Concordia Seminary - Saint Louis
Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary

Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation Concordia Seminary Scholarship

2-1-2012

# Christian Justification after Nihilism

Joel Meyer
*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*, meyerj@csl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.csl.edu/phd

Part of the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

## Recommended Citation

Meyer, Joel, "Christian Justification after Nihilism" (2012). *Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation*. 118.
https://scholar.csl.edu/phd/118

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Concordia Seminary Scholarship at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

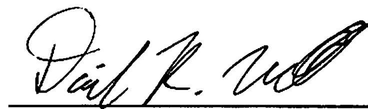
CHRISTIAN JUSTIFICATION AFTER NIHILISM

---

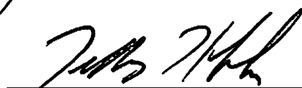
A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Systematic Theology
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

---

By
Joel P. Meyer
February 2012

Approved by 
Dr. David R. Maxwell Advisor

Dr. Joel D. Biermann Reader


Dr. Jeffrey J. Kloha Reader

© 2012 by Joel Phillip Meyer. All rights reserved.

To my parents

But if anyone persists in investigating the reason for that [hidden] will, refusing to pay heed to our warning, we let him go on and fight with God like the Giants, while we wait to see what triumphs he will bring back, certain that he will do no harm to our cause and no good to his own.

Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*

## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .......... vii

ABSTRACT .......... viii

INTRODUCTION .......... 1

Chapter

1. NORMAL NIHILISM AND THE QUESTION OF JUSTIFICATION .......... 15

    Introducing Nihilism as a Problem .......... 17

    Normal Nihilism and the Question of Justification .......... 27

    Assessing Edwards .......... 47

2. JOHN MILBANK'S RESPONSE .......... 57

    The Nihilism of *Theology and Social Theory* .......... 62

    Beyond Nihilism? .......... 80

    Ontology or Listening to Jesus; Or, Milbank or Hauerwas? .......... 86

3. STANLEY HAUERWAS' RESPONSE .......... 88

    Truth and Non-Violence in *The Peaceable Kingdom* .......... 94

    Christian Peaceableness and Nihilist Irony .......... 111

4. GOD AFTER NIHILISM .......... 119

    Luther versus Erasmus .......... 122

    God after Nihilism .......... 148

5. JESUS AFTER NIHILISM .......... 155

    Why Jesus? Three Nihilistic Answers .......... 157

    On Being a Theologian of the Cross .......... 169

The Apostolic Approach ........ 177

6. HOLY SCRIPTURE AFTER NIHILISM ........ 184

The (Im)Possibility of Holy Scripture in an Age of Normal Nihilism ........ 184

The Scriptures in God's Economy of Salvation ........ 187

Reading Scripture in God's Economy of Salvation ........ 197

Holy Scripture and Preaching ........ 212

CONCLUSION: AFTER NIHILISM? ........ 220

BIBLIOGRAPHY ........ 224

VITA ........ 235

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To only put my name on the title page of this dissertation seems dishonest. My name does not appear entirely alone. The readers of this dissertation took valuable time from their own duties as seminary professors to work through an idiosyncratic and dense argument, and I am thankful to Drs. Joel Biermann and Jeffery Kloha for their effort. Also, I could not have asked for a better advisor than Dr. David Maxwell. His diligence and clarity in thinking were invaluable to the writing process. He was also persistent in asking difficult questions of my thesis, which helped me gain a more precise understanding of the argument.

In addition, many people whose names do not appear on the title page have contributed much to this dissertation. My wife Stephanie is a better theologian than I am. And over the last three years that I have been working on this dissertation we've had endless conversations about God, nihilism, Jesus, Paul, the church in America, ministry experience, technology, food, economics, politics, the formation of desire, preaching, the Scriptures, and much more. She has not only allowed this work into our home, but her partnership in marriage has shaped my work in ways that cannot be fully accounted for.

I now have a hard time distinguishing my own thoughts on this topic from those of Luke Edwards and Stephen Rutherford. Countless times throughout the writing process I found myself listening to them speak more clearly about the issues involved in this dissertation than I ever could. Chad Lakies and Beth Hoeltke have also been constant conversation partners. All five of us began thinking about theology together in our reading group several years ago, and I have benefitted greatly from their partnership. I look forward to reading their dissertations.

Dr. Joel Okamoto has had more influence on this dissertation than anyone. The idea for this project began in his graduate seminar on God and Postmodernisms, where he had us read James Edwards and Martin Heidegger. He also graciously allowed me to sit in on several of his classes where he discussed the topic of nihilism and the death of God. This topic seems to have been an underlying theme in every one of his courses since I've known him. Most of the key moments in my argument came from listening to him speak in class and in personal discussions in his office. I am convinced that he could have put it better than me if he had written this dissertation, because I have in fact heard him put it better. He has been a gracious and patient guide to me along the way. It is a gift that I have had such a teacher in the faith.

While writing this dissertation, I have had the privilege to work as a youth leader and an assistant to the pastor as Holy Cross Lutheran Church in St. Louis, Missouri. Pastor Tim Wilkins and Dr. Jeff Gibbs have been mentors in the faith during this time. And the discussions I've had with Zac, Amanda, Aaron, Lydia, Sam, Victor, Jamia, Shannon, Kate, Josh, Tationa, Shane, Taylor, Jordan, Jared and Elizabeth over the past three years in high school Bible study have helped shape my arguments to the life of the Church and its Scriptures.

## ABSTRACT

Meyer, Joel P. "Christian Justification after Nihilism." Ph.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, 2012. [235] pp.

This dissertation addresses the problem that nihilism presents to Christian faith and life. North Atlantic Christians live in an age when nihilism is a normal condition. The world does not appear to have one clear and unquestionable meaning. Instead, each of us has convictions about the world that we hold dear. But we realize that other people hold drastically different convictions than our own, and we have no absolute way of determining the validity of one set over another. So they appear to us as values, rather than the way things are, grounded in nothing more than our own will and desire to hold them. In such an age Christians are confronted with the question of justification in its broadest sense: what reasons do we have for living as we do rather than some other way?

This dissertation asks whether Christians have reasons for their faith and life beyond their own will and desire to hold them. Christians are tempted, in this age, to trade on the value of Christianity, justifying it on the basis of its practical or aesthetic appeal. But this only reinforces the notion that Christianity is grounded in nothing more than our own will and desire. Instead, this dissertation argues that Christianity can only move beyond our nihilism by appealing to the authority of God's act through the man Jesus of Nazareth. In order to maintain the authority of God's act in Jesus, however, Christians will have to give up the Platonic assumption that God is the principled and rational ground of our existence, which is intelligible to any reasonable, good-willed person. This Platonic assumption leads Christians to construe God as a conjecture of human reason. Instead Christians will have to embrace an understanding of God as the personal, willful, and inscrutable creator, who speaks and acts intelligibly only through the man Jesus of Nazareth.

# INTRODUCTION

This dissertation will address the problem that many Christians in the North Atlantic West no longer have a good reason to go to church beyond the value they find in it.[1] There are, of course, different qualities of value. We can place a high value on Christianity by describing how it helps us make our way through life, providing therapeutic comfort or useful moral direction. Or we can place a low value on Christianity by having nothing more to say about it besides the observation that this is what we have always done. In either case, though, Christian faith and life today often appear as values; convictions *we* hold dear and nothing more. Traditionally, Christianity provided compelling claims about the way things are and a path of discipleship that would lead us to live a more righteous and holy life. Christianity was not valuable; it was true. But now it appears to be another option for us to appropriate among a variety of others, and we tend to practice Christianity insofar as it has some practical or aesthetic benefit.

One way to describe this problem is to say that nihilism is a normal condition. For Christians and non-Christians alike, the world does not appear to have one clear and unquestionable meaning. Instead, each of us has convictions about the world that we hold dear. But we realize that other people hold drastically different convictions than our own, and we have no absolute way of determining the validity of one set over another. So they appear to us as values, rather than the way things are, grounded in nothing more than our own will and desire to hold them.

In such an age Christians are confronted with the question of justification in its broadest

[1] I will defend this bold assertion in the first three chapters.

sense: what reasons do we have for living as we do rather than some other way? Christians are tempted, in this age, to trade on the value of Christianity, justifying it on the basis of its practical or aesthetic appeal. But this only reinforces the notion that Christianity is grounded in nothing more than our own will and desire. Instead, this dissertation argues that Christianity can only move beyond our nihilism by appealing to the authority of God's act through the man Jesus of Nazareth. In order to maintain the authority of God's act in Jesus, however, Christians will have to give up the Platonic assumption that God is the principled and rational ground of our existence, which is intelligible to any reasonable, good-willed person. This Platonic assumption leads Christians to construe God as a conjecture of human reason. Instead Christians will have to embrace an understanding of God as the personal, willful, and inscrutable creator, who speaks and acts intelligibly only through the man Jesus of Nazareth.

The dissertation is an essay in postmodern theology. By using the term *postmodern*, however, I do not mean to invest much in any definition of what counts as either modern or postmodern. I only want to describe, in an idiosyncratic way, a style of argumentation. Postmodern arguments, as I am defining them, assume that something has gone wrong; there is a problem that needs attention. For instance, the basic problem that I address is that many Christians in America have a hard time giving an answer to the question "Why go to church?" that does not appeal to the personal value of Christianity. If this is right, I cannot help but conclude that something has gone wrong. Modern arguments, as I am defining them, do not start with a problem. They tend to assume that there are perennial subjects, which each have their own set of categories that give rise to propositions. They aim to evaluate propositions on the basis of the traditional categories. Postmodern arguments recognize that all categories and topics function within a web of assumptions that are dependent on a social and historical context. Therefore, a postmodern argument can recognize that when basic problems arise, they stem systematically

from a complex group of assumptions. Once it has identified a problem, the postmodern argument will give an account of the assumptions that have given rise to the current difficulty. Then, in order to fix the problem, it will suggest that we have overlooked something within our own tradition that is important or would make a difference if we took it more seriously. So it goes on to propose an alternative paradigm or trajectory that will help us understand ourselves and get along better in our current context.

However, the trouble with postmodern arguments is that there are so many of them. They do not all identify exactly the same problem, and they give their own nuanced story about when and where things went wrong. Each account is coherent and consistent, which makes it hard to discern why one is better than another. Before I go on to add another to the list, it will be helpful to situate this dissertation within the context of several other postmodern arguments, and begin to suggest what advantages my argument has. I can already begin to argue for my own account by casting the others as attempts to answer the same sort of problem. Although they might not use Nietzsche's vocabulary of nihilism, nor has this always been their principle focus, several movements in contemporary Christian theology address this problem, or a variation of it, in postmodern fashion: by giving an account of its origins and proposing a way past it. The main differences between them depend on where they locate the origin of the problem.

The movement called Postliberal theology points to the Enlightenment as the time when Christian theology took a turn for the worse. During the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Christian west found itself in a state of crisis over the issue of authority. Traditional religious authorities that had long been taken for granted were now in competition with one another, a rising secular political sphere, and modern science. So in order to gain a public hearing, Christians felt compelled to show how their particular beliefs about God and their interpretations of the Bible were grounded in and could be correlated with more general and

universally accessible truths. For instance, in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*,[2] Hans Frei demonstrates that during this period a shift took place in the direction of Biblical interpretation. Whereas a Christian in the west once understood his existence within the frame of reference provided by the biblical narratives, now the biblical narratives had to be shown to fit more universal descriptions of reality that were constructed apart from the biblical narrative. Rather than allowing the realistic Biblical stories to determine their own meaning, both liberals and conservatives tried to locate the meaning of the text in an historical or ideal referent. Frei made a similar argument about theological method in his book, *Types of Christian Theology*,[3] and George Lindbeck formalized a Postliberal theory of religion and doctrine in *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*.[4]

Postliberal theology recognizes that the quest to ground Christian beliefs in universal reason, or universally accepted notions of what counts for reason, only had the effect of stripping Christian beliefs of their core content and eliminating the rational context in which Christian beliefs made any sense in the first place. In response, Postliberal theology argues that particular Christian beliefs are not dependent on other frameworks for meaning, but sustain their own interpretive idiom, which works as a schema for depicting and understanding the world as a whole. This sort of schematic idiom is what Frei refers to as the literal sense of the text, or what he aims to say when he describes Christian theology as critical self-description, or what Lindbeck calls a cultural linguistic theory of doctrine. By recasting Christian theology in this

---

[2] Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).

[3] Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsiger and William C. Placher (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

[4] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Lousiville: Westminster John Knox, 1984).

way, Postliberal theology represents a gain in Christian self-understanding and practice because it identifies the externality of Christian faith. In its obsession to find indubitable grounds for Christian belief, 'liberal' theology sought to ground beliefs about God in universal standards of knowledge by which anyone reasonable person could judge their truth. Thus, questions as to what sorts of knowledge are possible gain precedence over what can or cannot be said. And since the epistemological question must be asked first, liberal theology represents a turn in the subject of theology from God to the perceiving and thinking individual, similar to what William Placher terms the domestication of transcendence.[5] Postliberal theology encourages us to reverse this trend.

While Postliberal theology focuses mainly on issues of knowledge and epistemology, Radical Orthodoxy focuses on being and ontology.[6] According to the Radical Orthodox account, Christian theology took a turn for the worse with Duns Scotus, who used being as a univocal concept. In Thomas Aquinas, for instance, being was thought of as an analogous term. This means simply that the language we use to talk about God was thought to be inadequate to the task of actually describing God. For as infinite, God transcends the possibilities of our finite language. Aquinas makes this point by saying that God is simple. He is not composed of parts that can be discerned and described. In fact, as the source and goal of all things created he is not composed at all. God is wholly other than the things our language is adept at naming. Thus, all the language we can use to speak of God falls short of actually describing him. For when we speak about God, we use words that apply to creatures. But this does not mean that when we

---

[5] William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

[6] The most accessible account of the Radical Orthodox project is Simon Oliver, "Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: from Participation to Late Modernity," in *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, ed. John Milbank and Simon Oliver (London: Routledge, 2009), 3–27.

speak about God, we do so equivocally, as if our words we use have nothing to do with God. Rather, we speak analogously. Since God is the source and goal of all created things he contains within himself the perfections we encounter in creation in diverse ways. This means that the term *good*, for instance, refers primarily to God who is himself goodness and secondarily to creatures that are good only insofar as they participate in and reflect God's goodness in their own distinct manner. But we can speak about God only as we can speak about creatures. So to say that God is good, then, is to speak analogously since a creature is good by virtue of its relation to God who is goodness. Simon Oliver, in his lucid introduction to an often opaque movement puts it this way: "we might say that the question is not 'Is God good?', but rather, 'In what sense, if at all, can I be called good.'"[7] For, we cannot have a prior notion of what is good apart from God who is our source and goal.

Therefore, when *being* is used as an analogous term, God *is* being itself; and all things have their existence, their being, only insofar as they participate in God. So knowledge of any created thing requires knowledge of the God who transcends all created things. But when being is used as a univocal term, as Radical Orthodoxy claims for Scotus and much of theology and philosophy after him, several things happen simultaneously. First, philosophy becomes the study of being as such without reference to God, and theology turns into the isolated study of revealed facts. Second, everything can now be known apart from its origin and goal in God. Created things become static and isolated, purely different and autonomous, i.e. conceptual space is made for "the secular." Third, God becomes an object of human perception. God's being can be mapped precisely as a distinct kind: infinite rather than finite. Thus, God who was the

[7] Simon Oliver, "Introducing Radical Orthodoxy," 16.

transcendent and ineffable source and goal of all things becomes grounded in human perception as an object of the thinking subject.

A significant part of the Radical Orthodox project consists of convincing its readers that this transformation did not have to happen, that univocity and its social and political consequences has no more justification than the analogy of being. And in this way, they hope to relativize the story that the contemporary secular world is one of emancipation from outworn religious superstition. The movement combines this with an effort to re-describe the world in a way that privileges a revised neo-platonic notion of the participation of all things in the Triune God, in order to suggest that the secular is regress rather than progress.[8]

Finally, Postconstantinianism locates the problem even further back in Christian history. Rather than focusing on epistemological or ontological issues, this movement, which has been spearheaded by the work of John Howard Yoder, identifies the political transformation of Christianity that began with the Constantinian era as fundamentally problematic.[9] The problem occurred when Christianity went from a minority religion to the accepted, and later designated, religion of the Roman Empire. During the former period, it took great conviction to be a Christian since it often meant one was persecuted and ostracized. But when it became the religion of the Empire, being a Christian was the social norm. Therefore Christianity accommodated itself to the aims and goals of the state, and Christian beliefs and practices underwent a transformation. The transformation can be described as a confusion of the church and the world. Since the church now has a vested interest in the present order of things, Christian ethics has to be workable for all in society. The Christian life then becomes defined not by the

[8] See, for example, the collection of essays in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999).

[9] See especially, John Howard Yoder, "The Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics," in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 135–47.

teachings and lordship of Jesus, but by the duties necessary for maintaining the present social order. Consequently, Christian eschatological convictions about God's work through Jesus were eclipsed altogether or spiritualized into matters of inner renewal. Therefore, during the Constantinian synthesis, substantial Christian convictions appeared more timeless and ideal, less embodied in everyday practices, and more detached from the church's central narrative. Hence, Christianity underwent a transformation of authority structures. The authenticity of Christian belief in God became underwritten not by the authority of God's action in Jesus, continued and sustained through the mission of the church, but by the state's official and sometimes tacit sanction.

Postconstantinian theology seeks to reverse this trend by recapturing the distinction between the church and world through a renewed appreciation of the political character of Jesus' identity and mission. For instance, in Yoder's landmark work *The Politics of Jesus*,[10] he effectively questions depictions of Jesus that excuse Christians from listening to Jesus. Then Yoder proposes ways that Jesus can and should be considered a political figure, later drawing out the consequences for Christian faith and life.

Each of these accounts is descriptively powerful. And my recognition of the problem depends in part on the invaluable and faithful work done by these Christian theologians. But rather than adopting any of these, I will account for our nihilism by following the story Friedrich Nietzsche,[11] Martin Heidegger[12] and James Edwards[13] tell. According to their accounts, a

---

[10] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus:* Vicit Agnus Noster, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

[11] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman and trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 171.

[12] Martin Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God Is Dead,'" in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper, 1977), 53–114.

[13] James C. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

significant transition took place when Plato subjected the gods to the Good. Formally, the gods were understood as the willful, passionate and unprincipled forces determining our existence. But a moral uneasiness about the arbitrariness of the gods (or God) led to us to rethink the sacred ground of our existence as a principled and rational standard to which even the gods must adhere. In this account, Socrates poses the key question when he asks Euthyphro whether the holy is approved by the gods because it is holy, or whether it is holy because it is approved by the gods.[14] Socrates and the western tradition after him side with the former position. And precisely at this stage, the question of authority and right (the question of justification) posed by human beings extends up to the sacred ground of existence, and God has to be justified by the bar of human reason. Human beings therefore stand as judge and arbiter of God, so that the groundwork is set for the death of God.[15] Christian theologians adopted and even advanced this conception of the sacred ground.[16] And it worked well within Christendom, when everyone assumed the same God. But when competing visions of the Good present themselves, this conception of the sacred has trouble answering why one is more right than another. So the human subject becomes exposed as the ground of the sacred, and nihilism ensues.

---

[14] Plato, *Euthyphro* in *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant (London: Penguin Books, 1954), 17.

[15] Cf. Simon Blackburn, *Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1–18, for his discussion of the comprehensive scope of the problem of justification, Euthyphro, and the death of God.

[16] Given my account of Aquinas above, one might get the impression that my depiction of Plato is a straw man since I suggest that Aquinas thinks that we cannot have a prior notion of the good apart from God. While this is a commendable aspect of Aquinas' thought, he still maintains the principled relationship between the sacred and the profane that is characteristic of this age and assumes Plato's argument against Homer. This does not become a problem until after Christendom. One way to test the cogency of my account is to ask whether Aquinas can be recovered in an age of normal nihilism. Radical Orthodoxy certainly thinks he can, but my argument suggests he cannot, at least not insofar as Radical Orthodoxy seeks to recover this aspect in particular. While I do not make this explicit, it is an important aspect of my argument and I track it in the footnotes of the second chapter. For now, Cf. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 171, "The true world, unattainable for now, but promised to the man who is wise, pious, virtuous ('to the sinner who repents'). (Progress of the idea: it gets trickier, more subtle, less comprehensible…it becomes Christian…)."

In light of this account, I will recommend Luther's treatment of God in *The Bondage of the Will*.[17] This famous work of Luther's was his side of an argument with Erasmus of Rotterdam. The dispute between the two takes place in the time of renaissance and reformation, when the age of Idealism has broken down and the sacred ground of existence needs to be redefined. While on the surface the argument is about human and divine freedom, the deeper argument is about the sacred ground. Erasmus' argument tends toward modern liberalism: since all we have to go on are human opinions, it is better to take refuge in the skeptics and the authority of the church. No other way can keep people from killing one another. Luther, on the other hand, argues that the only hope for Christian faith lies in the fact that God has made himself known—God has spoken a word for himself—in and through Jesus Christ, and continues to speak through the apostolic proclamation of Christ (the ministry of the word), which is contained in the Holy Scriptures. Furthermore, Luther argues that only when Christians resist the temptation of filling in the gaps to make God's action consistent with human reasoning will their theological speech let God be God. And he appropriates the theological distinction between God preached and God not preached to help us maintain God's priority. The force of Luther's final conclusion is that speculation about God directs one away from God's actual promises in Jesus to something more universal and appealing to human reasoning. An appeal to something more universal and principled than God's spoken word only has the effect of making Christianity into a conjecture about the way things really are that cannot stand the test of faith because it grounds our convictions not in the certainty of God but in the reasoning of the thinking subject. The theology of glory leads to nihilism.

[17] Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, vol. 33 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Philip S. Watson and trans. Philip S. Watson and Benjamin Drewery (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).

Presuming that my argument is coherent and logically consistent, this makes it, at best, equal to the other postmodern arguments; and by adding another to the bunch I only seem to be devaluing them all. So what exactly recommends this account? First, by highlighting the devaluation of our highest values, I have identified a more comprehensive issue than any of the other accounts. This does not mean that the others are wrong. I think they have each identified a real problem. But, as I have just now sketched, they each can be described, without too much exaggeration, as groping after the problem of authority, right, and justification; the problem of nihilism. So in order to elicit some common assent to the priority of this problem, I use the first chapter to describe nihilism as a normal condition. If the story Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Edwards tell is at all helpful, we should be able to recognize nihilism as an everyday feature of western life. So in the first chapter, I highlight the phenomenon of the devaluation of our highest values. I then lay out the story Edwards tells about how this came to be our condition, focusing specifically on the question of justification. To conclude the chapter, I begin to suggest some ways to assess this account.

In the second and third chapters I show how helpful this account of the matter is by addressing the work of John Milbank and Stanley Hauerwas. Both theologians engage the problem of Christian justification. Both understand that Christianity is no longer the unquestioned assumption of western life, and both seek to give reasons why Christianity is something more than another personal opinion, but actually the way things really are. In his masterful *Theology and Social Theory*,[18] Milbank even identifies nihilism as the central problem facing Christian faith and life. And Hauerwas takes up the problem of devaluation directly in *The*

[18] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

*Peaceable Kingdom.*[19] However, over the course of these two chapters, I find that neither adequately articulates the problem, nor gives reasons for Christian faith and life that transcend its status as a value.

For one, Milbank can speak about nihilism without recognizing the aspect of devaluation. He construes nihilism as a position or an ontology than competes with other positions. This allows him to suggest that we can overcome nihilism by having a better (more attractive) account of things. But this strategy of Christian justification intensifies the commoditization of Christianity by making it highly valuable. In identifying the problem, Hauerwas is quite different. He understands the significance of devaluation, but does not sufficiently articulate its root cause. Hauerwas works against the liberal assumption that we have no story except the one we choose when we have no story. This, he thinks, not only devalues the Christian faith but is also dishonest to our existence as contingent creatures. Christianity, on the other hand, allows us to accept our contingency and act as creatures, joyfully dispossessed of our need to control our own destiny. As Christians, in other words, we are not consumers of values but faithful followers of Jesus, through which we receive our lives as an unexpected gift from the Creator. I do not want to argue that this is a bad account of the Christian life, but I do question whether this actually overcomes the problem of devaluation. In the face of coherent lives lived according to a different *final vocabulary*, to steal a term from Richard Rorty, what makes Christianity more than just another personal preference? Hauerwas tends to answer this question by appealing to the attractiveness of the Christian witness, which only reduplicates the problem.

The arguments I make in these two chapters help recommend my account of the problem. Milbank represents the most powerful and influential thinker to appropriate the Radical

[19] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

Orthodox story of how things went wrong. And Hauerwas borrows from Postliberalism to make a Postconstantinian argument. I do not argue that they are wrong as much as I suggest that their account of the matter is not fully adequate to answer the problem. Put another way, in light of Edwards' account, Hauerwas and Milbank run into difficulties; and that recommends Edwards as a more comprehensive account of our common problem.

Luther, on the other hand, does not run into these difficulties. And in the fourth chapter I describe the core of Luther's argument with Erasmus and conclude with some summary reflections about doing theology after nihilism. In the final two chapters I fill out my argument and put my summary reflections to work by addressing two core issues related to my thesis. Put succinctly, my thesis is that Christianity can only overcome nihilism by appealing in a non-speculative way to the divine authority of Jesus. This means that Christians have an investment in a particular identity and mission of the man Jesus of Nazareth, and that they have reasons for believing this. The fifth chapter discusses the issues surrounding the person Jesus of Nazareth. The sixth chapter is about the scriptures. I ask whether the Christian scriptures can be holy in our age. When the authority of the Bible was assumed, interpretation happened rather un-problematically. But now that the church's interpretation of the Bible lacks the cultural backing it once had, Christians must be able to say why we think that God speaks through this book? Saying that the Bible is a book of the church only intensifies the problem. What reasons do we have for believing that the church's use of these texts is really God's use? This issue relates to my thesis because we come to know the identity of Jesus primarily through the scriptures.

Finally, let me speak a brief word about my intended audience. I will frequently refer to those affected by nihilism as westerners. Nihilism is a predominately western phenomenon, and a particular problem for the practice of Christianity in the west. It does not apply to global Christianity. But even this statement does not say enough. For recent immigration trends suggest

that many in "the west" are not afflicted by the problem simply because they do not share something as basic as a sense of disenchantment.[20] So who exactly do I mean to address when I say "westerners." To answer this question, let me refer to James Edwards who defines "the west" as,

> those who grew up by avidly reading Homer, the Bible, Plato, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Descartes, Kant, George Elliot, Nietzsche, Whitman, and Freud, and whose political consciousness was shaped by the European wars of religion and by the French, American, Russian, and Eastern European revolutions, and whose present circumstance is one of relative peace, plenty, and leisure in some one of the North Atlantic democracies.[21]

While I hope that my constructive chapters present a faithful and catholic account of the Christian faith, I will be writing primarily to those who have been formed by what Edwards describes as the west.

---

[20] Leopoldo A. Sanchez M., "The Global South Meets North America: Confessional Lutheran Identity in Light of Changing Christian Demographics," *Concordia Journal* 37 (2011), 39–56.

[21] Edwards, *Plain Sense*, 4.

# CHAPTER ONE

## NORMAL NIHILISM AND THE QUESTION OF JUSTIFICATION

This chapter will introduce the normal condition of nihilism as a problem for Christian life and witness. Since the term *nihilism* has been used in many different ways over the past several centuries, its meaning is anything but clear and unambiguous. My use of the term will follow Nietzsche's description when he writes, "What does Nihilism mean? *That the highest values devaluate themselves*. The aim is lacking; 'why?' finds no answer."[1] Of course, by itself, this statement does not clear up the ambiguity of the term. It too needs some explanation, and I will provide a fuller description throughout this chapter. For now, though, it is enough to know that nihilism means that our highest values devaluate themselves. In the face of convictions radically different than our own, we lack any reason for holding our beliefs and living as we do. Therefore, our convictions seem to be merely our values, grounded in nothing more than our personal will to hold them. But insofar as we understand our convictions to be values, they devalue themselves. If our will to hold them is the final measure of their significance and meaning, then they lose their authoritative and formative status. They appear as merely personal preferences rather than the way things really are.

Throughout this chapter, I will argue that nihilism is a normal condition. And my account of nihilism as a normal condition will draw primarily upon James Edwards' book *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism*. While the story Edwards

---

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale and Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), 9. Italics are original.

tells about how nihilism has come to be our normal condition will be the center piece of this chapter, and the starting point for the dissertation's greater argument, much of this chapter will try to recommend normal nihilism as an apt description of the North Atlantic context in which Christianity is practiced. I find that the story Edwards tells has great explanatory power. However, the explanatory power of any narrative can only be caught, in a sense, over the course of contemplating a wide range of topics. Therefore, this chapter will be divided into three sections. The first section will introduce the problem of nihilism by identifying the cultural phenomenon it aims to describe. In this section, I hope to produce some common assent and recognition of the condition I want to describe as nihilism. The second section will focus more specifically on the causes of our nihilism and how the central challenge to Christian faith and life is the question of justification. When our highest values devalue themselves, the central question facing Christianity becomes that of justification in its broadest sense. Is Christianity merely another set of personal values? Do Christians have reasons for their beliefs and lives beyond the value we find in them? Edwards' description of our nihilism will be the central feature of this section. But Edwards' account of our nihilism is not the only one available. So the third section will begin to show how Edwards marks a significant gain in understanding the problem.

Finally, before moving on, let me say something briefly about the term *justification*. In the most obvious sense, the "question of justification" that I am referring to is not the way many Lutherans have normally talked about justification. Lutherans have ordinarily used the term in a narrower and technical sense to refer to an individual's standing before God. But it will become clear, I hope, that the "question of justification" that nihilism poses to Christianity is the broadest possible sense of the term. In an age of normal nihilism we are forced to give reasons for doing what we do, for living one way rather than another. We must claim some sense of authority and right for being Christian. We must give some justification. That being the case, however, the two

different uses of the term should not mislead the reader into thinking that the forensic justification of the sinner before God has nothing to do with the broader "question of justification." For the more narrow sense is only a concentrated instance of the broader sense.

### Introducing Nihilism as a Problem

*All Things Shining*,[2] a recent book about how westerners might recover some sense of meaning in their lives, concludes with an unusual acknowledgement. After giving credit to all the people who helped with the book along the way, the authors write this final paragraph: "And thanks, finally, to the gods, who show themselves little by little or sometimes all at once and for whom we hope this book provides an appropriate landing place to welcome you back home."[3] The book, it turns out, is a recommendation of Homeric polytheism. Of course, the book's authors are not suggesting that there are beings named Athena or Zeus that have made convincing appearances after millennia of obscurity. But they do want us to recognize that diverse forces exist in this world, and that we might gain something by letting ourselves be caught up in them when they occasionally appear. This, at least, might allow us to recover a sense that the world is made up of shining things (things that transcend the value we assign them), which have been hidden by our contemporary world of control, manipulation and aimlessness.

For anyone raised in the traditions of the modern European and American west, whose ancestors took part not only in Christendom but also the Enlightenment, and who were taught to value not only the cultural achievement of monotheism but also rational inquiry, this recommendation should raise an important question. What has happened to our world that

[2] Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011).

[3] Ibid., 226.

polytheism has become a viable option today? One might answer that question in the way of G. K. Chesterton's fictional Rev. Father Brown; a staunch defender of both rationality and Christendom. "It's the first effect of not believing in God that you lose your common sense and can't see things as they are. Anything that anybody talks about, and says there's a good deal in it, extends itself indefinitely like a vista in a nightmare. And a dog is an omen, and a cat is a mystery, and a pig is a mascot and a beetle is a scarab, calling up all the menagerie of polytheism."[4] For Father Brown, the gospel and common sense go together. The history of the modern west is a story of progress and advancement in both religion and knowledge. Polytheism occurs only when that great tradition has been abandoned for superstition.

But that kind of answer does little to account for the problem which philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly aim to address in their book. The problem is what they call "our contemporary nihilism," and it is a common feature of everyday North Atlantic life. Dreyfus and Kelley notice that our lives are constituted by the burden of choice. Not only do we have to make choices about the everyday trivial things, like what to have for breakfast or what car to drive; but even more significantly we are forced to make choices about the kinds of things that make up our identity and person. What is our political affiliation? What job will I pursue? Who should I marry? Where should I live? The heart of the problem, though, is not merely that we have too many choices, but that "when we find ourselves confronted by these kinds of existential choices, we feel a lack of any genuine motivation to choose one over the others."[5] We lack such motivation because we have no unassailable reasons for choosing one way over

[4] G. K. Chesterton, *The Incredulity of Father Brown*, in *The Father Brown Stories: Part II*, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 93. Robert W. Jenson, "What is a Post-Christian?" in *The Strange New Word of the Gospel: Re-Evangelizing in the Postmodern World*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 21, first drew my attention to this quotation. Although Chesterton is sometimes thought to be a passé modernist, the collected essays in this important volume tend to take Chesterton's account of the situation as their starting point for reflection.

[5] Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 4.

another. Burdened by the sheer proliferation of options, none presents itself to us as the obvious right choice. So our lives appear arbitrary and meaningless because, despite all the options, we have no ultimate reasons for discerning the important differences between them. The question "why?" finds no good answer.

Dreyfus and Kelly account for our contemporary nihilism by telling the story of the west as a history of decline. Nihilism, they think, is uniquely our problem. Not long ago, the world appeared to have a discernable structure that shined forth with an unmistakable clarity. Rarely did anyone have to make a significant choice about the course of their lives. But when choices did have to be made, the structure of the world seemed to provide a clear answer to which one was right and wrong, better or worse, good and evil. In the middle ages, for example, the unquestioned assumption about the world was that the God of the Bible created it. Everything that happened could be explained in reference to his will and purposes, which seemed to permeate all of existence. But that clear and shining structure has dimmed over the course of western history. Dreyfus and Kelly explore the classics of western literature in order to trace the diminishment of the shining things in our world, and they notice that with the rise of a unified and comprehensive explanation for everything—monotheism—the inner self also gradually rose as the ultimate arbiter of the world's order. This effectively killed God, as Nietzsche once put it, leaving us with no good reasons for judging from among a world of choices.

The story that Dreyfus and Kelley tell about how nihilism came to be our problem has many affinities with the story James Edwards tells. And later in this chapter I will endorse his explanation of why nihilism has come to be a normal condition. For now, though, it is enough to notice that nihilism names a common phenomenon—the *burden* of choice. In the modern west, we seem to be forced to determine the meaning and value of our lives. Dreyfus and Kelley are not the only ones to make this observation. This phenomenon has been recognized by a wide

array of cultural observers, and it will be helpful to deepen this description of "our contemporary nihilism" by briefly surveying a few of the more influential voices.

First, no account of our contemporary nihilism can ignore the work Alasdair MacIntyre has done in the area of moral theory. In his seminal book, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*,[6] MacIntyre observes that contemporary moral debate seems interminable. In any given subject, like the debate over abortion for example, each side has a coherent argument based on its own starting premises. But there seems to be no way of discerning between the assumed starting premises. So while each of us who engage in moral discourse appear to be giving a rational and impersonal argument for our position, we lack any justification for why we have chosen to begin with those premises in the first place. Therefore, our arguments begin to look like the bald assertion of arbitrary and personal preferences despite their outward appearance as rational and impersonal. The moral theory that expresses this dilemma is called emotivism, which holds that "all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of personal preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character."[7] Emotivism, in other words, is the moral theory that assumes this is the inescapable fate of moral discourse as such.

MacIntyre wants to argue that emotivism does not capture the essence of moral discourse. Emotivism, he argues, results from the loss of sustained practices that lead toward the achievement of an objective good. And without those practices, our moral judgments lack a suitable context. That argument does not need to concern us here.[8] More importantly for our

---

[6] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

[7] Ibid., 12.

[8] Alasdair MacIntyre's work, especially *After Virtue* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1990) sounds a sense of panic at the approaching collapse of western civilization at the advent of nihilism. MacIntyre reduces our options to Nietzsche or Aristotle and later, Nietzsche or Aquinas. As will become clear later in my argument, I find this to be an inadequate parsing of the situation; one that tries unsuccessfully to tell a different story about the west than the

present purposes, MacIntyre finds that emotivism is more than a theory. Emotivism is deeply embedded in contemporary western culture, especially in its inability to distinguish between manipulative and non-manipulative social relationships.

If every evaluative utterance is thought to be the expression of personal desires and preferences, every expression treats the other as a means to achieve one's own personal will. To illustrate the grip emotivism has on our culture, MacIntyre depicts three types of persons, three stock characters, which determine the course of everyday life. They are the manager, the therapist and the rich aesthete. Each character approaches everything it encounters as a means toward a personally determined end. For instance, the manager uses whatever means are at his disposal to achieve maximum efficiency for his institution. Even humans are treated as any other resource for the maintenance and growth of an organization. Likewise, the therapist transforms "neurotic symptoms into directed energy, maladjusted individuals into well-adjusted ones."[9] Since it is assumed that no moral judgment can be publically justified, the only criterion available to these characters is efficiency and effectiveness. Moreover, on the opposite side of managerial effectiveness stands a unique brand of moral individualism. Since it is assumed that there are no universally binding criteria of judgment, the individual self stands apart from any external moral commitments. It is free to make and remake any series of moral judgments on the basis of its own determination of what is good. Therefore, MacIntyre argues, our contemporary lives are structured by the ongoing conflict between the aims of bureaucrats to increase their own effectiveness and power by using whatever means are available to them and the aims of

---

one Nietzsche told. I will be recommending that a better way to understand the problem is "Nietzsche or Luther." I briefly note this difference here because the focus of this dissertation is the Christian church rather than the predicament of the west. But I find it important to note because while MacIntyre will not appear in the body of my text, his central account of the matter has been taken up in different ways by both Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank. Thus, MacIntyre will always be in the background of this argument.

[9] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 30.

individuals to live according to their own chosen morality, free of the illegitimate authority of the moral convictions (preferences) of others.

By observing how emotivism imbues our culture, MacIntyre is stating nothing profound. The give and take we experience between the managerial and individual poles of western life is as ordinary as the pursuit of a job that will pay enough to enjoy life apart from work. But this only displays the way our contemporary nihilism is an enshrined part of everyday life. Everything, it seems, stands before us as a means to whatever end *we* find important. Nothing stands out as sacred and beyond the reach of our manipulation.

MacIntyre's observations about moral discourse fit nicely with Martin Heidegger's observations about modern technology and what he calls *Bestand*, or standing reserve. In a profound and important essay entitled, "The Question Concerning Technology,"[10] Heidegger suggests that contemporary westerners live in a technological age. This is more than the simple observation that contemporary life is filled with technology (even more so now than when Heidegger originally wrote the essay in the 1950's). More significantly, Heidegger argues that the character of modern technology has come to shape the way the world presents itself to us—it shapes our very self-understanding. According to Heidegger, technology has always served the purposes of bringing forth into light what is possible; for instance, in the way a silversmith brings forth a chalice from silver. But modern technology has the characteristic of bringing forth or revealing the world in a certain and distinctive way. Heidegger calls that way standing reserve, or that which is the storehouse for energy to be organized and used according to our desiring. He writes that, "the revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging

[10] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper, 1977), 3–35.

[*Herausforden*], which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such."[11]

To illustrate his point about modern technology, Heidegger asks us to observe the difference between the old windmill and the modern hydro-electric plant. While the windmill uses the wind to create energy, it nevertheless depends on the wind's blowing. The hydro-electric plant, on the other hand, is not placed into the current of the river. Rather, by damming the river, it changes the river's structure to fit the demands of the hydroelectric plant. "What the river is now, namely a water power supplier, derives from out of the essence of the power station."[12] Therefore, even the river now appears to us as an object that can be manipulated for the purposes of storing its latent energy for human use. This, Heidegger thinks, is in stark contrast to a previous time when the world appeared to stand over-against us. At one time, in other words, the river was something we could not control. It was a force external to us, one which we had to respect as it shaped our lives according to its power. But now, the power latent in the river is merely another resource at our disposal for whatever appropriation and use we desire.

Heidegger hopes that by reflecting on the essence of technology, we can get a sense of how our lives are nevertheless called forth by the world around us. For our present purposes, though, it should be enough to notice how modern technology is another aspect of our contemporary nihilism. Rather than standing over-against us, determining the limitations and meaning of our existence, the world itself now appears as a resource, as raw material to be used for whatever *we* determine.

The sort of transition in human self-understanding that Heidegger describes also finds expression in the work of Philip Rieff, who writes about the relationship between religion and

[11] Ibid., 14.

[12] Ibid., 16.

culture in his now prophetic book *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*.[13] Written in the midst of the secularization debate in the mid-twentieth century, Rieff argues that in the coming age the practice of religion in our culture will not decrease but increase. However, that increase will come only after a dramatic transformation has taken place in the function of culture and the character of religion. He describes this transformation of culture as moving from a therapy of commitment to a therapy of release. Rieff notices that the artifacts of our culture such as art, religion and the like, once served to give us meaning and purpose and assuage our displacement by situating us within structured and purposeful communities. Now, however, these cultural artifacts serve as tools of release from the outward communal purposes normally associated with religion. Thanks to Freud among others, we now recognize in ways that we previously did not that all moral demand systems are groundless. This recognition has lead to what Rieff calls the triumph of the therapeutic, in which we understand meaning and determination for life as unhealthy commitments of our imagination. A triumphantly therapeutic culture will seek to release us from the bondage of commitment to the external authority normally provided by culture. Rieff foresaw that the future therapeutic culture would not do away with religion, but embrace it in a new way. Since religions no longer stand as arch rivals against one another, faith can be used positively in the effort to constantly remake oneself free of any authoritative commitment. Faith will be transformed into "one entertainable and passing personal experience among others, to enhance the interest of living freed from communal purpose."[14]

[13] Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (1966; repr., Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), 16.

[14] Ibid., 16.

Rieff's thesis finds backing in at least one recent and influential study on religion in America. That book is called *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*.[15] Its authors, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, share the results of an extensive survey of American youth about their religious lives. Surprisingly, they find that American teenagers are remarkably conventional in their religious practices. They follow closely the habits of their parents, they have a generally positive attitude toward religion, and they participate in formal religious practices quite regularly on average. At the same time, however, these same teenagers are extremely inarticulate about what they believe, they have great difficulty noticing what difference their beliefs make in their own lives, they have a negative attitude to those who would pattern their life according to a set standard of beliefs, and they assume an individualism that precludes them from saying that one religion is more right than any other. The problem is that, overall, traditional religion (one that has compelling claims about the way the world really is and expectations to follow a path of discipleship that will lead its practitioners to a more righteous and holy life) has lost its persuasive power.

This does not mean religion is unimportant. But the importance has changed drastically. Religion still draws American teens insofar as it makes them happy and helps them get what they want out of life. "What legitimates the religion of most youth today is not that it is the life-transformative, transcendent truth, but that it instrumentally provides mental, psychological, emotional, and social benefits that teens find useful and valuable."[16] This attitude is so pervasive among American teenagers and the greater American public that Smith and Denton summarize their findings by calling the dominant religion among them Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. This

---

[15] Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[16] Ibid., 154.

