a mystic, or will not be at all."

Christianity is not a moral religion, but rather a mystical religion. At the same time, Christianity does have a morality, but the irony here is that Christianity does not know what its true morality is. Christianity practices a morality of withdrawal, but not of immunization—which should be its true morality. We need something that will actually make us incapable of thinking and wanting evil. When we are clear about this, then we really understand the role of morality in Christianity.

## 5. The Relationship of the World Religions to Each Other

**R:** The relationship of religions to each other is one of the most tricky and controversial problems of theology today. Where does Christianity fit in here? There are three basic positions. One is inclusiveness: the conviction that Christianity includes everything. This idea goes back to Karl Rahner and his idea of the “anonymous Christian.” Another position is that of exclusiveness and maintains the exact opposite. It excludes all the other religions and leaves no place for discussion. Then finally we have the third position, the pluralistic religious theory, which holds that all religions are more or less of equal value. Now what position do you hold on the relationships of the world religions to each other?

**E:** Our answer comes from the Second Vatican Council and its principle of dialogue. This principle invites all the world religions to enter into dialogue. In the context of dialogue, then, let us examine the three positions: that Christianity includes the other religions; or that Christianity excludes the others—which makes dialogue impossible; or that basically all the religions are the same and therefore no dialogue is necessary. Let us examine each position carefully.

I want to begin by examining Buddhism again, which is a primarily ascetical religion that attracts many people to it. Christians and the Buddhists have a major difference in their understanding of asceticism. Christianity sees asceticism as only a helpful means and never as an end in itself.

In this regard, Christianity is a therapeutic religion, not an ascetical one. Buddhism practically makes asceticism an end in itself. For Christianity, on the other hand, asceticism is a means to help humans achieve their highest goal. Buddhist asceticism ends in nirvana, whereas Christian asceticism helps us become a child of God. What is involved here is a magnificent concept of a Christian anthropology that is too often neglected. Nietzsche can actually help us here, because at the beginning of his *Zarathustra* he makes it clear that being a child does not mean infantilism, but rather it has to do with full personal self-identification.

**R:** If Buddhism basically strives for the dissolution of personal identity, can this approach be reconciled in any way with Christianity, seeing that Christianity is concerned with the concrete, individual human person, and not with humanity in general?

**E:** Naturally this is one of the central problems. I believe that the reason why Christianity has had such little success in a Buddhist, Asiatic culture is because we find two basic concepts of human beings diametrically opposed. Buddhism strives to dissolve and extinguish human identity, whereas Christianity strives to elevate and optimize it. Nonetheless, there is something that makes an encounter possible—mysticism. Christianity has to do with the gaining of one’s identity. This is a liberation from one’s self-limitations. Christianity says, “I no longer live, but rather Christ lives in me.” This really means a breakthrough into self identity whereby “God’s sense of self” helps the indwelling Christ in us to become predominant. Here we find a point of contact with the Buddhist forms of meditation inasmuch as this has to do with the achievement of the Buddha-being.

**R:** Perhaps we could also think of it in this way. In Christian understanding it is not so much a question of humans reclaiming their individuality but rather of their coming into the completion of their individuality. Personal identity forms the center of Christianity. Regarding Buddhism,

I believe we must be reserved in our discussions of such religions because we know too little about what Buddhism really and truly believes. I think that our Western way of thinking erects barriers against a full understanding.

E: I agree with you. Here in the West we have developed analytic thinking to a very high degree. But such a development also entails the loss of the trans-rational forms of empathy and other forms of connectedness. Here is where parapsychology has a role to play, something that is highly cultivated in the Asiatic world. Perhaps the current fascination with Buddhism is a longing for these lost forms of perception. Although the field of parapsychology is still quite undeveloped in the West, nonetheless it could be here that we could initiate an encounter between Christian and Asiatic thought.

R: What are we to say about the monotheistic, non-Christian religions?

E: My view is that in regard to Judaism and also in a certain respect in regard to Islam, Christianity is not a moralistic, but rather a mystical religion. For Judaism, God is first of all the law-giver who has revealed the divine will in the gift of the law found in the decalogue. It is the privilege of the Jew to constantly find deeper insights and directives in this law.

Christianity, in contrast, has a different concept of morality. Morality in Christianity does indeed have norms and directives, laws and commandments. But no less a person than Paul realized that “if I had not known the law, I would also not have known the inclination to transgress it.” This is why a morality based on laws and commandments has only a limited effect.

Paul saw a whole different approach to morality. This approach is to establish in us a principle that would make us incapable of wanting and doing evil. This is the principle of love, or, as Augustine said, “Love and do what you want.” With this principle, we want to only support and help others.

And here we see that Christianity is basically a mystical religion. In the Christian view, love is not an idea, but rather a person, namely the person of the founder. In comparison to the other religions, its founder is not someone who has faded away, but rather a “life-giving spirit,” as Paul said, “who is living on in the hearts of his own.” His love impels us towards the good. As the Munich fundamental theologian Gottlieb Soehngen said, this teaching about Christ living on in the hearts of his own followers must be revitalized today.

R: I am certain that we will have time to speak about this later on. For now, we must say something about Islam. How do you theologially conceive of Islam’s relationship to Christianity?

E: First of all, Islam had an extremely polemical relationship with Christianity. As we know, Islam began its triumphal march as a religion of the sword and tore away massive territories from Christianity. But if we penetrate more deeply into the world of ideas of Islam, we see that it basically is not a religion of the sword, but rather—as the name itself declares—a religion of peace, even though it began its triumphal march as a religion of the sword. Above all, it is a religion of the book. Therefore, the “people of the book,” as Mohammed designated the Jews and Christians, experienced a certain toleration in Islam. Here is a natural starting point, of course.

Recent circumstances have changed the relationship to Islam so that now it is one of extreme tension. Islam has been demonized, and whoever follows this direction will sooner or later throw

the world into a catastrophe. Islam has approximately one billion loyal members and sympathizers. For this reason we must develop a relationship of dialogue with Islam, no matter how difficult it is.

We must consider another factor: in relationship to Christianity: the religion of Islam is about 600 years younger. The stage it is at now, if we are to use the language of developmental psychology, is that of adolescence. In human life it is customary for youth to be carried away and to relate to others in a polemical way. Islam is still in this phase.

What is lacking in Islam is something that Christianity brought forward, much to its harm but also greatly to its benefit: the Enlightenment. Therefore I believe that it is essential in the dialogue with Islam to see if we can help Islam achieve its own Enlightenment. If this were to happen, then perhaps we will be able to clarify matters that up till today are still very controversial. Then Islam would come to see, for example, that the Qu'ran is still a human work and cannot be anything other than that, despite the belief that it fell from heaven and was given by God.

Through the Enlightenment, Christianity came to a better understanding of its own scriptures, including the writings of the New Testament. This also has to happen in Islam. Then we would have a relationship of dialogue characterized by peacefulness. This is the goal.

**R:** In order to avoid any misunderstandings, we must say in conclusion that all the questions we have considered here do not touch on the question of the salvation of the human individual. This means that even if Christianity were to assume some type of primacy in its self-understanding, this does not mean that non-Christians would be excluded from salvation.

**E:** Christian faith firmly believes that God's self-revelation is an act of love. And love is never exclusive. In human life it may focus very strongly on an individual, but it always includes everyone, and above all else, it excludes no one. God's self-revelation addresses itself to the whole world. Therefore, Christian revelation directs itself to all of humankind and to each individual. This is something we must understand if we are going to come to a constructive relationship to the world religions.

## 6. The Resurrection as the Axis and Hinge of Christianity

**R:** I can agree with you that Christianity is a written religion in only a secondary sense. The next question then is what is the prime mover, the real origin and impetus for Christianity to become a written religion. I don't believe that the mere historical actuality of Jesus of Nazareth is sufficient to explain this.

**E:** You are right. Because the most well-known fact about the life of Jesus is that his death on the cross was what the Romans called "the most wretched kind of death." Only slaves and traitors were crucified. This terrible death made it seem that Christ's mission had ended in complete failure. In addition, in the view of the Old Testament, Christ would seem to be accursed, because there is a sentence in the Old Testament that says, "Accursed is anyone who hangs on wood." In every respect—politically, spiritually, and religiously—Jesus appeared to be completely defeated. Unless something extraordinarily dramatic were to happen, there is no way that Christianity could have achieved its present meaning. There is no one who would have accepted

the thoughts, ideas, teachings, and directives of someone so totally destroyed. Much less any reason to collect and produce the writings of the Gospel.

A tremendous impetus would have to happen, and that was the Resurrection. Shortly after the death of Jesus, men and women appeared with the unbelievable message: “I have seen the Lord!” So, he did not remain dead. He is alive! He is right here among us! This naturally led to a complete change in perspective. The one who appeared to be defeated was actually undefeated. Rather, in some mysterious way he had experienced his greatest triumph on the cross. The one who had appeared to be cursed by God was in no way accursed. To the contrary, as Paul said, God has given him “a name that is above all other names, so that in the name of Jesus, every knee should bend in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that he is the lord.” That had enormous repercussions. Now, everything that people had experienced about him had the utmost meaning. That is how the collections of his words and teachings came about. Among them were the sources of what was known as the Gospel of Sayings, which led to our Gospels.

The exegete James M. Robinson expressed this very clearly when he said that this Gospel of Sayings should be considered the literary miracle of Easter. This means that when we hold the New Testament in our hands, we have the literary verification of the fact that Jesus has arisen. For had there been no Resurrection, that book would never have come into existence.

I believe that this has enormous repercussions. That is to say, the New Testament is impregnated with the Resurrection of Jesus. Even those things that seem to belong to the everyday world are secretly illuminated by the light of Easter. This is especially pertinent for the events of the life of Jesus, and particularly for Jesus’s discovery of God.

**R:** You have now explained how the Resurrection caused the Gospels to be written. At the same time, the Resurrection has always posed tremendous difficulties to our human way of thinking—so much so that there are countless theories about this. Perhaps we could reduce all this to a single sentence: he lives. Would this not express the decisive factor?

**E:** I would say yes. For everything that the Easter story expresses is a description of the fact of the Resurrection. This in turn means that in contrast to all the other founders of religions, Jesus did not sink into oblivion, he is not someone who has gone away and is absent. Rather, he is someone who is living in his community of believers and is even present to the whole world. The Resurrection of Jesus actually can be contained in this one sentence: The one who died on the cross is still living, and is living on in his own.

**R:** This gives us a whole new perspective on the life of Jesus, especially on the stories of his childhood and the Incarnation—his becoming man. What do these events look like in the light of the Resurrection?

**E:** As I have just now explained, we must see everything in the light of the Resurrection: the angels of Bethlehem and the light that shone about them. The basic thoughts about the stories of Christ’s childhood and the virginity of Mary must be seen as a consequence of the Resurrection of Jesus.

The Resurrection of Jesus casts its light backwards on the motherhood of Mary. Consequently, her virginity is not a physiological expression, but rather—as the Graz theologian Karl-Matthaeus Woschitz said—it is a title of dignity. This also applies to all the achievements of Jesus. We now need to see what these achievements mean, because this is the core of Christianity.

In other words, this is the very core of the New Testament. This is what new theology must reconstruct and bring to light. As we said earlier, for a long time Christianity believed in violence. But violence is diametrically opposed to how Jesus lived, what he wanted and did. He is the Incarnation of non-violence, if we can express it this way.

So long as the Church uses power or approves it, the heart of Christianity remains hidden. But at the Second Vatican Council, the Church changed all this. She renounced force in all its manifestations and established dialogue as the principle of engagement and debate. We now have an entirely new situation. Now we can return to the heart of the Gospel. We can ask what this heart wants to say? What does this heart consist of? This brings us to what Jesus revealed about God.

**R:** This means that if we do not hold fast to the Resurrection, there can be no Christianity. Therefore the attempt to marginalize the Resurrection or even dispense with it altogether is the same as renouncing Christianity.

**E:** I fully agree with you. I believe it is truly disastrous for our faith that in many theological circles the Resurrection has been marginalized. There is a belief that we could have known everything essential about Jesus even without the Resurrection. I have tried to say earlier that this is completely impossible. I want to reiterate that if Christ had not arisen, no one would have paid the slightest attention to the teachings of a man who had been a complete failure and even cursed by God. The Resurrection is the essential condition, the only clear and decisive reason why there is a Christianity at all! So let us consider what the Resurrection tells us about the life of Jesus. That is, how Jesus saw God.

**R:** The way that Jesus saw God is the central difference from all other religions. I believe that this understanding of God evolved in the life of Jesus. It only reached its culmination in his death.

**E:** I understand it the same way. First of all, we must take seriously the Christian principle that Christ is “true God and true man.” In every true human being there is a development of consciousness. To be truly human is to discover who we are, and we learn about ourselves through questions and doubts.

If we look at the life of Jesus without preconceptions, if we look at the life of Jesus the way the Gospel portrays it, we find this to be absolutely true. Christ had questions, he had doubts. He even had doubts about his own identity. That is what led him to ask his disciples: “Who do you think I am?” We have the magnificent scene in the Gospel of Matthew where Peter plucks up his courage and says to him, “You are Christ, the son of the living God!” Jesus hears this joyfully and says, “Blessed are you, Simon bar Jonas, because flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but rather my father in heaven.” He is now hearing the voice of God from the mouth of a friend, a voice he had already heard at his Baptism: “You are my beloved son.” The story of Jesus’s life involves disruptions, questions, and doubts until it comes to the definitive revelation which reaches its climax only in his death. This is why we must reflect on the death of Jesus ever anew.

**R:** This theme helps make clear the difference between traditional theology and your approach. You are taking a fresh approach here, basing it on the relationship of Jesus to his father, the living God, as presented in the New Testament. Classical dogmatics, however, uses concepts. It speaks about the “hypostatic union.” This is a concept which means that the human nature of Jesus has been taken up into the unity of the second divine person so that the one divine person

of the Logos possesses both the divine and the human nature. And even when we express this in our own language, we cannot understand it nor communicate it without a precise understanding of the underlying concepts of Greek metaphysics.

This is a cogent example of the necessity of replacing the categories of traditional dogma so that we can reflect on the reality here and express it in a language that we can understand.

**E:** In one of Paul's letters we find a pertinent expression dealing with Christ's preexistence. There Paul explains to the community at Corinth: "We have only one God, through whom and for whom everything exists; and we have only one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom everything exists and through whom we also exist." (1 Cor. 8:6) The Pauline school then added this thought: "Everything has been created in him, the visible and the invisible, angels, powers, and dominions. Everything has been created for and through him and has its being in him." Basically this is what the idea of the hypostatic union means, and clearly it would be a great help to make this dogma understandable in a new way.

**R:** You have placed great emphasis on the humanity of Jesus Christ. To understand his humanity properly, we must examine what it actually means to be a human being. I think that this will open up an avenue to understanding the mystery of Christ.

## 7. Human Being, Where Are You?

**R:** Christianity is a religion of revelation. However, there is no such thing as mere revelation, because revelation always addresses a hearer. To speak about revelation, then, is to speak about human beings. Words that are spoken but not received are not really words at all. At best they are only sounds. Consequently, at this point in our discussions we must ask the question: what precisely is a human being? It is no accident that you have placed the human being as the central focus of your life's work.

At the same time, if I ask the question about what a human being is, this actually implies an erroneous choice: for I am asking this question in the spirit of Greek philosophy and in a thought mode that is not compatible with the foundational realities of Christianity. What I must actually ask is who is a human being? And you would sharpen this question even more and ask: where is the human being?

**E:** You have a good reason for saying this. First of all, I agree with your view that in Christianity every sentence about God also says something about the human being. Both belong together. The communicator and the person addressed by the communicator form a unity. Let us examine this particular question.

For 2,500 years the question has been: "What is a human being?" You then instantly added that according to my approach, this is not the proper way to pose this question. However, at the same time I want to do justice to this way of asking the question. In a very significant way, this question begins with the myth of Oedipus. Oedipus comes to the City of Thebes—later to become the city of his kingdom—and on the outskirts of the city the sphinx is lying in wait. The sphinx addresses the same question to everyone, and if the passerby fails to answer the question, the sphinx throws the passerby into a chasm—which is filled with the bones of all the failures.

The question is “What is this? In the morning it goes on four legs, at noon on two, and in the evening on three.” Only Oedipus knows the answer. It is a human being. In the morning it crawls on all fours, at noon it walks on two legs, and in the evening it needs a cane and walks on three legs. The sphinx becomes so upset by this answer that it throws itself into the chasm, and the road to Thebes is free.

The question: “What is a human being” is a question about the unalterable nature of a human being. All theological speculation took this path of inquiry up to Immanuel Kant. Kant examined all the great questions about the possibility of human knowledge—such as “What can I know,” “What may I hope?” “What should I do?” In one of his late works he then concluded that all these questions could be contained in one question: “What is a human being?” So we can see what a huge range this question covers.

Kant was a philosopher who was not particularly musical. So if we bring in music here and all the other expressions of the inner life of human beings, we always find the same question: “What is a human being?” All the accomplishments of philosophy, ethics, literature, and art are basically ever new attempts to answer this question. But today the human being has been tried as never before—for example, by the two world wars and the two horrible dictatorships that tried to change the very nature of human consciousness. That is why this classical question is no longer adequate.

**R:** From its very beginning, philosophy has asked the question about the nature of human existence. However, the Judeo-Christian way of thinking has developed an understanding of human existence that is not so much concerned with human existence in general but rather with the individual human being, the person. It was reflection on the Trinity, on the Trinitarian God, that led to the first understandings of the concept of a person. Then this concept was later enlisted to express the singularity of a human being.

It was Thomas Aquinas who finally formulated the Christian understanding of a human being into the philosophical concept of a person. He then opposed Greek essentialism with Christian personalism. A human being is not simply an example of human existence, but rather a unique mode of being. This way of being human has broad implications for the actions of a person, because even a conscience that subjectively errs must be followed. The human being is a moral subject and must never be compelled to act from external motivation. We must always keep in mind this specifically Christian understanding of human existence because this understanding is greatly threatened today.

**E:** Obviously this development is of tremendous importance, and the very concept of person developed from a study of the relationships within the Trinity. It is surely one of the greatest achievements in the history of culture that a concept developed in thinking about God then became the key to understanding human existence itself. We should never forget this, because this is one of the greatest achievements in the history of Christian philosophy and theology.

And now I want to return to my thought of how human beings are being tested today so that we can no longer speak about humanity in general. Why is this so? It is especially the case because classical anthropology did not take into consideration the historical condition of human beings. That human existence unfolds within history, that all of us are bound together within history and are affected by it—most often as suffering participants but nonetheless as participants—this was

always assumed to be the case but was never proven. Now my anthropology can demonstrate that each human being has its own history.

Let us reconsider the more exact posing of our question, that is, “Where are you?” The Old Testament contains this question, a question thoroughly examined by Jewish commentators. It is, of course, the question that God posed to our ancestors after they had sinned and had hidden under the trees in the garden. God calls to them: “Where are you?” At first this seems to be merely a harmless question about physical location. But later commentators take it further, especially Buber and Rosenzweig. For them, much more is involved here. It is a question of human self-consciousness.

The Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola explored this question. He has the creator say to Adam, “I have not assigned any particular living space to you, for you can live where you want. I have also not given any specific form to you, because you can choose the form that you want. You can elevate yourself to the heights of divinity, or you can let yourself sink to the depths of bestiality.” This is the history we humans share.

The Jewish thinkers whom I mentioned above have explored this theme for its meaning and cogency, and they are thinkers who believe in the principle of dialogue. In fact, “dialogue” is the slogan adopted by the Second Vatican Council to characterize all relationships by Christians. The Council saw in the “where-question” the conceptual approach to exploring human affairs.

I have already spoken about the two possibilities for humans. On the one hand, we can raise ourselves to the heights of divinity. Christianity has a concept for this height when it says that we are called to be children of God. On the other hand, we can sink to the depths of bestiality, as Pico della Mirandola described it. I would express it as self-dispossession, self-alienation, and finally self-destruction. This is what the dictators can exploit when they make up their minds to manipulate us in our very core.

This is the way in which human history unfolds. We can elevate ourselves. We can ennoble ourselves and strive to achieve what I describe as the core of the entire life of culture, the pursuit of personal self-actualization. We can unfold and expand and achieve the very best in us. We can set free in ourselves our lofty possibilities and talents and thereby fully actualize our inchoate personhood. But we can also do the exact opposite. We can let ourselves sink down, choose the path of least resistance, howl with the wolves, drift along with the masses, let ourselves be guided by the media and propaganda about what we should do. In this case we find ourselves in a state of alienation. All this is meant to show that we humans belong to a world of history, because we have our own personal history.

**R:** I have already pointed out that a great part of the philosophical work of your life has been to elucidate human existence. I think that it has become clear that the way we humans understand our lives is of utmost importance. But what if Christian theology has not understood human existence or even pushed us into a wrong direction?

**E:** Above all, we must realize that through Christianity we are not simply “disciplined” but rather are elevated above our natural condition. At the end of the New Testament we read: “See what great love the Father has for us, that we are not only called children of God, but are so.”

Christianity must always have in mind the highest goal we can achieve. Now it is true that often the exact opposite has happened. We have been told that we must humiliate ourselves. This

presents the Gospel's demand for self-denial in a completely wrong way. The purpose of self-denial is to make room for the one who lives in us. This is naturally very different from a self-destructive form of self-denial. Here is an area where we must revision these matters. This will have enormous consequences for our entire system of education as well as individual self-actualization.

Christianity must expect more of us than it has done so in the past, simply because God expects more of us. God wants us to be partners whom God can address as children and we can address as father. With this we encounter once again the revelation of God that Jesus has given us, that is contained in one word. The great, revolutionary act of Jesus was that he addressed God as "father." At this point, someone might raise the objection that we find the same thing in many of the Indian religions and especially in many high religions, including Judaism. My answer to this objection is that when two of anything seem to do the same thing, it is not actually the same thing, and when two seem to say the same thing, it is not actually the same thing. When Jesus says "father" to God, this is actually a break-through into a whole new relationship to God, a relationship never before imagined, much less realized.

R: Eugen, I find these reflections very interesting.

## 8. Sin and Death

R: For Christian faith, the human being is not merely an exemplar of the species "human," but rather is a person. The person is in a direct, responsible relationship to God. You have written a work entitled: *The Human Being—the Unfulfilled Promise (Der Mensch—das uneingelöste Versprechen)*. This book argues that for a proper understanding of human beings we need to bring in the dimension of salvation history.