"religion" holds that God created and ordered the world and wants people to be good, that the goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself, and that God is not directly involved in anyone's life except to resolve a problem.[17] Rather than providing the categories and concepts that make the world shine forth with God's order, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism operates as a salve for teenage life. In other words, Christianity is merely another, even if sometimes effective,[18] way of human coping.

Examples of "our contemporary nihilism" can be unending. But these few should help us understand that the term *nihilism* is a description of a phenomenon; a phenomenon recognized by a diverse group of observers. We live in an age when the world no longer presents itself as having a recognizable order. Or, put another way, "God" no longer has constructive force and authority in our lives. So we human beings carry the burden of determining the meaning of our own lives. Some might triumph this as the human coming of age. Dreyfus and Kelley, MacIntyre, Heidegger, and Rieff, however, rightly worry that our nihilism can only be self-destructive. While I am sympathetic to their concern, I am more worried about the fate of Christian life and witness in such an age. Given our nihilism, can the God Christians worship be anything more than another personal value, anything more than a decomposing corpse of the one who supposedly works all in all?[19] In order to begin answering this question, we need to have a more focused description of the problem. And no one account of our nihilism is more persuasive and helpful than the one James Edwards provides in *The Plain Sense of Things*.

---

[17] Ibid., 162–70.

[18] By the end of the book, Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 218–58, demonstrate that religion does make a difference in the lives of American teens. But the kind of difference it makes corresponds to the aims of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Religious teenagers tend to have positive life outcomes.

[19] Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Madman," in *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 181–82.

## Normal Nihilism and the Question of Justification

Edwards too writes his book with a sense of worry about our contemporary nihilism. And Edwards also recognizes that Nihilism is a common feature of western life. We take for granted now in ways that we previously did not that the convictions we hold most dear, the convictions that are supposed to be ordering our existence, and that includes our Christian beliefs and practices, have no ground beyond our own will to hold them. And so, they appear as merely useful ways that we make sense of our lives. Thus, we choose to adopt and hold our convictions, not because they correspond to reality (whatever that might mean), but only in so far as we find some practical or aesthetic value in them.

It is no accident that the term value, and the economic connotations associated with it, becomes an apt way of describing ourselves in an age of normal nihilism. Edwards finds that the American shopping mall serves as the perfect example of our nihilism.

> Here one sees alternative values jostling one another in tenuous détente; more important, here one sees oneself operating as the consumer (and, indirectly, as the creator) of those values. In my community's largest mall, for example, a Christian bookstore sits right alongside a store selling reproductions of Early American knickknacks; just beside the shop for consumer software there is a clothing store that traffics in outfits apparently designed to be worn in the Maine woods....In air-conditioned comfort one can stroll from life to life, from world to world, complete with appropriate sounds effects...Laid out before one are whole lives that one can, if one has the necessary credit line, freely choose to inhabit: devout Christian; Williamsburg grandee; high-tech yuppie; Down East guide; great white hunter. This striking transformation of life into lifestyle, the way in which tools, garments and attitudes specific to particular times and places become commodities to be marketed to anonymous and rootless consumers: these are the natural (if also banal) expressions of our normal nihilism.[20]

Especially devastating for Christian life and witness is how nihilism has changed the way we relate to religious beliefs and practices. Whereas Christianity, along with other religions, used to structure the world for us, providing the concepts and categories necessary for us to have

[20] Edwards, *Plain Sense*, 49–50.

meaningful lives, now Christianity has become just another economic commodity competing for our attention and devotion. Edwards writes,

> Organized religion has certainly not disappeared in this shadow-time of values, but it has changed its character in fundamental ways. There are still devout Jews and Muslims and Christians around, of course, but to us they begin to look like the folks who need to wear nothing but Polo head to foot, or those who spend all their free time arguing the advantages of IBMs over Macs. The Christian book store is just another shop in the mall.[21]

While the shopping mall is a fine illustration of the way nihilism is our normal condition, the strength of Edwards' account lies in the way he tells the story of how we got here. For Edwards, the shopping mall is not an accident. It is only a late form of a long history of western religious sensibilities. Following Nietzsche, Edwards calls this the age of transvalued values. And the story Edwards tells draws much from both Nietzsche and Heidegger. In the next section of this chapter, I will assess Edwards' account in relationship to those two great figures. I will argue that Edwards' account understands and reads the tradition of western thought in a more helpful manner than either Nietzsche or Heidegger. The difference between Edwards and Heidegger especially brings clarity to the problem facing the Christian church. That clarity provides insight that some contemporary theologians today miss when they try to make sense of the western tradition. But first, let me lay out the basic contours of Edwards' description of how nihilism has become our normal condition.

By his own admission, Edwards's narrative is simple and "deliberately schematic."[22] My rendition will not try to give Edwards any more depth or argue more persuasively for his interpretation of key figures and movements. In fact, the simplicity of his account contributes to its clarity and usefulness. So, while I do find it to be an accurate description, I will not argue for

---

[21] Ibid., 51.

[22] Ibid., ix.

its accuracy by writing my own history of western life and thought. Rather I will recommend Edwards, in the next section and throughout the next two chapters, by showing how the narrative rightly calls into question some important but finally inadequate attempts to overcome the problem of normal nihilism.

According to Edwards, there are three features that make up western religiousness. They are not necessary to religion anywhere and everywhere. But they have endured in one form or another throughout the history of the west. The first feature, which lies at the heart and center of western religiousness, is a binary division of all things. Throughout its history westerners have typically understood reality as being divided into two different worlds. Edwards calls this the division between the sacred and the profane. This division is an ontological one, meaning that all things we account for are one kind of thing or another; they are either sacred or profane. The sacred world is made up of those things that are perfect in and of themselves. They do not rely on something else for their being or existence. They are "fully real and lack nothing in order to be what they are, things that are resplendent in their completeness, self-sameness, independence, and perfection." The profane world, on the other hand, is made up of those things "that are in some way imperfect and needy, needy in their very being (or Being), in comparison to the first."[23] In the book of Genesis, for example, God is the sacred, standing alone and independent of all things. The creation, on the other hand, comes to exist only because God calls it into being.

This division is so basic that it might seem trite to bring it to our attention. But its influence over our thinking and practices cannot be over-stated. Not only does it form our basic cosmology, but the structure is responsible for the most basic features of our common life: our notion of truth, and practices of truthfulness such as philosophy, theology, and morality. For

[23] Ibid., 7.

instance, Edwards goes on to describe the second and third features of western religiousness in relation to the first. The second feature is that the sacred serves as the ground of the profane. This can be stated both ontologically and epistemologically. Ontologically, the profane depends on the sacred for its very existence, and the sacred determines the shape and order of the profane. Epistemologically, the order and shape of the profane is only intelligible in light of the sacred. The sacred, "is that which clarifies and makes intelligible, that which justifies and rationally explains."[24] The Old Testament can serve again as a useful example. The creation comes into existence only because God wills it to exist. God's words cause it to come into being. And if Job, for instance, wants to know the logic or reasons behind the world's movement, he cannot find a right and satisfactory answer apart from the explanation God himself would provide.

The third feature also follows from the binary division. The two worlds are in an unstable relationship that must be maintained through sacramental practices, or practices that reestablish a proper order between the sacred and profane. The fall of creation occurs when Adam and Eve disobey the will of God. And restoration can only take place when people come to acknowledge Yahweh as the one true God. For example, when Abraham is willing to sacrifice his only son for no other reason than the one true God told him to, he is counted righteous, despite the apparent absurdity of the action.

Edwards tells of four stages, or ages, that progress towards the flowering of nihilism as a normal condition. His account begins with what he calls the age of the gods, which I have already highlighted in the examples from the Old Testament.[25] In this age, the sacred is the divine

---

[24] Ibid., 9.

[25] When David B. Burrell, *Deconstructing Theodicy: Why Job Has Nothing to Say to the Puzzle of Suffering*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 17, writes, "Rather than treat the Creator as a judge who must adjudicate by the rules, Job appeals directly to the Creator as the One who sets the very rules under which Job has been told he must consider his affliction as punishment, thereby turning this One into an interlocutor," he captures exactly the dynamic, personal relationship between the sacred and the profane the characterizes the age of the gods.

presence and force of God, or the gods in the case of polytheism, who orders the world by the sheer power of his will. "Crucial to our understanding of this epoch is its portrayal of the gods as centers of transcendent and terrible will. The gods are compelling super-human presences, instances of uncontrollable and (sometimes) incomprehensible force."[26] The creation story is an obvious example of such force, but more subtle examples exist throughout the Christian scriptures. For instance, Paul characterizes God's relationship to the creation in his letter to the church in Rome as one of force and power, enacting the terrible will of the creator on creation: "For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it in order that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:20–21).[27]

An important feature of Paul's letter to the Romans is that the will behind God's power often lacks intelligibility. Paul finds it especially troubling that God seems to have abandoned his promises to the Jews since they were rejecting the gospel about Jesus. Paul concludes with astonishment. "For God has imprisoned all to disobedience so that he might be merciful to all. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways" (Rom. 11:32–33).

The sense of mystery Paul expresses behind the ways and will of God demonstrates an important aspect of this age. The sacred grounds the profane merely by the sheer will of God or the gods. There exists no standard of what is right beyond the will of the gods or the one God. The gods do not operate according to any prior reasoning; they do not follow anyone's rules. Therefore, "As we understand the term, the gods are not moral beings at all, since for us the

[26] Ibid., 14.

[27] By drawing on the New Testament to describe the age of the gods, it should be understood that the ages do not have precise chronological distinctions.

notion of the moral largely derives from the epic of Idealism...and is intrinsically connected to the notions of human happiness and of formal rationality. Morality is not just power and the will to use it."[28] That the sacred is personal and willful, under no compulsion to follow any principled standard, sets the age of the gods apart from the next epoch. "In this first form of western religiousness, then, the gods want what they want just because they want it; they do what they do subject only to their own desires and to whatever external limitations on their power there may be. (In the case of strict monotheism, of course, there are no such limitations, so the god's will is boundless and unchallengeable...)."[29] The personal, dynamic and sometimes inscrutable will of the gods is the only standard and ground, and this distinguishes it from the age of the forms.

The age of the forms follows the age of the gods, and the key texts that mark the transition from one age to the other demonstrate uneasiness about understanding the sacred ground as sheer and inscrutable personal will. In its place, the age of the forms substitutes impersonal rational stability. It is worth taking a moment to notice the transition, because this one, more than any other, sets the trajectory of western religiousness toward the age of transvalued values. My argument will be that Christianity can only overcome nihilism by following Luther's lead to recover a sense that God rules by his personal, dynamic and inscrutable will. At the end of his first chapter, Edwards flirts with the option of going back to the age of the gods. But for him, unlike Dreyfus and Kelly, the brutality of the gods is not an option.[30] It is untenable, for Edwards, not so much because of its logical inconsistency as much as it is the cruel and harsh picture of a world ordered by the sheer and seemingly arbitrary will of a God or several gods. Put another way, the deficiency of the age of the gods is moral rather than ontological or

---

[28] Edwards, *Plain Sense*, 15.

[29] Ibid., 16–17.

[30] Ibid., 55.

epistemological. In the *Euthyphro*, Plato leads the reader to feel the same sort of uneasiness about the age of the gods.

Plato's *Euthyphro* is one of those key transitional texts between the ages.[31] In this early dialogue, we find Socrates questioning the supposedly stable relationship between the authority of the gods and holiness and piety. Socrates' dialogue partner Euthyphro meets Socrates outside court. Euthyphro is there to prosecute his father for the murder of one of his servants. And the reader immediately recognizes that the circumstances that led to the death of his father's servant are at best ambiguous. At worst the charge Euthyprho levels against his father seems outrageous, considering the man is being prosecuted by his own son for the death of a family slave. Or at least this seems to be the way we, who have been brought up in the tradition of idealism with all of its "powerful intellectual and ethical advantages,"[32] should react. But when Socrates brings this to Euthyphro's attention, Euthyphro justifies the holiness of his action by citing the will of the gods, specifically the way Zeus punished his own father Cronos. Socrates asks how Euthyphro can be so sure that what he is doing is holy since the gods will many different things that cannot all be made consistent with one another. Surely there is some standard that will allow one to recognize not just what is holy in one situation but holy in every situation. Given the inadequacy of appealing to the gods in tough cases like this particular one, there must be some special feature, some form that makes all things that are holy what they are. Socrates goes on to show Euthyphro that holiness cannot be merely what the gods love. But no matter the specifics of that argument, the movement from the age of the gods to the age of the forms had already

[31] Plato, *Euthyphro* in *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant (London: Penguin Books, 1954), 1–27.

[32] Edwards, *Plain Sense*, 20.

taken place when the plurality of the gods was rejected in favor of one ruling principle that could decide in all cases.

Rather than the pure power of the gods, used according to the sheer arbitrariness of their personal will, the age of the forms understands the sacred to be impersonal, rationally intelligible form, "an a priori cosmic order that confers intelligible substance on things. The sacred thus becomes understood as *the ideal*."[33] The classic expression of this impersonal order is Plato's allegory of the cave, found in the *Republic*.[34] Inside the cave we find men chained in place, only able to look upon the shadows projected on a wall by the light outside the cave. The world of the shadows is the only one they know. But outside of that world, if one is fortunate enough to find one's way out of the cave, one sees not just the shadows but the objects themselves, the ideal forms lying behind the shadows. These forms are the sacred ground, the special feature that stands behind every diverse experience. The *Euthyphro* is typical of Plato's dialogues. Socrates encounters someone who thinks he knows about holiness, justice, or some other concept on the basis of one example. Through dialectic conversation, Socrates quickly leads that person to realize that while there is a sense of the concept in the person's example, there must be something more formal and universal standing behind every particular case. Despite the contingencies of everyday life, there stands something enduring and fixed that gives necessary shape to the particulars we experience. These universals are the forms. The Form "is an ideal condition of intelligibility; it is the fully real, perfect and immutable archetype that gives intelligible substance (a determinate, enduring identity) to the things we normally encounter."[35]

[33] Ibid.

[34] Plato, *Republic*, in vol. 1of *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 163–499.

[35] Edwards, *Plain Sense*, 20.

Thus, the sacred grounds the profane in a rational way. The reason we can distinguish between kinds of things, according to the age of the forms, is that we can recognize within the things we encounter in the sensory world a more pure and enduring Form that gives them order, shape, and intelligibility. "The realm of the Forms is thus rational in our typical sense of the term: it exhibits (as do the earthly seasons) an impersonal, abstract, eternal, immutable, consistent pattern."[36] In direct contrast to the age of the gods, the profane does not come into existence by the pure will and force of the sacred, but rather emanates from and reflects the sacred. "The guiding image here is one of mirroring, the granting of an intelligible identity, rather than creation or control."[37] Since the profane is not contingent upon the will and power of the gods alone, but participates in something necessary and fixed, the sacred is patterned and intelligible rather than arbitrary and inscrutable.

In the age of the gods, the sacramental practices that restore order between the sacred and the profane were those that recognized the authority of the gods. Edwards cites the prominence of sacrifice in both the early Greek religions as well as in the Old Testament to this effect. But in the age of the forms, the sacramental practices aim to repair one's vision. "So long as we gaze at the shifting shadows of shadows and take them for reality, we cannot help living badly...We must first see (understand and know) what endures always as the same; then we can (and we will) act as is proper in its light."[38] Hence, sacramental practices are those that enable one to see the forms, to adjust one's sight in order to recognize the rational order behind all things. Rather than sacrificial, these practices are intellectual. In the *Republic*, for instance, Plato considers a number of intellectual exercises, such as mathematics, geometry, astronomy, and chief among

---

[36] Ibid., 21–22.

[37] Ibid., 22.

[38] Ibid., 23.

them philosophy, to be particularly fit to train the eye to see the enduring. And it is these intellectual exercises which ought to teach the republic's leading citizens to see the world rightly, and so make them fit to govern according to the Forms.[39]

The age of the forms lasted for many centuries. But the primary assumption that finally unraveled this age was that an immediate and comprehensive vision of the Ideal or the Forms was both a necessary and possible condition for comprehending a rational order within the world. In the later Christianized version of this age, the Forms gave way to God as the ground of all being, and the incarnation became a privileged locus for seeing the order behind this world. During this time, the doctrine of God as the ground of all Being, sometimes even the ontological necessity of the doctrine of the Trinity and the incarnation, were assumed in a rational discourse. And in times and places in which they were not assumed, they were argued either on rational basis that took for granted a general doctrine of God as the ground of all Being[40] or were considered more particular manifestations of a self-evident and general doctrine of God, which must be held by faith.[41] In either case, the full and complete vision of the rational order of the world was generally agreed upon. But when this comprehensive vision is questioned by equally plausible alternatives, so that no single vision of the Truth stands out to us as pure and unquestionable, the Platonic metaphysics of presence begins to collapse.

This sort of questioning occurred in many different ways over an extended period of time. Edwards directs our attention to the rise of empirical sciences that placed doubt upon the basic cosmology of the Christian scriptures, as well as the exploration of foreign lands with alternative

[39] Plato, *Republic*, 382–407.

[40] Cf. Augustine, *The Trinity*, vol. 5 of Part I, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991).

[41] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Theology, Faith and Reason. On Boethius* On the Trinity, in *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Ralph McInerny (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 109–41.

political and economic structures. These discoveries made the notion that the Truth presents itself to us in an unmediated way problematic. And without the certainty found in an immediate vision, the binary distinction began to wane and there arose an epistemological crisis. If there are many claims to immediate visions of the Truth, how do we know which one is right? The idea that Truth can merely present itself to us loses it descriptive power. We lose the certainty of an objective and immediate ground and must find a new ground upon which we can discern between competing visions.

This crisis of certainty gave rise to what Edwards calls the age of Cartesian Ego-Subjectivity. Rene Descartes' two major writings, *Discourse on Method*[42] and *Meditations on First Philosophy*,[43] begin with the challenge presented by the collapse of an uncontested vision of Truth. Through autobiographical reflection, Descartes recounts the diversity of opinions he has encountered throughout the world, and recalls how little help they provided him for judging between them. Thus, rather than searching the world for answers, he decides to make himself an object of study. Doubting tradition and the bodily senses, which were prone to deceive, Descartes came to the conclusion that the only certainty available to him was his own thinking consciousness. "The ego thus becomes the subject, the *hypokeimenon*, the fixed and identity-granting ground of all other reality....Everything else takes is determinative reality, its true Being, in relation to this ego-subject, as one of its 'objects.'"[44]

However, the Cartesian solution to the problem of certainty already betrays the precarious status of the sacred. The ground of Truth is no longer the world as it presents itself to

---

[42] Rene Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason*, in vol. 1 of *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*,trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Dover Publications, 1955), 79–130.

[43] Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in vol. 1of *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Dover Publications, 1955), 131–200.

[44] Edwards, *Plain Sense*, 29.

us; but now the human consciousness is the ground. The sacred is no longer the self-sustaining source of light, but is itself grounded in the subject. "Metaphysical entities and hierarchies (gods, Forms) necessarily become objects of the ego's *belief*, and this is a fundamental loss of status for those entities. They are no longer the sacred ground, no longer the full presence of Being itself. Rather, they are representations displayed as figures upon the ego-ground."[45]

Here we can begin to trace the decay and loss of the stability and certainty of the sacred. As we saw in the *Euthyphro*, the age of the forms appeared to be an advance on the age of the gods because the sacred ground became more fixed and certain. Since the sacred was that which gave shape to, made sense of, and justified the profane, the age of the forms made the relationship between the two more stable by making the sacred more fixed, enduring, and intelligible. But that supposed gain only had the effect of making the sacred more tenuous in the end, since it provided few resources for judging with any certainty between competing visions. Descartes' "solution" to the instability of the sacred in the age of the forms only made matters worse. The only stability remaining for Descartes was the thinking subject, and the subject itself became the sacred grounding of the sacred ground. Descartes, of course, saw some of the danger, and tried to argue for the necessity of God from the basis of the thinking subject. Whether that argument is convincing or not—and the history of philosophy seems to have decided against it—the fatal blow was already struck. The sacred ground now required an argument. The transition from the age of ego-subjectivity to the age of what Edwards calls transvalued values is a short step away, and the transition from Kant to Nietzsche serves as an apt illustration.

Kant thought he had secured the ground and objectivity of the thinking subject by recognizing that our perceptions were predetermined by the apparatus that enables us to have

---

[45] Ibid.

experience of the world in the first place. Our concepts are formed from a priori categories of human perception, which, Kant thought, determined our experiences in a fixed manner. While we do not have access to the things in themselves which give rise to our perceptions, the subject of perception is nevertheless fixed, providing some stability between the thinking subject and the world. But Nietzsche was quick to point out that Kant's discovery did not entail the objectivity Kant desired. For Kant's discovery simultaneously cut off any access we have to a real world beyond our perceptions of it. Thus, the notion that the subject has, to some degree of accuracy, a representation of the real world no longer holds water when we lack the ability to check our representations over-against the original thing-in-itself. As Edwards suggests, "objective reality—that opaque and resistant stuff assumed to stand over against the receptive ego and to be spontaneously reflected in its consciousness—has become a will-o'-the wisp."[46]

Nietzsche exposed Kant's faulty attempt to ground the subject in something more secure and real than its own perceptions. And despite Kant's optimism that he had saved metaphysics, he actually brought an end to any possibility of conceiving the world as something more than our interpretation of it. For Nietzsche, then, interpretation becomes the key to understanding the human quest for knowledge, truth, and stability. Edwards writes, "the basic activity of consciousness is not spontaneous representation but interpretation, the willful imposition of structure and meaning on something—a text, a set of events, a sequence of sense experiences—that demand it."[47] Far from corresponding to or participating in a fixed and enduring realm of the sacred, our knowledge depends merely on the human will to have some sense of stability in the first place. Given this recognition, the truth becomes merely another name for the necessary

---

[46] Ibid., 34.

[47] Ibid., 34.

activity of structuring and ordering our world for the enhancement of our own life. Truths are revalued as values: fixed patterns of interpretation that we use to cope.

Thus, for the first time in the history of the west, Nietzsche sees the whole project in scope. And what he saw was its necessary self-defeat. Our belief in a sacred world (what Nietzsche calls the true world), which would arbitrate any and all claims, had collapsed under the weight of its own determinacy to find truth, certainty, and stability. In a way that previously had not appeared to anyone, our belief in the sacred now appeared to Nietzsche as merely a belief. For the sacred had lost its justification. Nietzsche writes that, "the reasons people give for calling 'this' world an illusion argue much more convincingly in favour of its reality,—no *other* reality could ever be proven."[48] For millennia we thought the sacred world (and the constellation of values associated with it such as God, morality, religion and even philosophy) was part and parcel of our existence. But now it appears to be a human enterprise contingent on the human desire for truth and stability.

Thus, the sacred lost its persuasive power over our lives. Nietzsche's famous tale of the madman who accuses those standing on the street that they had killed God is a helpful illustration. With amazement that we human beings could do such a thing, the madman asks, "How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained the earth from its sun?"[49] This last question, of course, is a reference to Plato's allegory of the sun giving light to those stuck in the shadowy world of the cave. Edwards neatly summarizes the consequences. "After Nietzsche there is nothing left that possesses the full and final presence of pure Being; there is nothing that compels

---

[48] Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 170.

[49] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1954), 95.

our unremitting assent, nothing that stuns into a blessed silence our capacity for ironic redescription."[50] Western religiousness has exhausted its own best resources under the pressure to find truth, certainty, and stability in the world. And the end of the western project means the advent of nihilism.

Nietzsche neatly summarizes what he means by nihilism with the following aphorism. "What does nihilism mean? That the highest values have devalued themselves. The aim is lacking: 'why?' finds no answer."[51] The heart of this description is the rise and prominence of values in our own self-understanding. We used to hold to our beliefs and convictions because we thought they were true. We judged them by the standards of a real world—Nietzsche calls this the true world—that existed beyond our individual perceptions of it. But after ages, even millennia of unsuccessful attempts to prove the truth of our convictions we came to realize that the whole process was self-defeating. The notion that we have access to the truth or that a True world exists beyond our perceptions lost its descriptive power for us. And since we lacked any persuasive means of justifying our most basic convictions, it seemed more accurate to call them values. We value our convictions as ways of making sense of and ordering our lives and not because they correspond to the way the world really is. The devaluation of our highest values follows. Once we understand that the only ground for our convictions is the will to hold them, the power and authority they had over our lives erodes. Edwards summarizes the problem well when he writes that,

> What appears to our sight as truth is not truth but the *value* of truth; that is, various social practices for constructing and enforcing stable and public agreements about 'the facts,' agreements that always and only serve some particular instance of will to

---

[50] Edwards, *Plain Sense*, 41.

[51] Nietzsche, *Will To Power*, 9.

power. And this sort of 'posited' and contingent truth, like any other posited value, can claim only our pragmatic allegiance, not our worship.[52]

Edwards calls nihilism a normal condition in order to convey how nihilism is now an everyday phenomenon, as common as the air we breathe. Borrowing from Heidegger, Edwards describes nihilism as a mood. A mood is not a set of philosophical theses or doctrines that can be compared with another set. Rather a mood "is the way one receives whatever particular beliefs, philosophical or otherwise, then come to one. A mood shows itself in the way those beliefs are framed into one's life....A mood, then, is a way of acting, a style of response, a specific sense of inhabiting one's life."[53] Nihilism is a disposition and comportment we assume when we regard the world and others. In as much as we live at the time when Truth and practices of truthfulness have lost their hold over us, we are all normal nihilists. Nihilism is the way we now experience the world.

Usually the term nihilism carries with it the connotation that one is a psychopath, that one has given himself over to dark pessimism and apathy about the world. But this stereotype misses the simpler and more fundamental way that nihilism shapes our everyday lives. "To say that we are normal nihilists is just to say that our lives are constituted by self-devaluating values....As normal nihilists we are aware of both the existence of radically alternative structures of interpretation and the fact that we ourselves lack any knockdown, noncircular way to demonstrate the self-sufficiency, solidarity, or originality of our own."[54] Normal nihilism does not mean that everyone today is an immoral atheist, or that no one any longer practices religion. People still have moral convictions and regularly practice religion. But they also realize, in ways

[52] Edwards, *Plain Sense*, 42.

[53] Ibid., 13.

[54] Ibid., 46.

they previously did not, that they have no persuasive way of defending or justifying their own convictions or the uniqueness of their religious practices in the face of those radically different than their own. "To be a normal nihilist is to acknowledge that, however fervent and essential one's commitment to a particular set of values, that's all one ever has: a commitment to a particular set of values."[55]

The vast and penetrating effects normal nihilism has on our culture bring us full circle back to the regional shopping mall, which can now be seen not as a strange phenomenon, but the end of the long history of western religiousness that began with the desire to find truth, stability and certainty—the desire for justification. Although Edwards does not highlight the issue of justification in the same way I would like to, it is not hard to understand the history he writes in terms of "the dispute for justification."

While he does not intend to write a comprehensive history of the west in the manner of Edwards, Oswald Bayer's depiction of "the dispute for justification" tracks nicely with Edwards. In his book *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, Bayer observes that the legal terminology of justification is part and parcel of our everyday existence as social beings. We are under constraint to prove our right before the judgment of others. Why is this the case? Bayer only conjectures that it is our fate as social beings, who require recognition from one another in order to exist. However we construe the cause, we are constantly under pressure to give reasons for living as we do and not some other way. And we achieve that goal by claiming to be in the right before the judgment of others. Therefore, "the world of the court is not a special world of its own, but just a particular instance—a very striking one—of what is being done always and

[55] Ibid., 47.

everywhere."[56] This battle for justification forms not only our individual lives, but even world histories, as social groups struggle with one another to claim right, to assign guilt, and to vindicate themselves. The whole western project that Edwards narrates can be seen in precisely these terms. The invocation of the sacred, and the search for a workable, stable, and rationally intelligible ground has been part and parcel of the human attempt to assign meaning to our lives, to claim that there is some right and authority to which we must assent and obey, and which justifies our living one way rather than another. In an age of self-devaluating values, we realize that our sacred grounds do not provide the stability and authority they once did. As values, we have no justification for them beyond our own personal desire to hold them.

Thus, the question of justification stands at the heart of the devaluation of our highest values. Given that we lack any persuasive means of giving reasons for our convictions, we have been left with no other justification than our own commitment to them. The problem is not that our central convictions appear to be wrong or false. Rather, the problem is that we westerners have lost the ability to say why one viewpoint is more right than another. Our most ardent attempts at justification have come up short. And we as a western people are cognizant of this problem. More to the point then, the problem is that everyone's central convictions appear to be merely subjective and preferential, no more true or persuasive than our own ability to find value in them, which has significantly devalued them.

Christians have always been charged with the task of justification. The central claim Christians have made throughout the centuries is that the creator has acted in a decisive way through a particular person, and to know the truth about the world requires knowledge of this person in particular. This claim is not readily apparent to every living person as the truth; nor

[56] Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1.

should it, given its particularity and exclusivity. So Christians have always been forced to justify themselves as people who follow the way, the truth, and the life. But in an age of normal nihilism the problem of justification arises in a more sweeping manner. Since no single set of beliefs or way of life stands out above the rest as unmistakably the way things are, Christians are forced to give reasons for living as we do. In our recent past, western culture assumed that the Triune God was the creator of all things and the incarnation of God's Son was the pinnacle event in the history of the world. But now, "no form of life is unquestioned by us; none is proof to our capacity and need for irony," as Edwards warns.[57]

Christians must be able to give reasons for their faith and life that appeal to more than what Christians find personally valuable. The most nihilistic character of our convictions is that they provide us with no resources to recommend them to other people beyond the usefulness we have found in them for ordering our own lives. Of course, we have found ways to describe how Christianity is important to us, how we've decided to follow it, been bequeathed it by our ancestors, or what value we have found in it as we make our way through life. But nihilism is a normal condition when we have lost the ability to say why Christianity is more than personally useful, to say that we are compelled by its claims to believe it and have a right to hold others to the standards of these beliefs. This is not to say that our appeals to the value of Christianity are not valid attempts at justification. But it is to say that these are especially nihilistic means of justification.

Martin Heidegger begins to capture the disaster facing Christianity when it makes an appeal to values when he writes, "The heaviest blow against God is not that God is held to be unknowable, not that God's existence is demonstrated to be un-provable, but rather that the god

[57] Edwards, *Plain Sense*, 51.

held to be real is elevated to the highest value."[58] As a value, even the highest value, God loses his authority, his right, his persuasive and commanding power over us because God's significance to us is not that he is the ground of our existence—a powerful personal being and force that we must understand and obey if we are to have life. Rather, God appears significant only insofar as *we* have placed value on him. Heidegger appropriately uses the diminished *god* to signify the loss of authority God has as the highest value. For, "That which is, as the objective, is swallowed up into the immanence of subjectivity. The horizon no longer emits light of itself. It is now nothing but the point-of-view posited in the value-positing of the will to power."[59] Therefore, if Christianity in the west wants to avoid the fate of being another shop in the mall, Christians will have to have reasons for their beliefs that extend beyond the personal value of Christianity.

*When I say, "give reasons," I do not mean this in an Apologetic sense. I do not intend to show how Christians should persuade others into the faith by providing convincing reasons that any good or rational person would have to accept. This would only reduplicate our nihilism by underwriting the authority of human reason. Rather, I intend to answer these questions: What reasons do Christians have for their faith and life? Are those reasons anything more than our personal attraction to Christianity? Can we intelligibly say that our faith and life stem not from our will and desire, but from God? And what will Christian faith and life look like when it is formed by those reasons? Answering these questions will be the task of this dissertation.* Before moving on, though, it will be important to say something more about my choice of Edwards' narrative.

---

[58] Martin Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God Is Dead'," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper, 1977), 105.

[59] Ibid., 107.

## Assessing Edwards

Having canvassed the western tradition since the Homeric period, one cannot help but wonder how exactly to assess Edwards' claims. How does one judge such a broad and sweeping characterization of western life and thought? What resources are possibly available? One answer to that question might be to check the accuracy of Edwards' account over against the original sources, and see whether or not he gets one thinker or another right. Given the scope of his narrative, that kind of assessment is unrealistic, not to mention the fact that it begs the question of what the standards are by which anyone might consider a reading of Nietzsche or Plato right in the first place. But more so, it tends to misunderstand what Edwards aims to accomplish with his story.

Edwards himself admits that he is not trying to provide anything more than a characterization of these influential thinkers, to track a popular and influential way we have understood ourselves in light of their work. "The point here, as I say, is self-recognition, not the advancement of philosophical scholarship. The point is that we come to accept my narrative, and the particular philosophical mood it creates and explains, as *our own*: as a convincing account of what it does mean for us end-of-century, western intellectuals to be subject to religious affection."[60] Thus, the important question is not primarily one of accuracy but whether or not this account has explanatory power. Does it help us understand how we have come to be the people we are?

Another way of putting the matter is to suggest that we understand Edwards as a *literary critic* in the sense that Richard Rorty uses the term. A literary critic, according to Rorty, is someone who has the skill of creating a canon, or positioning certain thinkers in relationship to

---

[60] Edwards, *Plain Sense*, 13–14.

one another in such a way that creates a new final vocabulary; a new set of words that we use to justify our actions and beliefs. Rather than thinking that there are perennial categories in a field (philosophy or theology for instance) that can judge any one set of propositions from any thinker at any given time, a literary critic tries to re-describe diverse thinkers in such a way that makes sense of their differences. A literary critic thus considers his work successful when the canon he creates can provide a more persuasive and useful way of understanding the relationships between thinkers and periods. In the course of resituating various thinkers in relationship to one another, says Rorty, "we revise our opinions of both the old and the new. Simultaneously, we revise our own moral identity by revising our own final vocabulary."[61] Thus, a literary critic turns out to be more persuasive and useful when we notice that we gain something in adopting his re-description. A literary critic is successful when his canon helps us get along better.

The task of assessing Edwards as a literary critic will extend over the next few chapters. Already, though, we can begin to see how Edwards' account provides us with some advantage over the line of thinkers that have gone before him. Edwards writes about nihilism from within a tradition of reflection on the matter, and it will be beneficial to briefly recount that tradition in order to understand what kind of gain Edwards provides. The two most direct influences on Edwards' account of nihilism are Nietzsche and Heidegger.

Nietzsche was not the first person to use the term *nihilism*; in fact, he uses the word sparingly in his own body of writing. His most concentrated discussion of the topic can be found in a book he never lived to publish, *The Will to Power*. But his appropriation of the term has proven definitive. Nietzsche used nihilism to describe what he saw as the destiny of western

[61] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 80.

civilization for the next two centuries.[62] He recognized that the quest for truth and truthfulness, which has extended over the course of western history as we have come to know it, was collapsing under its own weight. We westerners once liked to think that our convictions about the world corresponded to a realm of Truth that was transcendent of our immediate experience but nevertheless accessible to our rational capabilities. We placed value on the pursuit of truth, and the exercise of truthfulness found in the practices of religion, theology and philosophy. And we structured our lives around the corresponding notions of God and creation, knowledge and mere belief, facts and values, good and evil. But Nietzsche understood that this era had run its course; for the ways we sought justification for our beliefs had proven over the expanse of this project to be untenable, faulty, and self-defeating. Therefore the notions that once seemed to be a necessary part of existence now appear to be contingent upon our desire for truth and certainty. Truth itself appears merely as something human beings value. And that realization significantly devalues the status of our own convictions. If they are not the truth or true in any traditional sense of the word, then they are mere personal preferences that we use to make sense of our lives.

According to this account, nihilism is not a prescriptive doctrine that aims at inducing the collapse of truth. Rather, nihilism is the observation that the collapse of the western project has been the latent and inevitable inner logic of western thought and civilization. Certainly, major figures in the west have influenced our collective imagination because they have encouraged us to think about our most basic convictions in terms of values. For instance, Rieff helpfully brings to our attention that no account of the western world can under-estimate the influence someone like Sigmund Freud has over our own self-description. But often, a mistaken perception of

[62] Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 3, comments, "What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*."

nihilism is that its influence extends only as far as the tenability of something like Freud's human psychology, or as we shall see, Nietsche's will to power. It is sometimes thought that nihilism can be defeated by isolating the individual faults of these independent thinkers and their doctrines, and providing better doctrines that ought to stifle their influence as soon as everyone sees how foolish or bad they really are. But nihilism is more than the sum of the most influential 'nihilists.' Nihilism is an historical observation, an attempt to articulate why we are the way we are on account of the people we have been. In particular, this historical account narrates *the necessary self-defeat* of the thing we have valued the most: truth and truthfulness.

All of this tracks with what I have already been describing as nihilism. But at some points in Nietzsche's writings, the story he tells is only an historical observation about the inner logic of western thought and life since Plato.[63] At other times, however, the story has the character of asserting non-historical doctrines aimed at inducing the collapse of truth. In other words, sometimes Nietzsche's arguments seem to depend on his description of the fundamental human condition: the will to power, or the will to self-preservation and enhancement of life. His argument in *Beyond Good and Evil* can serve as a good example.[64] Already in the first chapter Nietzsche neatly dispatches hundreds of years of arguments that human reasoning has some purchase on certainty and truth. The futility of this tradition, he thinks, ought to lead us to a more interesting question: why do we need truth in the first place? If our best efforts at finding the truth only lead us to believe in truth, why are we so intent on believing? Why not rather believe in interpretation; that the cause of our knowledge is not things in themselves but the will to

---

[63] Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, "How the True World Finally Became a Fable" in *Twilight of the Idols* in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols And Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 171.

[64] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. and trans., Marion Faber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3–24.

power? In this way, Nietzsche uses the doctrine of the will to power as an alternative interpretation about the way things really are. The will to power is a tool Nietzsche uses to dislodge the confidence we have in truth.

But these kinds of arguments in Nietzsche's work create some confusion about what he meant and whether or not his account is cogent. On the one hand, the validity of his account would seem to depend on the accuracy of items like the story he tells about the origins of morality in *On the Genealogy of Morals*.[65] In this book, Nietzsche gives an alternative account of morality that does not rely on the traditional Platonic notion that virtuous behavior leads one to achieve an objective good that is latent in the structure of reality. He argues that the notions of good and evil derive not from the existence of a True world but rather from the desire of a ruling class to secure its own power by calling its way of life natural or necessary.[66] Given that this work often claims to see the hidden motive behind history, it is doubtful that one could prove this in any convincing manner. Likewise, even in his later work, his argument sometimes seems to depend on the tenability of his description of human being as will to power.[67] Given the

---

[65] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 11–76.

[66] Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 13, asserts that, "the pathos of nobility and distance, the enduring, dominating, and fundamental overall feeling of a higher ruling kind in relation to a lower kind, to a 'below'—*that* is the origin of the opposition between 'good' and 'bad'. (The right of the masters to confer names extends so far that one should allow oneself to grasp the origin of language itself as the expression of the power of the rulers: they say 'this *is* such and such', they put their seal on each thing and event with a sound and in the process take possession of it.) It follows from this origin that there is from the outset absolutely *no* necessary connection between the word 'good' and 'unegoistic' actions, as the superstition of the genealogists of morals would have it. Rather, it is only with the decline of aristocratic value-judgments that this whole opposition between 'egoistic' and 'unegoistic' comes to impose itself increasingly on the human conscience."

[67] Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 275–76, writes, "The valuation 'I believe that this and that is so' as the *essence* of 'truth.' In valuations are expressed conditions of preservation and growth. All our organs of knowledge and our senses are developed only with regard to conditions of preservation and growth. Trust in reason and its categories, in dialectic, therefore the valuation of logic, proves only their usefulness for life, proved by experience—*not* that something *is* true."

historicizing claims of his conclusions, though, it would be hard to see how anyone could convincingly sustain the consistency of this position.[68]

Heidegger recognized the confusion in Nietzsche, and tried to take the argument a step in the right direction by separating the account of western philosophy from its dependence on the will to power.[69] Heidegger thinks that with the notion of will to power, Nietzsche was the last metaphysician; the final practitioner of the very tradition he saw collapsing. As a metaphysician, Heidegger thinks that Nietzsche had a description of the truth of what exists as a whole, i.e. Being. That description was the will to power. But Nietzsche's metaphysics was no accident or arbitrary assertion, argues Heidegger. That Being would be conceived as the will to power was the logical consummation of the tradition since Plato. This tradition held that the underlying and explanatory structure of existence—Being—could be thought of in its totality. And the only way to think of Being as a whole was through representational thinking. Representational thinking understands Being as an object available for the subject's examination. But this only makes the thinking subject the ground of Being. Being becomes merely the object of the subject so that the subject becomes the ground of its own ground. Thus, metaphysics consummates itself when it understands Being as that which is grounded in the human will for certainty and self-preservation; or as Nietzsche put it, the will to power.

---

[68]I do not mean to suggest that Nietzsche's arguments really do depend on his doctrine of the will to power. In fact, a careful reading of Nietzsche often turns up surprising ways in which he qualifies the will to power as another ungrounded conjecture, and that Nietzsche's intent is merely to provide a provocative or more useful alternative. For instance, Gavin Hyman, "John Milbank and Nihilism: A Metaphysical (Mis)Reading?" *Literature & Theology* 14 (2000): 430–43, helpfully points us to the preface of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* to see this very kind of qualification. However, I do mean to say that Nietzsche's use of the will to power does sometimes create confusion because they seem to make his arguments depend on these kinds of proofs.

[69] Cf. Martin Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead,'" in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Perennial) 53–112. Cf. Martin Heidegger, *The Will to Power as Knowledge and as Metaphysics*, vol.3 of *Nietzsche*, ed. David Farrell Krell, trans. Joan Stambaugh, David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987). Also, Martin Heidegger, *Nihilism*, vol. 4 of *Nietzsche*, ed. David Farrell Krell, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1982).

Especially in his later work, Heidegger expresses a great deal of worry about the history of metaphysics that culminates in nihilism; for the western tradition is not merely a set of ideas but a way of life that was part and parcel of human engagement with the world. And that engagement has profound consequences. As we have already seen, one primary concern for Heidegger is the place technology has in shaping our existence.[70] Technology, like western metaphysics, tries to secure the world as an object for the study and use of the subject. And at the end of the western project of metaphysics, our existence is defined by technology's ability to organize the world for us. Thus, Heidegger thinks that in our technological age the world now presents itself to us as standing reserve, or raw material to be stored for creating and recreating our existence at will.

Technology is an important example for Heidegger of the way in which Being comes to manifest itself at the end of metaphysics. Although completely contingent on the historical tradition of metaphysical thinking rather than the more doctrinal will to power, Heidegger thinks that Being now presents itself to us as nihilism. "Thought out from the destining of Being," he writes, "the *nihil* in 'nihilism' means that *Nothing* is befalling Being...Metaphysics is an epoch of the history of Being itself. But in its essence metaphysics is nihilism. The essence of nihilism belongs to that history as which Being itself comes to presence."[71] Thus, Being, in the sense of the totality of existence, still remains an important question for Heidegger to the extent that Being tends to be the overarching framework in which his account of nihilism arises.

This aspect of Heidegger's account will prove to be a misleading way of describing the problem, which will become clearer in light of John Milbank's engagement with nihilism and Heidegger. For now, it is enough to let Richard Rorty have the final word concerning Heidegger.

[70] Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 3–35.

[71] Heidegger, "Word of Nietzsche," 109–10.

By his own claims, Rorty places himself and his criticisms of the Platonic tradition in continuity with Nietzsche and Heidegger, as well as Wittgenstein and Dewey.[72] In an essay that compares Heidegger and Dewey on the tradition of philosophy stemming from Plato, Rorty observes that Heidegger has trouble casting off the tradition because he still finds a place for Thought. Or to put the matter in a way that tracks with what I have written above, Heidegger still finds a place for philosophy in the sense of a discourse that can speak about Being as such. But, Rorty says, this tendency in Heidegger only displays a hope for the holy and the religious, and this hope is "just what was worst in the tradition."[73] After all, given the trajectory of the Platonic tradition we ought to be able to recognize, as Nietzsche did about Truth, that Being is just a hope developed solely within the parameters of the tradition—in that sense, a 'religious' rather than necessary hope. For, Rorty argues, Heidegger has nothing from which to recommend that we take Being seriously as such. "All he can do to explain why we shouldn't shrug off Being as a vapor and a fallacy is to say that our fate is somehow linked to that tradition."[74] But such a case is far from demonstrating the necessity of thinking in terms of Being in the first place.

In contrast to Heidegger, Edwards describes nihilism more simply as the result of a certain way of thinking about the world that began with Plato. He does not need to make allusions to Being. In fact, Edwards embraces the irony latent within his own account of the matter.

> And now one can also easily see that my own potted narrative of who we have become—the narrative that represents us as normal nihilists—is itself a distinctly normal nihilist narrative. By representing our past as a series of replaceable sets of values (gods, Forms, egos), as alternative structures of interpretation succeeding one another as the varying conditions of life (intellectual and otherwise) demand, the narrative belongs to, as Heidegger would snidely put it, 'the age of the world picture' it is itself helping to define and to sustain...Thus my narrative places itself within its

---

[72] Cf. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

[73] Richard Rorty, "Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey," in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 52.

[74] Ibid., 53.

> own frame, forcing us to see not only the past but also the present—this account itself—as interpretation in service to a form of life...To us normal nihilists, obviously it must seem as if we *must* be normal nihilists: and that is right, only we must be careful not to turn the 'must' into a metaphysical imperative rather than a rhetorical need. Thus devaluation devaluates the very account that succeeds in explaining our mood of devaluation. Even our normal nihilism is just a banal contingency, not an uncanny insight into the Order of Things.[75]

In other words, Edwards' own description of our condition is not making a claim any more interesting than the following: nihilism is our normal condition because we have been committed to thinking about the world in Platonic terms. Unlike Heidegger, Edwards does not hold out hope that since nihilism is the latest means by which Being has come to presence, we might yet have something to say about Being. Unlike Heidegger, Edwards does not have the hope that Being can still save us from our nihilism. That, after all, is the worry that precipitates Edwards' book. Given the contingency of our thinking about Being, we should realize that no such thing *can* save us from our consumption of the world. Nor would we likely want it to if it could.[76]

For those of us Christians with a serious investment in 'God', accepting the terms and validity of Edwards' narrative might seem like suicide. But, I am adopting this narrative of decline because it poses a question to Christian life and witness that demands an answer: Why? Why do Christians gather on Sunday morning to pray in the name of a first century Jew from Nazareth? Why do we forgive sins, baptize, and celebrate the Lord's Supper? Why do we say things like Jesus is the Son of God and insist that God is triune? Why do we insist on following Jesus? What justifies our life together? These are the kinds of questions that our condition of normal nihilism forces upon us. We must give some justification for our life as Christians that does not ground our existence finally in our own desire and will; otherwise Christianity is just another shop in the mall. Before giving my own answer to these questions, I will evaluate two

[75] Edwards, *Plain Sense*, 49.

[76] Ibid., 54–57.

prominent attempts at justifying the Christian faith in an age of normal nihilism: that of John Milbank and Stanley Hauerwas. These chapters will help clarify the difficulty facing Christian life and witness in our age and set the stage for my own constructive answer in the final chapters.

# CHAPTER TWO

## JOHN MILBANK'S RESPONSE

> The pathos of modern theology is its false humility. For theology, this must be a fatal disease, because once theology surrenders its claim to be a metadiscourse, it cannot any longer articulate the word of the creator God, but is bound to turn into the oracular voice of some finite idol, such as historical scholarship, humanist psychology, or transcendental philosophy. If theology no longer seeks to position, qualify or criticize other discourses, then it is inevitable that these discourses will position theology: for the necessity of an ultimate organizing logic...cannot be wished away.[1]

Anyone who does Christian theology in the contemporary west must take seriously the argument behind these opening lines to John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, because no single work in theology today has treated the issue of Christian justification with greater focus, nuance and scholarship. And in that sense, Milbank's work is an anthem for contemporary theology. Despite Milbank's enormous range of scholarship and his idiosyncratic knack for turning a bad phrase, the book's thesis is quite simple. For centuries now, Christian theology has been marginalized by disciplines like philosophy, sociology, politics, history and economics, which claim to have a more fundamental understanding of the world than theology. Each of those disciplines has gained an authority over Christianity on account of their ability to tell us the way things really are without the outworn language of "God." Thus, secular reasoning has not only held a right over theology, but has gained public consensus as a more authoritative science. In the process, these disciplines argue that putting aside the language of theology has set us free to understand the world as it really is, without colloquial superstition or

[1] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1.

prejudice. The results have been disastrous for Christian faith and life. Milbank fears that secular reason has given westerners the ability to construct what appear to be perfectly coherent lives without ever thinking once about God, let alone the church or the church's more particular confessions like the doctrine of the Trinity or the divinity of Jesus. This must be a fatal disease for theology because even though its claims are about a God who is creator, it has forfeited the right to speak authoritatively about creation. On the one hand, if Christianity wants to regain some status of relevance under these conditions its talk about God must be translated into the language of historical scholarship, humanist psychology, or transcendental philosophy. On the other hand, if theology refuses to translate its convictions, it threatens to become just another topic alongside others with its own particular subject and study (i.e. revelation) with little or no necessary consequences for our greater understanding of the world in which we live. Given the way secular reason has situated theology, the question "Why go to church?" finds no answer.

Rather than accepting these parameters for doing theology, Milbank challenges them. In a provocative way, Milbank argues that the story secular disciplines tell about the way they have emancipated reason from superstition and prejudice cannot be sustained. Upon closer inspection, secular philosophy, history, politics and economics stem from arbitrary changes within Christian theology; changes that were theologically unorthodox if not outright heretical. Thus, without the guise of "pure" reason, the move to the secular depends on political motivations rather than necessary advancements. Once the secular is deconstructed in this genealogical fashion, theology can reposition itself as queen of the sciences by demonstrating that it has a better account than the secular sciences ever did.

But just what is better and who determines that standard? Much depends on how Milbank answers that question. And that raises the topic of nihilism in Milbank's work. Just as no single book in contemporary theology has given as much focused attention to the topic of Christian

justification, no single work of Christian theology has given such a nuanced account of nihilism than *Theology and Social Theory*. Nihilism, Milbank claims, is *the* postmodern form of secular reasoning. The modern form marginalized Christian theology by measuring it against the universal truths supposedly found within their disciplines (i.e. Marx on religion and economics). Nihilism lacks the ability to make claims about a single universal truth. "It can, however, relativize and question claims to universality. Its more insidious method reveals no secret behind the *mythos*, but merely points to other 'truths', and shows how these are suppressed by a totalizing perspective."[2] As Milbank defines it, nihilism is the new form of social theory standing over-against Christian theology, marginalizing Christian claims to truth by pointing out the necessary violence of making any comprehensive claim.

By the conclusion of Milbank's massive argument, the options are either secular nihilism or Christian theology. But Milbank makes an important move within his account of nihilism that distinguishes it from the description of nihilism that I have been borrowing from James Edwards. Milbank makes that move already in the opening lines quoted above. "For the necessity of an ultimate organizing logic…cannot be wished away."[3] Even nihilism itself, which according to Milbank undermines every claim to a totalizing truth, has its own ultimate organizing logic: that the world is at base ruled by a necessary and arbitrary violence. Every totalizing claim is an act of violence because every truth is merely the historically contingent and arbitrary movement of one cultural form to another. This organizing logic is the new secular social theory. Whereas the promise of modern secular social theory was its ability to give us coherent lives apart from the parochial claims of theology, postmodern secular reason has only followed through with the consequences of thinking about the world apart from a transcendent source. Now we live

---

[2] Ibid., 261.

[3] Ibid., 1.

incoherent lives because we lack any authoritative means of judging between competing claims. We have no reasonable way to say that one cultural form is good or right in comparison to another. So, nihilism now appears to be the social theory that makes our incoherence and violence necessary. This 'nihilism' is an opportunity, Milbank thinks, for Christian theology to reassert itself over-against the secular.[4]

Milbank draws his account of nihilism from the writings of a select but influential group of philosophers, including Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze. And while some of them would certainly be hesitant to affirm Milbank's claim that they hold to an ultimate organizing logic, the genius of Milbank's work appears to be the way he uses the Christian counter-logic to expose their prejudices for violence. Over-against such nihilism, Milbank offers the Christian ontology of ultimate peace, in which every difference is not ultimate but reconciled in its participation in the triune God's creative activity. Just to the extent that Christianity does not understand the world to be ruled by a necessary violence, the Christian organizing logic reveals itself as the uniquely better social science.

But does this argument do the work against nihilism that Milbank claims for it? Does the attractiveness of the Christian ontology really overcome nihilism? This is doubtful. In staking out the unique Christian difference, Milbank does not claim to be a foundationalist. That is to say, Milbank does not think that Christianity can be defended according to some universal standard of truth; a standard that would prove the truth of Christianity to any competent person. In agreement with the nihilists, Milbank does not think that such foundations exist. So the Christian ontology

[4] Cf. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, "Introduction" in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 1, who write, "For several centuries now secularism has been defining and constructing the world. It is a world in which the theological is either discredited or turned into a harmless leisure-time activity of private commitment. And yet in its early manifestations secular modernity exhibited anxiety concerning its own lack of ultimate ground....And today the logic of secularism is imploding...For this new project regards the nihilistic drift of postmodernism (which nonetheless has roots in the outset of modernity) as a supreme opportunity."

hangs suspended in utter contrast to secular social theory without any logical way of discerning between them. "If my Christian perspective is persuasive," he writes, "then this should be a persuasion intrinsic to the Christian logos itself, not the apologetic mediation of a universal human reason."[5] Thus, the persuasiveness of his argument for the Christian difference is only based on the attractiveness of Christian ontology. This means that for Milbank, the final justification for Christianity is the sheer appeal of its metaphysics.

Anyone following the line of argument made by James Edwards, that our normal nihilism is the condition in which our highest values are devalued insofar as we understand their status as values, will already see the problem with Milbank's position. Even though *Theology and Social Theory* is a profoundly dense and scholarly argument, it will only be necessary to draw out its major movements to see the difficulties it has as a response to our normal nihilism. Hopefully, Milbank's most erudite reader will recognize these basic movements and the problems they encounter when placed in contrast to Edwards. The trouble with Milbank's is that he tries to justify Christianity on the value of its metaphysics for western life.

This chapter will critically examine and evaluate two specific features of Milbank's attempt to overcome nihilism. The first feature of Milbank's argument is that nihilism is an organizing logic, an account of Reality as it always is and has to be. The second feature is that nihilism can be overcome and defeated by the persuasiveness or attractiveness of Christian metaphysics. By the term *metaphysics* I mean the philosophical practice of providing ultimate and comprehensive explanations of the world in which we live.[6] Milbank's argument for Christianity depends on the belief that human beings cannot escape the project of metaphysics. He finds that even the

[5] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1.

[6] I will sometimes use the term metaphysics in ways that seem synonymous with ontology. Ontology, as I will use it, is the particular organizing logic that founds one entire metaphysical enterprise or another.

nihilists, who categorically deny the possibility of such explanations, still depend on metaphysics to do so. The two features of Milbank's argument emerge from this single conviction. As I demonstrated briefly in the previous chapter, the metaphysical charge against the nihilists might apply to Nietzsche and Heidegger. But it is hard to say how it could possibly apply to Edwards' account of the matter. For Edwards, the devaluation of our highest values is not an insight into the way things have to be. Rather, it is only an observation that our most basic convictions have lost their ability to convince us that they are something more than *our* convictions. In the end, Milbank's failures will end up recommending Edwards.

## The Nihilism of *Theology and Social Theory*

The ultimate failure of Milbank's strategy for justifying Christianity in *Theology and Social Theory* depends on his definition of nihilism. Milbank derives this definition from a canonical list of nihilists and their works. Those include Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze. While these thinkers are diverse and nuanced, Milbank lumps them together; and he is not hesitant to do so because despite their differences, Milbank finds common features between them that he wants to place in stark contrast to Christianity. "I am concerned," he writes, "with what is common to the outlook of the major Nietzscheans, and I deliberately treat the writings of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Deleuze, Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida as elaborations of a single nihilistic philosophy, paying relatively less attention to their divergences of opinion."[7] That single nihilistic philosophy has three enduring and related characteristics. First, these thinkers hold to an absolute historicism. Second, and most important to Milbank's argument, an ontology of violence sustains their historicism. And third, the first two features lead to a nihilistic ethics, in which violence and coercion are

[7] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 278.

necessary features of human behavior and social organization. The apparent success of Milbank's argument depends on his claim that their historicizing must, but cannot be, sustained by an ontology of violence. The nihilists deconstruct every claim to the truth as a mere accident of history, contingent on arbitrary historical circumstances and thus always masking an equally justifiable alternative. But in order to sustain these arguments, they *must* posit an ontology or a description of the way things are always and everywhere—namely, that there exists an inherent and primordial violence. But this is just the sort of claim that cannot be sustained within the parameters of an absolute historicism. And he demonstrates their ungrounded character by juxtaposing these thinkers with the Christian ontology of primordial peace. Such juxtaposition, however, does not prove the Christian alternative. It only exposes the nihilists' preference for violence and recommends the Christian alternative for its preference and commitment to peace. Thus, Christianity appears to be a uniquely different social theory. Only the Christian ontology is able to envision the world without the necessity of violence and coercion.

Many have already attempted to discredit Milbank's reading of one or another of his canonical nihilists by showing that they do not fit the broad definition Milbank gives them.[8] This may or may not be true; but that is an interpretive question beyond the scope of this project because it is not relevant to the devaluation of our highest values. This sort of attack on Milbank's argument misses a more important point about nihilism's threat to Christian life and witness. Milbank justifies Christianity according to its value as the single alternative to

---

[8] Cf. On Derrida see, Hugh Rayment-Pickard, "Derrida and Nihilism" in *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric and Truth*, ed. Wayne Hankey and Douglas Hedley (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 161–75. On Foucault see, David Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 23–88. On Nietzsche see, Gavin Hyman, "John Milbank and Nihilism: A Metaphysical (Mis)Reading?" *Literature & Theology* 14 (2000): 430–43. Hyman's critique is very similar to mine in the sense that it questions the validity of Milbank's attempt to situate and overcome nihilism as metaphysics. However, Hyman's commitment to nihilist textualism devalues Christianity in the same manner. Cf. Gavin Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

nihilism's social theory. Despite his claims to overcome 'nihilism' he nevertheless justifies Christianity in a way that devalues it. He makes Christianity the highest possible value to contemporary western life. While he might in fact be correct about the ontological tendencies in writers like Nietzsche and Heidegger, which I have already alluded to in the previous chapter, nihilism as I am describing it, cannot be positioned as an ontology of violence. As Edwards says, "Even our nihilism is just a banal contingency, not an uncanny insight into the Order of Things."[9] Instead, it is better to understand nihilism as our normal condition: an economic disposition we have towards any ontological claims insofar as they have lost their power to convince us that this is the way things really are.

**Nihilism as Absolute Historicism and Ontology of Violence**

In order to demonstrate Milbank's misunderstanding, let me first unpack his definition of nihilism. The first character of nihilism is absolute historicism. By this, Milbank means that the nihilists think that every structure of meaning stems from contingent and historical circumstances. But the challenge is not merely the historical nature of every claim but more so that this sort of historicism "refuses to tell [the] Kantian and Hegelian (or sociological and Marxist) stories about a constant human subject. Instead, it is only interested in disinterring the thresholds of emergence for many different fictions of subjectivity in the course of human history."[10] Milbank points us to the transition from Kant and Hegel's philosophy to Nietzsche's genealogy. Whereas Kant and Hegel held out the hope that the contingent character of our thinking about the world could be overcome by appealing to the objectivity we have through some kind of access to the thinking subject, absolute historicism refuses even that as an

[9] Edwards, *Plain Sense*, 49.

[10] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 280.

Archimedean point of leverage. Instead, Nietzsche's genealogy denies altogether that the subject can be a transcendental point of reference. The genealogical method does this by telling the story of a more basic striving for power behind every disinterested claim. This story is meant to dislodge all claims to objectivity by recognizing that behind every disinterested claim to truth stands the will to self preservation and enhancement of life. Absolute historicism, according to Milbank's telling, holds that every framework of meaning is conditioned by history's *arbitrary* movement from one power-complex to the next and cannot be reconciled by talk of the progress of the Spirit or a transcendental ego.

The importance of an ontology of violence already begins to emerge from this description of absolute historicism. Absolute historicism relativizes every claim to objectivity insofar as it sees behind it the action of the will-to-power. "Hence, genealogy is not an interpretation, but a new 'joyfully' nihilistic form of positivism which explains every cultural meaning complex as a particular strategy or ruse of power. No universals are ascribed to human society save one: that it is always a field of warfare."[11] Of course, Milbank recognizes that Nietzsche's genealogy intends to undermine confidence in the objectivity of any perspective by "exploding the 'eternal verities' which it claims to promote, and exhibiting the 'base' origins of its apparently noble pretensions."[12] But intention does not necessarily mean that his genealogy is true or objective. It could be just another way of putting the matter; a way intended to unsettle, but nevertheless just another historically conditioned way. In other words, the possibility still exists that the will-to-power is only one interpretation among a number of others. But Milbank thinks that Nietzsche and the nihilists overtly assert a comprehensive account of reality. Moreover, he argues that they

---

[11] Ibid., 281–82.

[12] Ibid., 281.

*must* posit this ontology in order to sustain their absolute historicism. Here is where Milbank draws on his account of Christianity in order to assist his argument against the nihilists.

In order to explain how Christianity assists the argument, I will transition from Milbank's discussion of genealogy and Nietzsche to his discussion of the nihilist ontology in the work of Martin Heidegger. Milbank focuses especially on the earlier work of Heidegger in his *Being and Time.*[13] Like Nietzsche, Heidegger's work begins with the problematic condition of our historical contingency. But rather than construe this in terms of the will-to-power, Heidegger sees the problem of contingency latent in the task of philosophy itself, especially in the metaphysical manner of thinking. According to Heidegger, metaphysical thinking aims to answer the question of being: What is the meaning of being? Heidegger recognizes that typically, philosophy has tried to answer that question by referring us to more perfect instances of particular beings themselves. Plato's forms might be one example of just this kind of thinking. The problem, though, with this kind of answer to the metaphysical question is that individual things occur always within a complex web of other things, each of which has its own purposes that in turn depend on certain historical circumstances and movements. The desk, for instance, upon which I am writing is not merely a reflection of a more perfect form of desk, Heidegger would argue, but has its own existence in relationship to the quite ordinary task of academic scholarship (which places it in the basement of a theological research library built in the 1950's). Academic scholarship, especially in its unique western form, has a number of factors that determine its everyday ordinariness: the attainment of degrees, status, livelihood, and the functional operation of western society according to a distinctly scientific manner. And, the greater web itself, in

[13] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962). Although Milbank's criticism is not limited to that work or the early Heidegger. Cf. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 296–302.

which my desk exists, has a historical determination that cannot simply be abstracted at any one point and viewed in its entirety. What stands in the way of our doing so is the ontological difference—the difference between individual beings that happen to exist in any given circumstance and at any given time, and Being itself, which is no thing in particular but the sheer happening of beings in time. The metaphysical way of thinking ignores the ontological difference and makes Being a more perfect, now hypostasized and permanent, form of particular beings.

But this kind of projection only transgresses the ontological difference. It ignores the occurrence of Being in time and projects Being as a thing, even the most perfect instance of that thing. If we respect the ontological difference, we would recognize that every specific instance of being or beings simultaneously conceals Being from our vision. And as beings who exist within time we cannot hope to escape the way in which our perspectives are given by the circumstances of history.

Milbank acknowledges the validity of Heidegger's concern for the ontological difference. But as is typical of Milbank's conviction that an organizing logic is inescapable, he questions whether or not it is possible even to think without applying the kind of totalizing perspective Heidegger denies. In fact, he sees a hidden metaphysics operating in Heidegger's own description of the problem. Being remains forever elusive for Heidegger because it is always concealed in the historical contingency of beings, hidden from the gaze of our limited perspective. Being remains forever absent in beings. Milbank detects the work of an arbitrary metaphysics in Heidegger: the doctrine of an ontological fall in which Being retreats from itself. Milbank thinks this description is an unnecessary conclusion.

> One might want rather to say that as much as a being is a particular existence and not Being itself, it yet exhibits in its sheer contingency the inescapable mystery of Being. Precisely because Being and beings are not on the same level, nor related within any common arena, the difference of a being from Being in no way obliterates or conceals

> Being itself. It would then follow that to live in forgetfulness of Being is to live in a culture which discounts religion, and seeks purely immanent explanations.[14]

The key to understanding Milbank's argument with Heidegger is this: By presenting another option, he reveals Heidegger's hidden commitment to violence. In this case, he finds it in the way Heidegger constructs our historical contingency so that Being always conceals itself, always removing from us the possibility of fully knowing the source of our existence and always stuck in the concealing flux of time. Milbank asks simple questions of this position. Is this the only way to understand the ontological difference? Could it not also be possible that beings show forth the mystery of Being in their very situatedness? Are the only two options for accounting for the ontological difference metaphysical thinking or nihilistic concealment? Could we not equally consider a third option, an option unique to Christianity—the analogy of being, in which we understand that beings reveal rather than conceal Being by their movement toward an ultimate end and good within contingent circumstances.[15] This Christian alternative, perfected by Thomas Aquinas, must only be denied, Milbank thinks, if we uncritically assume that no transcendence exists which holds beings together in teleological activity. In other words, only if we posit Being as the arbitrary movement through time of one culture to the next (i.e. violence is a description of the way things really are) do we have to insist that Being is forever concealed from sight. Milbank puts it this way: "the idea of an inescapable ontological fall is, consequently, the transcendental support for Heidegger's nihilistic version of historicism, and the very heart of his philosophy."[16]

[14] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 300–1.

[15] Cf. Ibid., 302–6.

[16] Ibid., 300.

Christianity's ability to account differently for historical contingency and difference makes it seem as if nihilism prefers the story that violence is the way the world works. And it is the Christian difference that makes violence appear to be just another *story*. A historicism that is absolute appears to be only one of the ways of handling the historical contingency of every claim to truth, and one that requires us to adhere to an ontology of violence. Thus, Milbank uses Christianity as an alternative interpretation or encoding of existence that seems to unsettle the nihilist story as just another perspective on the matter. The nihilistic encoding of reality as violence has no more justification than the Christian alternative and appears to be an arbitrary choice rather than a rational necessity.[17]

---

[17] In his later work, Milbank strengthens his case against Heidegger by arguing that Heidegger's account of the ontological difference suffers from a kind of metaphysical thinking similar to the "onto-theological" constitution of metaphysics Heidegger wants to overcome in the first place. Milbank, "Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics," in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 42, contends that Heidegger's description of the ontological difference relies on a conjecture and projection of the nature of Being on the basis of the sheer phenomenology of beings as he observed them. "[B]ecause Heidegger believed that he had considered Being not 'speculatively' (metaphysically), but according to Being's own giving of itself as a phenomenon. This meant that what was sheerly 'apparent', namely the self-occlusion of Being in beings, was taken as identifying Being as such." Milbank goes on to point out that Heidegger's account of the self-occlusion of Being is in fact speculative and requires a faith in that which is not seen. Even stronger, Milbank recommends Aquinas' analogy of attribution, in which the movement of beings points towards its end in God. This too requires a faith in that which is not seen. But contrary to Heidegger, Aquinas does not practice ontotheology, in which one begins with the observation of beings and go on to posit from them an account of Being. Rather Aquinas practices theoontology in which beings relate analogically according to a notion of the good derived from God. In this manner, Milbank moves beyond the argument in *Theology and Social Theory* that nihilism and Christianity are two equally ungrounded myths. Instead he argues on the basis of a more robust Christian Platonism that only theology can overcome the problems latent within metaphysics. Or, as he would later write, "Only Theology Saves Metaphysics."

Nevertheless, Milbank's argument in this piece still retains all the problems that *Theology and Social Theory* does. Milbank offers a correct reading of Heidegger and the theological tradition building from him. The essay quoted above is a response to Jean-Luc Marion's attempt to articulate 'God' without the concept of Being. Milbank rightly argues that Marion's reliance on Heidegger's description of the ontological difference maintains the authority of secular reasoning over-against theology. But Milbank's 'solution' still has trouble answering the important question of right and authority since the only thing that would recommend theology is its ability to save metaphysics from its own ontotheological tendencies and allow the west to have coherent discourse about the good. For as Milbank never seems to tire of admitting, theoontology is always a conjecture judged by its speculative attractiveness and can never rule out the possibility of nihilism on neutral or dialectical grounds. Cf. John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001), 29, "Therefore, Aquinas does not really have recourse to an *a priori* vision of the Good in the sense of a Kantian epistemological reflection on the structures of finite understanding, but to a Platonic and Augustinian ontological recollection of something real and eternal. If this recourse indicates the limits of Aristotelian cosmological aspirations in Aquinas, it is equally the case that, like Augustine, he refuses (as he thinks, against Anselm) any purely *a priori* philosophical theology, or argument from the conception of the highest perfection to the necessity of its existence. On the contrary, Aquinas does not regard

The pivotal point of comparison between the two is the Christian ontology of ultimate peace. Before moving on to a critique of Milbank, it will be necessary to elaborate on what he means by his account of Christianity as a peaceful ontology. Milbank not only places the weight of his argument on the differences between ontology because they seem to be such obvious points of distinction. More so in *Theology and Social Theory*, the stress on ontology follows from his stress on narrative and what he calls meta-narrative realism.

**Meta-Narrative Realism and Theology as Social Theory**

Milbank's argument for meta-narrative realism and theology as social theory sets the parameters for judging between one ontology and another. An ontology operates as the director of human social practices. Thus, while speculative, a culture's guiding ontology is nevertheless embedded in a particular form of life, and can only be judged by the performance it directs. But how does one decide between different internally coherent performances? This is the question of justification. By what right does Christianity claim to be more authoritative; more demanding of our attention and adherence than others? Christianity is justified by the unique way its ontology makes violence an unnecessary part of our culture. This section will trace Milbank's meta-narrative realism and theology as a social theory in order to grasp *Theology and Social Theory*'s final answer to the question of justification.

The success of the secular sciences in modernity has been attributed to their ability to locate a privileged point of contact with Reality; a place of unmediated exposure to the way things really are that could not be doubted or questioned. Such a point of contact would serve as a foundation for all human knowledge because it would give us the ability to sort through the

---

perfection self-evident when reduced to bare possibility, and therefore is able to entertain (apparently) equally a nihilistic possibility: although the highest good would have to *be*, there need not be a highest good." The point I am now making requires a fuller investigation into Milbank's Platonic doctrine of God, and that will be made in the later chapter on Luther.

diversity of claims and convictions and determine which ones were valid and which were mere belief. Such foundations for knowledge would provide privileged perspectives for human understanding as well as for judging the validity and meaning of any given belief or conviction. But like many today, Milbank recognizes the necessary limitations human language places on our ability to find such foundations. We never have access to the world apart from language. Even our supposed foundations, where we thought we had privileged points of contact with Reality cannot escape the dress of *human* language. With these insights in mind, Milbank concludes that language does not reflect Reality as much as it shapes reality for us.

Therefore, narrative, Milbank argues, is the most basic form of human understanding because language is our most basic means of making sense of the world. We do not have access to rules of human behavior or facts about the world prior to our use of language. Rather, we make meaning by relating prior events to current events in a fashion that produces a causal story. Even our most scientific languages are stories we tell about a cause. Therefore,

> The adequate explanation of a text, or anything whatsoever, means merely its representational repetition, a narration of text or thing which identifies causes as occasions taken serious notice of by later events. Thus to say 'movement' and 'causation' is just to say 'meaning,' because something becomes of causal significance only when it is connected with a later subordinate event which presupposes it.[18]

But this does not mean that all knowledge is the arbitrary construction of human stories:

> The text, if we are attentive, forms a loose and complex knot of resistance, but we do not first of all register this resistance and position it precisely (explanation), and then pass on to the more freewheeling tasks of the spirit. On the contrary, we register this resistance in any number of ways. We may place the pressure here or there, complicate the knot here, undo it a little there—yet infuriatingly perhaps, we cannot undo the knot altogether (a final deconstruction is always endlessly postponed). Always we feel the resistance, although this is from elsewhere, and we cannot precisely place it, for it belongs, ultimately, to a whole wider network of resistances

[18] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 267.

> and counter-resistances, which we ourselves, by our intervention, are further adjusting and altering.[19]

Even though human language places necessary constraints on our knowledge, all knowledge is not arbitrary. In the act of our making sense through narrative, we find limitations of play—resistance formed from the complexity of the knot made by our language. We cannot ignore these limitations, and this sets a limit to the creativity of our narration and allows us to recover a sense of realism; or a sense that our language tracks and can be judged.[20]

Metanarrative realism is Milbank's description of how cultural meaning complexes like Christianity or nihilism play within the resistance of the knot. Cultures consist of practices that are directed by the narratives they find authoritative. The ongoing existence of a culture requires it constantly to reread the narrative as it guides the culture through time and history in faithful

---

[19] Ibid., 267.

[20] Tracks with what? In his later works, Milbank strengthens his realism through a more robust Platonism by which he argues for a recovery of the notion of truth as correspondence. In *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank seems to have little sympathy for any notion of correspondence. But in *Truth in Aquinas*, he and Pickstock contend that Aquinas' notion of correspondence is ontological rather than epistemological, and just to that extent, a viable alternative to modern epistemological notions of correspondence that end in nihilism. Whereas modern correspondence theories of truth construe the act of knowing as the subject properly checking the mind's representation of a thing over-against the thing-in-itself, Aquinas conceives of knowing as a mode of being itself that brings the thing-in-itself to its fulfillment as an idea in the mind of God by its proper assimilation into the human intellect. Key to grasping what Aquinas means here is to recognize that objects have a real existence in the human intellect. Human knowledge of them is a real event in the life of the object. This requires that the human mind must have a proper desire for it; things only have existence in relationship to other things—as Heidegger already points out—and human desire catches the way one thing relates to all others. Human desire for the good is essential to our knowledge, then, because the thing does not have an existence apart from the way it forms and is formed by human desire. Human knowledge is about the process of discerning whether something is being faithful to its intended purpose, according to the divine intellect. Thus all knowledge must grasp the analogical proportion of things to God by intuiting the proper harmony of one thing to another, and not just the thing independently of its proper telos. All knowledge, then, is participation in the divine intellect through the aesthetic intuiting of the good or God.

This notion of truth as correspondence is not contradictory to the 'realism' in Milbank's metanarrative realism, because it still requires an aesthetic grasp of the analogical proportion and hence a prior doctrine of God or the speculative moment of ontology. Likewise, the argument in *Truth in Aquinas* does not evade the criticism offered below of metanarrative realism because even though they say more specifically that theological language tracks with reality in the mind of God, this notion of truth as correspondence nevertheless does not offer new evidence that our ideas do correspond to reality, but only offers a different way of viewing Truth in which our ideas might correspond to reality; one in which no ultimate good is equally a possibility, faith is necessary for reasons, and theology is relevant. Such sophisticated insight into truth still does not escape Nietzsche's simple question of why we still hold to these notions when they require that we believe that they work in the first place.

practice. Here, a speculative moment arises in which we use our imagination faithfully to fill in the gaps of our narratives and better represent the meaning of the whole story in order to redirect the entire performance. Therefore, the task of narration requires ontology, an imaginative, yet ultimate account of the way things are to facilitate ongoing faithful practice.[21] An ontology faithfully guides readings of our authoritative texts, which in turn allows us to make sense and meaning through communal practices. Therefore, an ontology is the speculative focal point of a whole cultural meaning complex. Not only does it capture the meaning of a culture's authoritative texts in imaginative and faithful ways, but it also directs a culture's faithful performance. Ontology directs the way we tell the story and act out performances that faithfully imagine our present in continuity with the narrative. And when Milbank identifies the Christian ontology as one of ultimate peace he means that the social practices of the church ought to faithfully reflect the story we tell about God's peaceful donation of himself in creating the world and becoming incarnate.

But how does one judge between the competing ontological claims of different cultural meaning complexes. The false promise of foundationalism was that we could find one universal means of judging all claims and all languages. But if each individual community has its own way of complicating and undoing the knot of language, how does one judge between them? At this point, there is a danger that the postmodern sympathies that lead Milbank to focus on ontology in the first place also betray a nihilistic tendency in his own thought. In his own words, Milbank casts the problem this way: "The 'challenge' of social science turns out not to be the challenge of a knowledge that mirrors, but of a knowledge that is power…" so that the question becomes, "is

[21] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 383–88.

there anything but power? Is violence the master of us all?"[22] If language does not reflect reality but shapes it for us, how is all discourse not just the communal persuasion by power? Milbank answers that question by referring us to the uniqueness of the Christian ontology. Every cultural meaning complex requires an ontology, but the Christian ontology is uniquely able to account for differences without the necessity of violence because it encodes reality as being of harmonic peace rather than chaotic violence. Christianity believes that existence derives from the life of the Triune God, who is harmonious difference in unity. Therefore, every difference is not final, but reconciled in the life of the Triune God.[23] But one point must be clear. We do not have the ability to judge between Christianity and other cultural meaning complexes without laying aside our own sympathies. There is not any purely rational means of deciding between different encodings of reality. The only criteria for judgment are those of aesthetic taste.[24]

---

[22] Ibid., 276.

[23] Cf. Ibid., 422–32.

[24] In *Theology and Social Theory* it can appear that Milbank's emphasis on aesthetic taste stems from his post-modern emphasis on the inability of language to allow a final deconstruction so that all we have left is aesthetic taste rather than rational discourse. This is not entirely the case. A point that comes out in his later work is that his emphasis on aesthetics connects with his Platonic commitments to Truth and God. See, for instance, the footnote above on *Truth in Aquinas*. A more revealing case is the discussion that occurs between Gordan Michalson and Milbank. Michalson, "Re-Reading the Post-Kantian Tradition with Milbank," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 32 (2004): 367–68, asks Milbank the important question why anyone should believe the account he gives of western thought, when at the same time his own commitment to the absolute historicity of all thought paradigms seems to undermine the notion that his revision of the secularization narrative can carry any persuasive weight. "There is, in fact, a curious asymmetry between Milbank's postmodernist attitude toward rationality and argument and his apparent confidence that his ambitious program of revisionist interpretation will carry argumentative force: his position on the former seems to undermine the authority vested in the latter." Milbank, "The Invocation of Clio: A Response," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33 (2005), 3–4, responds by explaining his Platonic commitments toward rationality and taste that make his greater 'argument' work. "If, nonetheless, I believe that there is final truth; that there exists also essences (albeit elusive), and that there are good and bad ways to proceed even if they are not exhaustively presentable in advance, then one's procedure can only be *ad hoc* and cumulative (though without even a commitment to the emergence of a 'probability' from such cumulation)....The long but fragmentary gesturing to the inaccessible is the key to the natural alliance of the most radical Anglo-Celtic empiricism with Platonism, whereas the weaker version remains confined within immanence, because it non-empirically invokes some sort of imagined *a priori* limits to the scope of its investigation. Since the cumulation is itself the stuttering argument, inseparable from myriad specificities, it also develops its own criteria for its own success as it advances, and reveals a true method and procedure along with the emergence of the substantive results of its methods, and not otherwise. Its assumption is therefore radically realist: there are no prior criteria for the truth, since in that case truth would be governed by something other than the truth, which would therefore have to be false. Since the truth is the truth, it declares itself, with an apparentness that is only that of the truth, and is in consequence self-authenticating....At the outset of the

Milbank makes this important qualification when he writes that "Claims for objective truth, goodness and happiness can only be made by identification with a particular form of life that is claimed to participate in them—and this identification cannot be dialectically tested."[25] By saying that objective claims to truth can only be made by identification with a particular form of life, Milbank is building on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. His seminal book, *After Virtue* hopes to find a way to save rational argument, while also granting the historicist angle. In order to hold both rational argument and the historical character of reason together MacIntyre targets the fact/value distinction and the culture in which it arises. MacIntyre believes that our contemporary nihilism stems from the in ability of the fact/value distinction to make sense of competing commitments to what is good. The form of the fact/value distinction that MacIntyre contends against comes from the Enlightenment's quest to find unobjectionable universal reasons. Facts are those things that can be clearly articulated as true or false according to a unanimously agreed upon standard of judgment. Values, on the other hand, are those things that cannot find universal agreement but remain the expression of mere opinion. Since the Enlightenment, moral statements have clearly been judged as values because there appears to be no universal means of judging between commitments to an ultimate good. For example, we can all agree with 'the fact' that industrial farming has certain effects. But we cannot agree on why this is a problem. Our assertions of what is finally good or bad about industrial farming sound

---

quest for knowledge lies a wonder and an astonishment inseparable from the lure of something revealed and grace-imbued—something one must love, trust, and have faith in."

Milbank, it turns out, is more a Platonist than a postmodern about argument, rationality, and truth. But one must discern whether this Platonic realism does not stumble to answer the very questions posed by the age of Cartesian Ego-Subjectivity. How does one begin to discern between competing claims that truth shines itself forth and creates its own criteria for judgment? Milbank's Platonism only seems to anticipate the enshrinement of the human subject as the ultimate arbiter of truth by being a 'radical' realist. But anyone who takes Edwards' description of the devaluation of our highest values seriously can only laugh at the boldness with which Milbank thinks his Platonism overcomes nihilism.

[25]Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 262.

more like special pleas to make the earth the way we like it. But, MacIntyre interrupts; the fate of moral statements within the fact/value schema should not condemn such moral statements to the status of mere opinion. And the incoherent discourse of liberal cultures formed by the fact/value distinction is not necessary. MacIntyre's argument answers why.

Just to the extent that moral statements need to be justified according to an impersonal standard, he thinks, they cannot attain to the status of fact. For moral statements only have meaning within the framework of sustained traditions. A tradition, according to MacIntyre, "is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."[26] Traditions help us make sense of our lives by ordering them towards certain good ends—goals that constitute a life well lived. Therefore, moral statements have an objectivity to them that can be recovered if we recognize that they derive not from a universal principle but from a particular form of life that has an extended agreement on the ultimate goods. And this requires that we recover the significance of virtue. "A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods."[27] And practices are social activities in which the goods of a tradition can be realized.[28] Thus, moral statements can be objectively judged insofar as they lead us to the achievement of certain goods or not. But their objectivity can only be recognized within the particular form of life that upholds certain goods as the proper goal of human existence.

Milbank agrees with MacIntyre to the extent that the objectivity of our claims to truth or goodness can only be tested within a particular form of life—a tradition. But he wants to go

---

[26] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.

[27] Ibid., 191.

[28] Ibid., 187.

further than MacIntyre. He finds that MacIntyre's general recommendation of the virtues, practices, and traditioned reasoning is itself a quasi-foundationalist attack on nihilism, as if recovering a method of rationality will give us the ability to discover the way things really are. "I want to insist against MacIntyre that at this level of 'objective' reasoning one is only talking about the inner consistency of a discourse/practice, and that in so far as Christianity is able to render a discourse/practice more consistent, this *in no sense* necessarily suggests a new adequacy of discourse to 'reality'."[29] Rather Christianity must argue both from and for the specific goods internal to the entire Christian tradition. And when he says that the goods internal to the Christian form of life cannot be dialectically tested, he means that there are no resources external to the reasons within our own tradition that would enable us to judge which set of goods are more true to human life as such.

The consequence is that Christianity lacks the ability to defeat nihilism by rational argumentation. In fact, what Milbank recommends no longer fits the traditional notion of making a rational argument, but something altogether different. "MacIntyre, of course, wants to *argue* against this stoic-liberal-nihilist tendency, which is 'secular reason'. But *my* case is rather that it is only a *mythos*, and therefore cannot be refuted, but only out-narrated, if we can *persuade* people—for reasons of 'literary taste'—that Christianity offers a much better story."[30] There is no way to dialectically discern, in other words, between Heidegger's account of difference and the Christian one. Neither is rationally grounded, but each is equally a socially embodied encoding of reality, a mythos.

Therefore, "[T]he only possible response to nihilism is to affirm one's allegiance to a particular tradition, and derive an ontology from the implicit assumptions of its narrative

[29] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 330.

[30] Ibid. Italics are original.

forms."[31] As a socially embodied encoding of reality, Christianity not only has an alternative account of reality, it is an alternative account. Christian theology, then, is social theory; the critical reflection necessary for the ongoing faithful performance of its unique society. And the primary distinguishing feature of this social theory is its ontology that directs its faithful performance.

Unlike all other social theories, the Christian one does not assume an underlying primordial violence. If the Christian mythos cannot be rationally tested against the nihilist mythos, Christianity can only be 'objectively' distinguished by the uniqueness of the Christian social theory and especially as it finds its performance guided by its distinctive ontology. Milbank writes,

> Christianity starts to appear—even 'objectively'—as not just different, but as *the* difference from all other cultural systems, which it exposes as threatened by incipient nihilism. However, it is only on the ontological level, where theology articulates (always provisionally) the framework of reference implicit in Christian story and action, that this 'total' difference is fully clarified, along with its ineradicable ties to non-provable belief.[32]

In order to demonstrate that objective difference, Milbank borrows Augustine's critique of the founding myth of Rome and develops it into a greater critique of every non-Christian ontology. In *The City of God*, Augustine criticized Rome's ability to make true peace and achieve true justice. For he saw that the Roman conceptions of peace and justice were derived from their founding pagan myth, in which peace was established through a necessary act of violence. Augustine found that the Roman notions of peace and justice could be deconstructed to dominion and domination as ends in themselves. This deconstruction was possible because in comparison to the Christian story, they assumed a necessary primordial violence. And that

[31] Ibid., 262.