You describe how we human beings are living in a realm of possibilities, where we can develop from an inchoate person into an actualized person; but that at the same time we can sink back into the lowest level of personal existence. Actually, we are now considering not only the historical character of human existence, but also the question of sin and the conditions underlying the possibility to sin.

E: I completely agree with you. Yes, I do see a human being as a creature of possibilities, embedded in a world of possibilities. One of these is the possible elevation of our human nature that can only be achieved with the help of God. There is also the exact opposite possibility of lowering ourselves and sinking—a sinking that plunges down far below. It is in this world of possibilities that human history unfolds.

Classical anthropology never dealt with the fact that human beings are creatures who are oriented to history, who are intertwined with history. Not only in the history of salvation, but also in the history of the world. This fact of being embedded in history means that each one of us has an individual history. In this history there is a chronicler. I regard the chronicler as one's conscience.

Most often we think of a moral conscience. This is the conscience that chides us when we become disheartened, and that praises us when we do something good. But we have other forms of

conscience as well, for example an aesthetic and an intellectual conscience. We have special words for this. In regard to the person who has a special ability to distinguish between art and kitsch, we say that such a person has good taste. We are actually referring to a form of conscience. Then there is the person who is not misled by propaganda and doesn't go the way of the masses. We say that such a person has good judgment. Again, we are referring to a form of conscience.

I will now go a step further and say that these three forms of conscience—the moral, intellectual, and aesthetical—emerge from a more fundamental form, which I call the “existence conscience.” The “existence conscience” does not judge about good or evil, about truth or deceit, about art or kitsch. Rather, it judges about the way and the manner in which we relate to our own self—whether we realize our better possibilities, whether we cultivate ourselves, whether we develop from inchoate persons into actualized persons. Or whether we neglect ourselves, whether we go along with the masses, whether we choose the path of least resistance and thereby betray ourselves. Here is where the existence conscience passes judgments. Naturally this form of conscience has a special affinity with a moral conscience. Now, what bearing does this have on evil and sin?

**R:** In other words, the existence conscience is something dynamic, not static, something entirely connected to a subject and therefore cannot be objectified. It should be from this perspective that we consider the moral conscience.

**E:** The moral conscience is particularly problematic when people give themselves over to the power of evil and become evil themselves. This poses a fundamental question to every anthropology because it reveals a disturbing fact that constantly confronts us. That is, on the one hand, we are called to make positive contributions, to engage constructively in the cultural and economic life of the world. On the other hand, some of us do the exact opposite: we deceive others and bring them misfortune. Now, how does a person become evil? This is the ancient question that still has not been answered.

But there actually is an answer to this question, one that has acquired preeminent status in the Christian realm. It goes back to Paul and his Epistle to the Romans, where he refers to death as the wages of sin. The idea here is that humans are deeply evil, evil because we have all descended from Adam. Adam has sinned, and in him all of us have sinned. All of us are caught up in his sin and have been punished for this sin with death.

**R:** You are now referring to the notion of original sin. This is the Christian answer usually given to the question about the origin of evil. The method used here is a theological variation of etiology. It is an attempt to trace a present experience back to its ultimate cause.

Augustine considered the passage you have just cited and developed from it the theological proposition about original sin. According to his thesis, all humans sinned in Adam. Through sexual reproduction Adam's nature is passed on to his descendants. For this reason all humans are sinners.

Despite how mightily Augustine wrestled with this problem, his view is erroneous. For a necessary component of sin is free choice, and this is directly related to personal choice. Sin can never be inherited. Augustine knew this as well. He explicitly stated that without willing it freely, no one sins. If this is the case, how could he nonetheless propose his teaching about original sin?

The reason he could was because he was thinking according to Platonic metaphysics, and he overlooked the crucial Christian element. He agreed with Platonism that the species itself is above any individual so that whatever affects the species by that very fact affects each individual. This led to the conclusion that all humans sin in Adam, because they are individual exemplars of the species “human.” This way of thinking intended to safeguard the justice of God. All humans have sinned in Adam, in him they have all deserved eternal death, and God would be justified in condemning everyone. Therefore, St. Augustine is able to see humanity as the *massa damnata*, the vast number of people consigned to hell. However, because God is not only just but also merciful, for unknown reasons God has also destined a few for blessedness. This is a whole new topic. Not the condemnation of the many, but rather the salvation of the few requires an explanation.

With this very un-Christian response to the problem of evil, Augustine perverted the view of God in the New Testament. He turned the God of unconditional love into an arbitrary God who spreads horror. This is an image of God that has tremendously damaged our human development throughout the centuries. It still continues right up to the present through Martin Luther and especially John Calvin. This is an extremely negative tradition opposed to the very meaning of the Christian message. It shows the great need for your new theology to find a powerful place in Christian consciousness. And now let’s return to our problem. Can we find a way out of this hopeless situation of contradictory views?

**E:** Surprisingly, we find the solution in Paul. It is true that Paul was responsible for saying the fateful words that “death is the wages of sin.” But in his correspondence with the community in Corinth, he says the exact opposite, and says it emphatically. “Death,” he asks, “where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?” Then he adds the very important thought: “The sting of death is sin.” He has suddenly turned everything around. Death is no longer the punishment for sin, but rather sin is a consequence of death. In this Pauline context, death appears to be a driver with a whip in his hand that drives people to sin. Here Paul is explaining the sinfulness of humans in such a way that he safeguards their freedom.

Our task now is to elaborate this. This quickly leads to the insight that human life has something thoroughly unacceptable about it: namely the fact that we must die. This is something we hide from again and again. In fact, our civilization today has developed to a fine art the ability to deny death. However, this does not change the actuality. Our situation is like the Grimm Brothers fairy-tale about brother death. If we drive him out of the front door, he sneaks back in by the back door. We cannot suppress death. It is the ultimate confrontation of human existence and challenge to it. And now back to our question. What does death have to do with evil? What led Paul to say that death impels us to evil?

**R:** And then there is a further complication. That humans are finite is a given. In other words, evil ultimately goes back to God, because God created humankind. God cannot create a second God. When God creates anything, it must be finite. This is the basic situation for all humankind, and as you say, this is the root of the problem we are considering.

**E:** Exactly. This is the core of the so-called theodicy problem. God can only create a world that is relative, circumscribed, conditional. This sounds harmless enough, but the conditionality of our existence becomes dramatically conscious to us under the pressure of knowing that one day we must die. This is a fact that we can never fully come to grips with. We experience an

inner protest against this. And as a reaction to it, we become evil. Looking at history for a moment, we find that there have always been murderers. If we think about the psychology of the murderer, we find that when people realize that they have to die, they develop a sadistic tendency to take along as many people as possible into death with them. Now this mechanism also has a milder form whereby people deceive, cheat, harm, and hate others. In other words, people do evil things to others. All this is nothing less than the attempt to draw others into your own death. People who hate others actually want to wipe them out. Biblically speaking they are “murderers” (1 Jn. 3:15). This should be our starting point as we are searching for an alternative. And where do we find it?

In the great concert of world religions, there is only one religion that has been able to give an answer, and that is the religion in whose very heart there is the thought of overcoming death. This is the religion that is centered in the Resurrection of Jesus as its axis and hinge. It is only here that we can find a true overcoming of death.

**R:** This further means that death is also the root of all the possible anxieties that confront us. If this perspective is correct, then we can characterize Christianity as the religion that overcomes anxieties.

**E:** Absolutely, Richard! Christianity is the religion that overcomes anxiety. Especially when we see the relationship of anxiety to death. And there is a manifest connection, because death has a brother, who is sleep. And it has an even more terrifying sister, who is anxiety. This means that the problem of overcoming death is intimately related to the problem of overcoming anxiety. New theology has the central task of showing how Christianity is the religion that overcomes anxiety.

## 9. Overcoming Anxiety

**R:** When we think about the human condition, Eugen, we quickly realize that we must die, that we are finite. Death introduces anxiety, which has repercussions for our entire life. How does new theology approach this?

**E:** If new theology is to amount to anything at all, then it must respond to the problem of death and anxiety. Christianity must first show itself to be the religion that overcomes death, and then secondly that it overcomes anxiety, because anxiety is the harbinger of death.

When we experience deep anxiety, we feel as if we are sinking into a bottomless pit, and this is nothing else than a premonition of death. At the same time, we tend to erect two powerful defenses against these two basic feelings. That is, we not only live in a time when we try to deny death, but we also live in a time when we try to ignore our anxieties. This is bad enough, but Christianity has added to this misery.

First of all, I want to agree again with all the cultural critics who say that we are living in an age of anxiety. As the philosopher Karl Jaspers says, this is an existential anxiety of unprecedented proportions that has become a sinister companion of contemporary life. Poets of the caliber of Werner Bergengruen and Gertrud von le Fort and a thinker of the caliber of Martin Heidegger have emphatically stressed this.

I spoke a moment ago of how Christianity has added to this misery. What most Christians experience in Christianity is a religion that does not overcome anxiety, but rather a religion that increases anxiety. Indeed, for hundreds of years the churches have tried to discipline us and get us to accept their message through playing on our fears of sin, the devil, and hell. There is a disturbing book by the Zwinglian pastor, Oskar Pfister, a friend of Sigmund Freud, entitled *Christianity and Fear*. This book argues that all the Christian confessions agree on one point, no matter how much they might differ in dogmatic and cultural questions. They agree on trying to make us feel anxious. Then we will become obedient and subject ourselves to the commands and demands of the Church. However, this strategy no longer works today. Young people no longer take it seriously, not like their elders who were traumatized through this kind of pedagogy.

Now let us examine whether Christianity generates anxiety, or whether new theology is accurate in saying that Christianity is the religion that overcomes anxiety. Let us begin by considering the range of anxieties. There are anxieties about not belonging, about being isolated, about ecology, society, religion, life. Let us now go a step further and see if there is root anxiety that causes us the deepest suffering. What I see is that there are three fundamental anxieties. The first is the human anxiety in regard to God. Even atheists are not immune from this, because they are also searching for an ultimate orientation, an ultimate support, wherever they may find it. This is the first of the basic anxieties. The second is the anxiety in dealing with other human beings, that is, social anxiety. And the third is the most terrible of all: it is anxiety about one's very self, anxiety about one's existence. When we consider anxiety in this way, then we can see that Christianity can enter here and overcome anxiety.

R: This reflection on the contemporary situation is actually establishing a criterion for evaluating the different religions and their messages—a criterion of the Christian understanding of God, freed from all the damages of a dysfunctional development.

E: Absolutely, Richard. And here we have the possibility of overcoming these basic anxieties. The great difference of Christianity from other religions, no matter how much they may all share in common, is that Christianity presents a God who is not ambivalent. That is, not a God who at times loves and then threatens and punishes, but rather a God of unconditional love.

I am completely convinced that this God of unconditional love is a God that Jesus was the first to discover and proclaim in his preaching. This God of unconditional love cannot be feared. This understanding of God removes from our soul the deepest of all the anxieties, the anxiety about God. When we take hold of this God in faith, then we no longer have any reason to fear God. Therefore we are free of our deepest anxiety.

R: But, Eugen, is this God of unconditional love not in danger of becoming an indifferent God that allows us to say that nothing really matters because God is taking care of everything?

E: This is an objection raised by a new generation of theologians: that a God who is love is a God not to be taken seriously, a God who tolerates everything, and therefore a God who can be forgotten. Such thinkers fail to realize something that I have pointed out to them, and something that Nietzsche wrote about in his *Antichrist*. That is, they fail to realize that what they are actually saying is that only a God of hatred and revenge can be taken seriously.

Actually, a God of love is a tremendous challenge to us. We are torn between self-seeking and flight from self. In such a state of brokenness, we feel more at home with an arbitrary God

who vacillates between goodness and threats than with a God of unconditional love. The God of unconditional love affects us like a blinding light, like a “consuming fire” that gives everything of itself, even to the offering of God’s son. Such a God expects and demands that we love this God with all our heart, our life, and our spirit.

The contrary argumentation completely misses this. That is, the basic demand is to give God what God gives you. You should love such a God with your whole heart, your whole soul, your whole being, and your whole spirit. This is such a terrifying demand that it can almost overwhelm us. At the same time, there is a solution here, a solution that leads us into the deep dimensions of Christianity. The solution is that this God that makes such a terrifying demand on us actually fulfills it for us. God loves God in us.

**R:** Can we say then, that overcoming the distorted image of God also entails the overcoming of the other two anxieties you have spoken about?

**E:** Yes indeed. The second anxiety involves the commandment that we should love our neighbor as ourself. Our neighbor is the partner we need in order to live, to have the capacity for speech, to be able to experience the good fortune of love, to be able to exist as humans at all. Yet life experience shows us that we even distance ourselves from the people we love most. We hold onto a last piece of distancing because we somewhere fear that the beloved partner of today in the long or short term might be transformed into its hated opposite. When we look at the history of human relationships, especially at marriage, this fear is all too real.

But let us see what the Gospel says about this and what the great Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard, said about this. He said that the commandment that we should love our neighbor as we love ourselves must be re-translated. That is, rather than loving our neighbor in the way we love ourselves, we should love our neighbor as if our neighbor were our own self. We must realize that our own fate is bound up with the fate of the other. When we accept the other, we accept ourself. Just as when we reject the other and abandon the other, we abandon ourself. Therefore, the love of God is also the healing of our relationship to our partner, to our neighbor.

**R:** And now we come to the final step, the problem that we do not and cannot fully trust ourselves.

**E:** Precisely. We humans are so broken that we cannot be sure of ourselves in areas that have to do with health, intellect, and especially morality. Circumstances may arise that will defeat all our best intentions. Therefore we have anxiety about our own selves, the most terrible of all anxieties. All of our ideas up to now would be as futile as a house built on sand if we could not find some healing here based on the Gospel. And it is exactly here that I see the most beautiful of all possibilities to free ourselves of this anxiety: it is the gift of being a child of God.

It is a thought that the New Testament celebrates at the end when the First Epistle of John exhorts us: “See how great the love of the Father is for us, that we are not only called children of God but also are children.” When we have the experience of being led to this highest goal of human life through the love of the Father, then no matter how weak we are, how tempted we are, how impoverished we are, we nonetheless feel that we have been led to the heart of God and can find the solid point of our existence there.

This kind of existence outshines any of our negativity or disturbance. Consequently, in order to overcome anxiety, it is absolutely imperative that we rediscover and proclaim the theme of

being a child of God. This is the therapy for the third and most terrifying of all the anxieties. If this happens, then Christianity will indeed be seen as the religion that overcomes anxiety.

R: It is amazing how the theme of our being a child of God is not in the forefront of current theology. This state of affairs is a symptom of how Christianity has been alienated from its own identity. And it is precisely here that new theology must make a decisive contribution.

## 10. Jesus as the Son of God

R: Eugen, the New Testament tells us that the real goal of Christian existence is to become a child of God. At the same time, we call Jesus the “son of God.” To speak about ourselves as the “children of God,” we must first of all speak about how Jesus is the son of God.

To understand how Jesus is the son of God is at the very heart of Christian reflection. Over the centuries, tracts on this theme have filled entire libraries. All these tracts have one thing in common: they can only be understood by specialists. Can new theology present this mystery in a way that it is not only theologically sound but is also comprehensible to someone who is not a theologian?

E: Yes, Richard, that is a central task of new theology. I would say that being a child of God calls us both to examine how Jesus is the son of God and how Jesus’s divine sonship is passed on to us.

Over a hundred years ago, the great theologian William Wrede said that Jesus gives up his divine sonship and becomes a poor human like us so that we can become sons of God, the way that he is. Wrede believes that to become a child of God is to receive the divine sonship of Jesus. But this brings up a huge problem: how are we to understand the divine sonship of Jesus in the light of new theology. How did Jesus come to understand that he was the son of God?

A great strength of new theology is that it takes the humanity of Jesus seriously. For as a human, Jesus must regain all that he had from eternity, according to Christian dogma. Jesus had a human consciousness like ours, a consciousness that must ask questions and can have doubts. We must always keep this in mind when we speak about how Jesus realized his divine sonship.

R: The traditional view is that even in his childhood Jesus knew what his mission was. Your approach means saying goodbye to this traditional view and entertaining a new understanding of this problem.

E: Absolutely. We must incorporate anthropology into Christology. We must understand Jesus in his humanity. The traditional understanding believed that Jesus knew everything even in childhood. It believed that this understanding was confirmed in a very simple way by the Gospel—although when we look more closely at this view, it does not hold up. This old view was that when Jesus was baptized he heard a voice from heaven: “You are my beloved son, whom I have chosen.” Many theologians thought that this resolved the problem. Jesus had a vision, and this vision came with spoken words. Jesus heard something, and indeed they were the most wonderful words ever spoken to a human: “You are my beloved son.” But this whole approach has a snag.

R: How do we know that?

**E:** According to the oldest reports, Jesus is the only one who heard this heavenly voice, and there is no way that he would have repeated the words he heard to his disciples. Consequently, this apparently so straight-forward explanation simply does not apply. But one thing is certain: the idea of Jesus's divine sonship runs throughout the entire Gospel.

First of all, a divine voice says this. But even the satanic interlocutor concedes that he knows about Jesus's divine sonship when, in his attempt to derail the mission of Jesus, he says, "If you are the son of God, command that this stone becomes bread, cast yourself down below!" This continues into the trial of Jesus, where a human interlocutor asks, "Are you the Christ, the son of the living God?"

Above all we have the tremendous scene in which Jesus has lost faith in his own mission and identity, and in this heartfelt crisis turns to his disciples and asks: "But who do you say I am?" Peter takes heart and answers, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." Jesus reacts enthusiastically: "Blessed are you, Simon bar Jonas, because flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my father in heaven." This means: the voice from heaven has spoken to Jesus anew. This is the unbroken song that is heard throughout the Gospel. Yet in view of the traditional understanding of Christ's sonship, we must ask anew how we understand all this in terms of the development of Christ's consciousness.

**R:** And again we must remind ourselves that all these words were written in the light of the Resurrection. They are kerygmatic texts, proclamation texts, and not a literal biography.

**E:** We cannot stress enough that if Jesus had not arisen from the dead, there would be no Gospel. No one would have had any interest in the teachings of someone who had been executed on a cross. Only the Resurrection explains the origin of the Gospel. All the sayings in the Gospel are to be seen in the light of Easter.

This explains why the thought of Christ's divine sonship plays such a great role. We need only think about the beginning of Paul's Epistle to the Romans where he says: "He was shown to be the son of God by being raised from the dead through power." We have the task of understanding this more deeply.

I would like to say again that the life of Jesus is actually more dramatic than it normally is presented. I spoke a moment ago about the hour of crisis in the life of Jesus. That was his reaction to being abandoned by the masses. In the beginning, there was great success. People surged towards him. They even accompanied him unto the plain, forgetting about eating and drinking. Then the masses abandoned him.

Jesus now stands alone and asks himself: who am I really? And from a certain point on, as the Gospel of Luke says so clearly, Jesus becomes aware of the nature of his death. With great determination and awareness he walks towards Jerusalem, even though he knows: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem you murder the prophets and stone those who are sent to you. How often have I wanted to gather your children around me like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you did not want it." He is now going to the city that will bring him death.

I want to elaborate on this, something that must be at the center of new theology. On the way to his death, Jesus's relationship to death radically changes. Otherwise it would be the path of a suicidal victim. In fact, there is a biography of Jesus by Jack Miles that says exactly this. But it is impossible to accept such a view. No, Jesus's relationship to death must have changed

significantly. Naturally, death is first of all for him what it is for every human being: the unavoidable fate, the great challenge at the end of life and therefore a fate sent to him by God. But we have come to realize that Jesus no longer experienced death as fate and disaster, but rather as meaning and task. If we can accept this approach, then we have a solution.

Death for him is first of all the real goal of his entire life. We could say that, contrary to our human expectations, Jesus crowned his life's work not through some grandiose act, but rather through his passion, through his suffering and dying. His image of God certainly changed in this period. God was not the one who imposed death on him as fate, but rather the one who presented death to him as a task.

God is no longer for him the lord of life and death, but rather a father inviting him into his house of love. I see here Jesus's breakthrough to his thinking about the fatherhood of God and the way that he expresses it by calling upon God as "Abba, father!" And likewise I see here the awakening of Jesus to an awareness of his divine sonship: for if God is the father, then he is the son.

R: The entire development has two sides: the one is his relationship to God, and the other is his coming to know himself. In this process he becomes aware of his task, which culminates in death and reaches its true goal in the Resurrection.

E: Yes, it is interesting that one of the greatest thinkers of the late middle ages, Nicholas of Cusa, realized this. He sees all of revelation as a voice sounding throughout the history of the world. This voice first sounds in the hearts of humans. Then God calls this voice into history through the mouths of the prophets. In the last of the prophets, John the Baptist, it becomes the voice of someone crying in the wilderness. Then, after it becomes man in Jesus, it goes through a whole range of different modulations until it cries out in the death cry of the crucified one.

The whole picture of revelation changes and also our understanding of the work of Jesus. Death is no longer a passive experience that confronts him, but rather a deed through which he crowns his life's work.

R: And now I must come back to our starting point. What does it mean to be the son of God? All of our concepts come from the world of our experience, and they cannot be directly applied to this relationship. They can be applied only analogously—to express this technically. What does all this mean?

E: It means that Jesus has a unique relationship to God that our human terminology can only express in the image of father and son. But perhaps we can express it more precisely. Jesus transcends the creaturely relationship to God and wins a genealogical relationship. God does not cease to be his creator, but God also becomes something entirely new for him: his father. Now Jesus has an entirely new relationship.

I must quickly add, or course, that this approach does not exclude the dogma of Jesus's preexistence, according to which he was the son of God from eternity. Here we are simply taking the humanity of Jesus seriously. Dogmatically speaking, in terms of his human development, he had to regain that which he had possessed from all eternity. This is the view of new theology about the divine sonship of Jesus—which is also the precondition of our being children of God.

R: In other words, we are trying to express in contemporary categories the same thing that other epochs expressed with the language available to them.

## PART 2

### 1. Jesus—Son of Man and Son of God

R: At this point, we have another very important question: how did Jesus communicate his message to us?

E: This is a central question, and we now have a sort of key to his whole work. We spoke about the divine sonship of Jesus, and how his entire work is to extend continually this divine sonship to us. This is the central message of new theology. We have generally looked at the work of Jesus in terms of redemption, and this should in no way be contested. But now we are looking at Jesus's work in another, more convincing way: that his life's work is directed at conveying his divine sonship to us. The only question is how he can do this. What means is he able to use?

It should be obvious that Jesus cannot come forward and say: "I am the son of God." In his Jewish culture that kind of claim would only be seen as blasphemy. He has to find some middle ground that will allow him to communicate to people what he is in a way that they will understand. He finds this middle ground in the prophetic tradition, particularly the vision of the son of man in the Book of Daniel (Dan. 7:14). There the people of Israel are represented by the heavenly figure of the son of man, who is brought before the throne of God and commissioned by God to bring about the kingdom of God. I believe that Jesus recognized himself as this heavenly figure in the incident reported in the Gospel of John (Jn. 1:51). Jesus then knew that he had the task of bringing about the kingdom of God. He also knew that he had found the middle ground. Through his self-designation as the "son of man," he had found what he needed to transmit his divine sonship to people.

R: May I briefly interject a question of method? Would this mean that the historical Jesus knew that he had this task but did not yet realize that he was the son of God?

E: This is a very important question, and one that is difficult to decide.

R: But would this be possible?

E: What has priority? He designates himself again and again as the son of man. Certainly many of these designations as the son of man were attributed to him afterwards, but some of them are the genuine words of Jesus. And now we have your question: what has priority—his understanding that he is the son of God or his understanding that he is the son of man. I do not venture a decision, but I could imagine that Jesus came to both of these insights within a relatively short time of each other. In any case, with the concept of "the kingdom of God" he now possesses the vocabulary with which to express himself.

This is also the conviction of one of the greatest theologians of Christianity: Origen of Alexandria. He was perhaps the first one to raise the question of what Jesus meant when he constantly spoke about the kingdom of God. Origen's answer was "self-kingdom"—that is, that Jesus himself was the kingdom of God, he was the kingdom of God in person.

In the meantime, Jesus had to break through a second barrier. One day the Pharisees came to Jesus and said: "You are always talking about the kingdom of God. Show it to us!" And Jesus replied: "This is impossible, because it does not come in visible form. You cannot say: 'It is here

or there.’” This means that people cannot place the kingdom of God within the coordinates of time and place, “for it is in the midst of you.” He has an incredible task, for he has to speak about something that cannot be defined within the coordinates of time and place but is among and in the midst of people. New theology sees Jesus as someone who creatively changes language. Too often we make the mistake of seeing Jesus only as a figure in the history of religion and too often forget that he was very energetic in refashioning the life of the world. He figures prominently in both social history and the history of language. One of his greatest contributions to the history of language is his creation of the parables.

Now, when we explore the parables, we see that basically they all have a single job to do. It is a task that the Gospel of Mark summarizes when it has Jesus come forward and say: “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the Good News!” Jesus must communicate his message of repentance to people so that they will repent.

A few examples will make clear that the parables have this goal. Let us look at the parable of the sower who went out to sow his seed. We can imagine people saying to the sower: “You are having a run of bad luck. Some of your seed is falling by the wayside, other seed is falling on stony ground, and other seed is falling among the thistles and thorns. Why not simply give up!” However, despite our advice, the sower continues with his work and reaps a great reward: “And it brought forth fruit, thirty fold, sixty fold, a hundred fold.” When read in this way, this parable encourages us to not give up, but to persevere despite all setbacks, all disappointments, all frustrations. Jesus needs such people.

**R:** We can certainly see here how impossible it would be to turn the parables into concepts. The attempt to understand Christianity through Greek philosophy was doomed from the start.

**E:** That is why it is not possible to get teachings or moral directives from the parables. In the history of Christianity we have sad examples of where people tried to convert the parables into directives. An example of this is St. Augustine. He took the words about “force them to enter!” from the parable of the Great Feast as justification for the Church to use force. But let us return to the parables and their intention.

One of the most important is the parable about the workers in the vineyard. We easily identify with the workers who feel mistreated. In the evening they feel frustrated and disappointed because they are put on the same basis as the workers who have only worked one hour.

We always feel justified in thinking that a lot of work deserves a lot of pay, and less work deserves less pay. But in this parable of Jesus, the workers who have worked only one hour are made equal to those who can truthfully say: “We have borne the unbearable heat and burden of the day.” But the spokesperson for these workers is dealt with peremptorily: “Friend, did I not agree with you about a denarius? Take your pay and go! Can I not do with my money whatever I want, or are you envious because I am generous?” This parable literally breaks our ruler for measuring justice and injustice. Here we have repentance.

There are at least two parables that go a step further and therefore are particularly dear to me. They are the parable about the vineyard keeper who pleads, and the parable about the lord who serves.

The master of a vineyard comes to the vineyard keeper and tells him to cut down and throw into the fire a fig tree that is clearly unfruitful because it has not produced any fruit for three years.

But the vineyard keeper pleads: “Lord, leave it still. I will dig up the soil around it and put in fertilizer. Perhaps that way it will bear fruit.” This is a pleading for a hopeless case, because the vineyard keeper certainly knows that the tree is unfruitful. But he has an almost symbiotic relationship to this tree and will do everything in his power to save it. So, who does something like this? The answer: only Jesus.

The other parable is perhaps even more eloquent. The master comes back in the evening. He had commanded his servants to be watchful. And there they stand with burning lamps in their hands to receive him. He is so moved that he girds himself and invites them to the table to serve them. Because of his great joy over the faithfulness of the servants he exchanges the role of the master for the role of a slave. Who does something like this? The answer: only Jesus. The Gospel of Mark adds this very telling sentence: “The son of man did not come to be served, but to serve.” This thought is in the background of this subtle parable.

Now we can go a step further and ask the question: with what does Jesus serve us? The only real answer is this: with himself! As Paul says, he is the great gift of God, whom God gives us and in whom God gives us of God’s very self. All the parables pivot around this axis. Expressed very simply, they are parables of the divine sonship of Jesus that has been given us as a gift.

**R:** Let us now go a bit further and speak about the miracles, because in their own way they have the same function as the parables: they are a proclamation of the kingdom of God.

**E:** Precisely! There is even a scene in which Jesus confirms the insight you have just presented. He is verbally attacked by opponents who say that he is in league with Satan. He answers them: “But if I drive out demons with the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has already come to you.” This means that the miracles are “action proclamations;” that is, these are actions that proclaim that the kingdom of God is here.

Jesus does not only enjoy a mastery of a “verbal language” in words and pictures, but also a “performance” language, a language of action. Whenever he performs miracles—when he gives speech to the dumb and sight to the blind, and heals the lepers—then these are all signs that God has taken the world into God’s hands and that the world is now in a condition to renew everything. In the language of Jesus, this means “the kingdom of God.”

## 2. Miracles and Death of Jesus

**R:** We have briefly discussed the literary genre of the parables. The phenomenon of the miracles reported in the New Testament also belongs here. But the first question we ask is whether the New Testament presents miracles or simply stories about miracles. What are we to understand precisely with the miracles?

**E:** These are two very different questions. The first one touches on the connection between the preaching of Jesus with the miracles. There can be no doubt that Jesus was a miracle worker. The only question is this: what do the miracles have to do with his preaching?

At first there appears to be a huge chasm between these two worlds. But in reality the two of them belong most closely together. In contrast to us, Jesus has at his disposal not only the verbal speech that his contemporaries found so powerful (Mk. 1:22), but also an “action” speech. It was

his miracles. The miracles presented to everyone, but especially to those who were healed, that God was ready to take away the misery and suffering of the world, and that the kingdom of God was really coming.

The second question you raised touches on the historicity of the miracles. What are we to make of them? Are the miracles historical facts? Once again we must say that there is no doubt that Jesus was a miracle worker. However, we must differentiate among the miracles. There are miracles of healing, and undoubtedly they stand at the forefront in the question of the historicity. But there are also attributed miracles and symbolic actions. I would like to talk briefly about these three forms.

Foremost among the miracles of healing are the miracles that are the hardest for us to understand—the driving out of demons. But we have to realize that in those times there were no mental institutions, and that Jesus’s environment was full of mentally disturbed people. Now, because he saw himself as a helper of people, he intervened. We have to assume that Jesus had an incredible power of suggestibility at his disposal. And this meant that the “possessed person”—today we would say the “mentally ill person”—found healing in his presence.

A spectacular example of this is Mary Magdalene. The Gospel of Luke says that Jesus drove seven demons out of her, so she must have been very disturbed. By following him, she became healed and became one of the most faithful of his followers and disciples. We have proof of that in seeing her with the other women standing under the cross and knowing that the first Easter appearance was made to her, in contrast to Peter. Yes, the driving out of demons is a very important part of his activity.

**R:** In this context I want to come back to something. It is well known that at that time, in both the Hellenistic and Jewish realm there were many miracle workers. The most well known is Apollonius of Tyana (died 97 A.D.) We find the same stories about them, at times even the same structure. How do these miracles differ from those of Jesus? What makes those of Jesus so singular?

**E:** The miracles of Jesus are never his own actions. The theologian Ernst Fuchs, who was the successor of Rudolf Bultmann in Marburg, says that Jesus dared to act in the name of God. This is the great difference between the other miracle workers. Miracle workers like Apollonius of Tyana or Simon the Magician worked their miracles in their own name and trusting in their own power. Jesus, on the other hand, works only through God, so that God’s power may be visible in his works.

**R:** This does not mean any change in the historicity, only in terms of the power granted to him.

**E:** That is correct. But there is even a second possibility which we see when Jesus gives the power to others to work miracles. This is the case with the troubled woman who comes to Jesus because of her mentally disturbed daughter. After a moving conversation, Jesus says to her: “Woman, great is your faith. May it happen to you as you have wished.” In this case, Jesus hands over to the petitioner the miraculous power given to him by God so that she can herself heal her daughter from her suffering. In terms of historicity, Jesus certainly healed the mentally disturbed, gave sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. In fact, he even healed lepers.

Now, there are two further categories of miracles to which I referred earlier: the attributed miracles and the symbolic actions.

Many of the miracle stories of the Gospel play upon Old Testament accounts. The New Testament thinkers wanted to show Jesus as the one who fulfilled the Old Testament. In this category we have the miracles of the feedings, as Moses and Elijah did, or the walking of Jesus on the lake—which alluded to the passage over the sea wrought by Yahweh, the God of the covenant. Here Old Testament motives are attributed to Jesus.

And then we also have the third category, the symbolic actions. We often hear strange stories about the Old Testament prophets. They intended to show in a visual manner what these prophets had proclaimed or threatened. Such symbolic actions are also reported about Jesus, and I believe that the miracle of the feeding belongs in this category. For in this symbolic event the accent is placed not so much upon the miraculous event as upon its meaning. After this feeding event, Jesus gave the meaning of it in the great “bread speech” in the synagogue of Capernaum with the words: “I am the bread of life.”

Something similar applies to the cursing of the fig tree. This was a very dramatic way to show that Israel was in danger of losing its salvation and that it would be condemned as a sterile tree. And the most important of these signs is the meaning of his own death at the Last Supper.

And now I would like to speak about something else that seems very important to me. According to Reginald H. Fuller, the stories of the miracles have the tendency to point to Jesus. They are not intended to be read as reports about specific events so much as to place Jesus in a new perspective. This means, then, that the stories about the miracles in the Gospel tend to portray Jesus himself as the great miracle of God. I believe that this is a perspective that we really need to develop, because Jesus is so often portrayed as a model to imitate. We hardly pay attention to the fact that in the history between God and humans, he is really the miracle.

**R:** Many miracles, then, are less concerned about the objective happening than about the one who performs the miracles. They are actually Christological statements.

**E:** I would like to elaborate on this. Because if this is the case, then suddenly we see a connection between miracles and faith. We read in Goethe: “A miracle is faith’s beloved child.” But we can also turn this expression around and say: “Faith is the most beautiful fruit of a miracle.” If this is correct, that is, if Jesus is himself the greatest miracle of God, then he is the bodily proof of the truth of his preaching. In him the kingdom of God has come close to us and his appearance awakens faith.

**R:** Surprisingly this brings us to consider what the death of Jesus means, because this stands in the greatest contrast to what we have been considering about him and about the statements that have been made about him right up to the present.

**E:** Just as the casting out of evil spirits is the most attested event of the miracle working of Jesus, so is his death the most attested event of his life. This means that here we have a very sharp break between what he did, how he was experienced, and what he suffered. In the words of the ancient historians, Jesus suffered “the most wretched death on the cross.” This seems like a complete annihilation of all that he wanted, did, and brought to people. This means that the cross first of all seems to be the most forceful negation of all his life and life’s work. We cannot reflect too much upon this.

From the very beginning, the early community reflected on this, for it was faced with the problem that Friedrich Nietzsche posed most clearly when he asked, “Who was that? What was

that? Why exactly in this way?" The last question especially pained the early community, because it had to ask itself why they had had him for so short a time. Two, or at most, two-and-a-half years. And then this terrible ending, an ending for him that no one would have thought of. Why did he have to suffer that? This enormous pressure to understand his death and the meaning of his death weighed heavily upon the early community and demanded an answer from them

R: The mere death of Jesus as such expresses nothing at all. We need criteria to explain this historically established death. This is a very important task for theology, including your new theology.

### 3. The Death of Jesus—A Sacrifice?

R: In the history of theology, the death of Christ has been understood as a sacrifice. This is a theory that has been seen as self-evident. But you have convincingly shown us that Jesus revealed God as a father of unconditional love. I think that we have to consider the death of Jesus in the light of how Jesus understood God to be.

E: This is undoubtedly the case. The view of the death of Jesus as a sacrificial death runs throughout the entire history of Christianity. We find it in all the nooks and crannies of the New Testament.

But nonetheless, it stands in sharpest contrast to the way that Jesus came to understand God. For a God of unconditional love will not be appeased through sacrifice. In fact, God does not want any sacrifice at all. "I want love, not sacrifice," says the prophet Hosea (Hos. 6:6). Jesus takes this completely to heart and places it at the center of his preaching. That is why we have to think this question anew.

R: Now, how did this thinking about sacrifice win such a high place in the New Testament after it had already been abandoned in the Old Testament? It has such a high place that contemporary theology sees this view as something not to be challenged.

E: First of all, we have to understand what the thinking about God was at that time. Jesus and his disciples lived in an atmosphere in which it seemed completely self-evident that sacrifices had to be offered to God.

Israel had an extremely stark consciousness of sin. Therefore, every day in the Temple of Jerusalem there were sacrifices and burnt offerings to atone for the people. The thought behind this was that God was a God of punishment and revenge who had to be propitiated. The New Testament arose in this atmosphere. Therefore it was a tremendous innovation when a whole different understanding came into being.

How in fact did it happen that the death of Jesus was understood as a sacrificial death and is still widely understood this way today?

I think there is a very meaningful clue in the beginning of the pericope about Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles, where it says that a great number of priests joined the early community. As Nietzsche was to put it later on, the early community was weighed down by the question of why Jesus had to suffer such an early and terrible death. In the midst of this anguishing questioning, along come priests who had been performing the sacrifices in Jerusalem. They bring

the “liberating” answer by saying, “What all our offerings could not do, that is what the death of Jesus on the cross has achieved, provided it is understood as a sacrificial death.”

This argument seems unchallengeable. For Judaism had a view of a God who was ambivalent, vacillating between solace and terror. This view is in sharp contrast to Jesus’s view of God.

**R:** We see once again that God’s self-revelation could only take place in the horizon, the categories, and the imaginative possibilities of that time. Even the New Testament—that is not to be identified with revelation but does contain it—lags behind the original view of Jesus.

**E:** There have been other things as well. The spirit has moved on in history. For example, Kant has taught us that a human being must be regarded as having its own purpose and therefore can never be instrumentalized. If this is true of us in our totality, then it is especially true of Jesus in the most decisive hour of his life, in the hour of his death.

The death of a person can never be subjected to an external purpose, and this is also true of the death of Jesus. It would lose its worth if it were to be instrumentalized, as happened in the satisfaction theory. This is what Kant’s categorical imperative has taught us, even though he dismissed it as “compassionate sentimentality and affected humanity.”

**R:** Does this mean that Kant is a thinker who contributes to Christian theology?

**E:** Well, why not? If he has discovered something that is important for understanding ourselves, then we should accept it. This is even more relevant, because it is helping us to a paradigmatic change in a central matter of faith. Speaking concretely, it applies to a new understanding of the death of Jesus.

Further, here is something very important. If Jesus had to die as a sacrificial offering and it was something demanded by God, then he surely would have given us some indication of this in his talks. On the one hand, there are some indications that point out how he understood his death. The most important ones are the prophecies about his suffering.

But in all these statements, even when they go into detail, he gives us absolutely no indication of why he had to suffer and die. In view of his early death, he would certainly have had to give some understanding to his disciples. However, he did not do that, so it seems he did not feel it was necessary. Therefore, the theory of sacrifice and atonement has no foundation.

**R:** This brings us back to our earlier discussions about the humanity of Jesus. Death belongs to human life as a constitutive element. Therefore it belongs to the humanity of Jesus. Consequently, his death cannot be instrumentalized.

**E:** This is the decisive argument for our critique of the sacrificial theory that has been regarded as almost self-evident. Bach presents this sacrificial view in his *St. Matthew Passion*, where it says: “How wonderful is this punishment! The good shepherd suffers for his sheep. The master, the just one, pays the debt of his servants.” Quite clearly this flows from the misunderstanding of the death of Jesus.

To repeat, his death must not be instrumentalized. It has nothing to do with paying off the sinful debt of the world. This in no way means that Jesus did not take on the sin of the world. To the contrary, that was his great act. But he did this not through his bloody death on the cross, but in his whole life’s work, for his aim was to draw humans out of the swamp of sin and lead them into an existence similar to the divine. This is what the notion of our status as the children of God expresses.

**R:** Your critique of the sacrificial death theory actually does away with the satisfaction theory. That theory was one of the worst developments in Western theology—even though it is almost universally taught today. Let us briefly summarize this theory.

It goes back to Anselm of Canterbury. But we should not blame him for what later generations did with his theory. His thought, because it is so sophisticated, cannot be elaborated here in all its fullness. Anselm sought to express the Christian notion of salvation in the framework of formal, juridical Germanic thinking about law. In this thinking, the debt of a deed is not measured according to the status of the doer of a deed, but rather according to the status of the person offended by the deed.

Whoever sins, injures God and destroys the lawful order. There is an unconditional demand to make it good again, to atone, but at the same time, it is impossible, because the infinite God must be given infinite satisfaction. No human can do this. Therefore, God must become man so that God can be reconciled with humans through Jesus, who is both God and man. This is the underlying thought of the satisfaction theory.

**E:** This has been the prevailing theory. Yet, there is a weakness in it, namely in the artificiality of its construction, as you have already said. For in this theory, a human may offend God infinitely, while all the attempts of atonement by all humans taken together can never amount to sufficient satisfaction. From this point of view, God has to stand on our side. God must become human in order to bring about sufficient atonement for our sins.

Even apart from the artificiality of this approach, the underlying assumptions stand on shaky ground. That is why we must question this theory and search for the true meaning of Jesus's death. I am convinced that we are standing here before an important change of thought. The wide acceptance of this satisfaction theory affects the consciousness of the Church and is present in many forms of expression, in the liturgy and even in Christian art, as I have said earlier.

We find this satisfaction theory again and again. But it contradicts the manifest concept that Jesus has of God, which is his great discovery. We spoke about this at the very beginning of our discussion. A God of unconditional love does not need sacrifices, and desires no sacrifices. Our God wants “compassion and love,” as Hosea said. Jesus accepted what God really wanted, and this is attested by his life and death. So, is there an alternative understanding of the death of Jesus? Are we allowed to see this differently, even though this is a theory that has lasted almost two thousand years? This is a question that we must engage energetically.

**R:** Yes, indeed. It is a central question of your new theological approach. Let us answer an obvious objection that we encounter right away: is your new theology still faithful to the tradition of our two-thousand-year-old Christian culture?

Well, let us answer this question by recalling something of fundamental importance. Christianity has always been a historical religion, for humans are agents in history. All reflection on Christianity is subject to the laws of historical development. It must be possible for us to revision Christianity today in the light of our new realizations. Otherwise, Christianity will have nothing more to say to today's world.

**E:** Christianity is always in a process of self-actualization. We should not imagine that two thousand years are enough time to express all that has been given to us and revealed in the Incarnation, in the mission of the son of God, in his work and suffering in this world. We are always

in the process of gaining deeper insights into the revelation of God that Jesus has given us, for we have greater possibilities now.

Certainly a new understanding of the death of Jesus belongs here. The meaning of Christ's death on the cross has been imprisoned in the satisfaction theory. We must free it from this prison and elucidate its true meaning.

R: In this process we will realize that Christianity never comes to a final point in its reflection on this reality. In every new epoch, new people must reflect on this reality with their new thought forms.

#### 4. A New Understanding of the Death of Jesus

R: New theology has practically destroyed the almost unquestioned theory that the death of Jesus is a sacrificial death. But there is no purpose in destroying anything unless you have something better to put in its place. What can you say to this, Eugen?

E: New theology certainly intends to present a new understanding here, Richard. Let us consider the way in which Jesus experienced and understood his death. The Gospel of Luke shows us that Jesus very clearly set out for Jerusalem with his death in mind. Jerusalem was the place where all the prophets had been murdered, and Jesus knew that a bloody end awaited him too. Looking at this superficially, we could almost say that this was the path of a suicidal person consciously choosing death. But we certainly cannot assume that here. To the contrary. On this path, Jesus's relationship to death, to God, and to himself must have radically changed.

First of all, death is a fate given him by God. He does not choose this path as a suicidal person. Rather, a fundamental change in his understanding of death has taken place: death is no longer a tragedy for him, but rather an accomplishment, a task. Let us look at the greater context here. We are accustomed to see the work of a lifetime crowned by a spectacular deed. We expect persons who have achieved something great to achieve something even greater at the end of their lives.