[32] Ibid., 381.

assumption determined even their supposedly noble acts of creating order over chaos. Hence, "While Augustine notes that the philosophers sometimes had intimations of an idea of goodness going beyond such assumptions, he also realizes that they could not fully escape them, because they were so deeply inscribed at the level of myth and ritual. Only changes at *this* level can really alter public belief and practice, and make a genuinely non-polytheistic ontology possible."[33] In opposition, the Christian story of God's donation of himself as a peaceful act of willed fellowship with the beings he created founds the other city, the city of God. And rather than dominion, charity is the underlying feature of the Christian ontology. And Christianity stands apart because it does not assume that every difference entails violence, but that every difference has a place and is reconciled in the infinite activity of the creator to harmonize differences as the creator himself is infinite harmonized difference.[34] "By comparison," Milbank writes, "all others myths, or narrative traditions, affirm or barely conceal an original primordial violence, which a sacral order merely restrains. Even Plato and Aristotle were inhibited by such a mythical inheritance: in the end they could only think of goodness and happiness as occupying certain privileged sites of self-presence over against an irredeemably chaotic and conflictual cosmos."[35]

Hence, the Christian difference, and its final justification, is this: the Christian social theory alone is capable of overturning the notion that existence is finally driven by violence. Only Christian theology is able to overturn the guiding story of violence inherent in secular reason, and most fully articulated in modern nihilism. By holding to an ontology of ultimate peace, Milbank is not suggesting that real violence does not exist in the world. Nor is he suggesting that the church, as the city of God, does not have a place for punishment and even in

[33] Ibid., 391.

[34] Ibid., 404–6; 422–32.

[35] Ibid., 262.

rare cases coercion. Rather his point is to insist that the Christian ontology of peace alone allows us to account for and deal with violence without assuming its necessity. What difference does it make?

> It helps, because it allows us to unthink the necessity of violence, and exposes the manner in which the assumption of an inhibition of an always prior violence helps to preserve violence in motion. But it helps more, because it indicates that there is a way to act in a violent world which assumes the ontological priority of non-violence, and this way is called the 'forgiveness of sins.'[36]

And this stands in stark contrast to the ethical nihilism of Milbank's canonical nihilists. This ethics "teaches the needlessness of regret, and the necessity for resignation to the whole process, where all is equally necessary and equally arbitrary; where everything depends on everything else, and this dependence is enacted through constant struggle and counter-resistance."[37] Therefore, the final justification for Christian faith is its difference as a social theory and the life that is possible when its governing ontology helps us unthink the necessity of violence.

**Beyond Nihilism?**

The entire argument of *Theology and Social Theory* is far more nuanced and complex than the above survey can begin to demonstrate. If one were to do its argument full justice it would be necessary to mention Milbank's Christian reconfiguration of the classical virtues, his complex engagement with the work of Gilles Deleuze, his unique reading of Augustine's two cities, his deconstruction of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* at the hands of Augustine, and the specifics of his counter ontology of difference. But I have provided only what is necessary to understand the fundamental moves Milbank makes to overcome nihilism. It can be summarized this way: Nihilism holds the right to situate Christian talk about God because its absolute

[36] Ibid., 411.

[37] Ibid., 313–14.

historicism undermines any attempt at finding an ultimate organizing logic; absolute historicism categorically rejects the possibility of metaphsyics, including and especially intelligible transcendent causes like 'God'. But absolute historicism cannot escape the charge of being a metaphysical claim, an organizing logic, though a distinctively immanent one. While Christianity does not have any new universal reasons for recommending itself to us, its ontology does reveal nihilism as just another unfounded mythos. What finally justifies, giving right and authority to the Christian mythos, is its unique ability to encode the world without assuming the necessity of violence.

Even in this brief summary, Milbank's argument is dense. Just to sketch its basic outlines required a discussion of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, MacIntyre's *After Virtue* and a brief diversion into the philosophical issue of language and narrative rationality. Milbank aims to address all the central issues and battle with every contending party that might raise an objection. It is no wonder that the book is a landmark in contemporary theology. For our purposes of understanding it, though, recall the context of Christian justification mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Milbank fears that if theology does not recapture the status of a metadiscourse, if theology cannot encode the world for us, some other discourse will, and in so doing theology, not to mention Christianity, will suffer an ultimate defeat. After all, its topic is none other than the God who is creator. Nihilism threatens Christian theology because it can undermine any totalizing claim. And given the state of affairs in the contemporary west that were mentioned already at the beginning of the previous chapter, it does not seem to be a far stretch to think that nihilism is the organizing logic of western culture. It does not seem extraordinary to conclude that our inability to justify our most basic commitments implies that there is no Truth as such and all things are at base chaotic. And, as we have already discussed concerning Nietzsche and

Heidegger, Milbank seems to have some right to believe that certain nihilists make metaphysical claims about the world that cannot be sustained by their own historicizing purposes.

However, nihilism does not have to make metaphysical claims. Nihilism is merely our recognition that we lack any justification for our own convictions besides our own will to hold them, which gives us a sense of unease and tenuousness about them—we recognize them as values. This is what it means to regard nihilism as a mood rather than a set of theses or doctrines. Nihilism is a disposition we westerners have towards any set of distinct teachings. That disposition can be simply described as the devaluation of our highest values. We now recognize in ways that we previously did not that "however fervent and essential one's commitment to a particular set of values, that's all one ever has: a commitment to some particular set of values."[38] And just to the extent that we lack any justification for them beyond the value we find in them, our most basic beliefs appear to us as values—ways we make sense of our lives rather than indubitable statements about the way things really are. And recognizing our convictions to be values is just what devalues them. They no longer provide the stability and certainty that they once claimed to offer.

At this point, it is necessary to address one important objection to this explanation of nihilism. It could reasonably be argued that if nihilism is the recognition that we lack any ultimate justification for our beliefs, does this not imply a universal perspective? How do we come to the conclusion that we lack ultimate justification without being able to see from outside of our own perspective that no future justification is possible? Does not nihilism both imply and require a universal perspective on the way things really are?

---

[38] Edwards, *Plain Sense*, 47.

Simon Blackburn, who writes on the matter of Truth, makes a distinction that will be helpful to uphold here between absolute reasons and relativist reasons. Blackburn's book, *Truth: A Guide*,[39] surveys the philosophical debate over the topic of truth. Although the two sides of the debate have taken many names over the course of time, he characterizes them as the *absolutist* and the *relativist*. The typical absolutist—the one who believes that there are final answers to questions and that ultimate justification can be made for our convictions because Truth not only exists but we have immediate access to it—will often hear the relativist position that all truth is subjective to be offering absolute reasons. For instance, the relativist, or in our case we can say the "normal nihilist," will give reasons for his position that are relative. He might say that since we lack any justification for our most basic commitments, they are not the truth but merely values. He might, like Edwards does, recall the story of Nietzsche's recognition that Kant's categories do not entail the certainty he implies by them. One is still required to believe that they correspond to things in themselves. And, as Edwards and Nietzsche both do, he might recall the history of the philosophical quest for truth, certainty, and authority that goes back to Plato and conclude that the futility of this history to find these things implies that our claims for truth are merely values. These reasons are not dependant on an insight into the order of things, but are merely conclusions drawn from certain contingent circumstances. They could just as possibly change in the future if reasons arise that make us think otherwise; but for now, the conclusions we draw are the best we can do. But the absolutist will understand these kinds of reasons to be absolute reasons—insights into Truth as such. And as insights into Truth, the absolutist will think that they necessarily contradict the relativist's conclusions. But that is a misunderstanding on the

[39] Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). The following discussion can be found in Blackburn, 47–55.

part of the absolutist. For the absolutist mistakenly assumes that all good reasons have to be absolute reasons.

Blackburn's distinction is helpful because it illustrates the kind of claim that Edwards is making when he describes our condition as one of normal nihilism. The reasons he gives for our devaluation are not absolute reasons, but the recollection of a self-defeating quest for certainty and stability, a quest whose defeat is completely contingent upon the parameters set for certainty and truth itself. "Thus the devaluation of our highest values: given our long commitment to the value of rigorous honesty in thinking, we have left ourselves no intellectually respectable way to dismiss the disconcerting thought that other, and radically different, forms of life have just the same claim on some sacred ground as does ours; namely, no such claim at all."[40] And in that way, Edwards' reasons are less absolute than even those of Heidegger, who understands our nihilism to be the way in which Being now presents itself to us. "Even our normal nihilism is just a banal contingency, not an uncanny insight into the Order of Things."[41]

Therefore, in light of Edwards, Milbank's criticism that the nihilists are committed to an ontology of violence is beside the point. The more central question is whether or not Christians can justify their faith and life as something more than another value. And in that sense, not only does Milbank's strategy fail to overcome nihilism, but worse, it operates within the very parameters of our normal nihilism. At the heart of Milbank's argument, he insists that metaphysics are necessary. Everyone works with some sort of underlying organizing logic, and the only relevant question becomes who has a better encoding of reality. Milbank's theology might have a distinctively peaceable ontology. And that ontology might in fact stand in contrast to the work of some nihilists. But the question posed by nihilism is not one of comparison. The

---

[40] Edwards, *Plain Sense*, 47.

[41] Ibid., 49.

more important question is the one of authority and right. By what right does Milbank claim that Christianity is more than just another ontology; by what right does Milbank claim that Christian metaphysics is more than just another encoding of reality? Milbank's answer to that question appeals to the Christian difference, the unique attractiveness of its peaceableness, and its usefulness for the Christian west. These appeals should not be read as meager attempts at taking whatever post-modernism theory on language and truth leaves Christians. Rather we ought to read Milbank's metanarrative realism and his appeals to the aesthetic attractiveness of the Christian social theory as full bodied attempts at persuasion "intrinsic to the Christian logos itself"[42] that Christian beliefs in God are true and tell us the way things really are.

However, these appeals do not overcome our normal nihilism. They only play within its boundaries. If the only way to discern between competing metaphysical claims is through the aesthetic appeal of one form of life or another, the final mode of judgment rests within individual aesthetic sensibilities. Milbank tries to hedge the issue by proposing that Christianity is the only form of life capable of producing a coherent vision of the truth, the only social theory capable of reasonable rather than violent discourse. However, we should not be worried about which discourse retains the possibility of truth, but that *we* must believe in truth in the first place. If nihilism is just as likely an option, if the only objectivity available for Christian justification is its difference, the truth no longer shines forth with unmistakable clarity. We have to judge it on the basis of its aesthetic value. In an age of normal nihilism, we are astutely aware that the things that matter most to us are merely preferences. We may not have made a conscious choice to adhere to or admire them, but we lack the ability to give reasons for them beyond their value for our lives. And just to the extent that we lack such justification, those convictions are

[42] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1.

pragmatically posited filters, personal preferences that we use to make sense of our lives. When Milbank recommends Christian social theory on the basis of its attractiveness, its unique ability to unthink violence, he is only recommending it as a value for our lives. It is hard to see how the attractiveness of Christian metaphysics gets us beyond the desires and proclivities of the shopping mall.

### Ontology or Listening to Jesus; Or, Milbank or Hauerwas?

Typical of his writing, Stanley Hauerwas has a provocative critique of Milbank's work that should draw our attention at this point. In regards to Milbank's ontological commitment to non-violence, Hauerwas finds that Milbank is just plain wrong. Or, "In more friendly terms: it is not that Milbank is wrong, but rather an indication that sometimes Milbank does ontology when he ought to be listening to Jesus."[43] The occasion for this comment is an essay that tires to distinguish Milbank's non-violence form that of John Howard Yoder's and by extension Hauerwas' own pacifism. Yoder, he argues, is not a pacifist, at least not in the sense that Milbank is a pacifist. Yoder's pacifism derives from his belief in the lordship of Jesus. It is because Jesus has called us to discipleship that Yoder practices non-violence, and it is only in the course of following Jesus that one comes to name the violence he is against. Yoder allows Jesus to define what true peace is, and the Christian commitment to non-violence requires one to constantly learn and relearn the ways we are implicated in that which is contrary to such peace. Another way of putting the matter is to say that Yoder's definition of non-violence is not more determinative than his Christology or belief in the Trinity. Milbank, on the other hand, by naming violence in the abstract, or by giving it ontological definition, always threatens to

[43] Stanley Hauerwas, "Explaining Christian Non-Violence: Notes for a Conversation between John Howard Yoder and John Milbank," in *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 175.

succumb to the temptation to let ontology become determinative of our theological claims. Certainly Hauerwas would agree with much of what Milbank has to say about the church and the non-violent constitution of existence. But, Hauerwas fears that Milbank's need for ontology threatens to be a false proof of those claims. That is an argument that demands our attention.

## CHAPTER THREE

## STANLEY HAUERWAS' RESPONSE

The last chapter concluded that Milbank's response to nihilism is a path that cannot lead Christian faith and life beyond the devaluation of our highest values. No matter what some secular thinkers might hold, it is not helpful to regard nihilism as a position or ontology. When nihilism is positioned in that manner, one gets the false impression that it can be defeated by presenting a better and more functional position. But better and functional are the precise economic categories that make nihilism the condition in which our highest values appear to be values, and just to that extent they devalue themselves. Despite his masterful and nuanced accounts of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Augustine, Milbank's appeal to the attractiveness of the Christian ontology ends up reducing Christian faith and practice to another value to be judged according to its usefulness for life. Milbank's appeal to Christian ontology does not overcome, but operates within the parameters of nihilism.

As we will see over the course of the next two chapters, John Milbank and Stanley Hauerwas agree about much more than they disagree. But the concluding paragraph of the last chapter suggested that their disagreements might make a meaningful difference for how Christians address the challenge of nihilism. In an essay that explores the commitment both men have to non-violence, the priority of ontology is the matter over which Hauerwas displays his divergence from Milbank. Milbank's problem, Hauerwas thinks, is that having an ontology of non-violence presumes that we can know what violence is prior to the knowledge we gain from being trained to live our lives within the peace that is a present reality in the dominion of God through Jesus. And such knowledge betrays Milbank's best insight that without universal

foundations for justifying Christian beliefs, the best we can do is out-narrate the opposition. The best we can do is display the difference Christian beliefs make in the never-ending process of description and redescription of our world according to the central Christian narratives about God. On the contrary, "Attempts to find the one feature that makes violence violence, that shortcuts the process of analogical reasoning, must be resisted as a premature if not violent attempt to get a handle on history."[1] Milbank's move to ontology circumvents the ongoing process of reasoning necessary to properly display the Christian difference. Ontology is a power play that impatiently forgoes the extended argument required to give good reasons for Christianity by showing the difference Christian beliefs really make. That difference cannot be reduced to an ontology but can only be displayed by witnesses.

The meaningful difference, then, between Hauerwas and Milbank is the priority of witness over ontology, and this chapter will explore what difference witness makes for overcoming the problem of normal nihilism. However, in order to grasp the significance of Hauerwas' focus on witness one cannot ignore his deep agreements with Milbank's strategy for Christian justification. Like Milbank, Hauerwas recognizes the challenge of justification that arises when "the secular" gains authority over the theological. If we can have an adequate description of the world in which we live without recourse to talk about God it becomes difficult to see how such theological language might be true. When we can get along and live perfectly coherent lives without ever speaking about God, or more problematically, the God of Jesus, Christian beliefs and practices become devalued as that which we do in the privacy of our free time with little or no consequences for our daily lives. Put differently, if Christianity loses its

[1] Hauerwas, "Explaining Christian Nonviolence," 180.

right and authority to tell us the truth about the world, it becomes little more than another religion.

While Milbank's work in this area focuses more specifically on the secular and can even be described as post-secular,[2] Hauerwas' work is best described as post-Constantinian.[3] For Hauerwas, the problem just described has surfaced especially in the realm of politics. When Christianity became an official state religion, Christian convictions tacitly became depoliticized in order to secure agreement between the aims of the state and the practice of the Christian faith. Substantial Christian beliefs appeared more timeless and ideal, and less embodied in everyday practices. Since they lack any immediate reference and have little tangible consequences, Constantinianism has the effect of making Christian truth claims unintelligible to those who do not already assume its basic tenets. In one way or another, all of Hauerwas' work deals with the difficulty this condition creates for understanding the truthfulness of Christian claims. But the majority of Hauerwas' theology tries to draw out the particular way that modern, liberal politics makes Christian truth problematic. Rather than nihilist social theory, the agent of secularization that gets the most attention in Hauerwas' writings is liberalism. Liberalism has been able to devalue Christian claims by privatizing them, ensuring that we cannot know what it means for Christian beliefs to be true because they have no critical "purchase"[4] on the world in which we

---

[2] James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), for one, organizes Milbank's Radical Orthodox sensibility according to this theme.

[3] The seminal post-Constantinian theologian is, of course, John Howard Yoder. And a seminal text for identifying the post-Constantinian problem is John Howard Yoder, "The Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics," in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 135–147.

[4] I am borrowing the term *purchase* from Hauerwas in order to give a short hand description of the phenomenon that takes place when Christian beliefs are no longer taken to have meaningful referents in public discourse. Stanley Hauerwas, "Postscript: A Response to Jeff Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*," in *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 215, writes that like Stout, he worries "that the justifications often given for liberal democracies render strong Christian convictions politically irrelevant and imply that such convictions have no purchase on the way things are."

live. Hauerwas aims to reverse this trend by showing not only how Christian beliefs have ethical consequences, but also by demonstrating how the lives that embody Christian beliefs display the way things are.

For Hauerwas, Christians must be able to give an account of nature in order to exhibit the truthfulness of our talk about God. But unlike Milbank, this account does not take the form of an ontology that can rule all the sciences at once. Instead, it takes the form of pragmatic witness. The basic lines of this argument are on display in a representative essay entitled, "The Truth about God: The Decalogue as Condition for Truthful Speech."[5] There Hauerwas begins to argue why lives faithfully lived matter to Christian justification—that we can only know the truth about God when we see that the community formed by the politics of God's dominion exhibits the way the world really is.

The essay begins with a problem. Typically, in the modern situation, the relationship between God and ethics has been construed in such a way that our talk about God turns into a special kind of pleading. On the one hand, we have justified Christian moral precepts on account of their correspondence with a general morality that is available to any rational person. But "such accounts of morality are destined to run aground precisely because they confirm modernity's presumption that God is, at best, something 'added on' to the moral life."[6] On the other hand, we have justified them on the grounds of God's sheer authority and command with little regard for their natural goodness. But "then the God who commands risks appearing as arbitrary or at best

[5] Stanley Hauerwas, "The Truth about God: The Decalogue as Condition for Truthful Speech," in *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 37–59.

[6] Ibid., 43.

external to God's own creation."[7] In either case, our talk about God lacks the justification necessary to carry any public weight.

Rather than these two options, Hauerwas argues that "a true and proper understanding of nature cannot be had apart from a true and proper understanding of the politics of God's rule."[8] God's dominion over creation is most manifest in the life of Jesus, who demonstrates to us the true *telos* of human nature. The life and politics of Jesus, and consequently God's proper dominion, is extended through the practices of the church. The church, which follows the politics of Jesus through lives of holiness, gives a witness to the God of Jesus by displaying the goods embodied in the living tradition and community. Thus, the politics of the church demonstrate that "it makes all the difference which God commands and whose morality is commanded."[9] As the title suggests, the Ten Commandments are a necessary condition for speaking the truth about God. The commandments prove God because they are natural law. But they are natural in the sense that we recognize their goodness only when we see their embodiment in the lives of a community that worships the God who has given them. All knowledge of nature is only possible through the retrospective lenses of grace provided by the politics of the church.

The general lines of what I am identifying as Hauerwas' strategy for justifying Christianity are already present in this essay. But so too is a difficult question. What reasons can we give for thinking that the goods embodied by the Christian community are the way things really are? If the lives of faithful witnesses, which are organized according to the belief that God is most present and active in Jesus of Nazareth, display the truth about the world, how do we come to know that? Certainly there are many different embodiments that work to display the

---

[7] Ibid., 54.

[8] Ibid., 45.

[9] Ibid., 56.

world in one way or another. What distinguishes Christian practices? Hauerwas has a nuanced answer to that question that will occupy us for the remainder of the chapter. But for now, it is important to recognize the significance of this question for the problem of normal nihilism. This question is the question of justification. And if Hauerwas cannot give an answer that does not appeal to the value of Christian faith and life, his way is just as lacking as Milbank. I will conclude that Hauerwas *tends* to give an answer which appeals to the value of Christianity. And in a certain sense, the deck is already stacked against Hauerwas in the way he sets himself to justify Christian beliefs according to their ability to form lives. As he asks rhetorically at the conclusion of his Gifford lectures on natural theology, "but can such lives be anything more than attractive or unattractive?"[10] The important issue in the rest of the chapter will be to discover how Hauerwas answers the question that began this paragraph.

This will be challenging. To say that Hauerwas' theology is occasional is an understatement, both in terms of the volume of *ad hoc* essays and in terms of the greater aims of his theology. Hauerwas' work should be understood as a prolific attempt at out-narrating the opponent by displaying the ways in which Christian theological language works to reveal the way things are.[11] The temptation for any scholarly account of Hauerwas will always be to fill in the gaps in such a way that explains him without the hard work of thoroughly reading what he has written and in the process risk being transformed by his Christian vision, or not.[12] In the

[10] Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001), 231.

[11] Despite all the misunderstandings of his theological work, Hauerwas has been explaining himself in the introduction of his books since 1981. For a recent and accessible self-description, see Stanley Hauerwas, "Connecting Some of the Dots, or An Attempt to Understand Myself," in *A Cross-Shattered Church: Reclaiming the Theological Heart of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 144–56.

[12] Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 6, "Without presuming that my work has anything like the power of Wittgenstein's, it remains my intention that the essays, like his aphorisms, should make the reader think at least as hard, if not harder, than the author has about the issues raised."

following discussion I will not attempt to provide a comprehensive theology of Stanley Hauerwas. Instead I will present the content of one of his most significant book length arguments: *The Peaceable Kingdom.*[13] Then I will ask of it the same question I asked of the essay above.[14]

## Truth and Non-Violence in *The Peaceable Kingdom*

### Liberalism and Devaluation

The subtitle to *The Peaceable Kingdom* identifies it as a primer in Christian ethics. Hauerwas's concern for ethics relates directly to the question of the truthfulness of Christian beliefs and thus precisely to the question of justification. If Christian talk about God has no public consequences, one loses the ability to demonstrate how Christian beliefs are true. Therefore, the following will treat *The Peaceable Kingdom* as a theological text intent on answering the question of justification. Furthermore, it will even be possible to read this work as a response to the condition of normal nihilism. Take, for instance, an initial account of the context in which this book arises as a response.

> Underlying such a view or morality [that makes up our current situation] is the presupposition that we are required by our modern predicament to make up our 'own minds' about what is good and bad. Indeed, those who do so with determination are seen as morally exemplary because they act autonomously rather than uncritically accept convention. But the very notion we are 'choosing' or 'making up' our morality contains the seeds of its own destruction, for moral authenticity seems to require that morality be not a matter of one's own shaping, but something that shapes one. We do not create moral values, principles, virtues; rather they constitute a life for us to

[13] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

[14] Of course, even in presenting the basic content of that argument, I can't help but put the pieces together, if for no other reason than Hauerwas' own writing often resists such neat coherence. Therefore I need to be upfront that my assistance in doing so comes from the many introductions to his books, but especially "Connecting Some of the Dots." I have also drawn to a lesser extent from Samuel Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny: The Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1998), and then, Emmanuel Katongole, *Beyond Universal Reason: The Relationship Between Religion and Ethics in the Work of Stanley Hauerwas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000).

appropriate. The very idea that we choose what is valuable undermines our confidence in its worth.[15]

One could hardly ask for a better description of the "shopping mall" character of our lives and the devaluation that takes place on its account.[16] Even though Hauerwas does not address directly the issue of nihilism in the greater body of his work, he is certainly not ignorant of the problem of devaluation.

However, in order to explain how this situation has become our own, Hauerwas focuses on the impact of "liberalism." That making up one's own mind is a morally commendable act reflects a distinctive way of dealing with the problem of our fragmented moral existence. To illustrate, Hauerwas borrows Alasdair MacIntyre's fictional story about the total demise of a scientific culture. Contrary to our current culture in which science is a sustained practice, in this imaginary post-scientific culture only fragments of scientific learning remain without the sustained tradition in which they make sense. The practice of science as we know it has been abolished. Likewise, MacIntyre and Hauerwas describe our current context as one of moral fragments. We hold to convictions from a past tradition, but without the practices necessary to sustain that tradition we can no longer give good reasons for acting the way we do. So, "even though we feel strongly about abortion, divorce, dishonesty, and so on, we are not sure why we feel as we do."[17] The dominant response has been to seek a universal standpoint from which we could judge all moral claims without referring to any one particular tradition or set of convictions. This movement has been politically enforced by democratic societies in which the

[15] Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 3.

[16] Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, "No Enemy, No Christianity: Preaching between 'Worlds'," in *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 191–200, where Hauerwas relates the post-constantinian problem to James Edwards' normal nihilism. The response he gives to normal nihilism in this essay follows the lines of the argument in *Peaceable Kingdom*.

[17] Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 3.

only unquestioned good is the freedom to use one's own reason to determine what is best. Moreover, it has been philosophically backed by the likes of Kant's categorical imperative, which grounds moral judgments in the capacities of autonomous reason; assuming that unaided reason is the only point of contact human beings have with the universal and absolute. Typical of this response, the field of ethics has been assigned extraordinary moral significance. Modern ethics is the field in which we use our reason not only to determine what action is right or wrong, but to arbitrate between competing rationalities. Its assignment has consisted of finding rules that could judge any individual moral quandary independent of the extended context of the action. But Hauerwas understands that freedom has become our fate. We are destined, it seems, to be the makers and consumers of our own lives insofar as autonomous reason is the final judge. And so, when we are faced with the hard task of giving reasons for what we do, we lack the resources to respond because our reasons are grounded in our own autonomy.[18] Thus, without the justification necessary to defend ourselves, we feel especially tempted to use violence and coercion to maintain our integrity.

What most concerns Hauerwas, however, is the way this liberal strategy ends up construing Christian beliefs. Since the goal of moral reflection lies in finding universal rules that will be able to judge any one case regardless of its given context, the particularities that drive one to act in the first place become incidental. Chief among those particularities is our more unique beliefs about God, such as the divinity of Jesus and the Trinity. For instance, Christian arguments against abortion that are made within the parameters set by liberalism do not regard the Christian

[18] Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 1–120, for an extended discussion of the greater social web built around this problem. Hauerwas agrees with MacIntyre's assessment that the enlightenment project of justifying morality had to fail because moral statements only have factual meaning within a tradition formed according to a teleology; attempts at finding universal grounds in human nature as such only disguised the sheer human will and desire behind modern moral sentiments. MacIntyre finds Nietzsche's critique of the enlightenment moral tradition to be correct, and the problem of justification for western society to be central.

act of baptism—an act done in the name of the triune God—to be of any material significance. Nor would many Christians who are raised within the broader liberal tradition even see what those particular beliefs have to do with public arguments over moral issues. Those beliefs must be left behind in order to find reasons that can be applied in any given situation regardless of one's 'religion' or other prior commitment. All other prior commitments, in fact, become incidental to moral reasoning.

Edwards has already drawn our attention to what happens when the age of Cartesean Ego-Subjectivity reduces God to the best idea we have. Hauerwas recognizes the unique way that contemporary ethics accomplishes the same sort of devaluation. Once our more particular beliefs are subordinated to reason's autonomy, which is backed by their political privatization, our talk about God gets reduced to the sphere of personal motivation. The question of the truth of Christian convictions is replaced by the question of their functionality. Are they sufficient motivating factors for an individual to act according to a more universal rule that has been established apart from any one particular tradition? Once the question has been changed from truth to functionality, it is hard to rebut Feuerbach's claim that all talk about God is talk about human need. Furthermore, if Christian beliefs are merely functional, it becomes hard to see why we should give our lives to any beliefs of that meager, devalued status. It is not hard to imagine just this sort of devaluation behind something like Smith's "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."[19] If youth are practitioners of religion it is because it has certain advantageous effects, such as positive life outcomes. But mere functionality is something quite different than truth; for one, it is hard to see why anyone would be willing to die for something that is only useful for one's personal gain. If Hauerwas is right in his analysis, it is no wonder that American teens have a

[19] Smith, *Soul Searching*, 162–70.

negative attitude to anyone who thinks that only one religion is true, or that we should order our lives according to those beliefs. "And so the circle continues. The less sure we are of the truth of our religious convictions, the more we consider them immune from public scrutiny. But in the process we lose what seems essential to their being true, namely that we be willing to commend them to others. For the necessity of witness is not accidental to Christian convictions."[20]

The constructive argument in *The Peaceable Kingdom* aims to reverse this trend by demonstrating how Christian convictions refuse to be disembodied from faithful public practice. "The task of Christian ethics," Hauerwas contends, "is to help us see how our convictions *are* in themselves a morality."[21] And once the unity of purposeful actions, moral precepts and cognitive Christian beliefs are restored, we regain the context in which we can meaningfully ask the question of the truth of Christianity. For then, beliefs can be tested by their ability to sustain truthful lives in any given experience of the world. For Christianity, a truthful life is one that reflects its own confession that the world is created. And this will require a life, or a community of lives as it turns out, that are joyfully dispossessed of power so as to receive all of life as a gift. This will require, in other words, peaceable witness. The concepts of narrative, character, and agency help in this task, and it is to those that we now turn.

### Narrative, Character, and Agency

Before moving on to describe how narrative, character and agency help in the task of demonstrating that Christian beliefs are a morality, it is important to understand how Hauerwas uses these concepts in the greater argument of the book. Narrative, character, and agency are the

---

[20] Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 14.

[21] Ibid., 16.

"conceptual tools"[22] that Hauerwas uses to show that Christianity is not merely a set of beliefs. When reading *The Peaceable Kingdom* it can be tempting to understand these as more than the tools applied in this particular case. One could get the impression that they are a foundational anthropology. For instance, Hauerwas places them along side a critique of the liberal strategy for justifying moral claims. Let me explain how this might seem to be more than the appropriation of conceptual tools.

One way of articulating the liberal strategy is to say that it is interested in *E*thics as opposed to *e*thics. On the one hand, *E*thics desires to hold as valid only those moral precepts that have universal acceptance. On the other hand, *e*thics are those sets of rules that each individual tradition possess, and each seems to be valid only within that particular tradition. Thus they have a lower status and require a qualifier such as "Christian" ethics. The quest for *E*thics, then, is for moral precepts that can be justified apart from any one particular commitment and history, such as one's adherence to the Ten Commandments and the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures. *E*thics, in other words, asks us to step back from our particular circumstances, motivations, goals, and commitments in order to make a 'rational' decision—rational means here, of course, a judgment that has unqualified justification. But, Hauerwas argues, the search for *E*thics is self-defeating because it ignores the basic features of moral decision-making. After all, our projects, commitments and goals are the only criteria we have to make a decision, and our actions can only be judged in light of the history of our commitments and goals. The practice of *E*thics, in other words, robs us of the resources that make sense of actions like abortion; or even stronger it robs us of the practices in which the language of abortion makes sense. After all, what we call abortion can only be considered abortion in the context of practices that assume it is good to

[22] Ibid.

welcome the strangeness of new human life. Otherwise, it might as well be considered the termination of a pregnancy. In any case, there is no neutral language available to describe the action in the first place. And the language we use coheres, or at least it does when it is in working order, with a series of purposeful actions that assume a good purpose—like welcoming the stranger. Without such a context, *E*thics can only be the idiosyncratic and subjective appropriation of independent moral precepts. Hence Hauerwas quips that modernity is the project "to produce people who believe they should have no story except the story they choose when they had no story."[23] It seems that if we are to have authentic moral descriptions and be actual moral agents, we need to recognize that our lives are historically constituted. We must recognize that the decisions we make fit into a series of events within our lives that are organized for the purpose of achieving a good (or at least they should if moral reasoning is to take place). And if our lives are historically constituted, they require *narratives* to make sense of our commitments, so that we might operate as *agents* by possessing the *character* to achieve the inherent goods.

When reading *The Peaceable Kingdom* it is possible to get the impression that because these concepts assist in the dismantling of *E*thics, they are a ground for any reasonable depiction of the ethical life, as if we have come upon the neutral starting point for considering the nature of moral reasoning. However, we should resist understanding narrative, character, and agency in this way because it would undermine the book's own insight that as contingent creatures we cannot escape the commitments of our own personal and communal history. Rather, it is best to consider these as conceptual tools that help display the Christian confession that the world is created. When Hauerwas uses these conceptual tools to critique the liberal tradition, he is merely

---

[23] Hauerwas, "No Enemy," 197–98.

engaging in the task of out-narrating the opponent by undermining the confidence liberalism places in *E*thics. For instance, he writes that,

> part of what it means to recognize the world as it is, rather than as we want it to be, is to see that all existence, and in particular the human self, is narratively formed. Put differently, it is our nature to be historic beings. Reflection upon the historic, and therefore narrative character of our existence is an enterprise integral to understanding what it means to claim as true the story Christians tell of God. For we must show that in fact our existence, our nature, corresponds to that story—namely, that we are beings whose life requires narrative display.[24]

These conceptual tools, in other words, are what lie at hand for Hauerwas to express the Christian belief that the world is created. Those tools also enable our confession that the world is created to have some cognitive purchase on the world in as much as they testify to the inadequacy of the liberal project. "In other words, the enterprise of Christian ethics primarily helps us to see,"[25] and that vision is gained in part by the way these conceptual tools work against the contending tradition in the hands of a Christian practitioner.

All that being said, the main purpose of these conceptual tools is to help us recognize how Christian convictions work to shape the moral life. In that function, they find their coherence in the Christian belief that the world is created by the God of Jesus. The central consequence that Hauerwas draws from this confession is that we are creatures who depend for our existence on a creator. Therefore, our lives are contingent rather than necessary. One way of putting this is to say that since we are beings who exist by the purposes of a creator, our lives are historical all the way down. There is no necessary reason contained within the world itself for the world being the way it is. The world is not a closed and self-sufficient system that runs on the necessity of its own rules. The only thing necessary is God. Therefore, if we are to understand ourselves as created we must be able to recognize that our identity is determined by the unique

[24] Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 35.

[25] Ibid., 29.

history given to us by our particular circumstances. Narrative, then, is the proper means of displaying this contingency because it enables us to account for the purposeful relations between the actions in our lives. Stories help us connect one event to another in such a way that displays the meaning and reasons behind our acts. Hence, "Narrative is required precisely because the world and events in the world do not exist by necessity. Any attempt to depict our world and ourselves non-narratively is doomed to failure insofar as it denies our contingent nature."[26]

Furthermore, the narratives we use will be more or less truthful. For the stories we tell about ourselves will either make proper sense of our history and contingency, or it will lead us astray to dishonesty about it. Narratives significant enough to account for the purposeful actions within our lives are sustained by communities and not just individuals. In this sense, the narratives that Hauerwas is referring to are those which sustain living traditions. A living tradition is "an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."[27] We have already encountered a good example of this sort of narrative in the story that has sustained the notion that secularization is emancipation of human reason from religious authorities. It is just that narrative that allows for and even maintains the political marginalization of Christian convictions in the name of *E*thics. And it is the truthfulness of this story which Hauerwas aims to undercut by demonstrating the trouble *E*thics has in maintaining meaningful debates about the moral life precisely because it cannot account for our contingency. By contrast, the narrative that sustains the Christian community is of a God who is most properly known according to the story that is told about him in the scriptures. The God Christians worship is the God who raised Jesus from the dead, having

[26] Ibid., 28.

[27] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.

formerly delivered his people Israel from slavery in Egypt.[28] For Christians, then, "neither God, the world, nor the self are properly known as separate entities but are in a relation requiring concrete display. That display takes the form of a narrative in which we discover that the only way to 'know' God, the world, or the self is through their history."[29] The Christian narrative leads us to believe that in order to know ourselves rightly as creatures, we also need a proper corresponding knowledge of God and the world as it coheres in the narrative about God's life with Israel and Jesus. And the truthfulness of that story is judged by its ability to provide us with the skills to live as creatures. Christians claim that their story about God is "true and objective in that they give us the skills rightly to see and act in the world, not as we want it to be, but as it is, namely, as God's good but fallen creation."[30]

But what does it take to see and act in the world as God's good but fallen creation? Here is where the notions of character and agency come into play, as well as the corollary notions of sin and peaceableness. Since we are historic beings, we frequently find that significant aspects of our identities are formed for us by our circumstances. Looking back, it appears that we had little choice in the matter of our existence; we did not choose our parents, the time of our birth, nor the circumstances in which we were raised. Those in turn significantly determine the remainder of our choices in life to such an extent that we appear fated. On the other hand, looking forward, our existence as historical beings seems to mean that we can control our futures; we can secure for ourselves the history we want to have. We think that we are free to choose the story we want if we can only anticipate the consequences of our decisions. But this only hides the ways in which our decisions are in large part already made for us by our social location. For instance,

[28] Of course, I am borrowing this way of putting the matter from Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1:63.

[29] Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 26.

[30] Ibid., 35.

American middle class social mobility, in which one seems free to pick up and start over again in a new place at any given time, is itself determined by the uniquely combined conditions of capitalism and modern technology. Such freedom deceives us because we cannot stand back from our prior history and decisions. Even though we would like to think that our true selves exist apart from our history, we never have access to a transcendental position from which we can make up our own minds. No decision can ever be made in abstraction from a location or a moment in time. Therefore, the greatest deception of the transcendental perspective is that it engenders a deep dishonesty about our selves. In the name of freedom, we think that we are "not to be held to those 'decisions' I made in the past which were less than fully mine."[31]

Such freedom is a delusion because we all embody some sort of character. Character is the personality we acquire on account of our socially formed habits. My character is not something I can choose or stand apart from. My character is given to me by the habits of response I develop on account of the stories that are told about the world, and those stories come from the living tradition of which I am a part. The transcendental perspective assumes that we can stand apart from our character in order to make a decision. But we cannot. Having character is the necessary consequence of being contingent creatures. In a certain sense, even the decisions we "freely" make are already made for us by the kind of character we are. And when we ignore our character, we lose the resources to make sense of our past decisions; and just to that extent we lose the resources to be truthful about ourselves. Agency, however, names our ability to describe ourselves by locating our actions within an ongoing series of purposeful events, which are determined by the living tradition, or the community, of which I am a part. We acquire the skills to be agents when we can inhabit our characters through truthful stories. "My power as an agent

[31] Ibid., 37.

is therefore relative to the power of my descriptive ability. Yet that very ability is fundamentally a social skill, for we learn to describe through appropriating the narratives of the communities in which we find ourselves."[32] Our true freedom, "therefore, is dependent on our being initiated into a truthful narrative, as in fact it is the resource from which we derive the power to 'have character' at all."[33]

Therefore, the "test of whether the narrative is true lies in whether the community can maintain its integrity without resorting to control or violence."[34] The temptation to act violently arises when we lack the skills to account for our contingency, so that we develop an anxiety about ourselves. That anxiety is produced by the need to protect and maintain our integrity regardless of our ability to justify our actions. If the narrative that forms the community of which I am a part does not give me the skills to recognize my self within an ongoing story—if the narrative lacks the resources that allow me to fully recognize my contingency—then this demonstrates the insufficiency of the narrative. In just this way, narratives are reality making claims. For, "we can only act in a world we can envision, and we can envision the world rightly only as we are trained to see. We do not come to see merely by looking, but must develop the skills through initiation into that community that attempts to live faithful to the story of God."[35] And a determining factor for the truthfulness of any narrative is its ability to form us so that we see the world as it is (namely created), rather than as we want it to be. In gaining that vision we become free from the temptation to violence. "There is, therefore, an inherent relation between truthfulness and peaceableness because peace comes only as we are transformed by a truth that

[32] Ibid., 42.

[33] Ibid., 43.

[34] Wells, *Transforming Fate*, 2.

[35] Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 29–30.

gives us the confidence to rely on nothing else than witness."[36] On the contrary, a false narrative will lead us into sin. Sin is our inability to accept the world as a gift from the creator, which is manifested in our desire for control. "In other words, our sin—our fundamental sin—is the assumption that we are the creators of the history through which we acquire and possess our character."[37] And so a truthful narrative will both give us the skills to recognize the contingency of our lives, as well as the ability to recognize our inherent sin.

We already have here the basic framework for determining how Hauerwas answers the question of Christian justification. If Christianity is true, the story Christians tell about God should enable its practitioners to live contingently as creatures. That is to say, the Christian narrative ought to give us the ability to inhabit our character so that we can act as agents who refuse the temptation of violence. Christian justification, then, lies within faithful Christian practice. But we cannot be peaceable our own. We need the help of others, who train us to see the world rightly by initiating us into the practices necessary to gain such vision. Therefore in order to grasp more fully Hauerwas' position, it will be necessary to understand the importance of Jesus, the church, and casuistry in maintaining faithful Christians who will witness to the truth of the Christian narrative.

**Jesus, the Church, and Casuistry as Narrative Art**

Hauerwas uses the tools of narrative, character and agency to explain the Christian conviction that the world in which we live is the good but fallen creation of God. Since Hauerwas places so much emphasis on God as the creator, one might get the impression that Jesus is peripheral in Hauerwas' account of Christianity. But Hauerwas would disagree. Rather,

[36] Ibid., 15.

[37] Ibid., 47.

narrative, character and agency provide "a framework that can help us understand the moral significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection."[38] Jesus is morally significant because he has initiated the eschatological kingdom of God. And by participating in that kingdom through discipleship, we are given the ability to live as creatures in a created world.

Hauerwas uses the imitation of God motif in order to explain Jesus' moral significance. Just as Israel's vocation was to imitate God and reflect God's own character, the early Christians found in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection "a continuation of Israel's vocation to imitate God and thus in a decisive way to depict God's kingdom in the world."[39] Especially significant is the way in which Jesus deferred to God by dispossessing himself of the power necessary to defeat God's enemies and bring about the kingdom through force. From the temptation in the wilderness to his crucifixion, Jesus embodied the way God would deal with human sin; namely through mercy and forgiveness rather than through coercion. The cross then becomes a key moment in the life of Jesus because there he refused to use the power at his disposal to bring about God's victory. The cross is a Roman tool for the execution of those who are a threat to Roman power and authority. But in Jesus' possession the cross is God's ultimate victory. Hauerwas puts the matter quite frankly: "[T]he cross is Jesus' ultimate dispossession through which God has conquered the powers of this world."[40]

It is important to recognize that in referring to the cross, mercy and forgiveness, Hauerwas does not mean that God deals with sin through the forensic justification of the sinner. Jesus, in his embodiment of God's dominion on the cross, provides a way to follow.[41] And in following

[38] Ibid., 72.

[39] Ibid., 78.

[40] Ibid., 87.

[41] For Hauerwas, the categories of justification and sanctification derive from a unified narrative. Therefore, he is uneasy about the typical Lutheran categorical distinctions that would make our justification an excuse not to

the path of non-violence rather than the destructive use of force, we participate in the life of God. In other words, Jesus presents us with a real possibility of living truly as creatures dispossessed of the false idols that lead us to violence.