For Jesus it is the exact opposite. He crowned the work of his life through suffering and death. Death has a whole different meaning for him. He understands it as a task given him by God. This is a change in both his relationship to God and to himself. God is no longer the Lord over life and death, someone who has assigned him death as a task and as a disaster. Rather, God is the one who has entrusted him to death. In this way God becomes for him the father who invites him to return to the home of the father. He sees himself as God's beloved son.

Consequently, we can no longer conceive of death as an atonement for sin, in the way that almost all of Christian history has seen it. Rather, we must learn to see it with the eyes of Jesus. We learn this from Jesus's understanding of his death. We spoke earlier about sign deeds through which Jesus clarified his message and, even more importantly, himself as a sign given by God.

Jesus worked such a sign deed shortly before his death at the Last Supper, according to the reports of the three synoptics, and especially Paul. The oldest account says: "In the night in which he was betrayed, he took bread, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: 'Take and eat this. This is my body.'" As we know, Jesus spoke Aramaic, and in Aramaic body is the same as person. What Jesus's words really mean is "Take this and eat it, this is who I am for you." Further, "body"

does not mean what we mean in the West where we differentiate between body and soul. For the Semites, and especially for the Jews, body and soul formed a unity. Therefore, when he says: "Take this and eat it, this is who I am for you," he means the totality of his existence.

When we fully realize this, we find an astonishing meaning of the death of Jesus. He gives up the individual aspect of himself so that he can live on in his disciples as food, that is, as the essence of life. This is the new understanding of the death of Jesus. Understood in this way, the death of Jesus is the passage from his earthly life to a new way of working in history.

There is another important element here. The death of Jesus cannot be considered in itself alone, but rather as inseparably joined to the event of his Resurrection. In this way, it is the Resurrection of Jesus that gives the authentic interpretation of Jesus's death. It is God who clarified the meaning of the death of Jesus. God does not let the dying man sink into annihilation; rather, God takes him into the fullness of God's life. Clearly there is no longer any talk here about death as atonement or sacrifice. Rather, death is the passage from Jesus's historical life in the world into Jesus's working now in history.

**R:** In line with this thought, we can say that not only for Jesus, but also for all of us, death and Resurrection are one event considered from two different points of view. In the Church year they follow one another, but that is only to elucidate each aspect more fully. Maybe this also is the answer to another question that you pose: from what, and into what has Jesus arisen?

**E:** From what? He has arisen from the dead. Here death serves to verify that he actually died. As you know, in the West there has recently been a spate of ludicrous books about Jesus asserting that he did not truly die. That he was taken down from the cross while only apparently dead and then revitalized by his disciples so that he could quickly show himself to a great number of people. And afterwards he was supposed to have settled down in Rome or somewhere near Kashmir. Some of the newer publications repeatedly challenge the death of Jesus.

It is very important to know that he really did die on the cross. In fact, his death on the cross is the most attested fact of his entire life. His Resurrection is inseparably bound up with his death.

Now we have the question: into what has Jesus arisen. We cannot fully deal with that matter in the short space allotted to us. Because here we find a whole new dimension, the dimension of mysticism. The death of Jesus on the cross is a deed. It is the crowning deed of his life. This challenges our normal way of thinking, because we so often think of death as something completely passive, as annihilation.

Conceiving of death as a crowning deed is incredibly difficult for us. But we must wrestle with this. The Gospel of John points the way here. At the beginning of the story of the passion, John says: "Having loved his own, he loved them to the very end." This sentence contains the realization that the death of Jesus was not only a deed, but moreover even a deed of love.

In his death, Jesus definitively revealed himself as the one who entered into the world as the embodiment of God's love for the world, and all his work was to initiate humanity into the love of God. This was a new understanding of the love of God that he spoke about not only in words but also supported them with his miracles. Behind his words and his miracles stood the God he had discovered as "a father of mercy and God of all solace."

When he laid his healing hand on a suffering person, this was a proclamation of the love of God, just as in his beatitudes. Yet he still needed a final verification of this discovery. He found

it when he transformed his death from being a mere act into an act of love. When we understand the death of Jesus in this way, we realize why this death was to have such a powerful impact. Even before the Resurrection took place, the death of Jesus is the greatest sign of salvation that has even taken place in the history of the world and in the history of salvation. This is how we need to understand the death of Jesus.

**R:** This understanding opens a new perspective about the reports of the Resurrection in the New Testament. Was the grave empty, was it not empty—and other questions of this sort. In a technical sense, such problems are irrelevant. For they are expressions of a reality that exceeds literal thinking—a reality that you are so convincingly expressing here.

**E:** We will certainly come back to the Easter stories later on, but for now I would like to say this. The accounts of the life of Jesus present a relatively unanimous view up to the Resurrection. But then everything breaks apart and conveys an almost surrealistic impression: Jesus comes through closed doors, he is in two places at the same time, he is seen by someone in a certain way and by others in a different way. This is an indication that the Resurrection explodes all categories and reveals its mystical dimension. Yet this is simply the confirmation that in his death Jesus surrendered his individual way of existing so that he can live on in those who accept him as someone present to them. Until now, we really have not fully understood the meaning of Jesus's death and Resurrection. One of the tasks of new theology is to engage in this.

**R:** As much as I like this interpretation, I still have a problem about how Jesus surrendered his individual way of existing. Perhaps you could elaborate on this.

**E:** This does not mean that Jesus gives up being a person, for that would be a complete misunderstanding. It simply means that his individuality is no longer a corporeality limited by time and space.

We are following the thought of Paul here. Just as the first Adam became a living being, so the second Adam—Christ—became a life-giving spirit. So he still remains a person. But even more than that, he has become a person who can encompass everyone. We will explore later how Christ encompasses us, who simultaneously lives in us and has become the substance of our life. With death, Christ's individual way of existing in time and place comes to an end. Then the spiritual existence begins: as a life-giving spirit, Christ ensouls the world and each one of us. This is the great news about Easter.

**R:** But then isn't this a Christian variation of pantheism?

**E:** Absolutely not. Personal existence remains the central category of Christianity.

## 5. Christianity and Mysticism

R: Eugen, in our last discussion, we heard the word “mysticism” repeatedly. Mysticism has great importance in Christianity and therefore must be explored by us. But first we have some questions.

When average Christians hear the word mysticism, they do not believe that it applies to them. Rather, when they think about mysticism, they think about the great figures of Christian mysticism such as John of the Cross, Johannes Tauler, Master Eckhart, Nicolaus of Cusa, Hildegard von Bingen, Thérèse of Lisieux, and others. Mystics such as these are bound to confirm the belief of average Christians that mysticism is not for them! On the other hand, we have the view of Karl Rahner that you are always referring to, a view that identifies mysticism with Christianity. He says that the Christian of the future will be a mystic or nothing at all. I think we have a view of mysticism here that goes beyond our identification of mysticism with only the mystics cited above.

E: I agree with you. Often we think of mysticism as something extraordinary, something supernatural. We think of visions, voices, the stigmata. That is what we associate with mysticism. But Rahner has a different approach. He ignores all these phenomena and gives a strikingly simple answer to what a mystic is. He says that a mystic is “a person who is seeking to experience God.” This is the heart of mysticism.

Now let’s go back to the problem you have brought up. There are people who have no idea what it means to become a mystic. Then there are others who accuse the Church of having kept the great treasure of mystical experience under wraps. Hiding it from the faithful. Here we find something quite disturbing. Instead of asking theologians what mysticism is and how it relates to them, they turn to Buddhism or something esoteric and look outside the Church to find what they believe the Church has withheld from them.

But there are others who ask whether mysticism could become an essential element of their religious life. Pursuing mysticism from this point of view, we must go back to a central figure, Paul. Now, it is true that there are some modern Pauline researchers who assert that Paul was not a mystic. But I would say that such researchers have not entered deeply into the world of Paul.

Let us look into real Pauline research. I am thinking of the older Pauline researchers, with Albert Schweitzer as foremost among them. Research in depth shows that there are two formulations that run through almost all of Paul’s epistles. One is “in Christ,” and the other is “Christ in me.” I regard these two formulations as the two pillars supporting the edifice of Pauline mysticism. If we say this, then we have to ask what these formulations mean.

Let us turn for help to the most important Pauline researcher, my teacher Alfred Wikenhauser. He imagines that “in Christ” is like a sphere that surrounds and shelters us. Since the Resurrection of Jesus we have not been abandoned. Rather, we have been granted access to this mysterious sphere that has been created by none other than the living Christ.

In our last discussion, we were meditating about the personality of Christ. We came to the conclusion that Jesus no longer has an individual existence. Rather, he is a person, a mystical person, a life-giving spirit, as Paul says. As this life-giving spirit, he shelters not only Christianity but also the whole world. This is the one pole, the first pillar of the edifice of Christian mysticism.

Then there is the other pole, “Christ in me,” that for Paul is even more important. In a conflict with Peter in Antioch, he withdrew from the conflict in a dazzling way and returned to his own innermost self-understanding. He then came to these incomparable words: “I have been crucified with Christ; I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me. As long as I still live in this body, I live in faith in the son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me.”

If anywhere at all, we can feel here the heartbeat of Pauline mysticism, for Paul no longer understands himself as the same individual he was before he met Christ. Another has taken possession of him, one who “has been spoken into his heart” and has become the substance of his life. He draws out the consequence from this with the remarkable statement at the end of his Epistle to the Romans: “I do not dare to say anything that Christ has not worked in me.” He is living out the conviction that despite his subjectivity, he is being led, inspired, moved, and held by another, and this other has become the mystical substance of his life. This is the core of Pauline mysticism.

**R:** This is a magnificent portrayal of Pauline mysticism. Yet I have to go back to the question I asked at the very beginning. Will this portrayal appeal to ordinary Christians and make them believe that they can also become mystics like Paul? A further question relates to why the notion of mysticism has almost been lost.

**E:** The reason for this is the way that faith developed in the last two centuries. At that time the Church believed that it should codify its faith. That led to a theology of Neo-Scholasticism, which I suspect turned Christian faith into an ideology. As that happened, there was no room left for mysticism. We can see this in the realm of Church history.

One of our earlier archbishops, Konrad Groeber, published a book about the mystic Heinrich Seuse. At the same time he passionately fought against mysticism, because he believed that it weakened the strong system of Christianity. This was not the opinion of only a single bishop, but pretty well a general feeling. This is how mysticism fell into disrepute.

In addition, mysticism became erroneously associated with the notion that the mystic could dispense with the sacramental order—that the mystic had a relationship with God that did not need the operation of the Church. Then there was a further misconception. There was the belief that the mystic was a religious connoisseur who withdrew into isolation and forgot that he or she had a responsibility for the world. We must do away with both these misconceptions.

**R:** That is clear. The process you described at the beginning began even earlier, with Augustine. In a later phase of his life he focused so powerfully on the objective content of faith that a very important aspect was altogether repressed. Augustine forgot that faith is always an act of personal freedom and that the subjective aspect of faith is an inalienable element of faith. This undermined mysticism, with its emphasis on subjectivity and freedom.

This development reached a high point in the Neo-Scholastics. As we rediscover the mystical dimension of Christianity, we must make corrections in almost all areas of the Church, not least of all in its juridical structure. It will take a long time for these new insights to work themselves out. But this revisioning has to take place if a human being is to become a Christian person.

**E:** We will soon be speaking about the problem of faith. For now I only want to say that I believe we are experiencing a change from faith as content, to faith as something interior and

involved with one's identity. You are certainly right to say that the faith experience of the Christian has largely concentrated on pictures and dogmas, that is, on concretizations.

We could compare this with the façade of a great Gothic cathedral. It is certainly something that is fascinating. It presents many mysteries of faith, many of them in the form of impressive statues. But a cathedral does not exist so that we can look at its façade, but rather for us to enter into it through its portal. I believe that we are still standing in front of the façade of the Church's edifice.

We are like the "man from the country" in Kafka's parable of *Before the Law*. The gate keeper holds him back from entering into the law. Then he only discovers in the hour of his death that this entrance was specifically meant for him and that because of his anxiety he had not dared to do what he should have most certainly done.

I believe that we must battle to enter into the inner world of faith despite the many obstacles and hindrances. It is only in this way that we will have the chance to become fully aware of how our faith will help us to become more human and happy.

R: In this way, faith is not something that narrows us, but rather liberates us. When we enter into the cathedral you have spoken about and then look outside, we realize that we are not locked in, but rather that there is an endless horizon in front of us.

E: The Church does not need to fear this liberation, because people who only go along with her do not really help her. If she is going to experience success in the future, she needs people who are aware of their faith and happy for it. People, in other words, who want to do something for their faith. People who want to share with the world their joy in their faith. It is an error to think of the mystic as someone who has become a withdrawn individualist. The contrary is true, and we find this for example in the concern of St. Thérèse of Lisieux for the missions.

## 6. The Resurrection

R: Without the Resurrection, Christianity makes no sense. It is possible to reject Christianity in its totality, but it is impossible to reject the Resurrection and still hold on to Christianity. This is fundamental. At the same time, it is extremely difficult to speak about the Resurrection. This difficulty lies in the reality of the Resurrection itself. We have to be aware of two dangers here. The one danger is that we will be trapped in images so that we overlook the transcendent character of the Resurrection; the other danger is that the reality of the Resurrection will be swallowed up by symbolism.

The difficulties here go back to the very reports of the Resurrection in the New Testament themselves. Especially the meaning of the empty grave. Are we to see it as a fact that can be empirically verified—an approach that is very common even today—or are we to see in the reports the attempt to put into words an event that transcends our space and time categories and defies our efforts to express this? These are the themes we should consider now.

E: First of all, I agree with the exegete, Ulrich Wilckens, that the Resurrection is the axis and hinge of Christianity, its indispensable structure. We have to be very clear that if the Resurrection disappears, Christianity disappears too. But we must also recognize that the Resurrection

poses a number of problems. For example, we have the problem of what the empty grave means. And even more important are the Easter stories that present to us the thinking about the Resurrection. We must certainly say that the Resurrection is a historical fact, even though we may have some reservations. Schelling pointed this out in his *Philosophy of Revelation*, where he said, “Events like the Resurrection are like flashes of lightning in which a higher history blazes through a more external one.” I think that this is a precise description of the Resurrection. We could say, then, that the Resurrection is an event that happens in history but breaks through history and points to higher dimensions.

**R:** In speaking about the death of Jesus, we saw that the Resurrection is basically the other side of his death. Now death is an event that can be proven in history, but the Resurrection leaves history behind and goes beyond time and space, so it no longer belongs to our usual view of history.

**E:** I think we also need to look at another problem here. People today have great problems with the Resurrection. Why is that? It is because we are the heirs of the Enlightenment. For example, there is David Friedrich Strauss, a radical theologian inspired by the Enlightenment. He stated that history can only deal with events that take place in this world, and that events such as the Resurrection disrupt the framework of history and make history impossible.

This is an approach that has also found its way into Christianity and has led to tremendous difficulties for our thinking. But I would like to remind him boldly that we have experienced events that transcend the Enlightenment and our normal way of thinking about history. One such event is the outbreak of freedom in 1989, in which millions of people were freed from a dictatorial system without fighting and shedding blood.

My understanding of history includes the realistic belief that divine intervention is possible, although not in the form of a factual happening, because that would draw God into the world of facts. No, a divine intervention must be understood according to the model of the Easter event. This is a “genealogical assumption” into a closer and more intimate relationship with God.

And now let us return to the actual question of the Resurrection. You spoke about the empty grave. It is simply the verification that Christ’s death was real and not merely an apparent death. That is all that the empty grave has to tell us. Nothing more. As you said, in earlier times the empty grave was seen as the real proof for the Resurrection. But nowhere does the New Testament present the empty grave as the proof for the Resurrection. The New Testament presents other proofs: primarily the witnesses of the Resurrection, and then the Easter stories of the Gospels inspired by the witnesses.

In our last discussions we had already concluded that when the Gospels speak about the life of Jesus up to his death on the cross, they pretty well present the same picture. But when it comes to the Resurrection, everything breaks apart—they present an almost surrealistic picture to us. What is the dynamic behind these Easter stories? At times they almost seem to contradict themselves. At times, the risen Christ comes through closed doors and then disappears. At other times he both appears and then gives the impression that he cannot be grasped. What is the dynamic here?

My answer is that there is a guiding theme. This is the theme that all the witnesses of Easter proclaim: “I have seen the Lord.” St. Paul deals with the meaning of the Resurrection in Chapter

15 of his First Epistle to the Corinthians. He uses this occasion to present his own conviction as well as the oldest tradition here: “He (the Lord) appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve, then to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at the same time, then to Jacob and the other Apostles. Last of all he appeared to me.” He had already announced the same thing earlier in chapter nine when he asks: “Am I not free? Am I not an Apostle? Have I not seen our Lord Jesus?” Then we hear the guiding theme: “I have seen the Lord.”

**R:** The word “to see” has a double meaning. It can mean both a perceiving with the senses, as well as a spiritual experience. This also applies to the Greek word “ophte” of the ancient text. This word could be equally translated by “he was seen,” or “he has appeared.” In our context, we are speaking about a spiritual experience. This thought leads us into mysticism.

**E:** Exactly. Everything here draws us into a mystical sphere, even though it has a historical basis and is rooted in a historical event. “Ophte” testifies to this actual event. It can mean both “I have seen” as well as “he has shown himself.” This brings us back to the question of what is the dynamic behind this ophte? What is the dynamic behind the guiding theme: “I have seen the Lord”? Most of the Resurrection accounts do not go into this.

However, there is one exception to that. This is the witness of Paul. For new theology, Paul is the Easter witness with the answer. He answers the question that we have posed to the Easter witnesses, that is, what have they actually seen? What have they experienced? Paul gives three answers in his epistles. There is a foundational answer in his Epistle to the Galatians. This is the epistle in which he discusses the authenticity of his evangelization. In order to present his case forcefully, he reaches back to the beginning of how he became a Christian, to the Damascus experience. In that hour, he emphasized, God was revealed to him in God’s son. Literally, “It pleased God in his goodness to reveal his son to me.” A modern translation would say: “In that hour the mystery of God’s son was spoken into my heart.”

This is the first testimony, and I would like to characterize it as foundational. But there is also a second one, the testimony in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians. There St. Paul dares to compare the Resurrection with the beginning of creation. “The God who said, ‘Let there be light!’ has shone into our hearts the brightness of the majesty of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Incidentally, this is the only passage that speaks about the face of the risen Lord.

The face of the risen Lord is the place where the majesty of God shines. This is the really pivotal experience of revelation. Paul is telling us that his Damascus experience gave him a special relationship to the beginning of creation. For him, Easter is a new creation that elevates the original creation to a new level.

Then there is a third passage, in his epistle to his beloved community in Philippi where he is having a controversy with some opponents: “In that hour, Christ seized me. I would like to seize it in the way that I have been seized by Christ.” Here “ophte” means “being seized.” So this word has not only an acoustical dimension, but also an optical dimension, and a tactile dimension, a dimension of being seized and overpowered. As a result, Christ has really made Paul his own. From then on Paul’s life consisted in the desire to possess ever more fully the one who had possessed him. No one can testify more powerfully to something he has experienced!

**R:** This is to experience a reality in such a way that our soul grasps it. Therefore we should not place the emphasis upon the empirical event but rather what it means for our inner experience.

E: That is absolutely true. The Resurrection is the beginning of mysticism. Mysticism is the central dimension of Christianity. Let us return to our image of the cathedral. We must pass through the façade of this imposing cathedral to enter into its inner realm. Only there will we really know the meaning of our Christian faith and truly learn what it means to live from our faith.

R: I would imagine that living from our faith is one of our next topics.

## 7. The Inner Teacher

R: When we speak about a teacher, we usually think about someone who is competent to pass on his or her knowledge to others. In the Catholic world, we quickly think about a teaching office that authoritatively presents the contents of faith that are to be received obediently. On the other hand, you have written a book entitled *The Indwelling Teacher: Paths to Self-Discovery and Healing (Der inwendige Lehrer)*. Now how can you reconcile your view with the traditional concept of teaching?

E: To answer your question, I must go a bit far afield. I have a deep theological concern to rescue from oblivion a forgotten idea. It is the idea of the indwelling of Christ in the hearts of the faithful. This is not only a concern of new theology, but also a concern of Paul.

At the end of his Epistle to the Romans, Paul stresses that he never tried to say anything that had not been effected in him by Christ. This is the theme of the inner teacher. But Paul points also to a learning process that is initiated through this inner teacher. We may ask whether anyone else has thought this way.

That is indeed the case with the early Augustine. Augustine had a son, a young man of shocking intelligence, as he once put it. This young man died very prematurely—he was only seventeen. But before his death there was a conversation between father and son that Augustine published as *The Teacher*. The son has the last word in this dialogue, and this is how he summarizes the discussion: “As we are talking about this, I realize that with language a teacher can only present a portion of what he is thinking. I especially realize that whenever we understand something, the person who taught us in words is present to continue informing us by dwelling inside us.” Then he concludes by saying so beautifully: “I will love him all the more as I make progress in learning.”

As I said, the book is entitled *The Teacher*, and in the background is the idea of the inner teacher. That was the theme I developed in my book and that we are now discussing, namely: what do we mean by this inner or indwelling teacher?

This theme is rooted in the great Biblical tradition, which gives us another expression that means the same thing. The Gospel of John speaks about this teacher as “the advocate.” This advocate “is to teach us everything and remind us of everything that Christ has said. For he is the Spirit who will lead us into all truth.” John is speaking here about the inner teacher.

R: It is precisely here that we see the difference between your new theological approach and traditional theology in the sense of Augustine. According to classical theology, teachings are there to help people find themselves and find salvation. Your theology does not want this type of objectification. Your approach poses serious questions about the structure of the Church as well

as about the understanding of office and sacraments—to point out some of the most important questions.

E: You are perfectly right, but I would formulate it a bit milder than you have. I would say that we have to return from the teachings to the teacher, and from the dogmas to the content of the dogmas. We can learn something about this from Paul. Paul had been accused of having suppressed the message of Christ and replacing it with his own. That, of course, was completely untrue. Whenever we read Paul closely, we see that he is always returning to the message of Christ. But this is not the most important point. The most important point is that Paul understood like no one before or after him that the revelation of God did not consist so much in individual teachings as in the one who came to us as God's messenger. "He comes from the heart of God," says the beginning of John's Gospel, "and has brought us tidings." He is both the messenger and the message. This has a great impact on how we read the New Testament.

The New Testament is a compendium of all kinds of statements and teachings, even at times seeming to be contradictory. Therefore we need Christ himself as the authentic teacher and the living interpreter of these statements. As both the message and the messenger, he is also the interpreter and the key. So when we invite Christ himself to help us understand the sentences of the New Testament, we make the remarkable observation which I have already referred to. Many statements that at first frighten us with their threatening character become milder, while others that we have passed over suddenly seem to be illuminated and lead to unexpected meanings.

Here are a few examples. We have already referred to the great reader of the New Testament, Søren Kierkegaard. On the pedestal of the statue of Christ by Thorvaldsen in the Church of Mary in Copenhagen, a church he visited every Sunday, he saw this sentence engraved in gold letters: "Come to me all you who are weary and down-trodden, and I will refresh you." This sentence was the key to his whole Christology.

Here is another example. It is a saying from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Luke which incredibly has received very little attention in theology. It reads: "God is also gracious to the ungrateful and the bad." When Christ is made the interpreter of these words, then we see that they are the central message of the Sermon on the Mount.

Here is a final example. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says that "the son of man has not come to be served, but to serve." It is a statement that we can easily ignore. But when we turn to Jesus as the key to this statement, we suddenly realize that this is the central statement about Jesus and his life's work. He doesn't want to be served. He wants to serve. It turns the relationship of master and servant upside down. He makes himself into the servant. And when we pose the further question of how he serves us, the answer is that he serves us with himself; he makes himself into a gift for us.

R: This destroys the belief that Christianity means something heteronomous and other-determined. Rather, we discover the mysteries of faith within ourselves. This view will ask for many changes in perspective. Especially for the act of faith itself.

E: That is certainly true. We will have to look at faith more closely. But now I would like to clarify once again the learning process with the indwelling teacher. It is more astonishing than perhaps we realize, because in this learning process the indwelling teacher himself participates in the believer's understanding of faith.

This thought takes us back to what the great Cappadocian Father of the Church, Gregory of Nyssa, said about believers. In his commentary on The Song of Songs, he says: “Jesus is the child born in us. In us he grows in age, wisdom, and grace.”

It is as if Jesus himself goes through the learning process in us. He becomes a child again, and he becomes a twelve-year-old who then experiences that he belongs to the Father in an exceptional way. He is the one who is told that he is the son of God, the one who discovers himself as the son of man and the son of God. And then he goes through the most bitter learning process of all in us, the learning process of being on the cross, where all the attributes of God disappear, when the night of abandonment by God enfolds him, but when he is then drawn out of this night through the Resurrection and reaches the divine fulfillment of eternal life as the son of God.

This is the great learning process that Christ realizes in us, and this is the real contribution of the inner teacher. This has much to do with our healing and self-discovery. For basically this is the path that every person has to walk up until the hour of his or her death, in the hope of being awakened from the dead with Christ.

**R:** These considerations reveal a further ground-structure of Christianity. We realize that there is not a subject-object relationship here. Christianity is essentially a personal relationship that can only occur between two persons. In this relationship no one can be determined from the outside.

**E:** You are absolutely right, Richard. Not only can we think about this as dialogue, but we can also compare it with the uncertainty principle of Werner Heisenberg. This theory holds that in the realm of subatomic physics the difference between subject and object is irrelevant. Subject and object condition each other. This is the same with the act of knowledge. In the act of knowing, I co-form that which is known.

The same applies to faith. Faith does not mean accepting something from someone else, something that I accept through great effort, but rather the living co-experience, even the effecting of what is believed. Putting it the other way around, the one who is believed enters into my act of belief and participates in it with me. I think this is the most important insight of all, no matter how difficult it might be to convey it to others. One of the central tasks of new theology will be to blaze a path for ordinary believers to come to this “hearing-knowing” and “sharing-realizing” in faith.

**R:** Now that you are using the model of the uncertainty principle in subatomic physics, Eugen, we must not forget how different the activity in chaos theory is from the personal structure of belief.

**E:** Precisely. We are speaking about community here, and what takes place in community is not something that takes place between the two of us, but rather between Christ and us. Here we find the inner teacher who is involved in this learning process, who keeps the faith with us and thereby grants to faith its full solidity and intensity.

## 8. Prayer

**R:** Prayer enjoys a central role in all religions. This naturally applies to Christianity. We speak about many forms of prayer: prayer of petition, prayer of thanks, prayer of praise, and so on. Is there an underlying structure here? What is the common root that gives rise to all these different forms of expression? Perhaps we can find the answer given by a famous theologian of the Middle Ages, Anselm of Canterbury. In a small work of his, the *Proslogion*, he begins his work by “addressing” God and writes: “I long to see your truth in some way, the truth that my heart believes and loves.” It seems to me that this thought presents the deepest reason for prayer.

**E:** I would agree with you. In prayer we are not only trying to make sure of who God is but also who we, the prayers, are. We can look to another great thinker here. He is perhaps the greatest philosopher of religion in Judaism in the last century, Martin Buber. In his book *Eclipse of God* he presents a most beautiful definition of prayer: “Prayer is the plea for God’s self-presentation, a plea for a dialogical perception of this divine self-presentation.” Buber deals with the contention that prayer and faith lie poles apart, like two different worlds. Prayer, it is said, comes from the heart, while faith comes from the intellect and the will. But for Buber, the definition of prayer is almost the same as the definition of faith. Faith has about it the sense of “*emuna*,” making oneself secure in God. It is the attempt to find our concrete support in the divine reality. This is the same as Buber’s view that prayer is the plea for a dialogical perception of this divine reality and divine presence.

As we are discussing prayer, we turn once again to Paul. In chapter eight of his *Epistle to the Romans*, he gave us a cryptic thought that Johann Sebastian Bach made into a most beautiful motet entitled *The Spirit Helps our Weakness*. The *Epistle to the Romans* says literally: “The Spirit helps our weakness, because we do not know what we should pray for as we ought. The Spirit then pleads for us in unutterable groans, and the one who searches the hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, who pleads for the saints before God.”

This difficult passage begins with the surprising words: “We do not know what we should pray for.” Perhaps we might want to argue with Paul and say that we very well do know what we pray for: our pressing human, vocational, and existential needs. But for Paul these are only occasions for prayer. For him, prayer is concerned with something incomparably greater: it is concerned with God! With this in mind, we can now return to Anselm of Canterbury and say that prayer is the question about God posed with our heart.

When we begin to pray, we first of all feel inadequate. What we have is only a hopeless stammering. Then according to Paul something marvelous occurs: God participates with us as the inner teacher. Paul speaks in this context about the Spirit of God who pleads for us in unutterable groans. Perhaps we can see it in this way. The Spirit enters into our stammering prayer and pleads for us in our helplessness. And then there is this wonderful conclusion: “And the one who searches the hearts”—that is, the God who is listening—“this one knows the mind of the Spirit who pleads for the saints before God.” This means that the Spirit of God participates in our prayer needs and presents them before the face of God so that it is God who finishes our prayer for us.

**R:** This means that prayer is the life-long questioning and seeking for God. I believe that the average believers know very little about this understanding of God and do not feel it is

pertinent for them. Most people experience their pressing daily needs and make prayers of petition. Can we say that God hears a prayer?

**E:** It would be a complete contradiction of Christianity to state the opposite. God naturally hears every prayer, but not in the way that we expect it. We constantly experience that many things that appear important to us at first, afterwards appear to be peripheral, if not downright harmful. It is often for our own good that we do not get what we pray for.

On the other hand, no prayer remains unanswered. Perhaps we can imagine it in this way. Usually prayer begins with a petition. It is like casting out a line into the unknown. Therefore at the beginning of a prayer we often have the experience of being left alone, the experience of emptiness. This is the critical moment. We might think that prayer is useless, nothing will come from it, and it would be better to return to the activities of life and do something more reasonable.

But if we resist this temptation and wait in the stillness, we have the remarkable experience of a very faint and unexpected connection to God. The apparently empty space is now being filled by something mysterious, namely by an experience of the presence of God. In this sense, no prayer remains unanswered. Even though we may not obtain what was regarded as so important to us, yet in every prayer we gain something of God. To pray is to approach God, or, according to the thought of Anselm of Canterbury, prayer is the question about God posed with our heart. And God answers by bestowing God's presence.

**R:** We find a similar thought in Augustine. He says that in our everyday world we are distracted by many stimuli. This causes a type of self-alienation that we must overcome in order to return to ourselves. When we do this, we can turn to God. Then we experience that every form of prayer is the experience of the presence of God, and in this way every prayer is heard and fulfilled.

**E:** Every prayer has the character of recollection. As you have said so well, we generally live in a state of scatteredness. We are carried away by all the stimuli coming towards us, stimuli that demand our attention. When we pray, we have to resist all these distractions and return to what is central in our lives, namely our relationship to God.

Whether we are believers or unbelievers, we all need something that gives our life a final direction, that gives us concrete support. Without this anchor we are a leaf tossed by the wind. We need to be anchored in God. Therefore prayer cannot be described better than by Buber's words that it is a plea for God's self-presentation.

Or putting it differently, it is the search for an ultimate concrete support that only the reality of God can offer us. The astonishing realization is that prayer is not only the question about God, but also the experience of an answer that God gives us through the proof of the divine presence. This means that prayer is not only a question about God but also a proof of God.

In theology and philosophy—and no one knows this better than you, Richard—we often discuss the proofs for God's existence. It appears to me that we forget about one of these proofs that is the most important of all. It is a proof that does not proceed from speculation, but from the heart. A central tenant of new theology is that prayer makes a credible proof for God's existence that comes from the heart.

**R:** Now here is another question. What can we say about the prayer of petition for others? I have some understanding about praying for myself. But can I turn to God for others? How are we to understand this?

E: We understand this through the notion of Christian community. Paul has given us the wonderful image of the mysterious body of Jesus Christ, and he says of this body: “No one lives for himself alone, no one dies for himself alone. Whenever someone rejoices, we all rejoice. Whenever someone suffers, we all suffer.” This means that in addition to individuality, our human situation is also characterized by what Peter Wust calls the “intertwining of souls.”

We are all bound together. According to Paul, we are all bound together in one body and in the communication flowing through it. So when Paul says, “Whenever someone rejoices, we all rejoice,” we can go further and say, “Whenever someone prays, we all pray together and pray for each other.” This also applies to the goal of prayer, something we must soon consider, which is faith. This means, whenever anyone believes, then we all believe, and then others believe for me and I believe for others.

R: You are speaking about a community of people who believe in Christ. Can we not simply extend this community to all human beings? Is not the whole of humanity included here?

E: I affirm this whole-heartedly. Christianity is never the religion of an elite—whatever that should mean—but is always a religion for everyone. Christ died for everyone, and the goal of all our activity is for “God to be all in all,” as Paul says. This means that prayer is not only a private matter, but also something that must include everyone and everything. Christianity is a religion for the whole world.

## 9. Being a Child of God

R: We have words in our language that are more apt to undermine our intended meaning than to express it. One such concept is “being a child of God.” It suggests something infantile and cannot express its real meaning without a lot of explanation. What does this concept mean in your theology?

E: New theology is a theology of rediscovering. The concept of being a child of God belongs to this category. We must rediscover its original meaning. As we do this, we come to the thought of the exegete William Wrede. Almost a hundred years ago he proposed the simple formula that “Christ, the son of God, surrenders his divine sonship and becomes a wretched man like ourselves so that we may become sons of God.”

Christ became what we are so that through his death we may become what he is. This gives us a whole new understanding of the concept of being a child of God, a concept that has been infantilized so often. This concept has nothing to do with belittling, trivializing, reducing. Rather it has to do with the exact opposite, the elevating of humans.

There is an old view that can hardly be surpassed. It maintains that the greatest thing that can be said about humans is contained in the concept of our being the image of God. Naturally this is a concept of extraordinary beauty, and no philosopher has ever said anything as noble as this. But in our Christian understanding, the concept of being a child of God, towers above even this concept. Maybe we can get a clearer understanding of this when we view it from an atheistic position.

One of the greatest proponents of this atheism is, of course, Nietzsche. At the beginning of his most famous work, *Zarathustra*, he speaks about the three transformations. First there is the

transformation of a human into a camel, the load-bearing spirit, the heteronomous person who needs orders in order to know what he or she must do. Then there is the transformation of the camel into the lion, the autonomous human who is a law unto himself. But it is also necessary to transcend the lion, because he always has to prove his autonomy again and again. Therefore the highest goal of a human is to become a child.

Nietzsche has certainly borrowed the notion of the human's being a child of God from Christian teaching. At this point I want to come back to one of my central themes. Christianity is a religion that neither infantilizes nor disciplines us, but rather it elevates us to becoming the children of God. And this is the greatest thing that can be said about a human being.

R: That would mean that being a child of God is identical with the concept of a God-directed autonomy. Humans are moral subjects. We are autonomous while being responsible to God.

E: Yes, indeed. We are autonomous thanks to divine intervention, because God helps us to become autonomous. We may get more insight here when we once again look at the atheistic position. This time I am not referring to Nietzsche, but rather to Freud. As we discussed earlier, in 1930 he wrote a book, *Civilization and its Discontents*. There he saw in an almost prophetic way developments that are happening right now. He pointed out that through technology we are in a position to overstep ourselves and resemble God.

Through techniques of communication we are gaining a share in God's omniscience. Through space flight, a share in God's omnipresence; and through evolution techniques, a share in God's creativity. Nietzsche had said that these are qualities of God that have been set free through the so-called death of God and that we are still trying to master them. But we only do this with great difficulty, like becoming accustomed to a prosthesis. We have become a "prothetic God."

Despite the irony in this concept, it is nonetheless helpful in clarifying the idea of being a child of God. For if being a child of God means that we are ennobled, then we are sprouting wings that help us reach the highest possibilities of our human nature. Now, what are these possibilities?

According to my anthropology, we are creatures of possibilities. We are never determined. We are, like Nietzsche said, "a cable spanning an abyss." As such we are able to release the possibilities in us and make a better use of the talents at our disposal. Consequently, being a child of God is a concept of being human that helps us grow. The only question we have is how to make a good use of all this now that we have become children of God.

E: You would say that in both our individual development and in our common history we are moving towards goals that are not yet clear to us. And in this process, Christianity is not putting on the brakes but rather providing new impulses for our self-realization—always, of course, in responsibility to God.

E: Yes indeed. We know that we have developed into our present condition from very primitive beginnings. And we should not imagine that we have already come to the end of evolution and our human history—in either a cultural, political, or anthropological sense. We are always realizing more of our potential. Christianity is not a religion of putting on the brakes and reversing development. Rather, it is a religion that contributes challenges and impetus into this world history of ours. Therefore we must focus intensively on the possibilities for optimizing human life. In other words, how we can help people to liberate their inherent—sometime even fallow—possibilities and use them effectively.

**R:** We certainly need an ethical development of humanity at the same time, a development that will keep pace with the technological one. Today we are in a situation where the technological development has outstripped the ethical. This has presented us with many problems. But this fact should not hinder us from using and developing our abilities. Possible abuses should not hinder good uses.

**E:** Certainly the ethical development must keep pace with the technological development. Otherwise technology will get out of control. Technology brings up issues that have not been fully understood or ethically incorporated. But this should be an incentive for a deeper morality and in no case a reason to hinder development.

Now let us return to our theme of being a child of God. What are the possibilities that should be explored right now in our present situation? Gregory of Nyssa gives an engaging answer. In a meditation on the Sermon on the Mount, he discusses the beatitude about the peacemakers. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.”

If we turn this sentence around, then we have our answer. Persons who have truly become children of God feel themselves deeply responsible for the peace of the world and feel called upon to pursue it. Gregory says enthusiastically, “How can we thank God sufficiently for crowning us with the crown of the grace of being children of God?” He then leaves no doubt that true thanks consists in working for peace and for the “loving agreement among people.” These words are very pertinent for us. For the world in which we live is deeply divided.

In the Epistle to the Ephesians we find the thought: “He is our peace, for through his death he has destroyed the separating wall of enmity.” I know of no other thought that is more pertinent than this. For we live in a world divided by the walls of groups, culture, worldviews, and religion. It is very important that we do something to dismantle these walls. Perhaps I can state this more positively. There must be a community that is founded on mutual respect, tolerance, and responsibility. This would be a contribution to peace that is extremely pertinent in view of the threats of war constantly over-shadowing our world today. That is why working for peace begins with the grass roots.

World peace will not come from above; it comes from here below. It begins right there where we cope with our shadows, where we are aware of our mutual responsibility, where we learn to vouch for each other, where we are prepared to go beyond our inhibitions and extend a helping hand to others. This is the work for peace that we must all undertake.

As this happens, it takes the wind out of the sails of those who believe that they can only achieve their interests through force and war. They must be confronted by those who live the beatitude: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons and daughters of God.” I would like to turn these words around once again and say that the first and most important dimension of being a child of God is to serve peace and work for a world that will renounce force and be peaceful.

**R:** If this is the essence of Christianity, then we must say that Christianity has not made much progress. Therefore we must discuss what all this means for faith. Why do people have such great difficulty in accepting Christian faith and finding meaning in it? What contribution can new theology make here?

## 10. Faith

R: Eugen, Christian faith today is in a deep crisis. Yet, there is a new development that will help to meet this crisis—you call it a change in faith. The classical form of faith consisted in giving one's assent to statements. But this kind of obedience weakened our will by letting ourselves be determined by others. People today no longer want this kind of faith. Now, where do you see a change in faith, and how would you apply it to Christian belief?

E: First let us talk about how faith is in a deep crisis, Richard. Faith is in this crisis because we understand and express it in an anachronistic way. We still tend to have a view of faith that goes back to the First Vatican Council (1869/1870). Incidentally, the great Jewish critic of Christianity, Martin Buber, also sees the First Vatican Council in that way. According to that Council, faith is the assent to what God has said authoritatively. In this view, faith is an obedient submission to the authority of God: faith is obedience.

Let us call this faith in authority, something that both you and I have amply experienced in our lives. But this type of faith has been strongly challenged in the crisis over authority, especially by the students' revolt. This crisis then expanded. People began questioning not only teaching authorities, but also parental, political, and religious authorities. Only one authority seemed to be exempt from this questioning, namely the divine authority. But that was only an illusion.

Of all people, it was the very pious philosopher of the last century, Peter Wust, who posed a great challenge in his work, *Uncertainty and Risk*. He asked, "Why is God above and we are here below? And why is God powerless above on the very pinnacle of the hierarchy of being, while we must struggle with unending anxiety and need?" This is a direct challenge to divine authority, so it makes the whole concept of faith in authority untenable.

R: We have concrete evidence of this change. In 1937, Romano Guardini published his most important work, a work about Jesus, entitled *The Lord*. Now, sitting across from me is Eugen Biser, who in 1973 published a work about Jesus entitled *The Helper (Der Helfer)*. Both works are about Jesus. The change from "Lord" into "Helper" mirrors the change that has taken place in the last decades and is extraordinarily important for the understanding of Christian faith. This crisis of authority has affected all areas of human society and also has an impact on how we understand Christianity and faith.

E: This is where I want to begin correcting this old notion. I owe it to the doyen of German philosophy, Hans-Georg Gadamer. In his philosophical hermeneutics of theology, he has rendered a tremendous service, something that is still not properly recognized. He distinguishes between two completely different forms of authority. There is the authority of the person with power who wants to preserve his or her authority under all circumstances. Then there is the authority of the teacher. Teachers surrender their authority so that the students may go beyond the teachers' knowledge. When this happens successfully, then, in Gadamer's words, the miracle of understanding occurs. For me, this was the key to describing the first and momentous change in faith we are discussing here. I see a change from a faith based on responding to authority, into a faith based on understanding. This should be evident even without these reflections of mine.

The purpose of God's revelation is not to discipline humans and make them dependent, but rather to teach them about something they could never attain through their own thinking and

searching, namely the mystery of God's own being. God's revelation is a sharing of what God is. And there we find the core of Christian faith: that God's self-revelation has been given to the world through God's only begotten son. God obviously wants this self-revelation to be understood by us humans. That is why we have the transition from faith based on obedience and authority into a faith based on understanding.

**R:** This is the insight that God created us as thinking beings and always speaks to us as thinking beings. Pursuing this line of thought, we certainly come to the position you have described. But do you also see a further aspect in your new understanding of faith?

**E:** Yes, I do, and this is in the area of dogmas. If I were to express this visually, dogmas are containers meant to securely hold something very precious. In a way, they are primarily defensive, because they intend to preserve Christian truth from errors and delusions.

But a container is essentially there to be drunk from. We have a longing to taste what is in this container. So I see a second change: a change from faith in declarations and propositions into a faith based on experience. Karl Rahner, my predecessor in the Guardini chair, concluded his theological work with the powerful thought: "The Christian of the future will either be a mystic or cease to be." When asked about what he understood by mysticism, he replied, "A mystic is anyone who is seeking to experience God." This has led me to think about the change from faith in propositions into a faith based on experience.

In addition, there is a third change, one that we surprisingly owe indirectly to something that Guardini said. Guardini stressed that "no one believes for himself or herself alone. When we believe, we always believe in a context with others. We do not know how much we are supported by the faith of others, and we also do not know how much through our faith we enable others to believe and how much we support them."

This is where I see a third change. In the earlier conceptions, faith was always something individualistic that had the goal of achieving eternal salvation. It was a faith based on accomplishments. So what I see here is a change from a faith in accomplishments into a faith based on responsibility.

But even this third change is subsumed by a fourth, underlying change. That is the change from a faith directed towards objects into a faith dealing with one's inner life. We spoke about this earlier, using a parable from Franz Kafka and applying it to a cathedral. The austere façade of the cathedral gives no indication of the majesty within, awaiting the person who enters it.

The insights of the Pauline researcher, Ed Parish Sanders, are very helpful here in understanding this conceptually. He said that there are two dimensions in Paul that must be distinguished from each other. One is the juridical category. Using this category, Paul speaks about Christ's returning in majesty: there is the summons of the angels, the blowing of the trumpets, the gathering before the judgment seat of Christ, the saving of the elect. But there is also a deeper mystical dimension in Paul, whereby "believers share in Christ." This is our mystical union with Christ, which has a completely different meaning from the juridical one.