> For the announcement of the reality of this kingdom, of the possibility of living a life of forgiveness and peace with one's enemies, is based on our confidence that that kingdom has become a reality through the life and work of this man, Jesus of Nazareth. His life is the life of the end—this is the way the world is meant to be—and thus those who follow him become a people of the last times, the people of the new age.[42]

Thus, we are able to live as creatures insofar as we follow the way of dispossession initiated by Jesus. Forgiveness plays a key role here. In dispossessing ourselves of power and control we are capable recipients of forgiveness. And forgiveness enables us to own up to our past since we no longer need to fear and hide what is an integral part of our existence. Therefore, "that we only have a history, a self, through the forgiveness wrought by God means that the resurrection of Jesus is the absolute center of history."[43] Jesus' non-violent life and death, then, figure as the central feature of the Christian narrative, and provides us with the true possibility of living as creatures. For we only come to be dispossessed of our ambitions to control our life in our imitation of Jesus. "In him we see that living a life of forgiveness and peace is not an impossible ideal but an opportunity now present."[44]

But we cannot appropriate that life on our own. Rather, such appropriation requires a community that gives us the skills to participate in God's peaceable kingdom. The church is this

---

participate in the ongoing narrative of God in Jesus. Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 94, writes that "the language of 'sanctification' and 'justification' is not meant to be descriptive of a status. Indeed, part of the problem with those terms is that they are abstractions. When they are separated from Jesus' life and death, they distort Christian life." To this degree, Hauerwas' call to imitation is a call to participation in the act of God in Jesus. However, when he goes on to say that, "'Justification' is but a reminder of the character of that story—namely, what God has done for us by providing us with a path to follow," he reads the narrative as a summons to salvation through imitation.

[42] Ibid., 85.

[43] Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 90.

[44] Ibid., 85.

community. Hauerwas' quip that, "the church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic"[45] explains this in a direct manner. Liberalism asks whether Christianity has a social ethics that can motivate us to abide by a more universal rule. But the work Hauerwas has done to show that moral precepts derive from a people formed by their habits into a particular character and according to a particular story already challenges the validity of that question. Every ethic already is social in the sense that it requires a socially embodied set of goods to have moral precepts in the first place. Therefore, the church does not *have* a social ethic but rather *is* a social ethic. After all, the church is "the extended argument over time about the significance of [the story of Jesus Christ in the world] and how best to understand it."[46] That extended argument requires people who are trained in the skills of seeing the world according to its story about God in Jesus. It requires, in other words, a people who have attained the virtues necessary for continuing the story of God's dominion in the crucified Christ into the present. These people help us recognize how our own vision is limited by our sinful desire to control our own destiny simply by being different than us. For, their difference allows us to recognize our own habits and the (false) stories that underwrite them by placing them in relief. Thus, our recognition and embodiment of non-violence does not come all at once, but only over the course of being trained by a community to see the ways our own lives are already implicated in violence. That training occurs through others who embody the story of Jesus and the peaceableness that he makes possible.

Finally, then, casuistry plays a key role in our training. Casuistry not only allows the church to extend its tradition across time, but it also allows the church to test the truthfulness of its narrative. Casuistry has a place in the practice of *E*thics, and it will be helpful to distinguish

[45] Ibid., 99.

[46] Ibid., 107.

this from Hauerwas' use. Casuistry has typically been the practice of applying a universal moral principle to any given situation. Hauerwas, on the other hand, considers casuistry to be the practice of applying the narrative to any particular situation. Remember that we can only act in a world that we can see, and that our seeing depends on our ability to describe our actions in a meaningful way. But our speech coheres with a form of life. Our language is coterminous with sustained habits that form our emotions and passions to respond in a certain way to different situations. Casuistry is the community's practice of extending and testing the validity of its own narrative by encountering new situations that would challenge its coherence. If Christians can re-describe any new situation in light of the Christian narrative in such a way that proves fruitful in sustaining its vision and corresponding habits, that not only extends the narrative across time, but validates its central convictions.

One example of this testing could be the challenge presented to the Christian prohibition against premarital sex by contemporary American culture. In some communities, like college dorm life for example, there do not seem to be any negative consequences for premarital sex. In fact, premarital sex only seems, at times, to advance the American story of personal success through self-fulfillment. Therefore, if it does not seem as if there are any negative consequences, the Christian prohibition appears arbitrary, and the story from which the prohibition comes loses its coherence because the prohibition cannot be sustained despite its fit within the narrative. In that case, the Christian narrative loses its ability to account for reality, and just to that extent its validity and justification. For if Christians cannot extend their narrative to account for college dorm life, for example, this begins to demonstrate that, "there is something basically wrong with how Christians understand the nature of human existence."[47]

[47] Ibid.

Therefore casuistry is the means by which a living tradition extends itself into circumstances and experiences that it previously had not encountered. And these experiences take place both within the community as members interact with one another, and as strangers, who live according to a different narrative, challenge the validity of the church's narrative by presenting an alternative social embodiment. If Christians cannot go on living peaceably in the face of such a challenge, which is to say that if Christians cannot maintain the consistency of their story within the test of their own diverse experiences, that demonstrates the insufficiency of the community's narrative. But if Christians can go on, this demonstrates the truthfulness of the Christian narrative, and the truthfulness of their talk about God. This is how Christian witnesses, in their faithfulness and especially in their non-violence, demonstrate the truth of Christian convictions about God.

**Christian Peaceableness and Nihilist Irony**

We have now come to the place where we can understand and begin to assess Hauerwas' answer to the question of justification. I put the question this way: How do we know that the goods embodied by the Christian community are the way things really are? If the lives of faithful witnesses, which are organized according to the belief that God is most present and active in Jesus of Nazareth, display the truth about the world, how do we come to know that? Certainly there are many different embodiments that work to display the world in one way or another. What distinguishes Christian practices? The answer Hauerwas gives in *The Peaceable Kingdom* seems to be that the proof is in the practice. If the story Christians tell about God is true, then it will be able to sustain faithful witnesses who find that in any given experience the Christian narrative gives them the resources to live as creatures, dispossessed of their need to control their own destinies. Remember that the test for whether any narrative is truthful is whether it provides

us with the resources to sufficiently account for our existence. For the Christian narrative this means that it enables us to account for our existence as contingent creatures.

At first glance, this seems to be a circular or even spiraling argument. The Christian narrative provides its own criteria for judging whether or not it is true; and we judge the truth of the Christian narrative on the basis of its ability to create lives that cohere to its basic confession. But we should not be surprised at this. Hauerwas is merely being consistent in his own conviction that as contingent creatures we have no neutral, non-traditioned, or non-partisan criteria for judging the truth. We are all embedded in histories that we cannot escape. If we truly are contingent creatures, if the God of Jesus truly is the creator as Christians claim, we cannot pretend to have access to a transcendental point of reference by which we might judge any and every claim. This does not mean that what Hauerwas proposes is hopelessly self-defeating; it simply means that the truth of Christian convictions can only be tested over the course of experience and practice. In that experience and practice, we come to see that the world is just as the Christian narrative depicts it. This is what Hauerwas means when he says that narrative is a reality-making claim. "If we somehow discover the world is not as that story suggests, then we have good grounds for not believing in, or more accurately, not worshiping the God revealed in the life, cross, and resurrection of Jesus."[48] But we can only assess whether or not the world is as the story suggests by risking our autonomy and submitting ourselves to the authority of the narrative.

Therefore, one possible answer to my question is this: we come to know that the lives of faithful witnesses display the world as it really is in so far as *we* have become the people transformed by the Christian story. At this point, the discussion of this matter by Samuel Wells

---

[48] Ibid., 29.

offers some insight. Wells suggests that "Hauerwas addresses the justification of Christianity in pragmatic terms—since a theoretical justification would almost inevitably be foundationalist."[49] Therefore, Wells describes how truth, for Hauerwas, cannot be separated from its embodiment. Truth is assessed on the basis of the Christian story's ability to let us go on in life without deceiving us, which means that the narrative is fruitful in producing the people and virtues it claims. But, Wells suggests that there is a danger here. For it could easily be perceived that without any external criteria for judging the truth of Christianity, Hauerwas is susceptible to the threat of relativism: since there are no neutral means of assessing truth claims, then all truth is what is true for us. But, he says, Hauerwas steers a careful path past relativism.

> His path is to see the assessment of truth-claims as itself a skill. One learns how to judge between stories by oneself living truthfully within a story. Who is the person who says Christian claims are false? What story has taught such a person that is good and right and true? Is this person criticizing Christianity for being something it never set out to be—perspicuous, context-independent, objectively justifiable?[50]

Therefore, one receives the ability to be a proper judge of the truthfulness of other stories by being habituated into the virtues of a true story.

However consistent Hauerwas' argument is, it is not clear that this is a sufficient answer to the justification question. Instead, it seems to beg the same question in a new form. Given that I can only judge the truthfulness of Christianity in as much as I am transformed by its particular goods, what makes me think that I could not just as easily do the same within another tradition? Hauerwas does not take up this question in *The Peaceable Kingdom*. Nor does he try to address the possibility that other religions, like Buddhism for instance, have an equally consistent and capable tradition. Along with the majority of his writing, Hauerwas focuses on the problem liberalism presents to Christianity. But the cause of our normal nihilism extends beyond

[49] Wells, *Transforming Fate*, 86.

[50] Ibid., 87.

liberalism. Simply put, nihilism is a normal condition when the there no longer appears to be one clear and unmistakable truth to the world. Rather, since there are several different ways to describe the world, *we* have to decide between them. Therefore, while the uneasiness behind my question might be taken to be the uneasiness of an unbeliever, one who has not been properly transformed, I take it to be a valid question posed to Christian faith and life in an age that worries deeply that its own basic convictions are grounded in nothing more than our own will to hold them. That is, I take it to be the question of justification pressed to its fullest extent.

Edwards highlights why the justification question is pushed to its fullest extent in our age when he writes that "Even if one might be moved—for reasons of sentiment, or of political advantage—to defend one of these sets of values over the others, one must at the same time realize that such a defense has now become necessary: no form of life is unquestioned by us; none is proof to our capacity and need for irony."[51] No form of life is unquestioned by us because none presents itself to us as the clear favorite; none shines forth with the unmistakable mark of truth. None can silence our capacity for irony. In using the term *irony* Edwards is borrowing from Richard Rorty, and Rorty's use of that term is worth a moment's reflection. For, irony is one possible reaction to Hauerwas's response in an age of normal nihilism.

According to Rorty, irony is a response we have when we see the limitations of our "final vocabulary." By final vocabulary, Rorty means the words we use to explain why we do what we do.

> All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words we use to tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives.[52]

---

[51] Edwards, *Plain Sense*, 51.

[52] Richard M. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73.

Our vocabulary is final in the sense that we have no other words to use when we defend ourselves. If we are pressed to explain or justify our use of that vocabulary, we can do nothing but repeat what we have already said. "Those words are as far as we can go with language." Irony occurs when we come to see that other people's final vocabularies are just as coherent and impressive as our own. In other words, they strike us as having the ability to function just as well as ours; and in this sense they place within us radical doubts about the superiority and authenticity of our own way of life. For the ironist also recognizes that "argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts."[53] Therefore, those struck by irony realize that they do not have recourse to a neutral and universal language that could judge between their final vocabulary and another's. The ironist responds to this situation by holding her own convictions with a sense of uneasiness and suspicion, a sense of irony that her own best reasons cannot settle the doubts she has on account of the success of others.

An important point to make about the response of irony is that it is not relativism. Relativism provides a theory about truth and truth statements that secures a level of stability by which anyone can judge any and all claims and vocabularies. That theory holds that all truth is only what is true for you; and once that theory is established the relativist seems to have a point of leverage from which to take a critical position over truth claims. But the ironist lacks just that point of leverage. The ironist,

> spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game. She worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being. But she cannot give a criterion of wrongness.[54]

---

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid., 75.

In other words, the deep-seeded uneasiness about one's own final vocabulary that plagues the ironist does not come from a theory about truth, nor does it require a transcendental perspective. Rather, it comes simply from the vertigo created when one recognizes that one's own best reasons for living as one does do not provide one with the sufficient justification to settle the doubts one has about one's own final vocabulary; doubts created by the existence of equally justifiable alternatives.

Rorty's description of irony helps explain what Edwards means when he says that no form of life is proof to our capacity for irony. The question of justification cannot be pushed to the side by the mere recognition that our own forms of life provide their own criteria of justification. Rather, recognizing that each tradition has its own set of criteria for judging truthfulness only heightens our senses to the real possibility that we hold our final vocabulary because it *works for us*. For another community's narrative could work just as well in forming someone to achieve the goods presupposed by the story. But without any means for judging between the two, the world does not appear to give us a definitive answer in one direction or the other. And this is a key point. Hauerwas seems to proceed as if the world, or at least our experience of the world, will help us decide whether or not our narratives are true. But if many narratives embody the world in equally successful ways, the idea that the world can arbitrate between one and another loses its descriptive and functional persuasiveness. Therefore, the answer that *The Peaceable Kingdom* gives to the question of justification does not settle the matter of nihilism, but only intensifies it.

Having said all of this, it is still important to notice that Hauerwas is convinced that the Christian story will be able to address all objections over the course of time, as long as the church is faithful enough to produce faithful witnesses. In this sense he seems to agree with Thomas Aquinas who says famously that "since faith rests on unfailing truth, and the contrary of truth cannot really be demonstrated, it is clear that alleged proofs against faith are not

demonstrations, but charges that can be refuted." (*Summa Theologiae* 1a.1.8). But in light of the question of justification posed by our condition of normal nihilism, such conviction is an eschatological hope. And since Hauerwas is unwilling to project that eschatological hope into anything as firm as an ontology, as we have already seen in his disagreement with Milbank,[55] it is not clear that his answer to the question of justification is anything more than an appeal that Christianity works. In fact, the overarching argument of *The Peaceable Kingdom* tends to give that sense: where liberalism struggles to account for our historical contingency and tends toward violence, Christianity makes peaceableness a present possibility insofar as it allows us to account fully for our contingency. Hauerwas wants to say that its success displays the way things are. But without the type of ontological claim that Christianity will win out in the end, Hauerwas' justification *appears* to be little more than an appeal to the functional success of Christian talk about God, and hence an appeal to the value of Christian witness for the enhancement of life.

As a matter of fact, an appeal to the attractiveness of Christian witness runs subtly throughout Hauerwas's work. It is subtle because unlike Milbank, Hauerwas does not set up an opposition between two opposing meta-narratives competing against one another for our approval. But his refusal to be so explicit coincides with his difference from Milbank. Hauerwas prefers actually out-narrating the opponent by showing just how bad liberalism really is. This strategy implies that Christianity will justify itself by its goodness. And on occasion, Hauerwas explicitly mentions the role of aesthetic taste. I have already mentioned the conclusion of his Gifford Lectures. But also his essay, "The Truth about God: The Decalogue as Condition for Truthful Speech" concludes with these remarks: "Christians therefore should not be surprised to

[55] Stanley Hauerwas, "Creation, Contingecy, and Truthful Nonviolence: A Milbankian Reflection," in *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 188–198, considers this possibility. But his conclusion tends toward the argument already reviewed in Hauerwas, "Explaining Christian Nonviolence."

discover that people who are not Christians find themselves attracted to the church not so much by our beliefs, nor necessarily always by how we live, but by the God whom we worship and who by his Spirit is pleased to dwell within and among us."[56] This might be the case. Nevertheless, despite his differences from Milbank, in the end, Hauerwas also tries to overcome our normal nihilism by making Christianity highly valuable.

---

[56] Hauerwas, "The Truth about God," 57.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# GOD AFTER NIHILISM

Gerhard Forde, who spent a life-time working on Luther's argument with Erasmus, writes that "nothing would be more salutary in the life of the church today than a careful reading of Luther's *Bondage of the Will*."[1] The previous three chapters of this dissertation have been the argument necessary to support Forde's assertion that nothing can benefit the church today more than to take Luther's book seriously. In the first chapter I described how nihilism is our normal condition. For us westerners, the world no longer has one clear and unmistakable meaning. Instead, there are many different interpretations of the world that present themselves to us as valid depending on their aesthetic or practical value for our lives. In precisely this way, the basic structure of western thought and life has turned upside-down. The sacred no longer stands over-against the profane as that which gives life and order. "God" is no longer the author of our world and God no longer commands unquestioned obedience and worship. Instead, the profane stands over the sacred. We human beings give the sacred its status by assigning it a value. Therefore we are the source and ground of "God".

As an integral part of western life and thought, the church participates in this condition. In the first chapter I drew our attention to one example by citing what Christian Smith calls "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." This phrase summarizes a common form of religious practice that does no more than help its practitioners cope with life. But I also identified more subtle and

[1] Gerhard O. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage*, ed. Steven Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), vii.

penetrating examples of the church's participation in our nihilism in chapters two and three. Despite their best efforts to overcome the problem, both Milbank and Hauerwas tend to contribute to it. They still appeal to the value of Christian beliefs and practices. And because of their appeal to the value of Christianity, their work fits properly into the end of the story Edwards tells about our condition.

Luther is quite different. Rather than appealing to the value of Christianity, Luther asserts God's act in Jesus as the sole ground of Christian faith. In his dispute with Erasmus, Luther makes one point clear: Jesus Christ is the only justification Christians have for their faith and life. Human reason may not approve and our aesthetic sensibilities may not find it appealing, but the sole reason for Christian faith is God's decisive action in Jesus. Of course, this statement may not seem to be very insightful. It might seem rather obvious that Christians are Christians on account of Jesus Christ. So the temptation always follows to assign Jesus some greater value, to say more than this simple point. For instance, one way to say more about Jesus would be to find in his life, death and resurrection a pattern for imitation that displays the truth about human nature.[2] But Luther refuses that temptation. The only justification Christians have for their faith and life is the divine authority of the man Jesus of Nazareth.

By speaking of Jesus' divine authority, I mean to identify a specific conviction about the man Jesus of Nazareth. This conviction derives from a narrative told about him in the New Testament. The narrative contains these basic features: The man Jesus of Nazareth claimed to be sent by the God of Israel and to have God's own authority in order to bring about the eschatological consummation of all things. But Jesus' authority was put to the test by the leaders of Israel, who thought his teachings and actions were contrary to the God that had delivered them

[2] Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 72–95. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 387–88.

from slavery in Egypt. So when Jesus would not back down from his claim to divine authority, they crucified him with the help of the Roman authorities as a blasphemer. But God vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead. After appearing to his disciples and demonstrating to them that he had risen, Jesus sent them out into the whole world with his own authority to make disciples of all nations until he returns to judge the world. Based on this narrative, Christians have only one justification for their faith and life: the divine authority of the man Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, in this case, is not valuable to anyone except to God. Therefore Jesus has no appeal or value besides the authority given him by God, who raised him from the dead. Another way of putting this is to say that only God justifies Jesus, not human reason or aesthetic taste. The consequence of understanding Jesus in this way relates directly to normal nihilism. In an age when Christianity is merely another value, Christians must justify their faith and life by appealing to the divine authority of Jesus.

Luther does not spell out this underlying narrative about Jesus' authority.[3] But Luther does assume at least a form of this narrative in his argument with Erasmus. For Luther, God's dominion over the world in the man Jesus is the irreducible center of all theological reflection. James Nestingen, who writes about the competing theological frameworks at work in Luther's argument with Erasmus, puts the matter quite simply: "At the center of everything is a person, Jesus of Nazareth whom God raised from the dead, not an idea, a system of rules and regulations, or a sequence of causes."[4] Luther, in other words, does not try to move from Jesus to something more universal and principled about God. Instead he draws the necessary consequences and

---

[3] I will spell out the significance of this underlying narrative for this dissertation in the next chapter. For the significance of this narrative in Luther, cf. Ian D. Kingston Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 48–78.

[4] James A. Nestingen, "Introduction: Luther and Erasmus on the Bondage of the Will," in Gerhard O. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage*, ed. Steven Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 16.

conclusions about God's relationship to the world from the center. He even goes so far as to hold in tension God as he is preached in Christ and God as he acts apart from the preaching of Christ. Making the distinction between God preached and God not preached allows Luther to appeal solely to God as he has defined himself. The genius of Luther's way becomes clear when his distinction recoils on every other theology. This way alone lets God be God. Any other way of dealing with God only ends up grounding God in the thinking subject, which is precisely the cause of our normal nihilism.

This chapter will explore Luther's way of treating God in his argument with Erasmus as an alternative response to our normal nihilism. First, it will recount some of the most significant moves in the debate between Erasmus and Luther. Then, it will identify two key distinctions that follow from Luther's position. The first distinction is between God preached and God hidden. The second distinction is between a theologian of glory and a theologian of the cross. I will describe briefly how these distinctions work and why they must be followed if we are to overcome our nihilism.

## Luther versus Erasmus

Systematic theology faces the perennial temptation to extract significant thinkers from their contexts and force them to give answers to questions they were not asking. With that in mind, one might legitimately ask what the Luther/Erasmus debate has to do with normal nihilism. The debate took place within a politically insulated Christendom. Few, if any, were asking the question that has been driving this dissertation: what reasons do Christians have for their faith and life? However, the debate between Luther and Erasmus can be placed within the narrative that leads to normal nihilism. Like James Edwards, Michael Allen Gillespie is one of those contemporary thinkers who have been trying to tell a convincing story about the origins of our present existence. And Gillespie takes the debate between Luther and Erasmus as a significant

defining moment in western history. Without too much exaggeration, the story Gillespie tells can briefly coalesce with the narrative I have been borrowing from Edwards. According to Gillespie, the Luther/Erasmus debate was precipitated by what he calls the "nominalist revolution." Prior to nominalism, westerners understood the world as being constituted by universals that had a real existence, first in God, who is their source and goal, and then in individual things. These universals gave definite shape to the world, and human reason could grasp the world's order by participating in divine reason. But nominalism called the real existence of these universals into question, asserting instead that all things are particular and that universals are mere fictions. Placed in Edwards' vocabulary, the nominalist deconstruction of scholastic Realism destabilized the relationship between sacred and the profane, and opened the question about the ground of our being. The debate between Luther and Erasmus takes place within this period of epochal upheaval and concerns more than just a theological dispute over human bondage and divine freedom. Gillespie describes the context this way: "The deepest disagreements in the period between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries were...not about the nature of being but about which of the three realms of being—the human, the divine, or the natural—had priority."[5]

While I do not want to accept everything from Gillespie's genealogy, it does help fit the debate between Luther and Erasmus within the concerns of normal nihilism, while also recognizing their historical difference.[6] Luther and Erasmus not only debate about divine and

[5] Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 16.

[6] Gillespie's narrative differs from Edwards in that he places primary significance in the nominalists rather than Plato and the Age of the Forms. While Luther gained much from the nominalist critique of scholasticism, he does not quite fit the nominalist paradigm that Gillespie applies to his *De Servo Arbitrio*. Gillespie rightly identifies the debate between Luther and Erasmus as being about the sacred ground of our existence. And he helpfully shows how the argument between them presupposes the nominalist deconstruction of medieval realism that precipitated a sense of ontological instability. A key aspect of the nominalist revolution was the distinction between God's ordained and absolute will. In the quest to maintain the freedom of God, the nominalists found that God could not create universals without constraining his omnipotence (since universals had a real existence in both creation and in God). So the nominalists supposed that God operated within creation primarily on a contractual basis, creating a system of

human freedom, but about which realm of being can serve as the stable and authoritative sacred ground. Already in the preface to his *De Libero Arbitrio* and before discussing any definite position on free will, Erasmus hedges the topic of human bondage altogether as something that is ill-suited for Christian faith and life. In the process Erasmus raises the problem of Christian authority and justification for speaking about God.[7] Luther did not miss the opportunity that Erasmus presented him to discuss these important matters. He understood a danger in Erasmus' position and responded by turning the question of authority toward Jesus. Therefore, over the course of the discussion, the topic of divine and human freedom gets placed within a larger discussion about the question of authority and the problem of God. I hope to show that Luther's argument for the priority of God in Jesus provides a resource for Christians who are forced to think about God in an age when the sacred and profane have inverted and collapsed. Therefore, the following discussion of the debate will focus on the issues of Christian authority and God.

---

ordained rules that God himself could overturn if he found it necessary. When Gillespie reads Luther's *Bondage of the Will* he overlays these nominalist categories on Luther's distinction between God preached and God not preached, or God hidden and God revealed. Thus Gillespie, *Theological Origins*, 157–58, writes that "the doctrine of the hidden God presents Luther with a problem that is deeply disquieting, for if the concealed God is the real God and the revealed God merely the mask he presents to humans in Scripture, how can Luther know that he will keep his promises, particularly about salvation? How can this God present the certainty Luther needs?"

However influential the nominalist categories are on Luther, they do not fit precisely at this moment in Luther's argument. In fact, Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 189, finds the matter significant enough to explain why these nominalist categories do not apply to his argument. By making the distinction between God hidden and God preached Luther suggests that the only certainty we have in the face of God's abstract hiddenness (the fact that God does all in all with no apparent explanation) is the word God speaks when God breaks through the abstractness and speaks up for himself. Furthermore, Luther argues that if we were to try and synthesize or fill in the gaps to make the unexplainable acts of God coherent with his revealed will and spoken word, we will only exalt ourselves above God. And no matter how hard we try to have God our way, we will never succeed. Therefore, it is best to let God be God and hold him to account exactly where he himself wants to be known (the proclaimed word concerning Christ). So if one is judging Luther by the standard of the Platonic sacred ground, he will end up looking just as confused as Gillespie thinks. But, as I will argue in the course of this chapter, a better way to understand Luther's argument here is to cast him in the light of the pre-platonic age of the gods. God is the personal and willful force working life, death and all in all. For Luther, the best we can do is hold on to such a God when and where he makes available to us. Cf. Oswald Bayer, "The Plurality of the One God and the Plurality of the Gods," trans. John R. Betz, *Pro Ecclesia* 15 (2006): 338–54.

[7] With her discussion of the early letters between Erasmus and Luther's camp Erika Rummel, *Erasmus* (London: Continuum, 2004), 90–96, suggests that the issue of Christian authority was already disputed between the two camps, and that it was a central difference between their attempts to reform the church.

In the typical fashion of a scholastic debate, Luther replies to Erasmus point by point in his *De Servo Arbitrio*. So he never gets around to putting together a complete argument for his position. Instead he argues from his position against Erasmus' *De Libero Arbitrio*. So the best way to see Luther's answer to the question of justification and God will be to set the two arguments side by side, starting with Erasmus.

**Erasmus on Authority, God, and Free Choice**

"I have now completed the first part of this book. If in it I have persuaded my readers of what I undertook, namely that it is preferable not to dispute matters of this kind too pedantically, especially in front of the masses, there will be no need for the argument for which I now gird myself..."[8] This passage summarizes the argument Erasmus makes in the preface and introduction to his book on free choice. It would be altogether better if Christians do not take this matter too seriously. For nothing could be of more harm to Christian piety and concord than to commit oneself wholeheartedly to the opinions of men. The topic of divine and human freedom has been fervently pursued by so many learned men with so little success or progress that there seems to be no point in getting worked up one more time over an intractable debate. From a humanist scholar at the end of the scholastic period and the beginning of the modern, this sort of protest about the issue should not be surprising. However, Luther's response gets its fuel from the reasons Erasmus gives for thinking that the freedom of the will is a matter of human opinion.

In his preface and introduction, Erasmus presents three main concerns that create boundaries for understanding the topic. The first boundary deals with the propriety of making assertions about the kinds of topics that have been debated over and again with little success. If the topic has proven so insolvable, it seems unfruitful to throw oneself entirely into a position

[8] Desiderius Erasmus, *A Discussion of Free Will*, in vol. 76 of *Collected Works of Erasmus*, ed. Charles Trinkaus, trans. Peter Macardle (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 21.

that can produce a probable opinion at best. That sort of argumentation only makes for unnecessary quarrels that threaten Christian unity. Rather, Erasmus recommends his own dispassionate and temperate approach. He writes: "And I take so little pleasure in assertions that I will gladly seek refuge in Scepticism whenever this is allowed by the inviolable authority of Holy Scripture and the church's decrees; to these decrees I willingly submit my judgment in all things, whether I fully understand what the church commands or not."[9] The position of the skeptic on these matters is preferable, Erasmus argues, because it handles the issue of authority well. To make something like an assertion about a matter that can be endlessly debated tends to produce people who are blinded to the truth by their own passions. Assertions, in other words, honor human opinions over the authority of scriptures and the decrees of the church. Better to be a Christian skeptic about these sorts of things and give the proper authority its due.

The second boundary that Erasmus erects around the issue coincides with the first. The scriptures are unclear about some matters, and the issue of divine and human freedom is one of them. "For in Holy Scripture there are some secret places into which God did not intend us to penetrate very far, and if we attempt to do so, the farther we go the less and less clearly we see. This is presumably in order to make us recognize the unsearchable majesty of divine wisdom, and the frailty of the human intellect."[10] The problem with making assertions about the matter of divine and human freedom is that the scriptures are unclear about it. They do not provide a unified and decisive position one way or the other. So every assertion on the matter will always be the achievement of the interpreter who puts the disparate pieces of the scriptures together for himself. When Erasmus finally gets around to debating the issue at hand, this is exactly what he does. He gathers together the passages that seem to support free choice and then the passages

[9] Ibid., 7.

[10] Ibid., 8.

that seem to oppose it. Then he organizes them on the basis of an inference about God. Given that he takes the scriptures to be unclear, there seems to be no other option than to leave it up to the interpreter to put the pieces together into a persuasive way. And this is just what Erasmus does when he gets around to his argument for free choice. But his opening complaint about the obscurity of the scriptures aims to stimulate a debate or a civil discussion rather than an assertion or dogmatic position. Again, this seems to be the best way to handle the problem of authority. Those, on the other hand, who adhere dogmatically to one side or the other on the basis of the scriptures alone cannot answer the authority question well. If the same scriptures are honored by both sides of the dispute, how is one to judge between them? What right does one have to hold his position over someone else's position? The scriptures themselves cannot be the judge since both sides read the same scriptures differently. So what authority is available to arbitrate the case? One answer might be that an interpreter is right because he possesses the Holy Spirit. But how does one test for the Holy Spirit? Does one judge by the character of the interpreter, according to his piety or wisdom? Well, there are both wise and pious men on both sides of the debate. Since there does not seem to be any good way to decide, Erasmus concludes: "let others decide what claim they will make for themselves. For myself I claim neither learning nor holiness, nor do I trust in my own spirit."[11] It is better to respect the mysteriousness of the divine majesty and take the position of skeptic and debater "than to define what passes the scope of human thought."[12]

The third boundary follows from the first two and reveals Erasmus' commitment to peace within Christendom through simple Christian piety. The third boundary is this: some truths are not appropriate for the common ears. Even if Luther's position is true, it is still unprofitable for

---

[11] Ibid., 20.

[12] Ibid., 9.

the common Christian to know it. If all things happen by divine necessity, then God rewards his own good works and punishes his own evil works. This picture of God is simply too unsavory for the common Christian. So Erasmus protests:

> if this were made known to the masses, how wide this would open the door to godlessness in countless mortals, especially given the extent of their dullness, inertia, wickedness, and their incorrigible tendency to all manner of evil? Where is the weak man who will keep the unremitting and painful struggle against his flesh? Where is the evil man who will strive to correct his life? Who will bring himself to love wholeheartedly the God who has created a hell seething with everlasting tortures where he can punish his own deeds in wretched human beings, as though he delighted in their suffering?[13]

Erasmus, in other words, worries that the common Christian will be unable to love such a God as Luther's. Nor would a Christian have any motivation to strive for good works. Here, Erasmus is concerned to protect the Christianity he finds important. Despite his contention that the scriptures are unclear about the issue of divine and human freedom (not to mention the distinction between the divine persons, the two natures in Christ, and the unforgiveable sin) Erasmus does find some things to be clear and plainly evident: the precepts for the good life. And these precepts, along with an attitude that gives God glory when one does good works, and seeks his mercy when entangled in sin make up the horizon of the Christian life. If Luther had his way and we thought of God as working all things in all, this simple Christian piety would be upset by an unjust God who rewards and punishes for no good reason.

These three concerns hedge the matter of divine and human freedom, and are for Erasmus, "almost more to the point than the disputation itself."[14] When Erasmus finally addresses the matter of divine freedom, he does so in a way that follows his own advice. Since the best we can do is to produce a probable opinion, we should prefer a median position that does

---

[13] Ibid., 13.

[14] Ibid., 14.

not disturb Christian piety. So even before investigating the scriptures Erasmus surveys the tradition of positions and identifies two poles. The first pole is made up of those who are worried that the faithful will be apathetic towards God and not strive for godliness. This side tends toward the position that human beings have the ability to move themselves toward salvation. The two central figures on this side of the debate are Pelagius (who thought that after the human will was freed by grace it was capable of attaining salvation) and Duns Scotus (who thought that the human free will could make the initial move toward salvation and was then rewarded with grace). The other pole consists of those who worry that Christians do not take the grace of God seriously enough. Those who make up this pole tend to focus on God's action and mitigate free choice or get rid of all-together. According to Erasmus, this side includes Augustine (who thinks that while human movement toward salvation is necessary, it is started, carried through, and finished by the power of God's grace), then a position most likely attributable to Andreas Carlstadt or again to Augustine, that free choice only produces sin and grace alone produces good works; and finally there is Luther and Wycliffe who think that free choice is a fiction because God is responsible for all things both good and evil.

The criterion that Erasmus uses to discern between these positions is whether or not they maintain a balance between two constant concerns. On the one hand they need to give enough credit to God's grace, but on the other they need to leave room for human freedom to strive for the good. Erasmus finds that Augustine's position is "probable enough in that it leaves man to study and strive, but it does not leave aught for him to ascribe to his own powers." But Erasmus finds other opinions on this side of the pole "harder" and "hardest" to accept. His attitude toward this far side of the debate, including Luther's position, can be summarized nicely with this complaint: "I feel that these people are so anxious to escape reliance on human works and merits

that the 'run away beyond their own house', as the saying goes."[15] The saying "run away beyond their own house," comes from a Latin proverb and captures well the sense that Erasmus wants to give. These opinions are worried so much about honoring God that they run right past their proper goal and fall into a greater problem—human complacency and an unsavory notion of God.[16]

When Erasmus begins to investigate the scripture passages he follows the same basic strategy as when he surveys the tradition. He groups the passages together into those that support free choice and those that seem to oppose it. Then he argues for a probable opinion on the basis of what seems best for Christian piety. In support of free choice are all the passages that have some sort of imperative to choose the good rather than the evil. For example, when God speaks to Moses in Deuteronomy, he says, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendents may live..." (Deut. 30:19). Erasmus lists passage after passage just like this one and then argues that if human beings did not have the ability to choose, passages like these would be ridiculous. God would be demanding from humans exactly what he knows they cannot do. One passage that gets Luther's attention and becomes important for Luther's response is Ezekiel 18:31–32. "Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live." Erasmus asks of Luther's position, "Would the good Lord lament the death of his people which he himself brought about in them?"[17] If human beings do not have free choice, then God seems unjust to demand anything of us. For if our will is

[15] Ibid., 33.

[16] The proverb is from Terence's *Phormio*. A. N. Marlow, "Appendix: On the *Adagia* of Erasmus," in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, ed. and trans. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 335–37.

[17] Erasmus, *Discussion of Free Will*, 35–36.

bound, God would seem not only to demand from us what we cannot do but also to punish us for no good reason. Erasmus' complaint against such a God follows: "'Why bless me, as though I had done my duty, when whatever happens is your work? Why curse me, when I sinned through necessity?' What is the purpose of such a vast number of commandments if not a single person has it at all in his power to do what is commanded?"[18] Without free human choice, rewards and punishments would be of no consequence, and we would have no motivation before God to live piously. Therefore, since God would be unjust and the commands and imperatives that canvas the scriptures would lose their force, Erasmus concludes that we have to respect the position that says human beings have free choice.

This inference about God is rather straightforward. Erasmus has to do much more work to maintain the same inference about God in passages that seem to oppose free choice. One of those passages turns out to be Exodus 9:12ff in which God hardens Pharaoh's heart. In order to maintain his inference that God is just in his rewards and punishments, Erasmus says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart for a just reason. To uphold this position, Erasmus applies two theological distinctions. First, he distinguishes between God's foreknowledge and his will. God willed Pharaoh to perish and was right to will it because he foresaw the sin that Pharaoh was going to commit. This does not mean that God forced Pharaoh to sin. Rather God willed Pharaoh to perish because he knew beforehand that Pharaoh would sin in that given situation. Of course, this distinction only does so much work in making sense of the passage. After all, God is the one who hardens and that means that Pharaoh seems to be acting by divine necessity. So Erasmus applies the scholastic distinction between necessity of consequence and necessity of the thing consequent. The force of this distinction is to make a place for human free will while at the same

[18] Ibid., 37.

time honoring God's omnipotent will. On the one hand, if God wills something it must happen as a consequence of his will. But it does not follow that whatever happened, the consequent occurrence, had to take place. As Erasmus applies the distinction, Judas could have refrained from betraying Jesus. But even if Judas had not betrayed Jesus, God still would have willed it since God would have known what was going to happen. Therefore, "in the human sphere too we can posit a certain necessity which does not exclude the freedom of our will."[19] When applied to Pharaoh, this distinction would lead us to conclude that Pharaoh acted necessarily according to God's foreknowledge. But this does not preclude the fact that Pharaoh acted freely, or with no external constraint, according to his own wicked will. Such a subtle distinction allows room for Erasmus to read these difficult passages and still find that God punishes and rewards on account of free human choices.

In summary, Erasmus argues for free choice on the basis of an inference about God's justice. In the scriptures, God clearly makes demands and promises rewards and punishments. God would be unjust to do so if humans did not have the ability to choose between good or evil. But Erasmus means this inference only for the purposes of debate, or to form a probable opinion on the matter; and this reflects what Erasmus thinks is the deeper issue. Since the scriptures are unclear about human free will (which simply means that he thinks some passages seem to imply that human beings have free choice, while others do not), we lack the authority and right to judge between competing interpretations. In cases like this, the best option for Christian unity and piety is to debate as he does rather than to assert as Luther does. However, while Erasmus thinks that this way of proceeding is the best manner of Christian faith and life, Luther finds that Erasmus

[19] Ibid., 51.

places all of Christian faith in jeopardy because he has undermined the only certainty we have about God.

### Luther on Authority, God, and Human Bondage

> See now, my dear Erasmus, what that most moderate and peace-loving theology of yours leads to! You warn us off, and forbid us to try to understand the foreknowledge of God and the necessity laid on things and men, advising us to leave such things alone, and to shun and condemn them. And by this ill-advised labor of yours you teach us both to cultivate ignorance of God (which comes of its own accord, and indeed is inborn in us), and to despise faith, let go the promises of God, and treat all the consolations of the Spirit and certitudes of conscience as of no account. Such advice Epicurus himself would scarcely give![20]

Luther did not miss the fact that Erasmus had taken the debate to a higher level. Luther did not find this to be a distraction, however. By placing the matter of divine and human freedom within the context of questions on Christian authority and the problem of God Erasmus had gotten to the heart of the matter. By the conclusion of Luther's book, he even compliments Erasmus for it: "You and you alone have seen the question on which everything hinges, and have aimed at the vital spot..."[21] But this complimentary stance only coincides with Luther's conviction that Erasmus had gotten the most important things all wrong. Certainly the matter of divine and human freedom belongs properly with the question of God and Christian authority. But Erasmus' way of handling the matter only leads us to cultivate an ignorance of God and to despise the Christian faith.

Luther instead asserts God's authority. More specifically, Luther asserts that God has acted in a decisive way to bring about the redemption of all things through Jesus Christ. By any other authority, Luther argues, Christian faith is merely a conjecture about God, grounded only in human reason. So if we do not cling to God where he is to be found in Jesus, we only cultivate

[20] Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 43.

[21] Ibid., 294.

an ignorance of God. In the process of making this argument, Luther recasts Erasmus' concerns about authority in light of God's action in Jesus. Then he answers the problem of divine justice in a way that does not allow human reason to exalt itself above God. We will follow these two important moves in order.

The first thing to notice about Luther's book is that he handles the authority questions quite differently than Erasmus. Luther does not embrace the position of the Christian skeptic. Christian faith and life does not consist of a cool detachment that allows one to avoid personal commitment and struggle. Christianity consists of making assertions about, holding fast to, and confessing Christ even unto death. Luther writes: "Nothing is better known or more common among Christians than assertions. Take away assertions and you take away Christianity. Why, the Holy Spirit is given them from heaven, that he may glorify Christ [in them] and confess him even unto death..."[22] Christians make assertions because Christ is the center of Christian faith. Christians do not pick fights for the sake of academic debate, but to confess what we could otherwise not know and to hold to the only thing we do know with certainty—that God has acted in Christ to redeem the world. Take away assertions, Luther thinks, and you take away Christianity. Such conviction about assertions already marks a stark difference from Erasmus on the question of authority. For sure, that difference reflects the civil unrest present during the reformation and the impending collapse of Christendom. While Erasmus sought the position of the skeptic in order to preserve Christian unity and a simple piety that was underwritten by the church's place in society, Luther thought Christianity was about Christ and nothing else. Nothing could be more important to Luther's Christian than to confess Christ, "even if the whole world had not only to be thrown into strife and confusion, but actually to return to total chaos and be

[22] Ibid., 21.

reduced to nothingness."[23] Luther already shifts the question of authority to Jesus. While Erasmus would like to take the position of the skeptic for the sake of preserving the authorities of scripture and church, Luther takes the position of an assertor and confessor in order to preserve the significance of God's act in Jesus.

Luther handles the question about the scriptures in precisely the same manner. Whereas Erasmus finds the scriptures obscure and veiled, and therefore doubts their ability to serve as a sole authority, Luther finds them clear about one thing in particular: Jesus Christ.

> For what still sublimer thing can remain hidden in the Scriptures, now that the seals have been broken, the stone rolled from the door of the sepulcher [Matt. 27:66; 28:2], and the supreme majesty brought to light, namely, that Christ the Son of God has been made man, that God is three and one, that Christ has suffered for us and is to reign eternally? Are not these things known and sung even in the highways and byways? Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find left in them?[24]

Of course, Luther admits that there are many passages within the scriptures that are unclear in regards to the difficulty of reading a foreign text. But Luther does not allow these difficulties to give precedence to the interpreter. Rather the central subject matter overshadows the problem of reading the occasional obscure words or being unfamiliar with certain terms. "If the words are obscure in one place, yet they are plain in another; and it is one and the same theme published quite openly to the whole world, which in the scriptures is sometimes expressed in plain words, and sometimes lies as yet hidden in obscure words."[25]

In the process of identifying their central subject matter, Luther also changes the purpose and function of the scriptures within the debate to reflect the authority of God in Jesus. Erasmus argues as if the Scriptures are source material to construct a position about divine and human

---

[23] Ibid., 50.

[24] Ibid., 25–26.