Actually, Paul himself dispenses with this juridical scenario in his Epistle to the Corinthians about the goal and the end of the world. He sees two acts of submission here. The first one is where all the opposing powers—including his chief opponent, death—are submitted to Christ, who had been so despised and humiliated. The second is where Christ has now fully become lord,

and then he submits himself to the one who has submitted everything to him, so that God might become “all in all.” Paul is repeating the idea of sharing here, but now in a vision inspired by the end of history and time.

**R:** We can certainly apply this image of the cathedral to the great systems of theology that have been developed over the centuries. They are so cogent that they easily make us forget that they are not the actual reality, but are only pointing to a reality. One of the greatest systematic theologians, Thomas Aquinas, pointed out this danger when he wrote that “our faith is not in the words, but rather in the reality contained in the words and sentences.”

I believe that one reason why we have the crisis of faith today is because we have identified system with reality in the attempt to formulate faith definitively. As you are attempting to overcome this crisis, you are moving in the opposite direction: you are moving back from the statements and teachings about faith to the reality we believe in.

**E:** Perhaps Kierkegaard can come to our aid again. He said that someone who produces a system is like an architect who has designed a magnificent palace but has only forgotten one thing. He forgot to build accommodation for himself in the palace and therefore must live in a barn, perhaps even in a doghouse! This means that a system has no room for us.

The system simply wants to perpetuate itself and has forgotten that it is there for us. New theology, on the other hand, wants to help find a living space for us in the edifice of faith so that we feel at home and protected there. Our main goal is helping humans find themselves in faith, that is, the continuous striving for a harmonization between a living faith and being human.

**R:** Everything that we have spoken about up till now assumes the existence of God. So let us turn to this question now, and more precisely, by considering the fact of evil in the world.



## PART 3

### 1. Theodicy

**R:** All theology is based on an assumption: the existence of God. Philosophy and theology have developed many arguments for the existence of God. Atheism, as Georg Buechner says, trumps these arguments with the card of suffering. How can we reconcile a suffering world with a just God? Epicurus saw this problem centuries ago when he said that “if God is almighty, God could prevent suffering; and if God is good, then God would prevent suffering.” As we confront suffering, we ask which attribute of God we should dispense with—omnipotence or goodness. This might be less of a problem for some than it is for Georg Buechner, because people might accept a God who is not omnipotent. But then we would have the question of whether a God who is not omnipotent is still God. In other words, how do we reconcile our notion of an omnipotent God with the actual situation of our world?

**E:** Hans Jonas raised this question in a very powerful way in *The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice*. He believes that we can only retain a concept of God that contains neither omnipotence nor mercy. For if God were omnipotent, God could have prevented the Holocaust. And if God were merciful, then God would have had to prevent it.

Everything here comes back to the question of faith. For faith contains no evidence. “We live in faith, not in seeing,” said Paul. This means that faith is always vulnerable. It can fall into erroneous beliefs or be overwhelmed by doubts. One of the greatest reasons for doubts is the suffering in the world. What are we to do with this?

First of all, we should say that the notion of a world free of suffering is absurd. A world without suffering would be a perfect world, and consequently a second God. This would mean a surrender of divinity on the part of God. Let’s elaborate on this. When God wants to create—and for me this is the really unfathomable factor, that God wanted to create at all—God can only create a relative world.

Philosophically speaking, this is a contingent world. For human beings, this contingency confronts us in the most painful manner, namely that we have to die. Where there is death, there is also suffering, sickness, and force. All suffering in the world originates in the fact that we are subject to death. This lies behind our problem of reconciling faith with suffering.

**R:** Then we have to ask an even more basic question. Why has God created a finite world with all its ineradicable consequences? Does it not seem that God has put in motion all the boundless misery that we experience? Now we cannot really ask God to give an answer to our question of “why,” because that would reduce God to being an equal partner with us. On the other hand, we have the right to explore all questions to their greatest depth and then to fall silent before the mystery of God. Perhaps new theology can at least give a clue to an understanding of what seems to be a hopeless situation.

**E:** I see only one answer here, and that is that God became human. God must have always had the desire to enter into our contingency and celebrate God’s greatest triumph there. It is a triumph that in Christian understanding involves the death of God’s son. This is naturally only a

view. You say that a last answer to “why” will remain hidden from us. We would have to possess an infinite intellect to be able to grasp God’s motivation as creator. My way of speaking is only an attempt at an approximation.

Let us come back to the question of how suffering in the world relates to the traditional understanding of God. That view held God to be completely compatible with the brokenness and frailness of the world. In that view God is someone who at times loves and at other times threatens and punishes. This is the ambivalent God of our human tradition. This view can just barely reconcile the suffering of the world with God, but only at the price of believing that suffering is a punishment from God.

I am baffled when I see the Church resort to this view again and again. The Church says that if you are having misfortune, you must ask yourself how you have brought this upon yourself and what you have done to deserve this. Actually, this is a question that Jesus already answered in a very definitive way. The Gospel of John presents the moving scene of the man born blind from birth. When they see him, the disciples ask Jesus: “Master, who has sinned that he must atone for with his blindness—his own sins or the sins of his parents?” Jesus abruptly sweeps this way of thinking off the table, saying, “No one has sinned, but rather you will experience the majesty of God.” Then he grants this poor man his sight. That is his answer.

This is our key to this central problem. In the heart of Christianity there is no longer that ambivalent God who in the one moment comforts us and then in the next moment punishes us and pours out wrath upon the world. Rather, there is the God of unconditional love whom Jesus discovered. The question is how to reconcile the notion of this loving God with the fact of suffering in the world. Is there an answer here?

And even though it might seem to be a paradox at first, the answer lies in God’s very self. The suffering in the world may never be seen as a punishment. If it were a punishment, then God would be at an insurmountable distance from humanity. God would be the one imposing the punishment, and we would be suffering the punishment, so there would be an unending chasm between us.

To the contrary, the loving God revealed by Jesus enters right into the depth of suffering. When you were speaking earlier about the possible reasons for suffering, it reminded me of the French mystic, Simone Weil. She wrote an essay entitled *Waiting on God*. Her view is that misfortune is not the opposite of God’s love, but rather a container into which God pours the divine love in a special way. This has tremendous meaning for us in our suffering, for the most painful part of our suffering in our sickness and misery is the feeling that my life is meaningless. In particular, people who are chronically ill feel themselves excluded from our society of consumerism and production. They can neither produce nor consume anything. Consequently it seems to them that life has lost all its meaning.

Let us imagine, though, that God enters into our suffering with us in a special way. This is something I have tried to describe with the image of a vessel that God pours the divine self into in a special way. This means that our suffering is full of meaning, because there cannot be a greater meaning than the participation of our loving God. God is the complete answer to the question of meaning. This does not mean that the cancer victim is healed or everything turns out fine for someone who has experienced a great setback in his or her career. But the most bitter part

of suffering is taken away, which is the feeling of meaninglessness. On the contrary, now there is the feeling that suffering has a purpose!

I would like to add here a thought from Dionysius the Areopagite, who says that God is known more through suffering than through research. God draws suffering people into a learning process in which they learn about the depths of God in a new way. They acquire a type of knowledge that healthy people never attain.

**R:** I think it would be appropriate here to bring in a thought that our colleague, Armin Kreiner, developed in his work on theodicy. He reminds us that there are specific human qualities such as love, love of neighbor, mercy, and helpfulness that simply would not exist if we still lived in a condition of paradise. This means that humans can only develop their human capacities in a world—no matter how awful this might appear—that is just like ours. This is a view of creation and redemption that does not fully explain everything, yet it does offer some insight into the meaning of a world that often appears meaningless because of its negative aspects.

**E:** We have long known that the suffering in the world motivates us. There are always people who feel themselves called upon to help those who are handicapped or sick. And how many works of art and of the spirit owe their existence to the sufferings of their authors! I am thinking here of Pascal and Beethoven.

This also makes me think that death leads to a type of compensation. Since as living beings we are subject to death, we want to propagate ourselves. In the last instance this means that death is not the “wages of sin,” as Paul once said, but rather the price of love. It is precisely because we must die that we love one another. This is most especially true of the death of Jesus on the cross. As the Gospel of John assures us, this death was the greatest expression of the love of Jesus for us. In this way he was able to help love break through in a world darkened by hate and force.

As Schopenhauer says, death is “the patron and promoter of philosophy.” Death is not only the spokesperson for thinking, but also for loving. Therefore, we should not consider death to be only the opponent of God, even though death is to be conquered by the victorious Christ as the “last enemy.” Rather, in God’s hands, death is an instrument that leads to understanding and compassion. In fact, it even leads us to love.

**R:** This really means that it is only Christianity that can give an approximate answer to this problem. It also means that when we ask the question of “why,” we encounter the mystery of God and must be content with that.

**E:** Yes, Richard, I think this is the correct answer.

## 2. The Resurrection of Jesus and its Consequences

**R:** Eugen, so far we have been trying to come closer to the heart of Christianity, which is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The reports about the Resurrection are very different, at times even contradictory. I have the impression that the way in which the ordinary Christians regard the Resurrection is not really suitable to understand the reality of it. Now, if the Resurrection has such a fundamental meaning for Christianity, then the presentation of this event has an impact on everything—the world, humankind, and redemption. How does your theology deal with this?

**E:** You are absolutely right. New theology agrees with Wilckens that the Resurrection is the axis and center of all of Christianity. The Resurrection is the crystallization of an event that illuminates the areas you speak of. The first area that has an immediate impact on us is the world. The second is ourselves. And the third is a central thought of Christianity—redemption. What new light does the Resurrection cast on these areas?

Let us begin with the world, and here we find the words of Paul, who overturns all the usual notions: “We have only one God, through whom everything is and for whom we are, and we have only one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom everything is and for whom we are.” He is saying this about a man who was born in a corner of the Roman world and grew up in the somewhat disreputable village of Nazareth. Yet Paul is saying that this man created the world! Now if Easter is like a crystallization that reorders everything, then the world receives a new illumination. The question is only about what kind of illumination.

Paul gives a startling answer in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians with the words: “The God who said, ‘Let there be light,’ this God has also let the day dawn in our hearts through the radiant expression of God’s majesty in the face of Jesus Christ.” Putting this somewhat simply, through the Resurrection the world is raised to a new level, and this level is what the risen one has given to it. In the beginning of his Epistle to the Romans, Paul says that “he was established as the son of God with power through the Resurrection from the dead.” Through the Resurrection he entered into a trans-creaturely relationship to God, a relationship that radiates backwards to the beginning of the world and places the world in a new context.

**R:** In terms of the origin and course of the world, the traditional view is that it began at some time and as something. Sin made the Incarnation necessary, which led through the death of Jesus to the Resurrection. But according to your view, we can only understand theologically the creation and the course of the world in the light of the Resurrection. Or have I misunderstood you?

**E:** No, you have understood me properly. Now we naturally have our own understanding of the world, as well as our understanding of time. We generally understand a process as one thing following another. But for God, this all takes place in an instant. So we have to get our categories of time out of our heads if we are in any way going to approximate an understanding of the divine perspective. Paul speaks expressly about a new foundation of creation through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

**R:** This casts a different light on everything. We must also evaluate scientific facts such as evolution in this new theological perspective. Because there can be no double standard for science and theology.

E: You are speaking now about the theory of evolution which is current in science. However, we find something analogous already in Paul. Chapter eight of his Epistle to the Romans presents the history of the world as an evolutionary process that is leading from the birth pangs of the affliction of the past into the freedom of the children of God. We can see a similarity here with Hegel, who saw the meaning of history as a progress into a deeper consciousness of freedom. Paul says much the same thing when he sees the world moving from pain and affliction into the freedom of the sons of God.

R: This brings us to the second point we want to consider in this new way, namely to humans.

E: Of course this applies to human beings. The same thing applies to humanity as applies to the world. We receive a trans-creaturely relationship to God through faith in the Resurrection. This does not mean that we are spared the experience of death, but rather that we have already dealt with death. It makes a huge difference whether or not we accept our death. We can sink into a bottomless night with nothing left of us, or we can be taken out of death and taken to the place where the risen one has gone, that is, into the fullness of life in God. In this sense, when we believe in the Resurrection, then we already have dealt with death. And this will run throughout our lives.

Through the Resurrection we reach new possibilities of being. Sigmund Freud spoke about a prothetic God that has come into existence through the technological achievements of our time. As Christians we have an opposing concept, that of being children of God. When we become children of God, it is as if we are sprouting wings and can dare to do things we would never have dreamed possible. We enjoy the possibility of making a new use of our capabilities. Despite all obstacles, we gain a new relationship to ourselves.

R: This approach gives us the conviction that Christians do not have to search for their own meaning, because our meaning has already been given to us. This frees us up for our tasks in the world, for the problems we need to deal with and must solve as we deepen our Christian existence. This brings us to the third area: how does all this fall under the category of “redemption?”

E: Let me remark here that Christianity, properly understood, is basically the only answer to the human search for meaning. For we can never emphasize enough that in contrast to a widely-held notion, Christianity is not a religion that leads us to self-alienation, but rather a religion dedicated to the God of goodness who is desirous of human friendship. It is a religion that leads people to a sense of themselves in the highest sense of this word and brings them an understanding of their purpose in life. For Christianity is the religion of love. Once we know we are loved, we understand the meaning of our life. In our happiness, the question of meaning has been put to rest. This now brings us to the question of redemption.

Redemption is a fundamental concept of Christianity. But I have the impression that many people have heard about it but don’t understand it. This is related to something that we have not sufficiently discussed in our previous talks. We did indeed speak about the change in the history of faith that is now occurring.

Now, there is also a change happening in ethical awareness. This is something we have not spoken about, yet it is important here, because in terms of redemption, it relates to our traditional concept of how we are freed from sin. But this is where the problem lies. The Orientalist, Eric Robertson Dodds, has pointed out that in Homeric times there was a shift in moral consciousness.

At that time the Homeric heroes had no personal awareness of guilt. They did indeed have an awareness of shame, and they feared nothing as much as being shown public disrespect.

The Greek writers of tragedy effected a shift in this culture from shame to guilt, something that Judaism and Christianity deepened in the consciousness of people. But now we are experiencing a reversal of this process. Now a culture of guilt is giving way more and more to a culture of shame. People do not care about violating a moral code, only not to be caught red-handed.

In view of this situation, we must rethink our concept of redemption. Actually, this rethinking is nothing else than returning to what we find in Paul's epistles and the other writings of the New Testament. There we find thoughts about the forgiveness of sin, but we also find something else—the liberation of the person. The New Testament's concept of redemption is an emancipating one, as the Epistle to the Colossians expresses it: "He has snatched us from the power of darkness and placed us in the realm of his beloved son." In this sense, redemption is primarily liberation. Now this is only one of the perspectives. Because redemption is also at work in healing us. This is the therapeutic aspect, the liberating aspect.

**R:** The entire reality takes on a whole new light when we view it from the standpoint of the Resurrection of Jesus. When we look back critically at our history, we really have to say that the traditional understanding in Christianity has certainly not seen all the dimensions of this reality, much less realized them in its faith.

**E:** I completely agree with you, and it will not surprise anyone when I say that Christianity is still in its beginning phase. What has hindered Christianity is the fact that early on all the confessions chose the path of force, either using it or approving it. Force is diametrically opposed to what Jesus wanted, because he is a messenger of who renounces force. As long as it used force, Christianity could not advance to its heart. I believe that Christianity is in a constant process of self-discovery. Its primary task is to finally reveal its true qualities so that people can become aware of them and live from the energy of these qualities both inside and outside the Church.

**R:** If you are correct, then both Christianity and the world still have a great future ahead of them.

**E:** Yes, indeed. I fully believe that. Often we encounter the feeling in the Church that things are petering out. Blind prophets of doom come along and try to convince weak spirits that an imminent end of the world is at hand. But in actuality, the exact opposite is true. For Christianity is the religion of hope and therefore the religion of the future. We must make people aware of this, especially in this time of collective depression and ever-increasing anxiety.

**R:** Perhaps the feeling you describe has to do with the ending of a particular epoch and the particular way in which Christianity has expressed itself. But we must not identify Christianity with any particular form. To the contrary, what is breaking up is a form of Christianity that has been historically conditioned. This breaking up can release Christian energies that are able to overcome the problems of the present and the future.

### 3. Church, Mysticism, and Theology for the Future

**R:** As I look back at the themes we have discussed so far, I come to a startling observation. We have discussed countless themes of Christianity, including the heart of Christianity, but we have not discussed the Church as such. This made me think that perhaps we do not need the Church. You have discussed a number of themes, such as our relationship to God, “Christ in us,” and “we in Christ.” But does the Church itself, do the offices, do the dogmas still have any function for us in the unfolding of our Christian being?

**E:** This is a very serious question, and it is similar to the misgivings that the Church has about the mystics. This is one reason why mysticism has been neglected, because the mystics were suspected of not needing what the Church has to offer. This was a simple misunderstanding. Some mystics did have the tendency to withdraw into isolation and forget about the world. But they are the exceptions. True mysticism always has a social component, as we can see in great mystics such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Dag Hammarskjöld. We can even say that mysticism and politics are bound more closely together than is generally realized.

True mysticism is not something individualistic, but rather something that is concerned about the community. This is especially true about their relationship to the Church. The Church is the living requirement for a space which makes a genuine, living Christianity possible. The Church protects the community of believers from falling into a heap of conflicting segments. She guarantees unity and togetherness as well as the possibility for the members joined in her to live together and communicate together. Paul even sees this as a mystical event, when he names her the “mystical body of Christ.”

In this way, the Church and everything in her springs from the Resurrection of Jesus. The Acts of the Apostles confirms this connection in its description of the Pentecost event. Paul also confirms this when he says that besides Peter and James, “five hundred brothers and sisters” saw the risen Christ “all at once.” He sees them as being very important witnesses to the Resurrection.

Renowned exegetes believe that this is an allusion to Pentecost. This means that alongside the Easter appearances to individuals, there were also collective appearances, and especially the great experience of the five hundred. If we bring in the Pentecost experience, then we can say that the emphasis is not so much on the appearance of the risen one. Rather, the emphasis is on a collective ecstasy in which the risen one “as a life-giving spirit” seizes the people gathered together and enlivens and inspires them. This gives us a surprisingly new view of the Church.

The descent of the fiery tongues upon the gathered community has an evident inner relationship to the Annunciation scene described by the Gospel of Luke. There the angel appears to Mary as the messenger of God and speaks about the Spirit whose overshadowing will help Mary conceive the Messiah. At Pentecost, Mary is part of the first community of believers, and the fiery tongues are the same as what had been promised her in the annunciation scene: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most high will overshadow you.” Both scenes stand in the closest connection to each other, so that we may move from the one to the other and then back again.

This means that the Church was born out of an act of divine inspiration. The young community of believers had received and conceived God’s Spirit, or, more aptly expressed, the life-

giving spirit of the risen one. The Spirit becomes the principle of their lives. The Spirit grants them its gifts. We can see this in how Peter comes forward and delivers the great Pentecost sermon that penetrates into the hearts of the hearers. This is a picture of a Church that is enlivened and inspired by the Spirit of God.

**R:** Then the Church is primarily an inner event of the experience of faith. The external, juridical structures are indeed necessary, but they are secondary and must be shaped by this inner reality. I think we can see something more here. When we speak about the Church, we generally think about the hierarchy. We identify the Church with the clergy, while the lay people stand on the periphery. In your theology, all who believe in Christ are subjects with equal rights in this community. All have their own experience of faith, and therefore the views of the laity as an expression of their faith must have a constitutive function in the discovery and formulation of the truth.

**E:** Richard, you have spoken powerfully as a “lay” person, and I as a “theologian” could not agree more. We must make it very clear that there should be no passive members in the Church. All belong to the Church, from the Pope to the humblest believer. The faith community of the Church includes everyone. As you have said, there can be no doubt that the Church should be a spacious room for inspired communication.

From this we have a question: what must we say to the Church to bring this about? If we begin with the situation of the laity, we have to say that there is really a very one-sided channel of communication. The “peak” speaks, and the “base” has the duty to accept what is spoken and submit to it obediently. On the one hand, it is true that the “peak” is responsible for the word of God. Its task is to carry throughout the ages the word of revelation that God spoke through Jesus Christ, to preserve its authenticity, and to defend it from errors. So in actuality, in this sense the Church does the speaking.

At the same time, the base is not a mute recipient of commands, but rather has its own questions. We know that for a living process of communication—just as it is now happening between us—there must be questions from both parties, there must be speaking and listening. Therefore the base must have the opportunity to articulate their doubts, their difficulties, and their objections. At the same time, the peak must take care that it is really understood by the base. It must respond to the questions of the base. This is the only way that the living process of communication will happen, a process that Paul saw as essential to the life of the Church.

**R:** Eugen, I am not satisfied to see the role of the laity as only asking questions. Because of their experience of the world and their experience living the faith, the laity have essential things to say, matters that the teaching office will then present as the official self-understanding of Christianity.

**E:** This is another bold statement from a layman, Richard, one that this theologian can only affirm. We will soon be speaking about the role of art in the Church. The artists have their own genuine access to the mysteries of faith, and what is true of the artists is also true of each plain, simple lay person. The laity have their own experience of their faith, and the Church must listen to their voice. This is in line with the thinking of Pope Paul VI, who spoke about a “household conversation.” This will be the only way for a lively exchange between the peak and the base.

**R:** I believe that there is something even deeper to say about office and its relationship to charisma, something that played an extraordinarily great role in the mind of Paul.

E: Yes, indeed. Paul saw a unity between office and charisma. For him the Church had a twofold structure: office and charisma. The offices were already beginning in his time and were much more differentiated by his school later on. The holders of these offices not only had to fulfill functions, but they were also supposed to be bearers of the Spirit.

Paul saw different kinds of functions and different kinds of charismas. There was the charisma of wisdom, of knowledge, of working miracles, of speech—the ideal being that each holder of an office would also be charismatic. If this was impossible because of human weaknesses, the office holders were at least to listen to the charismatics and incorporate their insights.

R: I think this is now the place to speak once again about the liturgy and especially about prayer in the life of the Church as “the mystical Body of Christ.”

E: You are right, because prayer is the “soul of the Church.” The Church has the great mission of celebrating the nearness of God and of expressing this ever anew in her spiritual life. This is what the liturgy does. Its central event consists in the presence of Christ in the midst of his faithful. The other is what prayer does. Prayer is the heart-felt posed question to God. But this question does not diminish through prayer but rather reaches out to faith. A question seeks an answer, and the person praying only receives an answer when he or she believes. Now the Church is the place where faith lives. The Church awakens faith through proclaiming the words of God’s revelation. She enlivens faith through the dialogue of those gathered together. She structures faith through dogmas and teachings. On the other hand, she also lives from the faith of those joined together in her. As long as faith is alive, the Church does not need to fear enemies. But if faith disappears, her role as a world religion is endangered.

R: Let me now return to my starting point about the necessity of the Church. We now have a definitive answer to this question. She is clearly necessary. But it is also necessary to reflect on the concrete shape the Church should take in the light of your theology.

#### 4. The “Concept” of Christianity

R: We have explored the inner reality of Christianity in some detail. At this point, we should conceptualize our views in order to differentiate Christianity from other religions. However, I must confront myself here! How can we conceptualize Christianity when Christianity involves personal relationships that can never be conceptualized? We can only describe it. In fact, our drive to conceptualize is one of the great problems in the development of Christianity in the West. Nonetheless, the first thing I would like us to tackle is how Christianity differentiates itself from the other world religions.

E: Yes, you have pinpointed a tendency associated with the “concept” of Christianity, which is to find characteristics that differentiate Christianity from the other world religions and show how Christianity relates to them.

This is first of all true of the three Abrahamic religions, which have had a very tense and bloody history among themselves. This desire to differentiate also applies to Buddhism, where Christianity has had a largely conflict-free relationship, and where many people are fascinated by Buddhist forms of meditation. The historical relationship of Christianity to Judaism and Islam

has been tragically different. What are the theoretical reasons for all these different historical relationships?

In terms of the relationship of Christianity to Buddhism, the difference here is that Christianity is not an ascetic, but rather a therapeutic religion. In regard to Judaism, Christianity is not a moralistic, but rather a mystical religion. In regard to Islam, Christianity is a written religion in only a secondary sense, not in a primary sense.

Let us now begin with my last observation. The holy books of Christianity are the writings of the New Testament, and they are a secondary phenomenon. For Jesus himself neither wrote nor commissioned anyone to write. Rather, he proclaimed his message in an exclusively oral way. With this being the case, it is surprising that Christianity developed into a written religion. In fact, Christianity even caught up with the surrounding cultures, beginning with the Jewish culture and continuing through the Greek and Roman cultures with their great literature.

Christianity began with a purely oral culture based entirely on the spoken word. It was only later that Christianity became a literary religion and drew level with these outstanding literary cultures. This might serve to give us a new understanding of what the New Testament means for Christians.

We maintained in our earlier discussions that the Resurrection of Jesus is the core of Christian faith. This fully applies to the origin of the New Testament, because these writings would never have come about if the last word in the life of Jesus had been his bloody and dishonoring death of the cross. No intelligent person would have thought of examining the ideas, thoughts, teachings, and activities of Jesus if he had ultimately been defeated through his death, and even cursed by God. It was only the event of his Resurrection that put everything into a fully new perspective. No, he had not been defeated, and certainly not cursed by God. To the contrary, God had taken him into the divine life and established him as the son of God with power. The consequence was that the story of his life now had to be remembered, recounted, and documented.

The entire New Testament stands in the light of Easter. The Gospels recount the life of Jesus in two ways: the one is biographical, from his birth up to his death and Resurrection; the other is the reverse, from the Resurrection to the beginning of his life. Seen in this way, some of the data of his life are Easter scenes. One of these is the calling of his disciples, even though the Evangelists place this at the beginning of his ministry.

The same applies to the transfiguration, which I want to explore here. At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus calls together his disciples on a mountain. This mountain is none other than the mountain on which the transfiguration took place. The whole New Testament stands in the light of Easter. As James M. Robinson, said, the New Testament is the literary miracle of Easter. Despite all affinity this especially differentiates us from Islam, for Islam is prototypically a written religion. Allah sent the Qu'ran in the night, and its recipient, Mohammed, received the thoughts and decrees of Allah in this book.

**R:** Really, then, all that you have said just now about the New Testament you can summarize by saying that Christ must be our interpreter when we read the New Testament. Is there a similar interpreter for Islam, or is Islam tied to a literal interpretation?

**E:** Islam is tied to a literal interpretation. But we must remember that Islam as a religion is six hundreds years younger than Christianity. Islam still has not had the time to examine its holy

writings the way that Christianity has had. This is due to the Enlightenment. For many Christians and even for many theologians, the Enlightenment was a fiend from hell. But it is the Enlightenment that has given us our modern understanding of Scripture, especially the historical critical method. This understanding developed out of the Enlightenment.

This advantage we now have also presents us with a task: we must help Islam reach a type of Enlightenment so that it will see that the beautiful story about the origin of the Qu'ran is only a legend. In this legend, the recipient, Mohammed, received the Qu'ran in "the night of power," the night in which at the command of Allah, Mohammed was enabled to read and understand the holy text. Our task is to show Islam that for all its great religious quality, the Qu'ran, like the New Testament, is a work of humans. This would help Islam achieve a new understanding of itself and be able to judge things like the sharia in a new light.

**R:** We are really saying here that there can be no religion that renounces reason, because we were constituted thinking beings by God and have the obligation to always use our reason. Do you think that an enlightened interpretation of the Qu'ran would overcome the negative aspects of the image of God in Islam?

**E:** This would have to be the outcome of a lengthy process. I see an enormous task for us here. If I may express myself in this way, we must cultivate a brotherly relationship with Islam.

We also have a contribution to make to Judaism. Let me return here to my thesis. Judaism is a genuinely moralistic religion, while Christianity is a mystical religion. However, we must make one thing very clear. Christianity has morality but does not see that as its core. Judaism found its identity in the knowledge that God had given it the gift of God's law. Consequently, the task of every pious Jew is to meditate day and night on the law in order to gain ever new insights and directives. Christianity is essentially different. It has morality, but its emphasis is on mysticism. Perhaps it is exactly at this point that we can return to the "concept" of Christianity.

As we approach this topic, let us revisit Buddhism, for in some ways Buddha is the exact opposite of Jesus. Both want to improve the lives of human beings. Buddha wants to free people of their cravings for knowledge, esteem, possessions and ever more life. Buddha wants to place humans in a state of nirvana, in a state of complete peacefulness. Jesus chooses the exact opposite path. He wants to see humans rise above their personal states and degradations to a new level of existence, the highest form of existence, namely being a child of God.

As William Wrede pointed out, the whole work and desire of Jesus was to elevate humans to his own level of existence. Of course this does not mean that we become angels, but rather that we are drawn into the heart of God despite our weakness, our proneness to temptations, our sinfulness. These are the components that the concept of Christianity brings to the dialogue with Buddhism.

Let me now go back to one of your objections and say that there is no concept of Christianity in the sense of something arising from philosophical discourse. We are trying to look at Christianity from all sides and delineate its components, even if we do this inchoately. Christianity does not produce a concept, but rather extends an invitation. Christianity wants to win our hearts, Christianity wants to speak to us in such a way that we become more ourselves. So I believe that the "concept" of Christianity really means the process whereby we should let ourselves be encompassed by Christianity. In fact, if we really understand our situation today, we should and even must let ourselves be encompassed by Christianity.

R: The basic conviction behind these thoughts is that our own personal identity is at stake here. We see this in our difference from Buddhism.

E: Absolutely. Buddhism has immersed humans in nirvana, while Christianity raises us to community with God. I think this is the difference between two concepts that basically want the same thing: a peaceful world.

## 5. The New Morality

R: As we are differentiating Christianity from other religions, you stress how Christianity, in contrast to Judaism, is not a moralistic religion as such, but rather a mystical religion that has morality. In the course of its history, however, Christianity did not pay enough attention to this. There was an over-emphasis on morality that is not essentially Christian. We still have the question of how Christian morality deals with evil. Does your new theology give an orientation to Christians on how to think about this problem?

E: You have actually raised two questions here, and I would like to address them one at a time. The first question is how Christianity took a wrong turn in its understanding and viewed itself as a religion of morality, even though this was the privilege of Judaism for thousands of years.

My answer is that Christianity fell into the wake of the Enlightenment. The leading thinker of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, placed religion in the realm of mere reason. Furthermore, for Kant mere reason is practical reason. He saw religion as necessary to keep humans moral. This thesis was unanimously accepted by all the confessions.

But when we compare it with the attitude of Jesus, we see a startling difference: Jesus almost never spoke about private sin. Rather, he publicly identified with the “tax gatherers and sinners.” These are the persons who were suffering from what today we would call structural sin. They found themselves in impossible life situations and therefore at times came into conflict with civil law.

Jesus was more concerned about structural sin than private sin. He wanted a change of perspective that would do away with delusional thinking that created enemies. He wanted to protect his people from the disastrous fantasy of waging a war against the world power of that time, Rome. He knew that such a war would result in “not a stone standing upon a stone.” Therefore he wanted to give humans a new goal in life, so he placed the coming of the kingdom of God in the center of his preaching. This is what I want to say about the moral top-heaviness that Christians have with regard to their own religion.

And now let us address the second question, the problem of evil. Paul especially engaged this problem. His way of thinking is dialectical and often even contains contradictions. So we have two completely contrary views of St. Paul. One of them is in the Epistle to the Romans that views “death as the wages of sin.” We must die because we have inherited Adam’s sin and therefore are sinners ourselves. But in his First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul emphatically says the exact opposite: “Death, where is thy victory? Death, where is thy sting?” Then he adds, “The sting of death is sin.” This can only mean that death prods us to sin and to evil, that death makes us evil. For there is a reality in human life that we can never come to grips with, namely that we must die.

We react very differently to death. One is a type of resignation that seeks to get around death by denying it. In fact, society today is masterful at doing this. The other is reactive and consists in the tendency to draw others into death with us, if not physically, then at least in desire.

At the end of the New Testament we find the words: "Whoever hates a brother or sister is a murderer." This refers to a desire to snatch a person from life and give him over to death. It refers to those people who do not want to die alone, but rather want to take as many as possible with them into their catastrophe. This is the other, less well known idea of Paul, and shows us the root of evil.

R: We can see that Christianity, or more precisely, the Church, developed a wrong approach to two central issues relatively early in her history. If we are going to change the course of its history, we have to ask how this happened in the first place. We must have courage here to criticize our tradition. Because we have not only positive traditions, but also negative traditions that go right to the core of Christianity. What do you think is the reason for this negativity?

E: I fully agree with you. You have already criticized various theological developments. What you are saying here does not deal with the theological exposition of faith, but rather with the course taken by tradition. We definitely need a revisioning here, because some of the things that have stolen into tradition actually contradict the message of Jesus. An especially important one is the dualism of antiquity. It was the Gnostic doctrine which existed as a parallel tradition in the time of Jesus.

The Gnostics believed in a dualistic humanity and a dualistic divinity. According to them, humans were a mixture of good and evil. Matter was the evil part, whereas the spirit was the bright and good part. The tradition of Jesus fought with the tradition of the Gnostics for a long time. Church fathers like Irenaeus of Lyon fought against the Gnostics valiantly. Despite this, the views of the Gnostics slipped under the skin of the Christian tradition. This led to a devaluation of the physical dimension, especially the sexual dimension. In the history of culture, this tendency has deeply influenced our consciousness. As critics of tradition, I think we should begin right here to extirpate this utterly unchristian development.

R: The newest research has shown that at least since the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas recognized the dangers of this neo-Platonic/Augustinian dualism and confronted it as being unchristian.

Now, are there other reasons for this unchristian approach? Were there other tendencies that helped this view to become incorporated into tradition?

E: There are certainly other tendencies, for example, the place accorded to force in the Church's development. Force always involves repression. The people who can be repressed most easily are those who have been indoctrinated and thus formed a faulty conscience. This will be a broad field for our criticism of tradition. But now I would like to concentrate on positive alternatives. I believe that we cannot have a new morality by imposing more laws and commands but rather by taking a whole new path.

R: And what would that path be?

E: I found that path at the end of the Epistle to the Romans. There Paul gives us his final and most important reflections from all his wrestling with the problem of evil. However, there has been a corruption of this text by something that was politically motivated. It is a passage that

called upon the recipients of this epistle to show their solidarity with the powers of the State that properly carries a sword with which to punish the evil doers.

I have always stressed that it is impossible for Paul to have written this text. For if he had done so, he would have put his very life in danger because he was actually promoting “an illegal religion” as seen by the Romans. He would have been delivering his head to the sword. We must remove this passage as something non-Pauline.

When we do that, we then have a unified passage from the end of Chapter 12 to the beginning of Chapter 13. The passage culminates in the idea that there is something more powerful than laws and commandments to preserve us from evil. In other words, there is something in ourselves that makes it impossible for us to desire and commit evil. It is the royal way of “immunization” against evil.

I believe that this is an immunization that the Church has not yet discovered, much less put into practice. But we must dare to see if humans today are ready to accept the challenge of this immunization. It consists in the knowledge that God loves us and has even poured divine love into our hearts. When we are immunized in this way, then we are not able to even wish others evil.

R: One thing is clear: laws and commands have not made us better. Therefore it would be much better to offer this principle of immunization and see if it is realizable. Would this not amount to an essential change in the situation of the whole world itself?

E: I can well imagine that this would happen. It of course is bound up with the main theme of new theology, namely with Christ’s revelation that God is unconditional love. This theme would give the new morality a real possibility of success. If the people who want to get the most out of their lives accept this path, they will find that they are able to deal with the problems of life much better than when they tried to wrestle valiantly with evil in the old way.

R: This means that in the realm of morality, too, Christianity is just beginning to be effective in the world.

E: This is certainly one of my themes. I think that Christianity is still wearing children’s shoes. This is the way it had to be as long as the Church was using force or approving it, because it was not living from the heart of the Gospel. It was only with the Second Vatican Council that Christianity said goodbye to force and hello to dialogue. That then gave us the opportunity to see into the heart of Christianity and live from it.

R: We are also aware that a Council has a long and volatile history of effectiveness.

E: Absolutely, Richard!

## 6. Art as Witness to Faith

**R:** Eugen, we know that Christian thinking and the Christian experience of life have powerfully shaped the culture and art of the West. Is this accidental, perhaps something that is even opposed to the essence of Christianity? Or is this an essential expression of Christianity so that it is imperative to incorporate art into the proclamation of the Gospel? There have been different opinions about this in the course of history. What does new theology say about this?

**E:** At first Christianity was very reserved about art. This came from the Old Testament with its prohibition against images. Judaism had this prohibition, but so did Islam very powerfully, and this had disastrous repercussions for Christianity. But Christianity fundamentally cast away this prohibition when Paul called Christ “the image of God.” The Epistle to the Colossians strongly reinforced Paul’s view. The Gospel of John also applies here. There Jesus says, “Who has seen me, has also seen the father.” This solidified the break with the Old Testament prohibition against images. Furthermore, the young Christian community needed to fortify their belief with the help of paintings. In the paintings in the catacombs, we see pictures of the three young men in the fiery furnace and Jonas coming out of the belly of the whale. The young Christian community was experiencing fierce persecution at the time. With the help of these paintings they were able to portray the vital principle of their faith: the Resurrection of Jesus. Because this is what these symbols were really portraying.

**R:** I think we can develop this theme further. According to the understanding of the Judeo-Christian tradition, humans consist of a fundamental unity of spirit and matter. This means that in humans there is nothing that is purely spiritual nor anything that is purely material; rather, both dimensions are intertwined. Therefore, when we want to proclaim the message of Jesus, then all of our human capacities must be involved—even though this might at first strike us as unlikely. We must use all the ways at our disposal to promote understanding if we are to effectively proclaim the Gospel.

**E:** We see a confirmation of your view when we examine the nature of language. We usually think that we speak in concepts. But when we examine this more closely, we see that our concepts are rooted in sense experiences. Paul confirms this when he speaks about his experience of Easter. He begins by saying that the mystery of the son of God was spoken into his heart in the Damascus experience. Then he adds that he had seen the divine majesty shining through the countenance of the risen one. This clearly brings out the visual element. We must always take into account that we are not only creatures of abstraction, but also sensuous creatures.

**R:** Once again we need to look critically at our history. Christianity has developed teachings, and teachings only address the intellect; they exclude all the other dimensions. Maybe this is a reason that Christianity is no longer being received.

**E:** This brings us to something very important. We have never understood the full efficacy of the visual, especially as a witness to faith. Yet we are living in an alarming pastoral situation. There are now too few of us who are proclaiming the faith, whether from our calling or from personal initiative. On the other hand, art is both a rich and nuanced witness to faith. Therefore, we should employ art not only as something that illustrates faith, but also promotes it. We should regard art as an enduring witness to faith.

R: An argument against this is the general feeling that art cannot express the teachings of dogma.

E: This is a very good observation. However, the gifted artists have their own intuitive access to the mysteries. This is the deepest core of Christian art. In fact, there are works of art that go beyond what is presented in the texts.

Let me offer an example. The last work Raffael painted was the transfiguration of Christ. This work, in fact, stood at the head of his bier. For the first time ever, it showed Christ elevated in the air. Even though the text itself did not speak about this elevation, the work expressed the meaning of the text in a most suggestive way. Furthermore, this work had a profound influence on the development of art. Ever since this work, artists present Christ as hovering above the mountain of the transfiguration. In other words, Raffael has influenced us how to see and how to experience the transfiguration. This shows how the great artists can contribute to our understanding of our faith.

R: This is plausible, but what we have here is a painting that relates to a text, to a statement. Now what about the witness of music? I know that you are an enthusiastic fan of the music of Ludwig van Beethoven. Would you like to comment on this?

E: Music is undoubtedly the language that is universally understood despite all the different idioms. I think that even the preliminary way in which people can understand European cultures will be found in music. There is a remarkable fact about Beethoven that he not only produced religious music but even intended it to deepen our awareness. He declared his *Missa solemnis* to be the masterpiece of all his work. And he expressly said that he wanted to awaken religious feelings in his singers and listeners that no preacher or author could.

Beethoven was saying that the artists have their own access to the religious mysteries. We directly experience this in the *Missa solemnis* when the “Et incarnatus est” of the Creed blooms like a mystical rose, or when the tenor intones the “Et homo factus est” in such a stunning way. These are expressions of an intensity that confirm the power of the artists to deepen awareness. Yes, Richard, I believe that we have to place music alongside the visual arts as witnesses to faith.

R: Eugen, this brings us back to your view that Christianity is essentially a mystical religion, a religion of inner experience. Perhaps we should also consider a third aspect here: literature, for literature can articulate Christian dimensions in a very clear way.

E: Yes, literature shows how religious artists arrive at their intuitions. In fact, many literary works begin with a visionary experience. This has happened both in theology and philosophy.

For example, Anselm of Canterbury developed his proof for the existence of God after he had had a visionary experience. Nicholas of Cusa said that on a trip from Constantinople to Greece he had had a visionary experience that led him to write his *Docta ignorantia*. Dante speaks about his wonderful vision of Beatrice that enabled him to write things about a woman that had never been written before.

We find this throughout the whole history of literature. Religious literature certainly confirms what we have spoken about as the artists’ witness to faith. This witness originates in a type of visionary intuition that leads the artists to a creative relationship to the religious mysteries. This creativity causes them to express things that might shock us when we first encounter them, yet they are really contributing to our developing a deeper appreciation of our faith.

Earlier you mentioned a name that I would like to bring in here: Gertrud von le Fort. Her most important work, *The Veil of Veronica*, was attacked at first. Today, however, we see it as a work of literature that leads us into the depths of Christian mysticism. The same can be said of Georges Bernanos and of Werner Bergengruen, to mention a few names of Christian literature. The same can be said of some other works, for example, the Legends of William Faulkner that transport the passion of Jesus into an event in the First World War. Then there is also all the modern world literature that presents the life of Jesus in a literary manner.

R: All this is really proof that we must examine the experience of faith—including that of the laity—to see the essential impulses they give us for the way the Church proclaims the faith.

E: I am thinking here of something my teacher, the late Archbishop Eugen Seiterich said. He stressed that the infallible expression of the faith of the people in the Church was essential for the infallible faith of the Church. Church teaching has to be supported by the acceptance of the infallible believers. Both constitute an inseparable unity. Therefore the Church must always take into account the faith experience of the Church's people, just as that experience has to rely on the Church's magisterium for its orientation.

R: We must certainly do this in the future.

E: I hope that we have made a small contribution to this.

## 7. The Consequences for People and for Faith

R: In this series of conversations we have attempted to explore your new theology as a theology for the future. Rather than tackle any particular problem at first, you went right to the root of Christianity, which is Jesus Christ. You developed your whole theology around him, as drawing the consequences from the one essential principle. An old philosophical principle states that a small mistake at the beginning leads to huge mistakes at the end.

As we look at the last two thousand years of the history of the Church, we come to the sober realization that at the very beginning of Christianity not only one small error crept in, but even some grave mistakes that led to an alienation in Christian self-understanding. The decisive message of Jesus, that God was a father of unconditional love—something that basically distinguishes Christianity from all other religions—was lost very early on. People regressed to the old notion of God as someone who at times threatens and at times loves, an ambivalent God, in other words, who constantly oppresses us. As we look at the tradition and interpretation of Christianity, there is a lot that needs to be corrected and revisioned. And there are other things that must simply be discarded from Christianity. What do you see as the most important points here?

E: The most decisive thing will be to return to the Christian message based on what Jesus revealed about God. My basic theme is that Jesus would not have had to come on earth, were he to only slightly improve what people already knew about God. There is only one way that the stunning adventure of the Incarnation could be worthwhile. Here is what it is.

The one who comes from the heart of God and reveals God to humankind proclaims something that no philosopher could have thought, no mystic could have intuited, no prophet could have spoken about. It is something that completely surprises humankind.

People were imprisoned in a notion of an ambivalent God because of their own historical experiences that oscillated between a few periods of light and many periods of darkness. This experience led them to regress to a split view of God, whereby God would help and console at times, and then mercilessly punish at other times. Christianity even in its very beginnings regressed back to this notion of the ambivalent God of antiquity.

On the other hand, we must try to imagine how difficult it was to accept this new God of Jesus Christ. Because it was a complete surprise to everyone. Jesus was speaking to us about a relationship to a God that had only been dimly seen by the prophets. Therefore there can be no surprise that under the pressure of the persecutions, the thought returned of a wrathful and punishing God like the one conjured up by the Apocalypse.