[25] Ibid., 26.

freedom. Each party in the debate must look over whatever passages present themselves as relevant to the issue, as it has already been defined by the interpreter, and then put together a position. But when used in this way, Erasmus is right to question them as a sole authority. As a resource for a more comprehensive position about divine and human freedom, they fail in their task just as Erasmus thinks. Some passages seem to imply human freedom while others seem to imply divine necessity. And the interpreter has to make sense of the implications by putting them together on the basis of an inference about God. And God is the problem. Erasmus traces the deficiency of the scriptures back to God himself, citing Paul's lament about God's inscrutability. Since the scriptures are an insufficient resource for constructing a definite position about divine and human freedom, we must conclude that there are some things about God that we simply cannot know. On these things, the debater rather than the asserter will provide only a probable opinion.

Luther, on the other hand uses the scriptures quite differently. He admits that there are many things in God that are hidden and beyond human comprehension. But "God and the Scripture of God are two things, no less than the Creator and the creatures are two things. That in God there are many things hidden, of which we are ignorant, no one doubts...But that in Scripture there are some things abstruse, and everything is not plain—this is an idea put about by the ungodly Sophists..."[26] What we do know for certain about God is openly published in the scriptures. In fact, Luther finds that the scriptures make crystal clear something important about God: the identity and purpose of his Son.[27] "Matters of the highest majesty and the profoundest mysteries are no longer hidden away, but have been brought out and are openly displayed before

[26] Ibid., 25.

[27] From this follow the central Christian doctrines about which Erasmus is hesitant—the triune identity, the two natures, and the unforgiveable sin.

the very doors. For Christ has opened our minds so that we might understand the scriptures [Luke 24:45], and the gospel is preached to the whole creation [Mark 16:15]."[28] In other words, God uses the scriptures for the sole purpose of proclaiming Christ.

So once again Luther shifts the topic of authority to God's act in Jesus by turning attention from the question of scriptural interpretation to the place of the scriptures in God's action through Jesus. The scriptures proclaim Christ, who is the Son of God. Luther helps this process along by making a distinction between the inner and outer clarity of the scriptures. The outer clarity of the scriptures is their proclamation that Jesus is the Son of God, and that he has suffered for us and will reign eternally. This clarity directly concerns God. The stone has been rolled away, as Luther says, so that through their proclamation we come to know that God is acting in a clear and definitive way. God has bound himself to this word that proclaims Christ clearly. Therefore, the external clarity pertains to "the ministry of the word" or the office of preaching through which God acts to proclaim the reign of Christ. However, while the message is clear, some people refuse to believe that it is God's word. The internal clarity, then, pertains to matters of the heart. The internal clarity concerns whether or not we believe that the message published to all the world about Christ actually refers to God.[29] Between these two clarities, though, Luther leaves no room for the authority of the interpreter to make sense of the text. There is no room, in other words, for an inherent obscurity that needs to be cleared up by proper interpretation in order to arrive at the real meaning. The authority of the scriptures derives directly from their central content matter and their subsequent function of proclaiming Christ.

Thus, Luther answers the two initial authority questions by shifting the topic to God's action in Jesus. When he addresses Erasmus' third concern, Luther follows suit. The third issue

---

[28] Ibid., 26–27.

[29] Ibid., 28.

that Erasmus used to erect his boundary is whether the topic of divine and human freedom is salutary for Christian faith and life in the first place. Erasmus thought it was not salutary because Luther's position produced an unsatisfactory, even terrible, picture of God. Not surprisingly, Luther finds Erasmus' position unsatisfactory because it obscures the only thing we know with certainty about God—Jesus Christ. Luther's argument is straightforward. First, he contends that if we do not know what human choice can accomplish before God or whether all things happen by divine necessity, then we will not know how much we ought to do and how much we should leave up to God. Such uncertainty places God's action through Jesus under a shroud of doubt. Next, Luther argues that his own position on the matter is quite salutary for Christian faith and life. Again, Luther's reasoning is straightforward. If we do not know whether God works all in all, then we cannot know how far the proclamation of Christ found in scripture extends.

> For if you doubt or disdain to know that God foreknows all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably, how can you believe his promises and place a sure trust and reliance on them? For when he promises anything you ought to be certain that he knows and is able and willing to perform what he promises; otherwise, you will regard him as neither truthful nor faithful, and that is impiety and a denial of the Most High God….Therefore, Christian faith is entirely extinguished, the promises of God and the whole gospel are completely destroyed, if we teach and believe that it is not for us to know the necessary foreknowledge of God and the necessity of the things that are to come to pass. For this is the one supreme consolation of Christians in all adversities, to know that God does not lie, but does all things immutably, and that his will can neither be resisted nor changed nor hindered.[30]

If God does not control all things by the power of his will, if there is any room for human merit or achievement, then the scripture's proclamation of Christ has no force. Then human choice controls the destiny of the world rather than God in Jesus.

Again, the underlying assumption behind Luther's simple argument is that God is acting definitively in Christ to bring about the redemption of the world. This assumption becomes

[30] Ibid., 42–43.

clearer in Luther's conclusion and it will be helpful to pause here and bring this assumption to light. In the final section, Luther uses the notion of two kingdoms to summarize the scriptural proclamation found in Paul and the gospel of John. Those two kingdoms are the kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of God, which are warring against one another. Satan is the ruler of his kingdom, but Christ is the ruler of God's kingdom. In God's kingdom, "Christ reigns, and his Kingdom ceaselessly resists and makes war on the kingdom of Satan. Into this Kingdom we are transferred, not by our own power but by the grace of God, by which we are set free from the present evil age and delivered from the dominion of darkness."[31] The absolute opposition between the two kingdoms expresses Luther's conviction that God's work for the redemption of the world is centered in Christ alone. Our salvation takes place when we are transferred to Christ's kingdom by his grace rather than our works. Therefore nothing stands between our participation in Christ's kingdom and our salvation. There is no middle or neutral ground between Christ and Satan, and hence no place for our will.[32] It is this conviction about Jesus Christ, who is preached in the scriptures, that allows Luther to hold that all things happen by divine necessity. If human beings have the power to choose and move themselves toward Christ, then God's action in Christ becomes secondary to that power.

In fact, Luther goes so far as to say that divine necessity and human bondage are the two halves of the Christian summa.[33] It is important to understand why Luther makes such an exaggerated claim. He says as much because divine necessity and human bondage express in unmitigating terms the absolute centrality of Jesus. In this sense, Luther does not start from reflection on God's divinity in itself and then move to human bondage as the reciprocal part.

[31] Ibid., 287.

[32] Ibid., 115.

[33] Ibid., 35–36.

Rather these two parts keep Christ as he is proclaimed by the scriptures in its proper place. For as the two halves of the Christian summa, they ensure that God is in control; that God will follow through and bring to completion what he has begun in Christ and that he will no go back on his word as it is proclaimed through the scriptures. At the end of the entire work, Luther sums up this position with a confession: Luther would rather not have free choice given to him because then the certainty he has in God through Jesus would be lost. "But now, since God has taken my salvation out of my hands and into his, making it depend on his choice and not mine, and has promised to save me...I am assured and certain both that he is faithful and will not lie to me, and also that he is too great and powerful for any demons or adversaries to be able to break him or to snatch me from him."[34] In just this sense, it is proper to read Luther's argument for divine necessity and human bondage as a derivative of the scriptures' confession about the divine authority of Jesus Christ.

Of course, this does not mean that Luther refrains from arguing about divine necessity at the level of abstract theological reflection. Already in his review of Erasmus' preface he makes just this sort of argument against the theological distinctions Erasmus puts to use.[35] For instance, he calls into question the distinction between God's will and foreknowledge by following through on Erasmus' conviction that God must be just. If God is just he must be so immutably, Luther argues, which means also that this applies to his goodness, will and knowledge. If, then, God's will and knowledge is immutable, how can he foreknow without willing and how can he will without foreknowing. "From this it follows irrefutably that everything we do, everything

[34] Ibid., 289.

[35] I am not interested in arguing this point in any great detail from the text of *The Bondage of the Will*. The genre of disputation determines, for Luther, his willingness to stray into this sort of abstract attack of Erasmus' position. I am indebted to Robert Kolb for pointing this out to me. Nevertheless, I think that a close reading of the whole dispute demonstrates that Luther works out from the center, which is the Scripture's proclamation of Jesus Christ. Cf. Oswald Bayer, "God's Omnipotence," *Lutheran Quarterly* 23 (2009), 85–102, for a more sustained systematic reading of Luther's text in this regard.

that happens, even if it seems to us to happen mutably and contingently, happens in fact nonetheless necessarily and immutably, if you have regard for the will of God. For the will of God is effectual and cannot be hindered, since it is the power of the divine nature itself."[36] The most these kinds of arguments mean is that Luther is willing to work from the center, which is Christ as proclaimed by the scriptures, and draw the necessary consequences about God and humanity. Divine necessity and human bondage is not a derivative of God's divinity as such for Luther as much as it is a derivative of the authority of Jesus proclaimed by the scriptures. Therefore when Luther argues about divine necessity in terms of reflection on God himself, he is arguing about how best to adhere to the authority of Jesus proclaimed in the scriptures. Consequently, Erasmus' distinctions are not just theoretically flawed, but insufficient to treating the Triune God. They obscure the proclamation of Christ by putting the human will between God and Jesus.

Therefore, Luther recasts all three of Erasmus' concerns about authority in light of God's act in Jesus. And in so doing, Luther treats God in a different way. By asserting the authority of Jesus, Luther lets God be God. Erasmus, on the other hand, treats the scriptures as a resource for a debate about God, which makes God out to be a human idea dependent on an inference about divine justice. The Luther quotation we began with summarizes his contention against Erasmus. If we do not let God be God by appealing to the only thing we know for certain about God (namely Jesus), we cultivate an ignorance of God. Without Jesus, all we have left is a probable opinion.

The second major move that Luther makes concerns God's justice. Shifting the questions of authority to God's act in Jesus does not do away with the problem of God's justice. If divine

[36] Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 37–38.

necessity follows as a consequence of Jesus' authority, what do we make of evil? Is God also the cause of evil; or is evil a force that works against God? This is an important question because at first glance it seems to unravel Luther's assertion of God's authority. The former option (God is the cause of evil) would seem to uphold divine necessity and the authority of Jesus. But then it would also seem as if God is the author of evil and opposed to his own work through Jesus. The latter option (that evil is an opposing force) would absolve God from evil. But in indentifying a power that can war with God, the authority of Jesus would be jeopardized.

This troublesome question arises several times throughout the debate, but nowhere more focused than on the passage from Ezekiel. Erasmus put the problem this way: "Does the good Lord deplore the death of his people, which he himself works in them?" If God does will the death of his people which he himself works, as Luther's position seems to imply, then God seems to be against himself. On the one hand, God does not will the death of the wicked, as he states in Ezekiel. But on the other hand, many wicked people do not repent. So it seems as if God, who works all in all, also wills the death of sinners against his own good will. Luther not only anticipates the problem but also gives an answer. But he does not propose a theoretical solution that would resolve the differences. Instead, he draws a distinction that recognizes the different ways we encounter God. This distinction intends to keep God together when theoretical problems seem to drive God apart. Luther then warns that we ought to adhere to the distinction lest we find ourselves fighting against the divine majesty.

To deal with the problem of God's justice, Luther says we must distinguish between God as he is preached and God as he is not preached. God as he is preached is God as we encounter him through the Scripture's proclamation concerning Christ. In the scriptures proclamation, God speaks for himself and expresses his will clearly. As we encounter God in preaching, God does not will the death of the wicked. Instead, God as he is preached "deplores the death which he

finds in his people and desires to remove from them." Therefore he wills "that sin and death should be taken away and we should be saved." In other words, as we experience him in the preaching concerning Christ, God clearly communicates his will to us. But apart from this preaching, God has not defined himself. As we encounter God apart from the preaching of Christ, God does many things that have no immediate explanation. Therefore Luther says that apart from the preached word God hides himself from us and does not wish to be known. "God hidden in his majesty neither deplores nor takes away death, but works life, death, and all in all. For there he has not bound himself by his word, but has kept himself free over all things."[37] With this distinction, Luther admonishes us to take God seriously as God himself acts. On the one hand, when God acts through the preaching of Christ we come to know exactly what God desires. In the word about Christ, God binds himself and makes his desire and intent clear. But apart from that preaching, God does many different things that often seem to have no explicit coherence or consistency. God's acts apart from preaching often lack clear and distinguishable patterns of behavior. And in this sense, God apart from preaching hides himself from us. The point is quite simple. "God does many things which he does not disclose himself as willing in his word."[38] Apart from that proclamation, God does many things for which he has provided no explanation. Some of those things even contend with the preached word. When some hear the gospel and are saved while others do not, for example, it might appear that God apart from his preached word conflicts with God's preached word. Luther simply points out that we do not know for sure what God wills in this case. And we cannot make a generalization about it that would seem to fix the problem. When the two seem to come into conflict, Luther warns us to cling to God preached and have nothing to do with God hidden.

---

[37] Ibid., 140.

[38] Ibid.

> It is our business, however, to pay attention to the word and leave that inscrutable will alone, for we must be guided by the word and not by that inscrutable will. After all, who can direct himself by a will completely inscrutable and unknowable? It is enough to know simply that there is a certain inscrutable will in God, and as to what, why, and how far it wills, that is something we have no right whatever to inquire into, hanker after, care about, or meddle with, but only to fear and adore.[39]

Luther's warning gets to the heart of the question of justification in its broadest sense. As creatures, we have no right or authority to the things of God. If we could give a sufficient answer to the problem, then we would only exalt ourselves and what we think is reasonable above God himself.

> To the extent, therefore, that God hides himself and wills to be unknown to us, it is no business of ours. For here the saying truly applies, 'Things above us are no business of ours.' And lest anyone should think this is a distinction of my own, I am following Paul, who writes to the Thessalonians concerning Antichrist that he will exalt himself above every God that is preached and worshiped (II Thess. 2:4).[40]

To come up with reasons for God that God himself does not reveal is to exalt oneself above God as he acts in Christ and the preaching concerning Christ. If we are to let God be God, then we must observe the distinction and actually let God act in his inscrutable majesty and let God speak for himself in the proclaimed word.

Now, at first glance, this distinction might appear to undermine the authority given to the proclamation of the scriptures concerning Jesus since it affirms that God works in ways that do not seem bound to the promises made in Jesus. This would be a correct reading of the distinction only if Luther thought that we must find a principled answer to the problem of God. But Luther uses this distinction to overturn the priority of such conjectures. Because God makes his will known for certain through the person Jesus of Nazareth, this distinction allows us to hold the things of God that are not certain or definable in a non-speculative unity with God in Jesus.

---

[39]Ibid.

[40] Ibid., 139.

Making the distinction allows the work of God hidden to remain together with the work of God preached without Reason's speculation. In other words, the distinction works to maintain the confession that the one who created all things is active in the person Jesus of Nazareth in a manner that cannot be reduced to a more basic or universal principle about the world, such as his justice. Thus, rather than compose a conjecture about the justice of God, Luther uses this distinction as a way of teaching us to honor the God of Jesus as God.

After all, Luther is convinced that there is no sufficient answer to this problem. When he says that God is hiding himself, Luther seems to mean that the living God will simply not allow creatures to circumscribe him within a reasonable explanation. Every attempt to "pry into that awful will" only leads to our frustration in the face of God's majesty. Luther's worry is not merely a pious concern about maintaining God's transcendence. Rather Luther is warning us that we cannot resolve the problem of God no matter how hard we try. For "if anyone persists in investigating the reason for that [hidden] will, refusing to pay heed to our warning, we let him go on and fight with God like the Giants, while we wait to see what triumphs he will bring back, certain that he will do no harm to our cause and no good to his own."[41] Luther uses Erasmus' theological distinctions to demonstrate this point. Even if we grant the distinction between God's foreknowledge and God's will, then we still run into the problem of God's justice. If God foresees that free choice cannot will the good, or that Pharaoh would have hardened his heart on account of his wickedness, why did God not give Pharaoh the grace to change his heart? The responsibility for evil still finds its way to God. And "God appears to be just as cruel in bearing with us through his long-suffering...For since he sees that free choice cannot will good, and that it is made worse by the forbearance of the one who is long-suffering, this very lenience makes

[41] Ibid., 147.

him seem extremely cruel, and as if he enjoyed our evil plight."[42] Therefore, Erasmus' distinction only seems to have delayed the problem rather than overcome it. But of course, Erasmus might respond to this with the distinction between the two kinds of necessity. Pharaoh could have changed his wicked heart and chosen the good, and that still would have been God's will. But Luther draws out the consequences of that move.

> But if God is robbed of the power and wisdom to elect, what will he be but the false idol, chance, at whose nod everything happens at random? And in the end it will come to this, that men are saved and damned without God's knowledge, since he has not determined by his certain election who are saved and who are damned...and in the meantime he has himself, perhaps, gone off to the banquet of the Ethiopians, as Homer says.[43]

All the explaining we can do for God will never solve the problem. Our explanations will only make matters worse.

Luther's advice here is purely practical. Nothing we say about God will change the reality that God will go on just as before. "And if flesh and blood is offended here and murmurs [cf. John 6:61], by all means let it murmur; but it will achieve nothing; God will not change on that account."[44] Nothing will resolve the reality that God works life, death, and all in all. Erasmus' distinctions do not change the fact that some people do not repent, for example. They only try to explain them away so that they do not appear to be the problem they are. But such explanations only make matters worse. No one can erase the problem of God's cruelty, unless he also makes God into the idol chance. It is better to let God be God and cling to his action in Jesus. To observe Luther's distinction between God hidden and God preached means to appeal only to God as he has made himself available to us. And apart from that defined presence, "God" will only be

---

[42] Ibid., 170.

[43] Ibid., 171.

[44] Ibid., 180.

a human conjecture. For, if God is a reality—not a human idea but a living God—we cannot imagine that he will conform to *our* best explanations. Therefore, Jesus Christ, who is preached by the scriptures, is the only justification we have for God.

Finally, then, when Luther does get around to speak about God's justice, he demonstrates what it means to follow this distinction. Rather than speaking for God and construing an explanation that would prove God's justice, Luther first recognizes God's supreme and uncontestable will and the futility of human reason. "He is God, and for his will there is no cause or reason that can be laid down as a rule or measure for it since there is nothing equal or superior to it, but it is itself the rule of all things. For if there were any rule or standard for it, either as cause or reason, it could no longer be the will of God."[45] Luther refuses to speculate because speculation would only exalt ourselves above God, both as he is preached and not preached. If God were bound to follow a rule conjured up by human reason then he would not be God, and to seek after such a rule would only exalt human reason over God. Then Luther concludes that God's justice is not a demonstrable conclusion but a statement of faith. Luther makes this point at the conclusion of his entire argument.

> Let us take it that there are three lights—the light of nature, the light of grace, and the light of glory, to use the common and valid distinction. By the light of nature it is an insoluble problem how it can be just that a good man should suffer and a bad man prosper; but this problem is solved by the light of grace. By the light of grace it is an insoluble problem how God can damn one who is unable by any power of his own to do anything but sin and be guilty. Here both the light of nature and the light of grace tell us that it is not the fault of the unhappy man, but of an unjust God; for they cannot judge otherwise of a God who crowns one ungodly man freely and apart from merits, yet damns another who may well be less, or at least not more, ungodly. But the light of glory tells us differently, and it will show us hereafter that the God whose judgment here is one of incomprehensible righteousness is a God of most perfect and manifest righteousness. In the meantime, we can only *believe* this, being admonished

[45] Ibid., 181.

and confirmed by the example of the light of grace, which performs a similar miracle in relation to the light of nature.[46]

That God is just will be revealed in the light of glory and cannot be illuminated clearly by either the world we experience (the light of nature) nor even by the proclamation of the gospel about Jesus (the light of grace), but only by the fulfillment of all things in God (the light of glory). In the meantime, the light of grace gives us enough to trust God until the light of glory. Again we see here how Luther works from God's act in Jesus to what must be implied. Even with the knowledge of God that we receive in the proclamation concerning Christ, we still lack the resources to prove God's justice. But we have reason to believe it according to the light of grace. And until the consummation of all things, we can only believe it according to that light.

## God after Nihilism

I hope that Luther appears to be a model for justifying the Christian faith after nihilism simply by seeing him alongside Milbank and Hauerwas. Despite their differences, both Milbank and Hauerwas appeal to the value of Christian peaceableness in a violent world. Therefore, in order to deal with our normal nihilism, they try to make Christianity highly valuable. But this turns out to be like trying to put out a fire with gasoline. Nihilism is a normal condition for westerners because in the presence of many different possible ways of construing the world, none presents itself to us as the clear favorite. The world does not appear to have one clear and unmistakable meaning. Instead, there appear to be many different interpretations of the world. And since we have to decide between competing claims, we human beings find ourselves, wittingly or unwittingly, in the place of the sacred. The sacred gains its status on account of our determination. Making an appeal to the value of Christianity only reinforces the nihilist.

[46] Ibid., 292.

Rather than appealing to the value of Christianity, Luther leads us to appeal to the authority of God in Jesus. This simple move makes a world of difference. By appealing to what God has done definitively, while also refusing human speculation about the matter, God remains the ground of our existence. In the terms of our narrative about western life and thought, the sacred remains the ground of the profane in Luther's work. Luther lets God act for himself regardless of what we might think about his action or what existential difficulties we might have with God. Luther is especially clear about this when he refuses to provide a speculative answer to the problem of God's justice. Clearly God's justice is a problem for any theologian because, when taken altogether, God's actions do not seem principled. Ever since the Age of the Forms, theologians have assumed that God must be rational and that human reason allows us to share in God's reasons. But Luther is much more an Age of the Gods type theologian. For Luther, God does not have to act according to the measure of reason or taste. God does exactly what he likes. And that is a central theological problem for theologians. God's godness presents a problem not just for theology but for theologians because God does not respect our best intuitions. God is simply God. And when it comes to finding God's reasons, well, as Luther says, God often seems to be hiding himself.[47] To take such a God seriously means that the theologian must give up his pretentions to be God. Luther's distinction between God preached and God not preached aims to let God rather than the theologian be God. This feature of Luther's theology is exactly what helps Christians in an age of normal nihilism. Luther's way denies the kind of thinking about God that would put us in a position as judge and arbiter of God. Justification for "God" is in the

---

[47] Compare Friedrich Nietzsche's, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 38, typically crude warning to philosophers: "'Is it true that God is present everywhere?' a little girl asked her mother; 'I think that's indecent'—a hint for philosophers! One should have more respect for the bashfulness with which nature has hidden behind riddles and iridescent uncertainties. Perhaps truth is a woman who has reasons for not letting us see her reasons? Perhaps her name is—to speak Greek—*Baubo*?"

hands of God alone. Any speculative resolution, Luther insists, would only make God out to be a servant of human reason.

There are two sets of theological distinctions that can serve as rules for theological reflection. These distinctions should help us maintain Luther's insight that only God can justify himself, which he does through Jesus.

We have already encountered the first distinction. It is between God preached and God not preached; or between God preached and God hidden. As we have seen, the distinction allowed Luther to refuse the speculation about God that would resolve what seems to be a contradiction. Speculation about God runs into trouble because it tries to deal with the reality of God by providing a unifying explanation. But explanations are only abstractions about God. Luther's key insight is that these abstractions are not God himself. And no matter what explanation we might give to the problem of God's justice, for example, we will only be delaying the problem of these two realities. Gerhard Forde observes that, "the attempt [to explain God with an abstraction] is futile because it only shuffles masks. Just when one thinks that he or she has removed one terrifying mask, another mask emerges and turns out to be even more threatening, though the perfidy might not be immediately apparent. Such theologizing only substitutes another seductive abstraction for the proclamation."[48] The only solution to the shuffling masks is to let God break through our theology and speak for himself.

Therefore, respecting the difference between God preached and God not preached has a two-fold purpose. On the one hand, it puts a halt to explanations and stops human reason from exalting itself above God. This is as much of a pastoral warning as it is a theological one from Luther. God will not stop being God because we explain him. The two troublesome realities that

---

[48] Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation!* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 17.

Erasmus worries over will still take place no matter what we say about them, and that is the problem. There might be many different *persuasive* explanations that make sense of these realities. But the key point to be remembered, here, is that those explanations are human reasons for God, not reasons God himself gives. As human reasons, they *always* make an aesthetic appeal. They are always trying to be persuasive to human reason and taste. Therefore, theology that does not let God be God and speak for himself cannot help but appeal to its value.

But observing the distinction between God hidden and God preached puts a stop to such speculation. It keeps us from exalting ourselves over God. Once speculation about God finds its end, then we can let God speak for himself. So the second purpose of the distinction is to turn our attention to God as he wishes to be known. This is what Luther means when he says that we should have nothing to do with God apart from preaching but to pay attention only to the word. The hidden God might seem to will the death of a sinner, but at other times, he may not. Apart from the preaching that God himself has authorized, God does many different things for which he gives no explanation. And, as Forde observes,

> It is simply not true that God in general is bound even to an abstraction called the revealed word...What would happen if we were to claim that the absolute God is bound and limited by the word? We would revert to the situation in which the preached word—"I desire not the death of a sinner"—becomes a general statement by which God is bound and limited. But that is not true, nor does it accord God any honor.[49]

Therefore, Gillespie's common complaint that "not only does Luther have no explanation for Satan's evil, he also cannot explain the Fall, which in the absence of human freedom and responsibility is morally meaningless"[50] misses Luther's point altogether. Of course Luther does not have an explanation to these things. Luther wants to dissuade us from finding an explanation

---

[49] Ibid., 28–29.

[50] Gillespie, *Theological Origins*, 159.

that will do the job of making sense of the things of God in the first place. None will. And more to the point, any explanation will only be *our* best effort. It is better to let God be God and cling to him where he wishes to be found.[51]

If Christian theology wants to avoid turning God into a human value, it must observe the difference between God hidden and God preached. Those who observe this distinction are theologians of the cross. A theologian of the cross is a person "who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross."[52] This designation comes from Luther's Heidelberg disputation. One deserves to be called a theologian when he does not ignore God but embraces him where he makes himself available. The challenge of being a theologian of the cross, however, is that the foolishness and humility of the cross is just where we find God. It seems to be our perennial desire, even our bondage, to have God as we like him rather than as he chooses to be. To appeal simply to the authority of a crucified first-century Jew does not have the status of appealing to the alternative of peaceableness in a violent world, for instance. But that is where God is to be found. A theologian of the cross, however, does not look beyond suffering and cross; he does not look beyond Jesus. Luther summarizes his point when he says that, "For this reason true theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ, as it is also stated in John 10 [John 14:6]: 'No one comes to the Father, but by me.' 'I am the door' [John 10:9], and

[51] Gillespie's concern that the fall is morally meaningless also does not reflect a close reading of Luther's use of divine necessity. One way to put the matter is to say that Luther is a pragmatist about the relationship between human bondage and divine necessity. He observes the reality of our bondage and the reality of God's action in Jesus and does not try to unify the two systematically. Our bondage, Luther thinks, is not that we are puppets, but that we do exactly what we want. Cf. Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 39. And we are bound to not want God to be God. This aspect of Luther's thought leads Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 11–66, to conclude that Luther holds two total responsibilities that are kept in practical rather than theoretical unity by distinguishing properly between law and gospel.

[52] Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, in vol. 31 of *Luther's Works*, ed. and trans. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 52.

so forth."[53] Rather than putting together a conjecture about the invisible things of God, rather than finding a principled explanation for the world as we experience it, a theologian of the cross will speak truthfully when he speaks first of God in Christ.

By contrast, a theologian of glory will look "upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [Rom. 1:20]."[54] To look upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible is just what explanations do. They try to look behind the reality of God to see a principle at work that can organize God neatly into a coherent unity. But Luther asserts that these people do not deserve the title of theologian because they are not observing God as he acts. Rather they are philosophers or metaphysicians but not theologians. For rather than paying attention to God's particular actions, these so called theologians devise their own conjectures about God that explain why God acts the way he does.

These distinctions benefit Christians in an age of normal nihilism because they remind us that we can only justify our faith and life by appealing to God's own action in Jesus. Only God justifies God according to his own will and action. And God acts definitively in Jesus Christ. Any other reasons for Christian faith and life will always end up appealing to the value of Christianity.

Finally, then, we can return full circle to our opening narrative about nihilism. According to these distinctions, the Age of the Forms already contains within it the seeds of our present normal nihilism. These distinctions can apply directly to the divide between the Age of the Gods and the Age of the Forms. In the Age of the Gods we experience the sacred first hand as an active, personal, and willful force that controls the profane. In the Age of the Forms, the sacred is

[53] Ibid., 53.

[54] Ibid., 51.

the a priori cosmic order that gives intelligible substance to the profane. In the Age of the Gods we cannot always explain why something happened the way it did. The only explanation lies within God, who often hides himself and refuses our curiosity. All of Job's pleading with God only got him a lesson in who is the one with sole power, right, and authority. So all we can do is honor God when we run into him, or even better when God runs into us. We can only honor God as God lets himself be known. But in the Age of the Forms, "God" stands as the unifying and principled Reason for the way things are. What happens does not happen by chance or arbitrarily but follows an a priori order. God is that principled order, and we know God by recognizing the principled reasons for the world. Luther's theological warning about these things is simple. To treat God as the principled reason for the world will only lead us to ground God in our own best theological efforts. The only way to properly justify our talk about God is to let the living God speak for himself. Any other way can only make God out to be our best conjecture.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## JESUS AFTER NIHILISM

In the previous chapter I argued that Christians will only overcome the threat of nihilism by following Luther. Rather than appealing to the value of Christianity, Luther leads us to appeal to God's act in Jesus as the sole justification for Christian faith and life. Such an appeal helps Christians in an age of normal nihilism because it lets God speak for himself. Our age challenges us with many different claims to authority; some claim the authority of the Bible, others the Koran, and still others the scientific method. When so many different authorities exist side by side, the world no longer presents itself to us as having one clear and unmistakable meaning. After all, no one authority seems to be able to tell us the way things really are because in the face of many other plausible authorities, none goes unquestioned by us, none simply stands out above the rest. So *we* have to decide between them. That is exactly the problem. Authorities no longer have the same status when we have to judge their authenticity, when we stand over them as those who assign them value. That significantly devalues them. The sacred ground of our existence, as Edwards puts it, loses its constructive force and authority when the profane has to prop it up. If only God would save us by speaking for himself! But that is just what Luther thinks God has done and continues to do in Jesus. God has broken through our 'probable opinions' to give us something we can be certain about. By appealing to the divine authority of Jesus, Luther lets God speak for himself.

Moreover, Luther's theological distinctions show what it means to let God speak for himself. Especially by making the distinction between God preached and God not preached, Luther demonstrates how Christians might let God's act in Jesus stand as the sole justification

for their faith and life. Only when Christians resist the temptation of filling in the gaps to make God's actions consistent with human reasoning will their theological speech let God be God. Then and only then can we listen to God where he is to be found, namely in the preaching authorized by God himself through Jesus.

But Luther's argument begs a gigantic question. *Why do Christians say that God acts in Jesus of Nazareth?* What gives us the right to contend that God himself has spoken up and defined himself through this man? The matter can also be described more conventionally. Christians have traditionally claimed that Jesus is the Son of God. The Nicene Creed, which is an authoritative way of expressing the Christian faith, puts it this way: I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God. But *what gives us the right to make this confession about Jesus?* This question has two sides. On the one hand, the question asks about the man Jesus of Nazareth. What about Jesus makes us think that God is definitively present in him. On the other hand, the question asks about God. What do we know about God that makes us think God works through this man? This chapter aims to answer both of those questions together by working systematically with Luther's distinction between a theologian of the cross and a theologian of glory.

The range of topics and subtopics, not to mention the layers of scholarship that accompany this question are enormous. It would require at least a book length argument to cover the question sufficiently. The scope of relevant issues related to the topic extends from the "historical" Jesus to the development of the Nicene Creed. And that only covers the first side of the question. The second side concerning God would be just as immense in scale. I do not intend to write another dissertation on this topic. So in order to make the question manageable, I will

use John Milbank's article, "The Name of Jesus"[1] to frame the issue. Milbank's way of treating the question is not the only way, or even the best for that matter. But I have chosen to follow Milbank's lead for a couple of reasons. First, in this piece, Milbank grasps how the question is not merely historical in nature but also theological. Second, Milbank's argument serves as a good illustration of a 'nihilistic' attempt to solve the problem. By nihilistic, I only mean that he justifies the church's confession that Jesus is the Son of God by appealing to the confession's value. Rather than reframing the issue myself, in the style of a chapter in a dogmatics, I will write a critical response to Milbank's essay. I hope that my response will prove to be a helpful example of how to handle the wide scope of issues. The bulk of my argument for this dissertation consists in the way I have construed the problem of nihilism in the first four chapters. This does not mean that my thesis in this chapter is insignificant to the greater argument. In fact, as I've already mentioned, this question needs to be answered if Luther's response will carry any weight. But these are the limitations of this dissertation.

### Why Jesus? Three Nihilistic Answers

If Christians are going to give good reasons for their confession that Jesus is the Son of God, they will have to navigate two related questions. The first question concerns the man Jesus of Nazareth. What about this man leads Christians to link him so intimately with God? The Nicene Creed, for one, goes so far in its formulation of the confession to join the man Jesus ontologically with the Father. What can we say about the man who goes by the name of Jesus of Nazareth that can justify a claim that significant?[2] The second question arises whenever

[1] John Milbank, "The Name of Jesus," in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 145–68.

[2] I am not interested in answering here the secondary questions, "Why is Jesus considered to be of one being with the Father?" and "How does that particular confession make conceptual sense of an eternal God's incarnation in time?"

Christians try to give an answer to the first. When Christians say that Jesus is the Son of God they imply that they know something about God in the first place that would lead them to identify God intimately and uniquely with the man Jesus of Nazareth. But what reasons can they give for having such a definite knowledge of God?

Typical of John Milbank's dense and thoughtful work, his "The Name of Jesus," captures both sides of the Christological question in a short essay. Not only does Milbank briefly review the current status of the question, surveying a chief challenge to the Christian confession and two inadequate answers, he also proposes an alternative response. However, when placed in the light of the forgoing discussion of our normal nihilism, Milbank's alternative does not seem to be any better than the two inadequate responses he wants to transcend. Instead of two inadequate responses, I will argue that his essay presents three nihilistic answers to the Christological question. The critique of Milbank in this section will provide the platform for an answer that transcends nihilism in the next section.

Milbank begins his essay with a candid summary of the 'liberal' challenge[3] to the church's claims about Jesus. Both sides of the Christological question emerge already within the liberal challenge, and a brief review of that challenge and the two inadequate responses will help demonstrate just what is at stake when we try to answer the Christological question in an age of normal nihilism.

First of all, the liberal challenge concerns the man Jesus of Nazareth. According to many, the church's canonical gospels seem to leave a residue of evidence for another Jesus, a historical Jesus, who can be reconstructed without the church's transcendent language. The events in Jesus' life such as his teachings and crucifixion do not narrate events taking place on a vertical

[3] Following Milbank's general summary, I am using the term liberal rather loosely. The content of the 'liberal' critique will define that to which the term refers.

level as the gospels suggest. Rather, they recall events of merely 'historical' significance. Milbank summarizes their rereading of the gospel narratives this way: "Jesus offers God's unconditional forgiveness; he teaches a new way of life founded upon non-rivalry, non-retaliation and mutual sharing...However, the kingdom suffers an initial rebuff: Jesus's mission fails, he is crucified, and yet his steadfastness continues to provide testimony to the possibilities he earlier proclaimed."[4] This Jesus does not quite deserve the title Son of God. Instead he only seems to be a precursor to the Enlightenment's ideals. For "In the new community which he announces, particular cultic traditions, racial and even family attachments, become irrelevant: we can relate to all human beings, despite, or through their differences, as sons and daughters of a heavenly Father."[5] Therefore, exactly by making him one of their own, liberalism gives just enough reason to find Jesus insignificant. There are many other ways to achieve the goals of the Enlightenment without referring to Jesus. Therefore, the church's doctrines of divinity and atonement seem not only superfluous but ruses for their own cultic authority in that they seek to bind us to their Jesus.

Of course, the legitimacy of any historically reconstructed Jesus has been called into question at least since Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.[6] But Milbank does not bother attacking the dubious nature of historical reconstruction because liberalism has a second and more potent protest to the church's Jesus that doubles the effect of the first.[7] This challenge has to do with God. Besides the church's cultic authority, what manifest difference does it make to call Jesus the Son of God? Milbank puts it this way: "As Jews insist, Jesus's death quite

[4] Milbank, "Name of Jesus," 146.

[5] Ibid., 147.

[6] Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, ed. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

[7] In other places, Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 79–93, does find it important to critique historical reconstructions of the gospels.

manifestly did *not* redeem, did not bring in the reign of peace, reconciliation and eternal life. The church seems to make this death redemptive by claiming for it a secret, hidden efficacity which we must 'believe in', 'relate to' and somehow appropriate in our individual lives."[8] In other words, there does not seem to be any manifest reality that warrants the church's confession about Jesus. If there is no manifest reality, what does belief in Jesus' divinity amount to except a private, interior, and merely religious fascination? It seems ridiculous to talk about Jesus' relationship to the creator when the church's Jesus seems to have no material consequences. Liberalism might be reconstructing Jesus to fit its own agenda, but at least that Jesus can make a real difference in the world.

While Milbank does not make this connection himself, it is not hard to see that the liberal challenge is another form of our normal nihilism. If we cannot reconstruct the historical Jesus, then we seem to be helplessly stuck with many different interpretations of Jesus. But why respect one interpretation of Jesus over another? Why does the church's Jesus have more authority than the reconstructed historical Jesus? The 'liberal' response seems to give this answer: Because our Jesus helps underwrite a form of life we find useful and good. The church's Jesus, on the other hand, only binds us to a particular tradition and a cultic authority. We seem justified, then, in defining the identity of Jesus by what we find valuable.[9] In order to move beyond such nihilism, Christians need to have a strong theological answer. We need to claim some right to the church's confession about Jesus that appeals to more than Jesus' value. Put another way, Christians need to be able to defend their claims with an authority not their own. Milbank outlines two responses

---

[8] Milbank, "Name of Jesus" 147.

[9] Cf. Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

to the liberal challenge that he finds inadequate. He calls them the 'cultic' approach and the 'Christological' approach. Neither transcends the nihilism present in the liberal critique.

The cultic approach has the most difficulty answering the challenge. Milbank vaguely summarizes the cultic approach this way: this approach "seems to say to people, you must accept as a primary 'datum' a basic proposition that God became incarnate, and in addition that his death by violence made atonement for your sins."[10] Exactly who Milbank means to describe under this approach is not clear. One example, though, might be those who proceed as if doctrinal propositions about Jesus can be taken un-problematically from the text of the New Testament. When this is the case, the theologian merely, "compiles the doctrinal statements contained in Scripture (in the text and context), groups them under their proper heads, and arranges these doctrines in order of their relationship."[11] Christians call Jesus the Son of God because that is what the New Testament teaches. This procedure is usually backed by a prolegomena assumption about the divine authority of scripture, namely that it is the inspired and inerrant word of God and therefore an authoritative source for Christian doctrine.[12]

This approach has difficulty answering the 'liberal' challenge because it unreflectively accepts a text as an authority on God. Besides the fact that the supposedly inspired and inerrant text says that Jesus is the Son of God, there do not appear to be other warrants for believing that this speaks truthfully about God. So this approach leaves unanswered two important questions. "First of all, by what process of thought does one arrive at the conclusion that someone is God incarnate, or that a single death is universally effective."[13] And second, what difference does it

[10] Milbank, "Name of Jesus," 148.

[11] Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1950), 1:52.

[12] Ibid., 1:307–29.

[13] Milbank, "Name of Jesus," 148.

make? What reality, besides the statement in a text, demands that we take this proposition to telling the truth? The approach seems too extrinsic, as if nothing immediately demands the proposition. And this extrinsicism ends in nihilism because it fails to answer the question of divine authority. When pressed to give a reason for accepting the New Testament as an authority to speak about God in the first place, this approach typically cites the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit.[14] In the face of those who do not immediately share this assumption, this is the equivalent of asserting one's personal opinion. God, in this case, is unreflectively bound up with what seems to be the arbitrary adherence to a text, and even seems to be extrinsic to Jesus himself.

Milbank terms the second approach "Christological," and attributes it to the work of Hans Frei[15] and Ronald Thiemann.[16] Rather than understanding the church's confession about Jesus as mere revealed datum, the Christological approach suggests that the identity of Jesus can only be derived from the narratives told about him. When we see what Jesus of Nazareth was like, then we will have reasons for indentifying him as the Son of God. Milbank describes the approach this way: "The character of Jesus, as it emerges in the story, is a supreme pointer to the character of God himself. This proposal seeks to call us back from empty dogmatic formalism to a concrete content for belief."[17] While it is an advance on the extrinsicism of the cultic approach, Milbank finds this approach inadequate also. For Milbank, the gospel accounts do not reveal a substantial narrative character named Jesus. The gospels do not tell us about Jesus' intentions, quirks, and inclinations. Instead, they identify Jesus by ascribing transcendent titles to the man.

[14] Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:308–15.

[15] Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Basis of Docmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

[16] Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).

[17] Milbank, "Name of Jesus," 149.

To finally "indentify Jesus, the gospels abandon mimetic/diegetic narrative, and resort to metaphors: Jesus is the way, the word, the truth, life, water, bread, the seed of a tree and the fully grown tree, the foundation stone of a new temple and at the same time the whole edifice."[18] So it seems as if the name "Jesus" does not actually add anything to our knowledge of his identity.

Whether or not the gospels provide a sufficient description of Jesus' intention can be argued. Milbank does not mention the specific intentions that Frei thinks define Jesus' character. Those include Jesus' willing obedience to the Father that leads to his crucifixion, and the Father's subsequent vindication of Jesus through the resurrection.[19] Moreover, though, Frei seems less concerned about giving reasons for Jesus' identity than he does with the more formal matter of reading the gospels appropriately. He worries that since the time of historical criticism, the gospels have been read as if their meaning was the historical events that lie behind the texts, rather than the history-like narrative of the gospels themselves. This more formal concern only tangentially touches the question about God. For instance, Frei does not feel burdened to give reasons why these texts have the authority to tell us about God in the first place. This does not mean that Frei's work is insufficient, but only that his primary purpose for writing limits the scope of questions his work can answer.

For the purposes of advancing my argument, though, I want to draw attention to one way that Frei's position might be developed to answer the more theologically loaded question. A student of Frei's, William Placher, does ask the theological question. After arguing superbly along with Frei on the more formal level that the gospels are history-like witnesses to truths both historical and transcendent, Placher then asks why we should believe these texts. Why do we give these texts authority and not others? Placher replies that on the human level the church has

[18] Ibid., 149.

[19] Frei, *Identity of Jesus*, 86–153.

made them authoritative. So the question is more like asking why we are Christians. But "Each Christian comes to faith through a different combination of the haunting power of the biblical stories, the moral inspiration of the lives of other Christians, the way life seems to make sense when guided by Christian values, and who knows what other factors."[20] All of these reasons depict the personal value these texts have for the individual believer. And Placher's theological reasons do not improve matters. On the theological level Placher cites the work of the Holy Spirit to personally convince us that these texts are authoritative, which is the equivalent of giving no reason whatsoever. Or even worse, this answer uses speech about the Spirit to validate our personal attraction to the texts.

In summary, then, both the cultic approach and one version of the Christological approach do not overcome the nihilism latent in the liberal challenge. When pressed to answer the theological side of the Jesus question, the cultic approach has nothing at all to say except that God is vaguely associated with certain texts that Christians call God's inspired and inerrant word. Placher's version of the Christological approach only confuses God with our personal affection for Christianity. Milbank tries to move beyond these two options by giving a more substantial theological reason.

Milbank's answer to the question about Jesus can be called the ecclesiological approach. In this approach, "Christological and atonement doctrines are...theoretically secondary to definitions of the character of the new universal community or church."[21] Rather than focusing attention on the unique character of the man Jesus in order to derive his divine identity, the ecclesiological approach focuses on the unique character of the Christian ecclesial community.

[20] William C. Placher, "How the Gospels Mean," in *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 41.

[21] Milbank, "Name of Jesus," 148.

The community that patterns its life according to the Jesus-event in the gospels, and thereby extends that event into the present, gives warrant for calling Jesus the Son of God. Milbank hopes that the exceptional character of the new community will demonstrate why Christians go to the extent of calling Jesus divine. No other ascription for Jesus could sustain such a practice.

Let me unpack this approach step by step. First, Milbank builds on his argument that the character of Jesus does not sufficiently develop in the gospel narratives. He finds instead that the gospels tell us about the founding of a new social practice. Jesus founds that new society. And the gospels record not only events in the life of Jesus, but simultaneously the founding events of the new community. Therefore, the character of Jesus remains illusive in the gospels because the name Jesus and the new social practice coincide with one another in the narrative description. For, "If we want to describe a founder precisely in the moment of origination of a practice, then all we can do is to indentify him with the *general norms* of the practice, and this procedure is followed in the gospels."[22] The gospels, in other words, are not depictions of the man Jesus as much as they are the blueprint for a practice that is to be continued into the present in yet new and different situations. On the one hand, the events that happen to Jesus in the gospels cannot be identically repeated. The stories about Jesus are uniquely his own, belonging to his own time and circumstances. But on the other hand the way Jesus responds to his contingent historical situation initiates a way of life that can transform the embedded structures of violence and establish a practice of non-violence that can be extended into the present. Therefore, "The name of Jesus is attached to a descriptive content at the point where the word of the gospel ceases to be mere teaching, and is made 'real' and powerful in a new social body..."[23]

---

[22] Ibid., 152.

[23] Ibid., 153.

In the second step of the ecclesiological approach, Milbank outlines the exceptional character of this community. Milbank's account in this essay is abstract and multifaceted, which sometimes makes it unclear. One theme recurs throughout, though. The Christian community consists of a diverse and yet mutually reconciled community of people whose differences are not demolished but harmonized in consensus. On the one hand, this community looks different than a liberal society because our differences are not rendered insignificant by a policy of non-interference. On the other hand, this community looks different than one based on an abstract consensus of the good, because the only abstract goal is "now consensus itself, meaning a society without violence and unjust domination."[24]

Another way to discern the exceptional difference of the Christian community, though, is to look at its founder. In his more recent book, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and pardon*, Milbank describes more fully the transformative Jesus-event found in the gospels. Here, the theme of unjust domination gets expanded to frame Jesus' death. Jesus, it seems to Milbank, dies an almost accidental death. In the passions narratives, no one claims final sovereign authority for killing Jesus. The Jewish authorities take him to the Romans to be judged by Roman authority. But Pilate does not find anything wrong with him. And once he washes his hands of the whole event, he hands Jesus back to the Jewish mob. But the mob does not kill Jesus either. The mob hands Jesus over to the Roman soldiers, who then execute Jesus by no particular authority whatsoever. But in dying such a death, Jesus exposes the arbitrary power structures of absolute sovereignty. For instance, rather than use his assigned authority to protect Jesus, Pilate arbitrarily makes an exception to Roman rule and hands Jesus over to the mob. But this exception, where Pilate uses his power to ignore Roman law, proves the rule that absolute sovereignty is arbitrary

[24] Ibid., 155.

power. Therefore, Milbank concludes that Jesus "died the death of all of us—since he died the death that proves and exemplifies sovereignty in its arbitrariness."[25]

It is worth noting that Milbank's account of the passion contains an ironic element. Only one thing rescues Jesus from dying a completely arbitrary death: the community that recognizes Jesus' calculated submission and gives it ultimate significance. Milbank, of course, does not intend this irony explicitly. But his whole account of Jesus' death is ironic in this way: in the act of narrating Jesus' death as an arbitrary death, Milbank himself saves Jesus' crucifixion from being absolutely arbitrary. After all, in order to keep such a submissive death from being plain suicide, Milbank has to see an underlying motive in Jesus' submission that makes it arbitrary for everyone except Jesus. In this way Milbank assigns Jesus' death universal significance exactly by identifying it as arbitrary. So too does the community who recognizes along with Milbank that "Jesus only submits to being handed over because he is in himself the very heart of all transition as really loving gift, and thereby able to subvert every betrayal and abandonment."[26] When the ecclesial community reads this narrative into the life of Jesus it finds in him "the true aesthetic example for our reshaping of social existence."[27]

Third and finally, then, the community's appropriation of this unique Jesus-event signals Jesus' divinity. For, "Jesus is 'identical' with God, not in terms of an underlying 'essence', or his general human 'nature', but rather at the precise point of his irreplaceable specificity, or all that goes to make up his 'personality' including his historical situation and his own response to it."[28] . Or, put differently, the doctrine of Jesus' divinity is a communal rule to take this event as the

---

[25] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 97.

[26] Ibid., 99.

[27] Ibid., 103.

[28] Milbank, "Name of Jesus," 156.

ultimate hermeneutical horizon of human life. Milbank puts it this way: "The 'divine personhood' only works as a propositional 'belief'...if it is also taken as a pragmatic instruction to go on re-narrating and re-realizing 'Christ'."[29] Therefore, by re-realizing this event, the ecclesial community's own action validates their identification of this Jesus as the Son of God.

Here is where the ecclesiological approach provides a more nuanced theological answer to the question about Jesus' divinity. Whereas the cultic approach and Placher's version of the Christological approach had little to no theological reason for calling Jesus the Son of God, the ecclesiological approach points to the unique efficacy of the Christian community. In so doing, Milbank extends the argument already developed in his seminal *Theology and Social Theory*. Recall, for a moment, how Milbank argued that Christian social theory was uniquely capable of sustaining a community that found violence unessential to human life. All other forms of life in some way assume the necessity of violence. But Christianity stands apart from all others as the uniquely good and attractive alternative because it encodes the world as peaceable. Now we can see more fully that this encoding of reality stems from the Christian community's imperative to reads all things in light of the Jesus event. When it follows this imperative, the church understands Jesus' personality as the present manifestation of being itself. "Jesus is perfectly identified only as the source, goal, and context of all our lives: the *esse* of his personality is, in Thomist terms, *esse ipsum*, or the infinite totality of actualized being which is 'eminently' contained in God."[30] And this unique depiction of God sets Christianity apart.

But this answer to the Jesus question only embraces nihilism. Milbank justifies the divinity of Jesus by pointing it the doctrine's unique attractiveness. In fact, rather than transcending the nihilism of the liberal critique, Milbank accepts its parameters. Liberalism

[29] Ibid., 157.

[30] Ibid., 158.

argued as if the best we could do was find a Jesus who was useful and valuable. Milbank answers the liberal charge by making the church's Jesus' highly valuable. Far from letting God speak for himself, this only confuses God with our aesthetic intuitions.

I drew our attention earlier to the irony of Milbank's account of Jesus' death because it gets to the heart of the problem. The gospels do not make Jesus' secret motive explicit. Milbank might be able to find and exploit markers here and there. But there is only a little mentioned about Jesus' motives for going to the cross, and even less to suggest that his primary motivation was the subversion of arbitrary power. The ecclesial community has to read this into the text in order for Jesus to have such significance. Milbank does not feign ignorance about this. After all, unlike the previous two approaches, he does not argue for the divinity of Jesus on the basis of the text, but on the attractiveness of the community that reads the texts this way. But that is just the problem. If it is not the authority of the texts, what makes us think that Milbank's ecclesial community is ultimate and final, and that no other future society can provide a truly better way of life? What convinces us that we really do have in Jesus, *esse ipsum*? Milbank answers by saying that the "supplementary speculative attractiveness in the notions of a God once incarnate, and a sinless God alone able perfectly to suffer the effects of sin in one incarnate divine person."[31] What justifies the Christian depiction of God in Jesus? Our attraction to the form of life the doctrine enables justifies calling Jesus divine. This answer enshrines human aesthetic sensibilities as judge over God.

### On Being a Theologian of the Cross

The previous survey of answers to the Christological question leaves us wanting. The question "Why do Christians say that God acts in Jesus?" has been guiding this chapter, and the

[31] Ibid., 162.

three previous answers all appealed to the value of the confession in one way or another. Such an appeal grounds the sacred in the profane, maintains our nihilism, and makes Jesus' divinity out to be nothing more than our highest value. The last chapter argued that we can only avoid making God out to be another human value by letting God be God. We will only stop exalting ourselves above God when we embrace him where he specifically makes himself available. Following Luther's terminology, we called a theologian who lets God speak for himself a theologian of the cross. All others received the title of a theologian of glory. A theologian of glory refuses to let God be God. This theologian gives explanations for God that God himself does not give. But even stronger, the theologian of glory tries to make God seem persuasive to human standards of judgment by seeing in God's actions a universal rule or principle at work. If the previous chapter's contention about the two kinds of theologians is correct, we must now apply the distinctions to Jesus. When we answer the guiding question of this chapter as theologians of the cross, we will recognize that *our* theology cannot justify Jesus, no matter how persuasive it is. Only God can finally justify Jesus, which he does by raising Jesus from the dead, and proclaiming that event to the world through the apostolic word. Therefore, in order to avoid nihilism, we need to be theologians of the cross by letting God have the final say about Jesus.

But what does it mean to be a theologian of the cross when we speak about Jesus? In his book *Theology Is for Proclamation*, Gerhard Forde helps us see how the two types of theologians operate in regards to the matter of Jesus' divinity. Forde finds that when we make a confession about Jesus' identity, we are confronted by two levels of discontinuity. And the difference between a theologian of the cross and one of glory comes down to the way each handles the discontinuity.

The first level of discontinuity is formal and has to do with the elements involved in making a confession. When making a confession about Jesus' identity, the simple fact of the

matter is that *we* must give reasons. Even if we had the advantage of Jesus standing before us, glowing with divinity as on the mount of transfiguration, *we* would still have to point to him with some intent of explaining why this event signals his divine nature. "We are called upon to make explicit what was implicit in him."[32]After all, even within the gospel narratives there often are two different ways of accounting for the same Jesus. For example, some confessed that "It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of demons, that this fellow casts out the demons" (Matthew 12:24). So we cannot escape the fact that when we say something about Jesus, there is a necessary discontinuity between Jesus himself and our confession about him. *We* must answer Jesus' question, "But who do you say that I am" (Matthew 16:15).

So when we make the confession that Jesus is the Son of God, we must deal with three related elements. The first element is Jesus himself, the second element is the Christological title, and the third element is the hearer of the title. The three exist in dynamic relationship with one another, but I will begin with Jesus. To identify Jesus as the Son of God we must say something about the man. For instance, we might talk about the miracles he performed or the way he taught with authority in order to describe him as the Son of God. In any case, our descriptions of Jesus help us give explicit content to the title we assign him. We cannot meaningfully say that Jesus is the Son of God without filling in the title in a specific way. Of course, the title we assign Jesus can often have influence over the way we describe him. For instance, if we begin with the presupposition that God is omnipotent, then we'll tell the story of Jesus in a way that highlights his omnipotence, maybe citing his ability to walk on water. In so doing, we create continuity between the title and Jesus. But we also create continuity with the hearer. If the hearer holds

---

[32] Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation*, 65.

certain presuppositions about God, then those presuppositions will either be reinforced or confronted by the story we tell.

One can already anticipate how a theologian of the cross will handle the formal discontinuity involved in calling Jesus the Son of God. The theologian of the cross will let the story about Jesus shape the title Son of God. In so doing, the hearer's assumptions about God are challenged and formed by Jesus rather than by anything else. Forde puts it this way: "If the title is to be transformed by the story, so are we. To answer Jesus' question [about his identity] is to be drawn into his story."[33] Rather than let the story about Jesus transform the title, the theologian of glory will let the hearer's presupposition about God transform Jesus. When that happens, the hearer maintains continuity with himself. He is not confronted or changed by Jesus. But Jesus is transformed to fit into the assumptions of the hearer; and when this happens, as I have been arguing, nihilism ensues. Milbank's appeal to the attractiveness of the Christian confession that Jesus is *esse ipsum* presupposes this formal level of continuity with the hearer. Presented with the option of violence or non-violence, his assumption is that we will be drawn to the attractiveness of non-violence. Forde diagnosis the theologian of glory this way: "We know a God when we see one! Like is known by like. But that only puts us back to square one. We try to find a God to our liking in Jesus."[34] Proposing the choice between attractive and unattractive depictions of God in Jesus maintains the continuity of the hearer over-against Jesus.

All of this, though, is still a formal consideration, having nothing yet to do with the particularities of Jesus. A second level of discontinuity exists within Jesus' own life, particularly in his death and resurrection. Jesus' death by crucifixion put a radical end to all that Jesus had claimed and done for himself prior to that point. As crucifixion, his death was judgment on his

[33] Ibid., 67.

[34] Ibid., 106.

identity. Jesus of Nazareth, baptized by John in the Jordan, claimed to be the one anointed by the God of Israel to bring God's eschatological rule to earth. With a power and authority that he claimed to have from the Spirit of God, Jesus proclaimed that the reign of God had come with his own presence. He forgave sins with the authority of God, and with the power of God he drove out demons, healed the lame, and raised the dead. However, in spite of his works, the religious leaders of the Jewish people (those set aside to be the authoritative teachers of Israel) called into question the legitimacy of his authority and the character of his works. Many of Jesus' actions contradicted their interpretation of the law that God had given them through Moses and which set them apart as his people. For instance, Jesus was a man known to be a friend of sinners and tax collectors—he socialized with people who were legitimate outcasts within the community of Israel in such a way that earned him the reputation of being a drunkard and a glutton. Also, Jesus criticized the temple piety of the leaders, and broke the Sabbath seemingly at will, all the while claiming to do so with the right of God. The conflict over authority between Jesus and the religious leaders came to a head when they arrested Jesus and put him on trial for falsely claiming to be the Christ of Israel and the Son of God. When Jesus would not back down from his claims, they crucified him with the help of the Roman government. Therefore, the crucifixion seemed to be the final sentence of judgment on Jesus' identity. For instance, at the crucifixion "the leaders scoffed at him saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one" (Luke 23:35). And because it seemed as if Jesus was defeated by the religious authorities, his disciples scattered and fled from him, even publically denying him.

Therefore, on account of the particular form of his death, discontinuity is an integral part of Jesus' own identity. Had Jesus remained in the tomb, for instance, all of his works, teachings and life would have been disregarded as materially insignificant for indentifying him as the Son of

God, because the validity of those things was already put to the test on the cross. Therefore it is significant that "When he was dead and buried, his followers did not get together in a little liberal clique and comfort themselves with the fact that they still had his teachings. It was over. Mostly his disciples seemed afraid that they might share his fate!"[35] No positive reconstruction of his life on the part of his disciples could possibly overcome the judgment made by the crucifixion.

Consequently, the only continuity between Jesus and the divine title Son of God comes from God's act of resurrecting Jesus from the dead. Though he was judged and rejected as the one with sole authority to act on behalf of God, God nevertheless vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead. The apostolic preaching throughout the book of Acts, for instance, is formed by these themes of rejection and vindication. Peter's Pentecost proclamation ends with this statement: "Therefore, let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). Therefore, on account of the discontinuity of the crucifixion, only God could justify Jesus, which he did by raising him from the dead.

The two types of theologians will not only handle the discontinuity differently on the formal level, but also on this more material level. A theologian of glory will find some continuity in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that circumvents the need for God's own vindication of Jesus. Milbank's account of Jesus' passion is a perfect example of the theologian of glory at work. I made a point of this already by noticing the irony in Milbank's focus on the arbitrariness of Jesus' death. The way Milbank tells the story, Jesus subverts the arbitrariness of sovereign power by submitting non-violently to an arbitrary death. Therefore, even though the event itself

[35] Ibid., 73.

seemed arbitrary, there was an underlying motive that made the event more than arbitrary. Thus, Milbank claims to be able to see through the cross and makes something significant of it. It was not finally a completely arbitrary and contingent death, but a purposeful and calculated one, once Milbank's narration helps us see the event from a transcendent perspective. But in this case, God is robbed of his right to have the final word about Jesus in the resurrection. Instead the resurrection gets placed into a larger story about arbitrariness, power and non-violence that is contrived by the theologian on the basis of a presupposition about God's affinity with non-violence and non-arbitrary power. God does not get to speak the final word by raising Jesus from the dead. Instead the theologian narrates the cross in such a way that the unique event of Jesus' crucifixion can be a means of identifying his divinity apart from the resurrection. But then, the cross loses its function of creating discontinuity in the life of Jesus and God subsequently loses the authority to make a final claim about him in the resurrection. Forde puts it this way:

> What happened in the doctrine of God is thus repeated in the Christology. Just as the systematic tries to make God so nice that there is no room for or purpose in the preaching, so here the search for continuity with the 'real Jesus' reveals an attempt to recast him in the role of one we would be most likely to accept had we been there and had our wits about us.[36]

The theologian of the cross, on the other hand, lets God vindicate Jesus through the resurrection. This theologian refuses the temptation to transform Jesus into a divine figure we will recognize, accept, or find useful. Forde casts the matter in the economic terms of our normal nihilism. "Jesus did not meet anyone's needs. He was of no use to anyone here. He was wasted. Rather, Jesus was of use only to God, who raised him up."[37] Therefore, "The cross itself is the discontinuity planted in our way" of justifying Jesus on the basis of our prior notions of divinity.

---

[36] Ibid., 71.

[37] Ibid., 72.

Instead of reconfiguring Jesus so as to find in him something attractive, a theologian of the cross lets God's act of resurrecting Jesus have the final word about him.

When God gets the final word about Jesus through the resurrection, God alone gets to be God in Jesus. This affects both sides of the Jesus question. On the one hand, as theologians of the cross we do not construe the life of Jesus so as to find in him something we already would accept as divine. In other words, the teachings and deeds of Jesus are "not important as detachable, timeless truths, but rather as the words and deeds that got Jesus into trouble and incited the people of this age to crucify him. God alone vindicates Jesus, not his deeds or his teachings," or even the exceptional form of his death as Milbank thinks. On the other hand, when we construe the life of Jesus in this manner, God gets the final word about himself. When we understand the crucifixion as rejection and the resurrection as God's vindication of Jesus, we do not presuppose some notion of divinity that we then apply to Jesus. Rather God alone has the final say about himself. For not only is Jesus put to the test in the crucifixion, but so too is God. Will God finally indentify himself with this man alone as Jesus claims for himself? The answer in the resurrection is affirmative. "In all of that the very godness of God comes to light. God establishes the right to be God. This is God's 'righteousness,' God's self-vindication, indeed, the propitiation that God puts forward through the spilling of Jesus' blood under the law."[38]

We can summarize all of this by saying that a theologian of the cross will appeal to the divine authority of Jesus. The significance of Jesus is not primarily his unique way of life, his perfect death, or anything that *we* might find important about him. Rather the primary significance of the man Jesus of Nazareth, (that which justifies him as the Son of God), is that God has given him all authority in heaven and on earth to judge the living and the dead. This

[38] Ibid., 77.

authority was put to the test in his crucifixion, and vindicated by God in the resurrection. Therefore we can propose the first lines of a thesis about what it means to justify Jesus' divinity in an age of normal nihilism: Christians can only justify their claims about Jesus divinity by appealing to his divine authority, which God himself has given to him by raising Jesus from the dead.

### The Apostolic Approach

The thesis of this chapter differs from the previous three approaches we have already encountered. The cultic approach appeals not to Jesus' divine authority, but to the vague authority of the New Testament text as the inspired and inerrant word of God. While the Christological approach derives Jesus' divinity from the canonical narratives about Jesus, Placher's version nevertheless gives an unsatisfactory depiction of why the texts are authoritative. He concludes that we find these texts authoritative because of their personal value for us. Milbank's ecclesiological approach went in an entirely different direction, pointing us away from the texts and toward the church's unique way of life and the attractiveness of the Christological doctrines that underwrite the ecclesial community's appropriation of the texts. The thesis of this chapter points Christians neither toward the text alone nor toward the church, but to God's act of justifying Jesus by raising him from the dead. Up until now, however, my considerations about Jesus have presupposed that we have access to the event itself. As a conclusion, I will briefly unpack that presupposition. This too is a large question, about which I can only sketch an answer. The sketch will follow what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls the church's self narrative.[39] By appealing to the church's self narrative, I want to point out the particular

---

[39] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 288.

reasons Christians have for thinking that the apostolic testimony about Jesus is God's own words about Jesus.

This chapter has been arguing that only God can justify Jesus and he does so by raising him from the dead. According to the church's self narrative, the apostles are authoritative witnesses to God's acts through Jesus, because God uses *their* eye-witness testimony as earthly vehicles to speak *God's* word about Jesus to the world.

Early examples of this narrative are found frequently in Paul's letters, because he often finds it necessary to justify his own authority to speak about God. One example can be found in the opening address of his letter to the church in Rome. Paul begins the letter by summarizing his apostolic commission to bear witness to God's actions in Jesus. He writes,

> Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God with power according to the resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ (Romans 1:1-6).

Notice the direct line of descending authority from God and Jesus to Paul. Paul claims to be sent as a servant of Jesus to proclaim the gospel of God. That gospel pertains to God's act of resurrecting Jesus from the dead, by which God declares Jesus to be his Son. Therefore, Paul not only stands as a servant of Jesus, but also as a servant of God who raised Jesus from the dead.

In another place, Paul spells out in more detail why he thinks he was commissioned by God to be a witness to the resurrection. In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul writes,

> Now I would remind you, brothers, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, of which you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though

> some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain (1 Corinthians 15:1-10).

Paul considers himself one untimely born on account of the unusual way he came to be a witness to Jesus' resurrection. Paul evidently did not witness Jesus' life, death and burial as the other apostles did, nor was he part of the twelve. Instead, he formerly persecuted and opposed "the church of God." Hence, he handed down to the Corinthians what he had received from others who did witness the death and burial of Jesus. But Paul nevertheless came to know Jesus as the living Son of God first hand when Jesus appeared to him as well. Therefore, when Paul speaks about the resurrection of Jesus, he does so as an eye-witness to Jesus himself. This sets Paul along side the other apostles who speak about Jesus with the same authority.

The gospel of Luke, for instance, records the apostolic commissioning this way: After appearing to the disciples and demonstrating to them that he was alive by showing them his hands and feet, and eating a piece of fish, Jesus sends them on his Father's mission to bear witness to the things that had taken place concerning him. Jesus says,

> Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power on high (Luke 24:46–48).

When Luke introduces his gospel, he cites these witnesses as a source of his own orderly account. He writes that

> Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed (Luke 1:1–4).

Also, this same self-narrative extends beyond the apostolic period, and is used by the second century church to defend the authority of its teachings. Irenaeus, for example, not only cites the same apostolic narrative, but also uses it in his polemics against the Gnostics. By referring to "the Gnostics," I mean a diverse set of teachings and teachers in the second century, who adapted the Christian scriptures to support a cosmology of emanations.[40] The Gnostics posed a threat to the Christian faith because they were able to use the Christian scriptures to describe a higher knowledge than Christians, which included comprehensive claims about God, the nature of the world, the identity of Jesus, and the character and manner of salvation. In so doing, Gnostic writers eliminated the possibility for Christians to make a simple appeal to the authority of the scriptures. Both parties read the same scriptures and came to vastly different conclusions. And if Christians were to refer to the scriptures in their defense, the Gnostics would claim a source of knowledge beyond the scriptures to which Christians did not have privileged access; a secret oral tradition. Irenaeus resolves this dilemma by referring to the authority of the apostolic eye-witnesses. Jesus gave his teaching to the apostles and commissioned them to proclaim it to others for life and salvation. So, the apostles proclaimed the same teaching of Jesus by his authority; and those who received the apostles' teaching were gathered into the Christian church, in which this common teaching prevailed and formed a common community throughout the world. Irenaeus puts the matter directly.

> For the Lord of all gave to His apostles the power of the gospel, through whom also we have known the truth, that is, the doctrine of the Son of God; to whom also did the Lord declare: 'he that heareth you, heareth me; and he that despiseth you, despiseth me, and him that sent me.' We have learned from none other the plan of our salvation, than form those through whom the gospel has come down to us, which they

[40] Cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 315–58.

did at one time proclaim in public, and at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith.[41]

And in order to confirm that the authoritative apostolic message about Jesus now resides in the church's rule of faith,[42] Irenaeus provided a genealogy of those who had passed on the tradition from the apostles to the present day.[43] John Behr succinctly summarizes the argument by stating that for Irenaeus, "the locus of revelation, and the medium for our relationship with God, is precisely in the apostolic preaching of him, the Gospel which, as we have seen, stands in an interpretive engagement with scripture."[44]

This brief account of the church's claim of apostolic authority does not do justice to the complexity of historical and theological issues involved. But as a sketch, it presents a basic outline of the reasons Christians have for thinking that the apostolic word about Jesus, contained equally in the church's oral tradition and in the written scriptures, is God's own word.[45] Thus, the sketch means to support this chapter's thesis that only God can justify Jesus, which he does by raising him from the dead. After God raised Jesus from the dead, Jesus commissioned the apostles to bear witness to the things that had taken place that culminated in his resurrection. The apostles considered it God's own commissioning on account of the succession of authority from God to Jesus and now to themselves as they had partaken in these events. Therefore this chapter's thesis is most appropriately called the apostolic approach.

---

[41] Ibid., 414.

[42] Ibid., 330–31.

[43] Ibid., 416.

[44] John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, vol. 1 of *Formation of Christian Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 38–39.

[45] I do not have the space here to develop more fully the relationship between scripture and tradition. For a fuller account concerning Irenaeus, see Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, 17–48. For a helpful summary of the way the Lutheran tradition accounts for Irenaeus, see James R. A. Merrick, "*Sola Scriptura* and the *regula fidei*: The Reformation Scripture Principle and Early Oral Tradition in Martin Chemnitz' *Examinationof the Council of Trent*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63 (2010): 253–71.

There are, of course, limitations to this approach. The approach does not give Christians reasons for their faith in the divinity of Jesus that any supposedly rational and good-willed person must accept. The Age of Cartesian Ego-Subjectivity defined itself by the quest for such foundations for indubitable knowledge. But the quest turned out to be self-defeating as soon as we realized that *we* nevertheless had to define what makes a person rational and good-willed. Without those reasons, the apostolic approach suggests that we have to take the apostle's word for it that God raised Jesus from the dead. According to the bare outlines I sketched above, Christians do not have reasons for their faith in Jesus beyond the apostolic word. But they do have good reasons for believing that the apostolic word is the Word of God, and this is a great advantage in an age of normal nihilism. According to this approach, Christian faith and life depends on a word external to us. By contrast, Milbank's and Placher's approaches aim to reinforce our own inner convictions about God by maneuvering theologically to make the confession that Jesus is the Son of God appealing to us. In an age when we are worried that our own best convictions are grounded in nothing more than our own will to hold them, these approaches can only be disastrous. For, when we assume that the human will has the ability to recognize and accept the things of God, "the subject stands over against the gospel as an object, a theory that is to be accepted on grounds dictated by the subject."[46] The cultic approach, for all of its faults, nevertheless tries to maintain that external word by grounding the confession in an inerrant scripture. But the kind of reasons the cultic approach gives for its faith in those texts lacks the theological and historical nuance of the apostolic approach. The latter has a fully Trinitarian account of the authority of these texts. It suggests that Jesus' life, death and resurrection, along with the apostolic commissioning is the grounds for taking the scriptural

[46] Gerhard O. Forde, "Radical Lutheranism," in *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Eccuminism*, ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 11.

witnesses concerning him as God's own word about Jesus. This word from God is external to us in the sense that it does not try to appeal to our presuppositions about God, but instead pronounces the apostolic message as the word of God himself to the entire world regardless of our predisposition toward the message. Put another way, it does not make the gospel about Jesus into a theory that is to be accepted on the grounds dictated by the subject. Instead, it lets God stand over-against us with his word concerning his Son.

# CHAPTER SIX

# HOLY SCRIPTURE AFTER NIHILISM

## The (Im)Possibility of Holy Scripture in an Age of Normal Nihilism

Is *Holy* Scripture possible in an age when we worry that our most basic convictions are grounded in nothing more than our own will to hold them? Certainly *Scripture* is possible. There is a renewed recognition that the texts contained within the Bible were selected and assembled by the church, and that these texts are an essential and authoritative part of this particular community's common life (i.e. they are *Scripture*). Apart from this community, as Robert Jenson suggests, "the one book immediately disintegrates into its component parts, splitting first into Hebrew Scripture and New Testament and then into traditions, redactions, and so forth—to which fragments the heathen may be entirely welcome."[1] Jenson captures the sentiment of many Christian theologians today who have a post-critical stance on reading the Scriptures. Since the church is responsible for assembling these diverse texts into a single volume for the purposes of its common life, the Scriptures should be read according to the rules of that community. But Jenson's observation only heightens the sense of the problem. Rather than standing over-against the church as the Word of God that speaks and forms a community from without, the biblical texts seem contaminated by the church's all too human use of them.

This is a typical problem in an age of normal nihilism. In our age, no one authority stands out above the rest as given, so it seems that we have no grounds for determining which authority

[1] Robert W. Jenson, "Hermeneutics in the Life of the Church," in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 90.

is right beyond our own will to adhere to it. When it comes to the Scriptures, this problem manifests itself in the area of reading. For a long time, the church's presuppositions about how to read these texts were taken for granted. Most of western culture assumed that Christian doctrine "provides the clarifying principles that guide exegetical judgment toward a coherent overall reading of scripture as a unified witness."[2] But in our time and place, the church no longer has such a monopoly on reading its own Scriptures. Instead, the church appears to be only one among a number of other communities with their own presuppositions about how to read the text. So western Christians are faced with a new and daunting question: Why have a theological reading of these scriptures as opposed to a sociological reading, or an ecological reading, or even a historical-critical reading? What right do Christians have to claim that when they read the Bible according to the practices and traditions of the church, (for instance, by distinguishing between Old and New Testaments; or by reading the stories about Jesus as stories about God's action to bring about the consummation of all things), they are doing anything more correct than people who read the Bible as literature, or in a religious studies curriculum, or in private devotion as self-help? To say, as Jenson does, that these texts belong to the community that assembled them into a canonical whole only locates the problem; it does not solve it.

Despite his often controversial status, then, it is hard to disagree with Stanley Fish's argument that "meanings only become perspicuous against a background of interpretative assumptions in the absence of which reading and understanding would be impossible."[3] After all, as Jenson's quote makes clear, 'the Bible' will be read quite differently in a religious studies curriculum than on Sunday mornings in church. If every act of reading is determined by our

---

[2] R. R. Reno, "Series Preface," in Douglas Harink, *1 & 2 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 10.

[3] Stanley Fish, "Still Wrong after All These Years," in *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), 358.

assumptions, what saves us from the impression that no sacred text can finally achieve precedence over its users? What saves us from the impression that the Word does not shape a people, but the community shapes the word? What saves us from the impression that when the church reads the Bible, we do not get the Word of God, but the words and opinions of human beings?[4]

We cannot answer this question by denying the role of the human reader. After Christendom, we cannot get around the simple fact that the church already reads the Scriptures based on interpretive assumptions by assembling these diverse writings into a single book. Rather than trying to deny the activity of human appropriation, Christians must have a theologically justifiable account of the church's interpretative assumptions. By a theologically justifiable account, I mean that Christians must be able to describe their unique way of reading the Scriptures as acts determined and directed by the triune God. John Webster puts it this way:

> [T]he explications of [the act of reading] requires us to invoke language about the presence and activity of God, and more particularly about the Holy Spirit. Such language is, moreover, to be treated not as a distant and essentially non-functional backdrop to much more important human undertakings. It has real work to do: the invocation of language about God in the depiction of the human act of reading Scripture is not ornamental but of the essence. However, in this context as in any other, talk of God's action does not compete with, suspend or obliterate talk of creaturely activity. Rather, it *specifies* or *determines* the character of creaturely activity by indicating that creaturely acts take place in the overarching economy of salvation, and that as acts of *creatures* they are the acts of those who are being made holy, that is, transfigured by the Holy Spirit into conformity with the dying and rising of the Son of God.[5]

---

[4] My use of the term church cannot help but be vague in this opening introduction. I would like to say that the church is the community of believers formed by and around the Word and Sacraments. But this definition presupposes that the Scriptures speak the Word of God and gather a people. The problem that I am identifying asks whether the Scriptures are merely gathered by a community, or whether God uses the Scriptures to gather the community. If they are merely gathered by the community, then the church cannot be indentified as the body of believers. Then the identity of the church transforms into a matter of mere political affiliation. In other words, if God does not speak through the Scriptures, the Valentinians, for example, can only be excluded from the church on political grounds.

[5] John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 92.

The church has to be able to give reasons why it thinks that its own use of Scripture is not just another community's appropriation of a text, but the triune God's use of the text. As has been the case throughout this dissertation, these reasons will not be persuasive to any rational person, nor will they be beyond the pale of doubt. But, they will need to be coherent and defensible reasons. And, they will have to be reasons that reflect the acts of God as he discloses himself rather than reasons that appeal to the attractiveness of human conjectures about God. In order to give such an account of the church's use, the rest of this chapter will answer two questions. First, what reasons do Christians have for believing that God speaks through the scriptures? Second, how does the church use the scriptures so as to be faithful to the way in which God speaks through them? Phrased another way, how does the church read the scriptures in a way consistent with its conviction that they are divine speech?

Before answering these questions, let me sketch the direction my argument will take in the next two sections. I will answer the first question by arguing that God uses the apostolic witness to proclaim the Lordship of Jesus for the purposes of bringing about the obedience of faith. The New Testament Scriptures are authorized versions of the apostolic witness (which is properly expressed as the fulfillment of the Old Testament) through which God speaks to gather a people for himself. My answer to the second question will follow from the first. Since God uses the Scriptures for this purpose, we ought to read the Scriptures as direct address from God. If we do not, we will end up using the Scriptures as a resource for making inferences about God. When the Scriptures are used as a resource for making an inference about God, they are removed from their context within the triune economy of salvation. The Scriptures no longer operate as divine speech, grounded in God's act through Jesus of Nazareth and the Spirit. Rather their coherence and unity becomes grounded in the human intellect's ability to make judgments about God.

**The Scriptures in God's Economy of Salvation**

If the church wants to overcome the impression that its use of scripture is nothing more than another human rhetoric of power, it will have to give reasons why its acts of reading are not *merely* human, but guided by the Holy Spirit. There are two stages of reflection necessary to accomplish that task. The first stage has to do with the scriptures themselves. Christians must be able to give a reason for why they think the texts gathered into the Bible are not just human words but also the Word of God. The second stage has to do with finding guidelines that are consistent with the Christian conviction that God uses these texts in particular to speak. This section will answer the first concern by placing the scriptures within God's economy of salvation.

Among others, John Webster notices that the way Christians have recently defended the scriptures as the Word of God have been practically unworkable. As the "cultural metaphysic in which classical Christianity had developed and helped form," collapsed, Christian theology found itself in a state of disarray concerning its basic principles. Christian theology now had to argue for the possibility of revelation when for a long period of time the Bible had been the unquestioned principle source of revelation. To make a long story short, Christianity, "found itself largely incapable of following and deploying the inner logic of Christian conviction in its apologetic and polemical undertakings." And this further reflected that "Christian theology itself had in important respects already lost touch with an orderly understanding of God's self-communication, and in its place offered rather stripped-down or misshapen versions of the topic."[6] Another way of putting all of this is to say that in both its defense of the scriptures and its own systematic descriptions of them, contemporary Christian theology had forgotten the

[6] Ibid., 11.

church's self-understanding of the way God uses their own writings.[7] In order to reverse this trend, I will provide a brief account of the church's own self-understanding about its scriptures and the way God uses them for his purposes; I will situate the Scriptures in God's economy of salvation.

To claim that one brief account is *the* church's self-understanding certainly oversimplifies the matter. As in the previous chapter, there are a complex series of issues and layers of scholarship that accompany this topic. I can only hope to give a sketch of the church's account of its own writings that proves to be generally faithful to the Christian tradition and practically useful for the more constructive purposes of this chapter. In order to do that, I will begin by offering what I consider to be a catholic description of the basic economy of salvation: the rule of truth that Irenaeus recounts in *Against Heresies*. Irenaeus wrote *Against Heresies* as a refutation of the followers of Valentinus, who claimed to possess a different interpretive key to understand the scriptures. They contended that the Scriptures were about the emanation of Aeons and the liberation of the spiritual man from the base and corrupt existence of the lower Aeons.[8] Irenaeus refuted that claim by arguing that the church possessed this rule of truth, which was handed down from the apostles themselves. The following passage from Irenaeus reflects a catholic Christian key for reading the Scriptures. It depicts the coherence of Scripture as the work of the Creator to bring all created things created into consummation through his Son, Jesus Christ. While Irenaeus intended to use this rule as a key, I will use it as an uncontroversial account of the God's actions, which has been assumed by "the Church,"—those who have been gathered by and around this message—from the beginning. For, as Irenaeus writes, "the Church,

[7] In his analysis of Barth, Peter H. Nafzger, "'These are Written': Toward a Cruciform Theology of Scripture" (PhD. diss., Concordia Seminary, 2009), 52–98, shows how far this misunderstanding extends into contemporary theology. My account of the place of the Scriptures in the economy is in part indebted to Nafzger.

[8] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 315–358.

though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith…"[9] He goes on to describe the faith this way:

> [The Church] believes in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and his [future] manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father "to gather all things in one," and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God and Savior, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, "every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess" to Him, and that He should execute just judgment toward all; that He may send "spiritual wickedness," and the angels who transgressed and became apostates, together with the ungodly, and unrighteous, and wicked, and profane among men, into everlasting fire; but may, in the exercise of His grace, confer immortality on the righteous, and holy, and those who have kept His commandments, and have persevered in His love, some from the beginning [of their Christian course], and others from [the date of] their repentance, and may surround them with everlasting glory.[10]

The action of God in Irenaeus' rule focuses on the consummation of all things when Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead. The life of Jesus does not get significant attention, nor does the promises to Abraham, God's covenant with Israel, the Davidic promises, Israel's betrayal of God and the tension between Israel's unfaithfulness and God's election, which precedes Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. When judged as an account of the economy, which Irenaeus does not primarily intend it to be, it lacks many elements. But I have chosen to start here because it is a catholic expression of the church's faith, and it does include some of the most basic features. To summarize: God works through Jesus in order to accomplish God's will of setting creation right by assigning Jesus Christ, his Son, all authority to judge the living and the

---

[9] Ibid., 330.

[10] Ibid., 330–31.

dead—to separate the righteous and those who have obey God's commandments from the unrighteous and ungodly.

But how, exactly, do the Scriptures fit into this economy? In order to answer that question, it will be helpful to begin to fill out this picture by turning to the gospel of Luke. In the Gospel of Luke, and continuing into Acts, we find that the work of God to set all things right through the Lordship of Jesus starts with Jesus, but then extends to the apostles, who are commissioned by Jesus to speak (as well as baptize, celebrate the Lord's Supper, and obey Jesus' commands) in his stead and by his command until he returns to judge. Furthermore, in order to complete this task, Jesus gives them the Holy Spirit.

According to Luke's gospel, Jesus of Nazareth was anointed by the Spirit of God when he was baptized by John in the Jordan River (Luke 3:21-22). In the power of the Spirit, Jesus claimed to bring about the eschatological time of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:14-21). He taught with authority about how to live within the will and reign of God, he healed the sick, he cast out demons, he forgave sins, and he raised the dead. One way of summarizing Jesus' actions in the Spirit is to say that he acted with the authority and power of the almighty God.

But this authority and power created conflict between Jesus and many of the leaders of Israel. Jesus' authority and the conflict that it raised are both on display in Luke 5:17-26. In this passage, Jesus is teaching and healing in the presence of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, when some men bring a paralytic to him by lowering him through the roof. When Jesus sees the faith of these men, he forgives the paralytic his sins. But the scribes and the Pharisees then begin to question Jesus' authority to forgive sins, asking "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Luke 5:21). So, in order to demonstrate the origin of his authority Jesus addresses them and says, "'Which is easier, to say "Your sins are forgiven you," or to say, "Stand up and walk?" But so that you may know that the Son of Man

has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he said to the one who was paralyzed—"I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home'" (Luke 5:24). The man did just as Jesus said, demonstrating to all present his authority and power. But this was not the last word in the conflict. The leaders accused Jesus of working by the power of Satan rather than God (Luke 11:14-23). And when they arrested Jesus and put him on trial from his claims to authority, he did not back down (Luke 22:66-71). So they crucified him with the help of the Roman authorities as a blasphemer. His crucifixion, then, served as what appeared to be the final test of his claims to divine authority. For "the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one" (Luke 23:35)!

But God vindicated Jesus' authority by raising him from the dead. Jesus then appeared to his disciples and demonstrated that the one who was standing before them alive was the one who was crucified (Luke 24:36-43). Then Jesus commissioned his disciples to take part in the same mission for which God had sent him, which had been foretold in the Old Testament Scriptures, and promised them the power of the Spirit. Luke reports the commissioning when he writes the following:

> Then [Jesus] opened their mind to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you receive power from on high.' (Luke 24:45-48).

Therefore, according to this still basic account, the apostles participate in God's mission through Jesus by their witness, for which they receive the Holy Spirit. The apostolic mission and the important role of the apostolic word are on display throughout the book of Acts, but especially in the story of Pentecost. Having received the Spirit from Jesus, Peter stands up and addresses the crowd.

> You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power...This Jesus, God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you now see and hear...Therefore, let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified (Acts 2:22-36).

When those present hear Peter's witness, they are cut to the heart and ask Peter what they can do. He calls them to repent and to be baptized in the name of Jesus for their forgiveness and to receive the Holy Spirit themselves. Peter explains: "For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (Acts 2:39). Therefore, God uses the apostle's testimony about Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, to bring about faith in the God and Father of Jesus.