Now let us consider what must change or be discarded when we try to return to the central discovery of God by Jesus. The first thing is our relationship to misfortune. For centuries we have heard that if we become sick, if we have bad luck, if we have a personal or career setback, then this must be a punishment from God. This creates a tremendous distance between the punishing God and the persons who are suffering, so the sufferers are thrown back upon themselves radically and abandoned.

Simone Weil has shown that the exact opposite is true. God does not reject sufferers, but rather God bends towards them in a special manner and surrounds them with a great love. Sufferers then gain a new relationship to their suffering and thereby understand that their suffering has meaning. We especially find meaning when we feel raised up and protected. And where can we feel raised up better than in the hands of a loving God. So this is the first notion that must be revised. Away with the old theology of punishment! It is unworthy of God, and it harms us.

**R:** Why has this old theology of punishment lasted so long, and why has it taken us so long to see its negativity?

**E:** I will answer your question by returning once again to one of my themes. As long as the Church used force or approved it, the center—the heart—of Christianity remained hidden. Because force threw a shroud over the center of Christianity. I believe that this shroud has been torn away so that we have a chance to return to the heart of Christianity.

**R:** Your theme is very liberating, but it still must deal with other objections. Now, in the New Testament we read about the sacrificial death of Jesus, and in theological tradition we hear about the satisfaction and atonement that Jesus had to offer his father through his terrible suffering. Are not these actually core ideas of Christianity?

**E:** They would be core ideas if Jesus had accepted his passion and death on the cross in the belief that he had to die a sacrificial death. But that simply is not the case. Jesus has given us the authentic meaning of his death at the Last Supper—something that unfortunately is still so little understood. He breaks the bread, and this symbolizes his cruel death on the cross. Then he says, “Take this and eat, for this is what I am for you.” This is actually the real meaning of “This is my body.” This means that through his death he surrenders his individual existence so that as a mystical person he can be with everyone and in everyone.

Through this he is giving a wholly different meaning to his death on the cross from that of the satisfaction theory. If people insist on maintaining the old view of Christ’s death on the cross as a death of atonement and satisfaction, then behind it is a God who demands from God’s own

self more than God demanded from Abraham. We would then have to ask what kind of satisfaction can God find in the agony of God's divine son. And what would this have to do with the sins of the world? How could these sufferings of the crucified one take away guilt?

No, the cross is not a deed of satisfaction, but rather the crowning proof of Christ's love. The beginning of Chapter 13 of the Gospel of John says: "Because he loved his own, he loved them to the end." This is the authentic meaning of Christ's words at the Last Supper, spoken in his marvelous formulation. His death was the crowning work of love that he could give to the world. Through his death he showed us in the most shocking way that his God was the God of love.

**R:** Your theological approach to Jesus and his image of God opens up a whole new perspective. It means that we have to read the New Testament in a new and critical way when we apply this basic view of Jesus here. We must also subject tradition and the Church's teachings to this critical thinking.

This will have serious consequences. We need only think of the sacrificial death theory which you have refuted so conclusively. Apart from the problems of systematic theology, we will have to rewrite all the liturgical books.

**E:** That is not absolutely necessary. But we will have to read them in a new way. We must uncover the new meaning contained in the old sentences. Now, I would like to come back to what you said about a rereading of the New Testament. I think it is a fundamental error to equate the New Testament with divine revelation. Rather, it is a literary recording of divine revelation. And that is something essentially different. This process of writing down the divine revelation was very complicated, so we should not be surprised to find that errors have crept into the New Testament.

But I have a solution. The divine revelation here did not take place in laws, as it did for Judaism, nor in a book, as it did for Islam, but rather in the corporeal appearance of the son of God become man. He is the corporeal appearance of God, the self-sharing of God, and the revelation of God.

At the same time, this raises a serious problem that we must think about, namely, how can we interpret a person? How can we read a face, interpret a gesture, understand the meaning of a person's whole life? We need a new type of "hermeneutics of the person."

Now let us look at another matter that concerns our approach to the New Testament. If we are to truly understand the New Testament, then we must call upon Jesus as the interpreter's guide of each sentence there. When we do this, as I have said several times, then some of the statements lose their frightening quality and become more insignificant, while others that we have overlooked suddenly glow with meaning. This is a "hermeneutics of the future," towards which we are traveling.

This brings us to a final revisioning. If Christians are to find new joy in their faith, then all the confessions must abandon their pedagogy of anxiety, something that traumatizes many people and drives others away. We must replace it with an atmosphere of encouragement and trust, because it is only in that way that Christianity will win the battle for the future.

**R:** In this way, Eugen, Christianity is the answer to our existential situation. And because we can be human in only a historical framework, Christianity also has to look at us with a historical awareness, responding to our situation and showing us meaning.

E: Absolutely, Richard, this is the core of new theology. Christianity is the unsurpassable answer to our quest for meaning. I would like to express it a bit differently, because Christianity has been experienced again and again as bearing a message of threats and criticism of people. My belief is that Christianity is God's greatest statement of love for the world. Let's just imagine what it means for the world to think that God is turning to it in love. Then this world can blossom, and we can breathe. Then we can hope, and then we can be happy about our life and especially our faith. This is the goal of new theology, or—if you wish—the theology for the future.

II.

Richard Heinzmann:

From a System to Lived Experience.

The Basic Views of the Theologian Eugen Biser



## Introduction

“Get rid of a concept here, and simply substitute a reality in its place—and Christianity in its entirety fades into nothing.” This sentence is found in *Der Antichrist. Fluch auf das Christentum* (*The Antichrist. A Curse upon Christianity*) from Friedrich Nietzsche (Kritische Studienausgabe Bd. 6, S. 212, Nr. 39), and it summarizes his concern. Nietzsche centralizes in this treatise his radical, destructive critique of Christianity. He argues that in the course of history, especially under the influence of a Platonic-idealistic philosophy, Christian reality more and more disappeared. And it was replaced by teachings, by a more or less closed system of concepts and dogmatic fictions. The special weight of this accusation lies in the fact that it is not directed against any particular object of Christian faith, but rather against Christianity itself. Because of such a generalization, this accusation is certainly exaggerated, but we cannot disregard it simply by seeing it as a bad-will caricature and hate-filled calumny. For it contains a certain amount of validity.

### I.

Eugen Biser has taken up this challenge like no other theologian. For all its thematic variety, his immense philosophical and theological work converges in the concern to rescue Christianity from an abstract and closed system of teachings and return it to its proper identity. This is the only way to refute the attacks of Nietzsche and all the other critics of religion. In this process of a theological revisioning and renewing—and this is extraordinarily important—Biser sees Nietzsche less of an opponent to be vanquished, and more as a partner in dialogue who succeeds to call in question his own life as a Christian. By taking seriously Nietzsche's objections—as demonstrated in *Nietzsche—Zerstoerer oder Erneuerer des Christentums?* (*Nietzsche—A Destroyer or Renewer of Christianity?*), Darmstadt 2002—Biser endeavors to understand anew and to re-explain what it means to be a Christian.

Nietzsche hoped for a reality that would overthrow the rigid Christian system with its ideology of a hereafter that was negating the world. But in the passage cited above, he does not pursue this thought; it remains ambivalent. However, it was concerned about two things: the real life experience of actual human beings, and the figure of Jesus, who, according to Nietzsche, was the only real Christian.

The philosophy and theology of Eugen Biser deal with the same two issues: with ourselves, as we suffer from anxiety in our secular world, and with Jesus and his great contribution in proclaiming a God of unconditional love. Human beings and Jesus are the two focal points of an ellipse to which everything relates, and that are inextricably bound up with each other.

This approach not only gives us a hermeneutic access to the work of Eugen Biser, but moreover it conveys a sense of Biser's decision that has stamped all his work. First, it was a decision to leave the realm of Greek philosophy with its preoccupation with questions about the nature of being, the universal, and the unchangeable structures. Second, rather than asking about the essence of Christianity, it was a decision to explore Christian reality—or to put it more

precisely—to explore what is essential for an authentic Christian life. This uncovers the basic, genuine Judeo-Christian categories of subjectivity and personhood. These categories are the only ones that help us understand ourselves in the unfolding of our lives.

Within this framework, Biser is an existentialist philosopher and “concrete theologian” as he thinks about Christianity in a twofold way. In his search for a Christian identity, he not only tries to understand Christian life in a new way, but moreover he does this in a specifically Christian thought form where it is not the universal, but rather the singularity and value of a person that is the most important. All the way through, Biser thinks in the framework of salvation history. He does not think about God in a purely philosophical way, not even once.

This analysis regards human life in a new way. Biser uses an analysis of existence, a “modal anthropology,” that does not deal with humans in general, but rather with us in our concrete, actual life situations. It is an approach to find meaning for each individual, not for people in general. This is an approach you can read in Biser’s *Der Mensch—das uneingeloeste Versprechen. Entwurf einer Modalanthropologie (The Human Being—the Unrealized Promise. An Outline for a Modal Anthropology)*, Duesseldorf 1995, as well as in *Ist der Mensch, was er sein kann? Eine anthropologische Reflexion (Are humans actually all that they can be? An Anthropological Reflection)*, in: *Stimmen der Zeit* 199 (1981), 291–300, 292, or in: *Menschsein in Anfechtung und Widerspruch (Being Human Amidst Challenges and Contradictions)*, Duesseldorf 1980, pp. 11 ff. In this treatments Biser asks about the “where” of a person, “about the person’s dwelling, the person’s home, the person’s place of being protected and being safe,” and the guiding methodological theme is the “impossibility of being human today.”

In this theological approach, the analysis of existence receives much attention. Revelation addresses human beings, so for a proper understanding of God’s self-disclosure in Jesus, there has to be a proper understanding of what it means to be a human being. The key to understanding the message of Christ is the people being addressed. Theology is not reduced to anthropology here, but rather the empirical dimension—and as a consequence the reality—are given more respect. Up to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) the approach of systematic theology was to proceed only deductively and disregard experience and concrete, actual living. We now realize the many positive implications of a different approach to Christian theology that proceeds along the inductive, a posteriori path. Biser sees as a very grave distortion of contemporary Christianity the way that the addressees of Revelation were ignored in favor of a false, essentialist view of being human.

If there is no point of contact in one’s own personal existence, then all words, including the words of God, remain exterior and shut out, for they do not reach the addressees. For this reason we should pay special attention to the hermeneutics of Eugen Biser with his emphasis on the unity of Revelation and anthropology. An analysis of existence and an understanding of Revelation are intertwined. Motivation to believe ultimately is rooted in our disturbed existence. This disturbed existence contains and leads to the quest for meaning, a quest that leads us to ask about God. From this point of view we can see Revelation as giving us a helpful answer, as the self-disclosure of God helping us to understand the Godhead. This kind of disclosure is not conveyed to us in a system of truths, a deposit of faith—*depositum fidei*—like a type of report. Rather, it is conveyed in our experiencing the phenomena that invite us to believe.

When we examine the basic structure of belief, we see that Eugen Biser emphatically sees Christianity as a mystical religion in the sense of inner experience. In contrast to the actual moral top-heaviness in which the Church presents itself, we can then see that Christianity is not a moral religion as such, but rather it has a moral mission. Biser is not concerned with “moral education so much as our being raised up to become a child of God.” In its very heart, Christianity “is a mystical religion sharing in a living community with its founder and destined for an on-going life in a community of believers,” as Biser exemplifies in *An der Schwelle zum dritten Jahrtausend—wird dem Christentum der Einzug gelingen? (On the Threshold of the Third Millennium—will Christianity be able to enter it?)*, Hamburg 1996, p. 18. Another criterion comes into play here. This is the therapeutic function of a faith that gives us a meaning to our life that can overcome the anxiety brought about by the dreadful knowledge of our mortality.

A strong connection to reality for us is the knowledge that Christianity is not primarily a written religion. All the texts, including the normative ones, must always be read and interpreted from the central object of their concern. The New Testament came into existence as the eye witnesses were dying off and also as Christianity was spreading throughout the world. This gave “a freedom to the Scriptures that would have been impossible if they had been dictated by God. It is a freedom regarding the interpretation of these texts, perhaps even a freedom of revising and revisioning these texts—a freedom from which Christian theology sprang and lives in the present.” (Ibid., p. 9) One of the factors that Eugen Biser sees in the crisis of contemporary Christianity is the hermeneutic equating of Scripture with Revelation and the corresponding tendencies and dangers of a traditionalism.

This personal-existential basic structure of the act of belief results in what Biser has diagnosed as the beginnings of a change in faith which requires understanding in place of obedience, experience in the place of declarations, and responsibility in the place of performance. Biser explains this extensively in *Die glaubensgeschichtliche Wende. Eine Positionsbestimmung (The Historical Change in Faith. A Position Paper)*, Graz 1986, and in *Glaubensprognose. Orientierung in postsäkularistischer Zeit (A Prognosis for Faith: An Orientation in a Post-Secular Time)*, Graz 1991.

True faith does not consist in giving assent to declarations or statements, but rather belief in a living “God who in the person and life of Jesus gave understanding of the divine self in a way that both surpasses all the possibilities of verbalization while also containing all these possibilities.” (On the Threshold, p. 20) In *Das Antlitz. Eine Christologie von innen (The Countenance: A Christology From Within)*, Duesseldorf 1999, Biser develops—as the subtitle indicates—his “Christology from within.” In this Christology, faith is “a life-long attempt to understand God, transmitted by the only mediator between God and human beings, Jesus Christ,” so Biser in *Hat der Glaube eine Zukunft? Das Christentum auf dem Weg ins 3. Jahrtausend (Does Faith Have a Future? Christianity on the Way in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium)*, in: zur Debatte. Themes of the Catholic Academy of Bavaria 25 (1995), 13–16, 13. In this context Biser fruitfully explores the old Augustinian thought of Christ as the inner teacher.

As Jesus has been rediscovered in the faith awareness of the present—both by believers and unbelievers—there has been a radical change “from a Christology of authority into one of solidarity and identity” (On the Threshold, p. 15). Two outstanding publications on this theme in

our century have impressively shown this change in perspective. While the best known work of Romano Guardini bore the title *The Lord*, Eugen Biser entitled his Christology *The Helper: Der Helfer. Eine Vergegenwaertigung Jesu (A Visualization of Jesus)*, Muenchen 1973. This change in perspective in Christology must be incorporated as a corrective criterion for the understanding of the Church and her hierarchical structure. There is a growing alienation between the peak of the Church and her base that could lead to a “vertical schism.” Biser sees this as a structural disturbance that requires an urgent remedy.

The most characteristic feature of Christianity, and something that differentiates it from all other comparable religions, is its singular understanding of God, a God whom Jesus experienced and preached as a father of unconditional love. This is able to extirpate from our hearts anxiety around God, which is the most disastrous of all our anxieties. This means both liberation and redemption. Eugen Biser is convinced that Jesus “in his teaching and activities in no way confirmed what humans have always expected and feared from God. Their notion of God was a projection based on the historical human experience of life developed over many centuries and projected onto the mystery of God. Jesus came to unmask this projection and remove the veil from this mystery that had been woven out of longing and anxiety. He did this by taking away the shadow from the notion of a God who stirred in us anxiety and terror. And he did this by unsealing the depths of God whereby he was able to reveal the countenance of a father of unconditional love, a father whom he could address with the reverent and tender name of Abba. Through this he showed himself to be the greatest revolutionary in the history of religion,” as Biser conclusively develops in *Die Forderung der Stunde (The Demands of the Hour)*, in: zur debatte. Themes of the Catholic Academy of Bavaria 27 (1997), 6–8, 7.

The thought of Eugen Biser is unassailably anchored in this message of Jesus. His theology arises from it with an inner necessity. Our disturbance in our relationship to ourselves is the result of a notion of God that is both fascinating and threatening us. To the extent that Christianity can convey to us its understanding of God, it contains the answer to the question—arising out of anxiety—of the ultimate meaning of our lives, because to find our identity in Christ, and with Christ in God, also means overcoming death and all the other anxieties.

When we leave the concretized faith teachings of an abstract system and return to the reality of faith in a dialogical enterprise, then theology is able to make its contribution to the problem of establishing a new relationship between faith and language. This brings us to another main focus of the theological work of Eugen Biser.

In far-ranging and in-depth-probing analyses and reflections, he has explored language theory in general and the theology of language in particular with the goal of “showing that the language of Revelation is the appropriate language of our time,” so Biser in *Theologische Sprachtheorie und Hermeneutik (A Theological Theory of Language and Hermeneutics)*, Muenchen 1970, p. 568, and also in *Religioese Sprachbarrieren. Aufbau einer Logaporetik (Religious Language Barriers. Constructing a Logaporetik)*, Muenchen 1970. There he explains, that the language of Revelation is also the appropriate language to destroy “religious language barriers.” At this point we must remember that Eugen Biser is also a preacher who has not only thought about these problems but has also indefatigably made his insights available to countless listeners with the greatest acceptance.

## II.

In the strict sense of the word, the most important contribution of Biser in the decisive transformation from a system of belief into experienced reality is his insistence that we return to the profoundly neglected center, the heart, of the Gospel. This means a relativization in a positive and necessary sense and has nothing to do with arbitrariness whether in the dogmatic or moral realms. It primarily has to do with the structure of the teaching establishment. We can no longer hold onto a system that was constructed by the concepts and idealistic teachings formulated by Greek philosophy—with their immanent requirement of absolute validity and their intrinsic mechanistic determinism concerning the historical facts of life. This is an epistemological break with a long and honorable tradition, and the effects of this break will not remain confined within the domain of specialized theology. This will unavoidably irritate some people.

Those of us who are accustomed to equating the expressions of faith with the contents of faith will at first find it very hard to see the difference between the reality and the way this reality is expressed. Biser formulates it as our stepping through the façade of the cathedral of belief and entering into the interior of the cathedral. Nothing is lost in this process, but everything appears in a whole new light, because everything is now centered on God. This involves great changes. There was much in the history of the concretization of Christian belief that pushed its way into the foreground. This will now find its proper place on the periphery and lose its influence so that the center, the heart, of the Gospel can be seen as the essential. There are still many problem areas which are played up and which some of us think we need to defend in order to assure the solidity of Christian identity. Well, they will simply disappear as being insignificant; that will be the only way they are resolved adequately. If we are being theologically responsible, then we will not lose anything valuable from our tradition, but rather we will throw away the heteronomous ballast that was acquired in the course of history. At the same time, this approach of interiority will allow us to take a fresh look at serious theological problems. We will especially see that many theological controversies were actually a battle over preconceived philosophical conceptions and the linguistic formulations derived from them. They were not a battle over the real issues at all. This approach of interiority to the mysteries of faith will help ecumenical discussions go beyond the formulations to the issues themselves and more readily lead to a consensus. For Biser thinks less about the differences of dogmatic formulations and more about the basic ground of Christian reality.

This will entail necessary corrections of certain Christian teachings. At the top of the list Biser places the so-called satisfaction theory, because it has introduced downright sadistic elements into the Christian image of God. This theory maintains that God demands the horrible death of God's own son as atonement so that God may receive satisfaction for the sins and guilt of the human race. This theory stands in diametrical opposition to the God of love whom Jesus preached, and it reinforces the erroneous assumption that Christianity is an ascetical religion based on sacrificial thinking. This is actually a theologoumenon that is a popular, simplistic view from the Middle Ages that was a socio-culturally conditioned, impracticable attempt to explain Redemption. It has done much to darken the real message of Christianity. These few examples might serve to explain what we mean by necessary corrections.

The people who identify some of the teachings of the Church with Christianity itself might very well see the life's work of Eugen Biser as contributing to the destruction of Christianity. Some voices in this regard have already been heard. But there is no reason for us to become upset, because this is a sign of radical changes in our time, as the history of theology teaches us.

It is self-evident that Eugen Biser stands in the great tradition of Western theology. He knows its ways, detours, and occasional deviations. Strongly influenced by Søren Kierkegaard, he has adopted the impulses of our century, especially from the Second Vatican Council. He has incorporated them into his work with all his theological competence, and he has responsibly thought through all the theological implications. This is what gives such eminent status to his theology. It is not an exaggeration to say that the life's work of Eugen Biser signals an epochal turn in Western theology. It is a return to its origins—which by the same token is a decisive step into the future.

### III.

To speak about the future is to introduce an essential element into any assessment of the work of Eugen Biser. Combining great empathy with unsparing frankness, Eugen Biser has applied his method of analytic and diagnostic research to the crisis of identity and meaning which affects us today and concerns both the Church and society. He adopts Nietzsche's expression of "a spirit of heaviness" to characterize the spiritual atmosphere we live in with its oppressive expressions and its perturbing developments: freedom has been chained through external norms, the Gospel has been changed into a law book, dialogue has been replaced by the diction of decrees, the salvation event has been instrumentalized, the religious act as such is confused with achievement, there is the belief that misfortune is willed by God and is therefore especially meritorious, spontaneity has been immobilized, and the impulse toward hope has been dried up, as Biser describes perspicaciously in *Glaubenserweckung. Das Christentum auf der Suche nach seiner Identität* (*Awakening the Faith. Christianity in Search of its Identity*), in: *Stimmen der Zeit* 215 (1997), 171–182, 172.

Biser believes that the Church has played a part in this immobilization "through suggesting that certain religious anxieties, especially anxieties about one's conscience and punishments" (*ibid.*) will help move people to accept the message of salvation. Biser absolutely confronts this attitude by proclaiming insistently that the core of Christianity is the message from God as an unconditionally loving father, a message destined to overcome anxiety and to provide ultimate meaning for our lives. He is making us aware of a dimension in Christianity that has been hidden for a long time.

This insight applies to more than Christianity, for it has encompassing significance, because "the crisis of Christianity is synonymous with the human crisis, whereby the Christian's search for identity mirrors the human search. We hope that when Christianity recovers its central identity, then it can help other human beings with their identity crisis. We do not think that we are hoping for too much, because the paradox for humanity is that because of our many-faceted

conditionality, we can only find contentment in the unconditional. God must share a self-revelation with us and say to us in the twofold meaning of the word 'who God is'. When this happens, we are able to find a definitive identity and meaning." (Ibid., pp. 173 ff.)

Ultimately, this is what is so fascinating about the thought and work of Eugen Biser. Drawing on his understanding of Christian reality, he conveys to us hope and trust in the path to the future.

## Curricula Vitae

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