In describing God's economy of salvation so far, we have a descending line of authority from God, to Jesus, and extending to the apostles, who are commissioned to bear witness to the things that happened concerning Jesus, so that those who hear it might repent of their unbelief and sin and be incorporated into the body of those who trust and believe in the one true God. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit who descended from God and remained on Jesus also plays a part in the apostolic mission. Jesus gives the apostles the Spirit in order that they might fulfill their role as apostolic witnesses. However, we have not yet spoken about the Scriptures' place within this economy. And to take a step in that direction, it will be helpful to turn to the writings of one who considered himself an apostle—Paul.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul makes a bold claim about his own words. He writes, "We constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word,

which is also at work in you believers" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). Paul considers his own words not just human words but God's own. The reason Paul can be so bold as to make this claim about his own speech is that he has been commissioned as an apostle by God to speak on behalf of God and proclaim the Lordship of Jesus so that all who hear the message might believe it, and live by faith in the One who sent Jesus. As we saw in the last chapter, a key passage to understand Paul's description of the role and purpose of his apostleship can be found in the opening address of his letter to the church in Rome. He writes,

> Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God with power according to the resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 1:1-7).

Paul understands himself as one designated by God to speak the gospel about his Son in order to bring about the obedience of faith to the Gentiles. How does God use Paul's proclamation of the gospel to bring about the obedience of faith? Paul describes the logic of apostolic commissioning later in his letter when he writes that,

> if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." But how are they to call on one they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?...So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ (Romans 10:9-17).

As an apostle of God through Jesus, Paul was sent to speak on God's behalf about God's Son, bearing witness to the things that God had done through Jesus so that all who hear his words might trust in God and be saved. This proclamation about Jesus stands as the center piece

of his mission to bring about the obedience of faith to the Gentiles. For he says about this gospel message, that "it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith and for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith'" (Rom. 1:16–17). Paul also finds that his responsibility as an apostle to bring about the obedience of faith requires more than speaking the message about Jesus. It also requires exhortation to live out that faith in obedience to the commands and will of God and in conformity with the new life that Jesus initiates. Just as Irenaeus' rule suggests, Christians will be judged on whether or not they have obeyed the commands and will of God. So Paul frequently exhorts believers to live according to the faith throughout his letters.

In both cases, whether through exhortation to holy living or through proclamation about God's action in Jesus, Paul places his own writings within God's economy of salvation through Jesus to bring about the consummation of all things. That Paul considers his own written word to have a place within God's work can be noticed in his opening greeting, where he addresses the church in Rome on behalf of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And again, in his second letter to the church in Corinth, we see Paul using his written letter to exhort the Corinthians on God's behalf.

> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

Finally, then, we are in a position to more fully account for the role of the Scriptures in God's economy of salvation. Just as Paul considers his own writings to be part of the apostolic commissioning to bring about the obedience of faith, so also are the other written scriptures in the New Testament. The New Testament Scriptures are the written form of the apostolic

message. They are no different than the apostolic message, but derive their divine authority and purpose from the mission of the apostles. (The same can be said of the Old Testament Scriptures since the apostolic preaching about Jesus is properly expressed as a fulfillment of the Old Testament.)

In his argument with the followers of Valentinus, Irenaeus reiterates this understanding of the authority of the written scriptures, and even though we have covered this material in the previous chapter, it will be helpful to recall it here in order to demonstrate the catholicity of this understanding. Later in his argument, Irenaeus found it necessary to defend the authority of the Scriptures against the claim that the followers of Valentinus had a secret faith that was not written down, but nevertheless came from the apostles themselves. Irenaeus responds to their claims by drawing a direct line of descent from God to Jesus to the apostles and then to the written Scriptures. He writes,

> For the Lord of all gave to His apostles the power of the Gospel, through whom also we have known the truth, that is, the doctrine of the Son of God; to whom also did the Lord declare: "He that heareth you, heareth Me; and he that despiseth you, despiseth Me, and him that sent Me." We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith.[11]

In summary, then, Christians believe that the Scriptures are the Word of God because they do God's work to bring about the obedience of faith through the proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus. According to this account, God sent Jesus in the Spirit to act in God's stead and with God's authority, Jesus initiated the reign of God by using his divine power and authority to teach the will of God, heal the sick, raise the dead, and forgive sins. Jesus was crucified for this as a blasphemer, but was vindicated when God raised him from the

[11] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 414.

dead. Jesus then commissioned his disciples by his own authority and gave them the Spirit to continue his mission by witnessing to the things that God had done through him, and to teach those who hear the message to obey everything that Jesus commanded. God uses their word to bring about and sustain faith in God so that all who believe in Jesus and his Father might be saved from the wrath of God against all ungodliness to be revealed in the final judgment. The scriptures, then, are the written form of the apostolic Word of God. And Christians consider their Scriptures to be God's word because he has ordained them for the purposes of speaking according to this apostolic mission.

### Reading Scripture in God's Economy of Salvation

This chapter has been aiming to address this problem: Can Christians distinguish between their own use of Scripture and God's use? Or is all reading merely a human rhetoric of power? Again, I do not want to propose a way of reading the Scriptures that is free from interpretive assumptions. Christians in the modern west cannot ignore the fact that they read the Scriptures based on their assumptions. So in this section, I want to discuss how Christians should go about using the Scriptures in order that they can have defensible reasons for thinking that their use of Scripture is God's use.

The last section took a necessary detour to describe how words written by human beings can be considered the word of God. Having accomplished that task, we must now orient the church's reading of Scripture within God's economy of salvation in such a way that is consistent with our conviction that God speaks through the Scriptures. In the previous section I argued that God uses the Scriptures to declare the Lordship of his Son so that those who hear it might believe the message and live by faith in the God. But how do Christians read the Scriptures in a way consistent with God's purposes of creating faith and directing believers to live according to that faith in obedience to the will of God?

This section will answer that question by arguing that Christians ought to read the Scriptures as direct address from God. As direct address, God speaks in two different ways through the Scriptures. In order to describe the two different ways that God speaks, I will use the distinction between law and gospel. The distinction between law and gospel has a complicated history that extends back before the time of Luther (who made it popular in his own way), and forward within the Lutheran tradition.[12] But I have a simple intention for the distinction. By distinguishing between law and gospel, we can recognize the two different ways that God speaks through the Scriptures as God gathers a people for himself through Jesus and in the Spirit. On the one hand, God speaks about his Son through the apostolic witness in order to elicit faith. This message takes the form of a promise, or a word of gospel. On the other hand, God speaks words of law, by which God makes demands of us so that we will live in accordance with God's will. Both of these kinds of words exist in the Scriptures, and God uses both in order to bring about the obedience of faith. Therefore each word has its proper place and function within the economy, and they should not be confused with one another.

Before moving on, let me take a moment to be as clear as possible about my use of the law/gospel distinction in this section. The distinction between law and gospel, as I will be using it, is not an instruction to read each individual passage as if it had immediate existential significance, and that its significance could be one of two different categories: either it kills us (which is a function of the law) or it makes us alive in faith (which is a function of the gospel). Lutheranism has used the law/gospel distinction in this way; not just to read the Scriptures, but also for the purposes of pastoral care. But I will not focus on this existential aspect of the

[12] Cf. Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Fatih* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 50–55. Also, Timothy J. Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melanchthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over* Poenitentia (Grand Rapids and Carlisle: Baker and Paternoster, 1997).

law/gospel distinction. So when I use the terms *law* and *gospel* I am not referring to passages that have a particular effect on us.

Instead, I will be using the law/gospel distinction to refer to the form of God's address through Scripture. That form can be either a demand (law) or a promise (gospel). While God finally determines what effect the Scriptures have on us, we still need to have instructions on how to use the Scriptures in a way that is consistent with God's purposes of addressing us. In other words, we cannot merely let the text speak for itself. This chapter has been arguing that in an age of normal nihilism, there is no such thing as letting the text speak for itself. We cannot avoid the fact that *we* are users of the text. So, I will be arguing that in order to read the Scriptures in such a way that God uses them for his purposes, we must situate the Scriptures within a pre-understanding of what God wants to say through them.

God wants to speak to us about Jesus, which he does through the apostolic witness, in order that we might hear the message about Jesus and live by faith in God. Therefore, in order to allow the apostolic witness about Jesus to function in this manner, we need to read the broad story about Jesus' Lordship as gospel. But "gospel" in this sense does not mean an existential word that makes us feel accepted by God. It might or it might not make us feel accepted. Rather, as I will be using it, "gospel" means a speech act by which God makes a promise to us. This latter notion of gospel does not depend on the way someone might receive the text; it depends on the way we read the text so that God speaks to us through it just as he has ordained and commissioned it. Therefore, to say, "read this as gospel," is to give concrete instruction on how to read the story about Jesus within the economy of salvation. Likewise, in order to bring about the obedience of faith, God also sent the apostles out to call us to action and to live faithful lives. Therefore, God uses portions of Scripture to make demands of us. This is what I refer to as "law"

as opposed to "gospel." "Law" in this case, does not refer to the way certain passages make us feel convicted. It simply refers to the way that God uses the Scripture to make demands of us.

Not every minute, individual passage will be either an expression of demand or promise. Since God uses the whole story about Jesus to bring about faith, the story about Jesus taken together as a whole should be read as gospel.[13] But in light of the promise made through the whole story, we should also expect to find individual passages in Scripture that express this promise. But not every passage has to express this promise. For instance, many passages should be understood as mere descriptions, such as when Jesus says, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27). But those descriptions will support passages that do make demands or promises, like when Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28).

Also, as is evident from this passage in Matthew, some statements can be both demands and promises; or as Luther says, some passages can have both a legal and evangelical use.[14] For instance, this passage makes a demand in the sense that Jesus wants those who are weary and heavy burdened to obey and follow him. And it makes a promise in the sense that it offers mercy and blessing to those who come to Jesus. Both uses are possible, and God uses this passage to make both demands and promises. However, my use of the law/gospel distinction will not focus

---

[13] Cf. Martin Luther, *A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels*, in vol. 35 of *Luther's Works*, ed. and trans. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960), 116–123, helpfully depicts this by suggesting that there is one gospel which is described many apostles; that the gospel is simply a story about Christ, and that before we read this story about Christ as an example to follow, we should first read it as a gift from God to us.

[14] Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 134.

on whether the demand of this passage kills or gives life. That aspect depends on the disposition of the hearer toward the passage, about which I am not concerned in this chapter.

In any case, the important aspect of the law/gospel distinction is this: When we read the entire story of Jesus' Lordship in light of God's purposes to bring about the obedience of faith, we will realize that God intends to use the Scriptures to make promises to us concerning Jesus and demands on us to live according to God's will. For God has ordained Jesus Lord over all things. And there are two consequences of God's action. First, God wants us to hear the message of Jesus' Lordship as a promise of favor and mercy to us so that we will trust in him. But God also wants us to obey God's will and to listen to Jesus' commands. Therefore, God speaks through the apostolic Scriptures in order to accomplish both of these ends. I will be arguing that by recognizing that God makes demands and promises in the Scriptures, Christians will be properly guided in reading them for these divine purposes.

Moreover, I will argue in this section that if Christians do not recognize the fact that in Scripture God makes both demands and promises, they will approach the Scriptures as a source book for making inferences about God. And when the Scriptures are used in this way, they lose their context within the Triune economy—they no longer operate as divine speech stemming from God's act through Jesus and in the Spirit. Instead they operate in a different context and economy—the work of the human intellect to make a conjecture about God. When the Scriptures are transferred from the economy of the Triune God to the economy of the human intellect, the Scriptures' coherence and unity becomes grounded in the human ability to make judgments about God rather than in God's own acts.

This final point relates directly to the central problem of this chapter. In an age of normal nihilism, Christians must be able to give defensible reasons why they think that their use of Scripture is also God's use. But if interpreters do not recognize that God makes both demands

and promises through the Scriptures, then the unity and coherence of the Scriptures will be grounded in human speculation about God. Therefore, the assumptions that Christians apply to read the Scriptures will not be grounded in God's acts, but in the human intellect's ability to put all the pieces together in persuasive way.

The remainder of this section will unpack this thesis by discussing the two different economies in which the Scriptures might fit: the economy of the human intellect to make sense of God and the economy of the Triune God to create the obedience of faith. These two economies are already at work in the debate between Luther and Erasmus. Luther argues that we should place the scriptures within the economy of the Triune God, while Erasmus argues on behalf of the economy of the human intellect. I will use the debate between these two men in order to frame my discussion.

**Reading Scripture in Two Different Economies**

In his debate with Luther over the freedom of the will, Erasmus already understands the futility of reading the Scriptures within the economy of the human intellect. Erasmus thinks the Scriptures are unclear. And by unclear, Erasmus means that if one wants to formulate a definite position on the topic of human bondage, for example, one will encounter some passages that seem to support human freedom and some that seem to oppose it. The scriptures do not present a clear and unified position one way or the other. Since they are unclear, every position on the matter can only be the work of the interpreter who stands over the scriptures and organizes them into a coherent and unified way. Given this particular deficiency of the scriptures, there seems to be no other way of operating than to let the interpreter assemble a meaning in a persuasive way. And that is exactly what Erasmus does when he gets around to using the Scriptures. He lumps the passages together that seem to support free will and those that seem to oppose it, and he organizes them into a unified and coherent position on the basis of an inference about God,

namely that God would be unjust to punish if we do not have the ability to choose the good or not. About this, Steven Paulson remarks that, "Erasmus was traditional and old according to his method of reading Scripture (or any book for that matter) in one fundamental sense; he believed that the work of the exegete was to harmonize apparent contradictions in Scripture, acting as something of a neutral referee."[15]

To his credit, Erasmus already understood the consequences. One immediately encounters a multiplicity of competing interpretations about the same topic with no clear way of discerning between them. The scriptures themselves cannot be the final judge of their meaning since the meaning of the scriptures is exactly what is being debated. So Erasmus rightly concludes that we are left with the impossible task of discerning which interpreter has the Spirit. But how does one judge the Spirit? By the majority opinion? By ecclesial rank? By the attractiveness of the inference? Erasmus prefers to "seek refuge in Scepticism"[16] because he sees just how intractable this problem really is. Why squabble over the opinions of men?

Luther does not argue with Erasmus' point as much as he appropriates a different way of reading the scriptural text altogether. Luther reads the Scriptures within the context of the apostolic mission. Luther argues that contrary to what Erasmus thinks, the scriptures are not obscure, but in fact have a double clarity: an external and an internal clarity. The external clarity pertains to God's use of the scriptures for his own purposes of proclaiming Christ, or as Luther puts it, "to the ministry of the Word."[17] Luther writes,

---

[15] Steven D. Paulson, "Internal Clarity of Scripture and the Modern World," in *Hermeneutica Sacra: Studien Zur Auslegung Der Heiligen Schrift im 16. Und 17. Jahr Hundert/Studies of the Interpretation of Holy scripture in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. Torbjorn Johansson, Robert Kolb, Johann Anselm Steiger (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2010), 100.

[16] Erasmus, *Discussion of Free Will*, 7.

[17] Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 28.

> I admit, of course, that there are many texts in the Scriptures that are obscure and abstruse, not because of the majesty of their subject matter, but because of our ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar; but these texts in no way hinder a knowledge of all the subject matter of scripture. For what still sublime thing can remain hidden in the Scriptures, now that the seals have been broken, the stone rolled from the door of the sepulcher [Matt. 27:66; 28:2], and the supreme majesty brought to light, namely, that Christ the Son of God has been made man, that God is three and one, that Christ has suffered for us and is to reign eternally? Are not these things known and sung even in the highways and byways? Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find left in them?[18]

David Yeago notices that in marking out the external clarity of scripture as the ministry of the word, Luther distinguishes between "the *verba* of Holy Scripture and its *res* or subject matter."[19] Contrary to Erasmus, who approaches the scriptures as if the subject matter was unclear, Luther points out that while the words might be obscure in some places,

> The subject matter of Scriptures, therefore, is all quite accessible, even though some texts are still obscure owing to our ignorance of their terms. Truly it is stupid and impious, when we know that the subject matter of scripture has all been placed in the clearest light, to call it obscure on account of a few obscure words. If the words are obscure in one place, yet they are plain in another; and it is one and the same theme, published quite openly to the whole world, which in the Scriptures is sometimes expressed in plain words and sometimes lies as yet hidden in obscure words."[20]

Luther does not use the phrase "published quite openly to the whole world," by accident. He gestures here at the economy we have already mentioned. The subject matter of scripture is just as plain and clear as if Peter or Paul were standing before us pronouncing to us the acts of God in Jesus. Therefore, the external clarity of Scripture is external in the same sense that the apostle's message was external to those who heard them speaking. Elsewhere, Luther describes the same phenomenon in terms of spoken and written words. The spoken word of the gospel is primary and proper; it is that from which the written word derives and for which it aims. Luther

---

[18] Ibid., 25–26.

[19] David S. Yeago, "The Bible," in *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church*, ed. James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 57.

[20] Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 26.

puts it this way: "the gospel should really not be something written, but a spoken word which brought forth the Scriptures, as Christ and the apostles have done."[21]

By following Luther's language of the external clarity of Scripture, I am not suggesting that anyone can read the Scriptures without presuppositions. I am not suggesting, in other words, that the clarity of Scripture is an attribute of the text. Rather, I am suggesting that when the Scriptures are read within the context of the apostolic mission, they have a central feature: they proclaim the Lordship of Christ. This position is not only theologically significant but also historically defensible. As we have seen in our brief look at Irenaeus, the subject matter of scripture that Luther refers to is apostolic in nature. It is proclaimed publically first by the apostles who were commissioned by Christ, and then written down for the same purposes. In that sense the apostolic tradition precedes the written scriptures. Irenaeus makes this argument more fully in the first book of *Against Heresies*. There, he uses an analogy to describe the Gnostic interpretations of the scriptures. The scriptures, he argues, are like the image of a king cast in jewels. The Gnostics have taken apart the pieces and rearranged them into their own image, that of a fox; but they nevertheless declare that this is the right image of the king. Irenaeus, writes that "in like manner do these persons patch together old wives' fables, and then endevour, by violently drawing away from their proper connection, words, expressions, and parables whenever found, to adapt the oracles of God to their baseless fictions."[22] To counter this dilemma, Irenaeus refers us to the apostolic rule of truth as the correct way of assembling the pieces into their proper place. But, this rule of truth is not the application of a principle foreign to the scriptures that subsequently has authority over them. It is the proper subject matter of the scriptures themselves. And if the scriptures are to be read on their own terms, this subject matter must be

[21] Luther, *What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels*, 123.

[22] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 326.

applied. Irenaeus, can say this because the rule of truth that he refers to is none other than the apostolic tradition concerning Christ, passed down directly from the apostles through the church to the present time.[23]

Accordingly, John Behr contends that the rule of truth, which Irenaeus refers to, "is not an arbitrary principle to be used to exclude other legitimate voices or trajectories. Rather it expresses the hypothesis of scripture, enabling the demonstrations from Scripture to describe, accurately, the portrait of a king, Christ; it is a mode of interpretation delivered by the apostles in their proclamation of Christ."[24] Thus, Behr concludes that, "the apostolic writings and tradition are not two independent or complementary sources, but two modalities of the Gospel 'according to the [Old Testament] Scriptures.' So, for Irenaeus, both the true apostolic tradition maintained by the churches, and the apostolic writings themselves, derive from the same apostles, and have one and the same content..."[25] Hence, the external clarity of the Scripture that I am describing is not one that claims to have no presuppositions. Rather, when the apostolic testimony is the guiding assumption applied to the Scriptures, their clarity is the apostolic proclamation concerning Christ.

Let me pause here and elaborate on the external nature of the apostolic proclamation, because it is a crucial point. As I have said already, the primary purpose of Scripture is to declare the Lordship of God's Son so that those who hear the message might believe it and live by faith in Christ. Since God wishes to speak about his Son in order to create faith, the apostolic message about Jesus (the gospel in the broad sense) should be spoken as a word of promise (or what I would like to call the gospel in the narrow sense).

---

[23] Ibid., 330.

[24] John Behr, *Way to Nicaea*, 36–37.

[25] Ibid., 44–45.

Oswald Bayer helps clarify the significance of the spoken word with his discussion of *promissio* in Luther's thought. Borrowing from J. S. Austin, Bayer suggests that a promise is a kind of speech act, whereby God establishes a relationship with the one to whom God speaks. A promise does not make a declaration about a reality external to the word of promise itself. Words of promise do not refer to a state of affairs or express emotions. Rather, the words of a promise enact a reality as they are spoken from one person to another. "Since the sign is itself already the thing it declares, this means, with reference to absolution [for instance], that the statement 'I absolve you of your sins!' is not a judgment, which merely establishes that something is already true."[26] It is a statement that actually enacts forgiveness in the present. For example, when Jesus forgives the sins of the paralytic (Luke 5:17–26), Jesus' words enact the reality of forgiveness. Of course, the validity of Jesus' speech act depends on his authority—whether or not he has the right to speak in the stead and on behalf of God. And that is exactly why the Pharisees question Jesus' authority. Only God alone has the authority to forgive sins. So, only God can enact such a reality by speaking words. Otherwise Jesus really is a blasphemer. But if Jesus does have God's authority, his words do enact the reality of forgiveness between one person and another.

The forgiveness of sins is important for Luther, but I do not want to draw too much attention to forgiveness per se. I only point to forgiveness as an example of the kind of speech act that Bayer describes as "promise." For Luther, the apostolic proclamation about Jesus' lordship is this type of speech act whereby God establishes a relationship by taking a stance over-against the one with whom God speaks. Through this proclamation, God speaks by making a promise to us; he enacts a reality between the speaker and the hearer.

---

[26] Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 52–53.

Following the contours of our discussion, I might add that a promise cannot be used by the recipient in the same way that Erasmus uses the scripture to make an inference about God. And this is an important point. When a promise is made, the speaker uses the words to enact a present reality, creating a mutual bond between the speaker and hearer. So the hearer can do nothing except trust (or reject) the word on the basis of the speaker's authority. For instance, a response like, "that is just your opinion," does not recognize the type of speech act taking place. It tries to gain an advantage over the speaker by questioning the meaning and truth of his words. But if a promise is to be received as a promise, the question regarding its truth is a matter of whether the speaker has the proper authority to give the promise and not the reality of the referent.

Therefore, when Luther refers to the external clarity of scripture, he is referring to this sort of speech act. The promise that God makes to us by proclaiming the message about Jesus is one of favor and election. It can be summarized by the gospel of John when its author declares that, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Or again, "The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath" (John 3:35–36). Put in terms more akin to Paul, God has imprisoned all in disobedience in order that he might be free to have mercy on all who have faith in Jesus. But in order to have faith, someone needs to proclaim the message to us. Hence, John says about his gospel account: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30–31).

Therefore, the external clarity of the Scripture pertains directly to its function in God's economy of salvation. God sends out apostles to speak on God's behalf about Jesus, so that those

who believe the message might live by faith in the God and Father of Jesus. When the story about Jesus is read as a promise from God, for the hearer in the present, it functions properly as gospel.

But God does not only use the story about Jesus to make promises. God also uses the Scripture to make demands. Paul's letters contain countless exhortations to lead a holy life in accordance with our faith in God. And Jesus gives numerous commands throughout the gospels to live according to the will of God. As law, these passages express God's desire and will, and their function is plain and simple. They express what God wants from us; they express what God wants us to do. This is their intent and purpose. When we hear expressions of law, we will have different kinds of responses depending on our disposition and the Spirit's intent. We might hear these demands and welcome them as prudent instruction from God. In other words, we might hear these demands and feel compelled to do what they say because they are God's will; and God's will is always good. Or, we might hear these demands and realize that we are not living up to God's will, and we will be ashamed and crushed by their accusations and indignant of their giver. Or when we hear them we might feel compelled to keep them under the threat of punishment. All of these are valid ways to hear the demands of the law, and the Spirit uses these demands in different ways to conforming us to the obedience of faith.

Furthermore, the force of these demands is not mitigated by the promise of the gospel concerning Jesus. The word of the law is simply a different kind of word than the words of promise, and God speaks words of demand because he expects us to follow them and obey his will. Expressions of law are not any less demands from God on account of God's promises that we have God's favor through faith in Jesus. In fact, when we have heard the word of promise in the gospel concerning Jesus and trust in God, we will be inclined to hear these demands as prudent instruction and feel compelled to do what they say because we trust the God who gives

them. In summary, then, the law and the gospel are two different ways that God speaks through the Scriptures, and God uses them both for the purposes of bringing about the obedience of faith. Neither one cancels out the other.

As opposed to noticing that God speaks in two different ways through the Scriptures, Erasmus approaches the Scriptures with a different intent. When Erasmus made his argument for the freedom of the will, he focused his attention on those portions of Scripture that are not promises, but demands and threats. His argument went like this: Since there are many places in the scriptures where God makes demands, it would be unjust of God to judge us if we did not have the freedom to fulfill those demands. A key passage in Erasmus' argument was the eighteenth chapter of Ezekiel, in which God declares that he does not will the death of a sinner, but that the sinner turn and live. Erasmus used this passage, among others, as the basis for his inference about God. Notice, though, that in his use of the Scriptures, Erasmus does just as Paulson suggests. He finds a ruling principle—a harmony of the texts—that lies in the mind of the interpreter. As Erasmus admits, this inference can only be justified by its persuasiveness as a human conjecture about God.

But Luther recognizes that such an inference does not let God speak for himself. In light of the clarity of Scripture's proclamation concerning Christ, Luther exposes Erasmus' inference as just that—an inference belonging to human reason rather than God. Rather than make such an inference, Luther recognizes that God's speaks in two different ways through the apostolic Scriptures. Instead of trying to make the demands cohere with other content of Scripture, Luther notices that God speaks in two different ways through the Scriptures.

Therefore, the central insight about the law/gospel distinction is this: If we do not observe the fact that Scripture makes both demands and promises, then our reading will not be done within the context of God's economy of salvation. To try and make demands and promises

cohere into a unified system would only turn the message about Jesus into human speculation, producing an idea about God that we find either convincing or not. But if we recognize that God makes demands and promises in the Scriptures, we let the Scriptures function as direct discourse, through which God himself speaks to us—on the one hand making promises through the proclamation about Jesus and on the other hand making demands through the law.

If the words of promise and demand are not recognized in the Scriptures, the texts become general statements about God that need to be harmonized by the reader. For instance, Erasmus found it necessary to harmonize the imperatives of Scripture with its other content by making a general statement *about* God. Luther on the other hand, let the demands function as demands from God without speculating on how the same God could make both demands and promises of us. Luther does not move from the demands to something more universal and principled. He reads them as words from God. And rather than using these statements to make more general and principled conclusions *about* God, he allows them to have their force as demands and promises *from* God. The Scriptures should not be read for the purpose of making general statements about God; they are direct discourse from the one with the proper authority to speak either promises or demands. If the one with all authority in heaven and earth makes a promise to us, we should trust it. Likewise, if the one with all authority in heaven and earth makes demands of us, we should obey them. Therefore, Luther finds that both kinds of expressions (those that make demands and those that make promises) ought to be read as having their force. Erasmus, on the other hand, found it necessary to speculate about God because he did not approach the Scripture as direct discourse from God. But then "God" only becomes a principled idea, and the Scriptures merely serve as the raw material for human reason's project of making an inference about God. And if the unity and coherence of the Scriptures—the guiding assumption—of the Christian faith is grounded in the human mind's ability to make sense of God, we cannot avoid the impression,

which is common in our age of normal nihilism, that when the church reads the Scriptures, we never hear the word of God, but only human words.

On the other hand, recognizing the fact that God makes demands and promises through Scripture, allows the Christian use of Scripture to be grounded in God's acts in Jesus and through the Spirit. As I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, these acts of God are not impervious to doubt. For instance, their truth depends on the eyewitness apostolic account that the God of Israel raised Jesus from the dead. And this side of the eschaton, we will not be able to prove Jesus' resurrection. But at the least, when Christians distinguish between law and gospel when reading the Christian Scriptures, Christians will have defensible reasons for thinking that God is using their work to speak his word.

## Holy Scripture and Preaching

Finally, then, I would like to be a bit more specific about how the church should use its Scriptures. If the Scriptures are to function as direct discourse, speaking words from God rather than merely about God, the primary (but not the only) context for using the Scriptures should be the act of preaching. Preaching takes place in many different places throughout the life of the church. But the public worship service is one of the most significant places where preaching takes place. The church today often reads the Scriptures out loud in public worship. But if the Scriptures are not followed by preaching, it is not always clear why they are read aloud. And often times the hearer is left to assemble the meaning for himself. Preaching that follows the public reading of scripture provides an opportunity for the written Scriptures to be brought into the context of the apostolic mission. In the church, preaching is supposed to be the place where God's ordained servant speaks on God's behalf, just as he was sent and authorized to do. Exactly what the preacher says will be determined by the individual text and the place it has within God's purposes of speaking through the apostles to create a people for himself. It might be to

make the move to elect those present on God's behalf, but it does not have to be. It might also be an opportunity to warn them of complacency, to encourage them to perseverance and faithfulness, or even to teach in moments of misunderstanding or conflict. In any case, when the preacher lets the text place him within the apostolic mission, God gets the final word. Rather than conforming to our own best ideas, God stands over-against us and speaks his own mind. If the God of the Scriptures is to be a living God, and if the church's use is to be more than a rhetoric of power, then preachers need to fully embrace the apostolic mission for which they are ordained and preach from the Scriptures words of both law and gospel.

Of course, this is easy to say in the abstract. But what exactly does it look like? Let me conclude by offering a sermonic example along with some commentary in order to put some more substantial flesh on this chapter's thesis. The following sermon was preached at Holy Cross Lutheran church in Saint Louis, MO. The sermon preaches from the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25–37). This text of Scripture often gives people who claim to follow the law/gospel distinction trouble because the parable is introduced by a man who comes to Jesus and asks what he can do to inherit eternal life, and the passage ends when Jesus tells the man to go and do just as the parable suggests.

In this sermon, I follow the law/gospel distinction by maintaining the rhetorical force of the demand Jesus makes to go and do likewise. The difficulty in hearing this demand as prudent instruction from God, however, is that very few people think that spontaneously helping a stranger—even a possible enemy—is wise and good. This is especially true in a congregation with many (but certainly not all) white, middle class members. Even more challenging, this congregation worships in a building located in a poor area of town, where many immigrants live and where street begging can be considered a common nuisance. In the south portion of the city of Saint Louis, there is little segregation between wealthy and poor families. In this setting, it is

easy to think with the culture that everyone gets what they deserve, and no one has any right to what is mine. In order to address this challenge, the sermon asks about the way things really are. Do we live in a world where it makes sense to take Jesus' commands seriously? Or do Jesus' commands need to be reinterpreted and softened. The sermon tells an alternative parable that brings to light the radical nature of Jesus' commands and also exposes the grounds for thinking that these commands do not apply to us because they are simply not common sense. Then the sermon proclaims the Lordship of the one who turned no one away, declares our participation in Jesus' Lordship, and calls us to go and do just as Jesus commanded. All the elements of the law/gospel distinction I have described above are displayed in this sermon. The gospel promise concerning the Lordship of Jesus is proclaimed to the hearers. But that promise does not mitigate or reinterpret the demand Jesus makes. In fact, the demand applies in all of its radical force especially to those of us who have been called out of darkness and into light.

**A Sermon on Pentecost 7, Series C, 2010**

If you are anything like me, you've probably heard the parable of the Good Samaritan so many times now that you've forgotten that this isn't the only answer to the question that is asked.

Luke tells us that a lawyer, who at this time means someone who is a professional and a certified expert in reading the Old Testament, came up to Jesus in order to test him. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit the age to come?" Since he was a lawyer, Jesus asked him what he read in the Old Testament. The lawyer replied, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus thought this was a good answer and said to the lawyer, "You have given the right answer, do this and you will live."

But this isn't enough, at least not for the lawyer. After all, everyone knows the golden rule. Everyone knows that we're supposed to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. This seems like common sense. But not everyone keeps the golden rule in the same way. So for the

lawyer, Jesus hasn't said enough yet. Yes of course I'm supposed to love my neighbor, everyone knows that. But the real question is, "Who is my neighbor?"

If you're anything like me, you've probably heard the parable of the Good Samaritan so many times now that you've forgotten that this isn't the only answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" There are lots of different answers that we hear everyday. Yes, of course I should love my neighbor as myself, but who is my neighbor? I can't love everyone all the time exactly the same way. So who in particular should I love? Whether we realize it or not, Jesus' answer to this question isn't the common answer. In fact, the world has its own answer to this question that is quite different than what Jesus says.

If someone were to put the world's answer into a parable it would go like this. There was a young Hispanic woman who lived in sin most of her life. She went from boyfriend to boyfriend. And when her current boyfriend got her pregnant he started to beat her until she finally abandoned him. So she left Chicago where she was living with her boyfriend and went down to Saint Louis where her mother lived in poverty. And now she found herself living with her mother who didn't have enough money to feed herself, let alone her pregnant daughter. One night they didn't have anything to eat, and the young woman, pregnant seven months, was starving. At least that's the story her mother told when she was begging for food outside a fast food restaurant.

Now by chance, a middle-aged business man happened by the place where they were begging. The mother quickly came up to him and told him her story and said, "Could you please buy her a meal so she can have something to eat tonight?" But he quickly replied, "No," and went on his way. And as he walked away he thought to himself, "It was her fault that she got herself into this jam in the first place. We all have an equal opportunity in this country, and if you blow your chance, if you make the wrong decisions in life, that's the way the world works. I

have my own bills to pay and my own expenses, my wife, kids, and house. Who is going to feed us if I start giving money away like it's nothing. She doesn't deserve my help, and she's probably lying anyway."

Minutes later a young family came walking by and the Hispanic mother quickly came up to them and told her story and asked if they could please buy her daughter a meal for the night. The family stopped for a moment to talk it over. But then they decided that since they didn't know the woman they shouldn't just give their money away. If it was their actual neighbor who needed a meal, or the older woman they knew from church, then they would help. After all, they cared about their community. But this woman was clearly just driving through their neighborhood. You can only help so many people, so you might as well make it those who are closest to you. That's the way the world works.

But finally, a young man came walking by and the mother came up and begged him. And being a Christian who had some money in his pocket, he said "Yes." So he and the daughter went into the restaurant and she started ordering her meal. As they were making it, the mother came in too and she also started to order a meal. And then while they were making the mother's meal, the daughter ordered more food. And this went on until the bill for a fast food meal was over twenty dollars, and the young man had spent all the money he had on him. They took the young man for a ride.

Who is my neighbor? According to this story, the business man and the young family were smarter than the young man. They've been around the block a little longer and they knew just how the world works. The business man knew that you only have one chance in life and if you blow it, that's your own fault. So you better take care of yours in life. And the young family knew that you just can't help someone you don't know. You can certainly help others who are

close to you, your community, but not some stranger that you can't trust. There's no benefit to the community. That's the way the world works after all.

But Jesus tells a different story all-together. Who is my neighbor? Who should I love? Jesus tells this story: A man was going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho when a group of robbers ambushed him, beat him, took his money and left him by the side of the road for dead. A temple priest came down the road, and when he saw the man lying there he went to the other side. After all, he had his own business to attend to and touching a near-dead person would make him unfit for duty in the temple. Then a Levite, who is a person who also worked in the temple, came down the road and when he saw the man, he too crossed over to the other side.

But then a Samaritan came down the road. Samaritans were blood enemies of the Israelite people of that time. They were a half-breed of Israelite and gentile. When the Israelites were kicked out of their own land, the Samaritans were the people who stayed behind and married the conquerors. They were traitors—a disgrace to the Israelites—and they refused to respect the Israelite's authority when they came back to the land. They refused to worship in the temple in Jerusalem. And the Israelites wouldn't think of letting them get close to the temple anyway. Samaritans and Israelites wouldn't even touch the same water bucket at the well; this is how much they hated one another. But this Samaritan, when he saw the man who was beaten and lying on the road for dead was moved with compassion. He went over to him, bandaged his wounds, put him on his own animal, and took him to an inn to take care of him. And his care for the man didn't stop there. He gave the innkeeper money and told him to care for him until he is well, that he would repay the innkeeper anything it cost to bring this man back to health.

Who is my neighbor? The Samaritan had plenty of reasons to move on and keep walking down the road. He had plenty of reasons to think that this man was not his neighbor; that the golden rule didn't apply here and now. But when he saw this man who was beaten, robbed, and

left for dead he was moved with compassion and he put aside all those reasons and had mercy on the man. This is what it means to love your neighbor as yourself: to put aside all obligations, to put aside all the rules, and all the reasons, and to have mercy on those who need it the most.

I want to ask you a question: Is this realistic? The other story has lots of evidence on its side. That is why the world's answer is so common and often so appealing to us. Can we really take Jesus seriously? Should we really consider putting aside all our best reasons not to and have mercy on whomever needs it, to have mercy on those people who interrupt our lives and break all the rules? Is this the way the world really works?

Yes! This parable is not some fairy tail, or some unpractical, over-the-top ethical standard intended to make us feel bad about ourselves. This is the way the world works when God breaks in and has his way.

That, after all, is why God sent Jesus. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, Jesus said, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. And that is exactly what Jesus did. He touched those people who were considered untouchable, and he healed them. He reconciled the outcasts: those who were sinners and unforgiveable, he forgave their sins. And he turned no one away who sought him out. He had mercy on whoever needed it.

This is the way the world works when God breaks in through Jesus and has his way. Not everyone liked what God was doing through Jesus. And in order to save the old standard, the old rules, and the old reasons, they put Jesus on trial for claiming to be from God. They loved the old world so much that they couldn't believe that God who created all things in heaven and on earth had actually send this Jesus to do what he was doing. And they tried to do away with him by crucifying him. If you are the Christ of God, come down now from the cross so that we might

see and believe. But God had his way at the cross too. Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing, Jesus said. But even greater, God raised Jesus from the dead to live and reign over all things in heaven and on earth.

This is the way the world works when God breaks in and has his way here at Holy Cross. God, the one who controls the wind and the waves, who brings the sun to rise in the morning and set in the evening, the one who determines the way the world works—God is still working through Jesus. For God has gathered you here this morning to have mercy on you; to forgive your sins, to bring you into his kingdom to be a part of his people through Jesus. He hasn't done it by the world's rules. God doesn't favor you because you great-grandparents were German, or because you've been a good American your whole life, pulling yourself up by your boot straps and getting what you deserve. God favors you, God has mercy on you, simply because he loves you in Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is the way the world works when God breaks in and has his way. Go and do likewise. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

# CONCLUSION

## AFTER NIHILISM?

The past three chapters each claimed to help Christian faith and life move beyond nihilism. But even if the arguments are coherent and consistent, one might still wonder whether any of this really does help us get past the problem of nihilism. The thesis I have been offering over the past three chapters is this: the sole justification Christians have for their faith and life is found in the divine authority of the man Jesus of Nazareth. This man claimed to be sent by the God of Israel to bring about the consummation of all things. He was rejected for that claim by his own people, and crucified as a blasphemer. But God raised him from the dead, vindicating his claims to be the Son of God and the Christ of Israel. Then Jesus commissioned his disciples to go into the whole world to preach the message about him to anyone who would hear it, so that those who believe it might live by faith in the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. That message has been handed down from the apostles through the church, and is contained in the rule of faith. Christians believe in the divine authority of Jesus on account of this apostolic testimony. And the New Testament scriptures are authorized versions of the apostolic message, through which God speaks in the present in order to gather a people for himself.

This thesis should not be a controversial explanation of the Christian faith. But one might legitimately ask whether this account does the work I claim for it. Even if this is the only justification Christians have for their faith and life, does it really help us move beyond our nihilism? After all, this account does not give Christians a knock-down, unassailable reason for the Christian faith. It does not, in other words, give Christians reasons that silence all doubts and simultaneously prove all other belief to be false. For instance, while it gives reasons for believing

the Scripture's message, it does not prove those reasons beyond any doubt. And so even with this justification for their faith and life, Christians are still faced with the fact that our account is one among a number of others available in the contemporary west. Furthermore, it might not even be the "best" account. In other words, this thesis does not rule out the possibility that there are more comprehensive and appealing accounts of our existence than the Christian one. That is the primary difference between my thesis and the responses given by John Milbank and Stanley Hauerwas. My thesis simply suggests that Christians have these reasons for their faith and life. So does this really help us move beyond nihilism?

Let me try to answer this apparent objection by recounting the nature of the problem. We live in a time when we are burdened by choice. The world in which we live no longer presents itself to us as having one clear and discernable order. As I suggested in the first chapter, this burden is both a micro and a macro phenomenon. In its most banal expression, our nihilism is reflected in the grocery store as we stare at the dozens of options we can choose from and realize that we have no good way to discern between the choices. At another level, though, our nihilism comes to expression by the way technology presents the world to us as standing reserve, devoid of meaning beyond that to which we decide to assign it for our own use and purposes. Likewise, Christian faith and life used to frame existence for westerners. It provided the beliefs and practices that made the world meaningful. But now Christianity is another possible option among a number of others. Any Christian in the contemporary west can have an unbelieving neighbor, who lives a perfectly coherent life and yet adheres to another religion, or who is a convinced atheist, or is entirely apathetic to religion altogether. As Charles Taylor points out, we live in an age when religious belief is just one option among a number of others.[1] Nietzsche expressed this

[1] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 1–22.

condition by saying that God is dead. Whereas God used to frame our existence, God is now another possibility, another way to get through life. Given this common condition, the convictions we hold most dear appear to us as values: convictions we hold dear and nothing more. But insofar as our convictions appear as values, they devalue themselves. After all, they are not the way things are, but merely beliefs and practices that we hold. Given this common condition, the sacred and profane (to use Edwards' terminology) invert and collapse. God is dead. And Christians are faced with the real question whether or not Christianity is just another value, just another conviction that *we* find important.

One way to suggest that Christianity is more than another set of values is to argue that Christianity has the "best" account. Lacking the resources and political context to have a knock-down non-circular argument that would prove Christianity right, this strategy appeals to the goodness of Christian faith and life in comparison to the other options. But I have been trying to argue throughout the dissertation that aiming to give the "best" account of our existence only panders to the normal nihilist sense that all of life has become a commodity for our consumption. Since there is no clear, definitive, and assumed "way things are," we are burdened with the demand to judge and choose between them. Therefore, any judgment about what counts as the best can only be determined by our own tastes and preferences. This is finally where Milbank and Hauerwas, in my estimation, do not help us move beyond nihilism, but only operate within the parameters of the problem.

Instead of this strategy, my thesis does not appeal to human taste or reason but to God's own act as it is reported by the apostolic tradition. The reasons Christians have for their faith and life stem from God's action in the man Jesus of Nazareth. The challenge for Christian theology (and the reason this dissertation is a work in systematic theology) is to express the Christian faith in a way that is consistent with God's revealed will and action rather than something that is

palatable to what we think God should be like. Since the time of Plato, I have argued, the west has thought of God as the principled ground and cause of our existence. Therefore, under the persuasion of this mood of thinking, Christians have been compelled to portray God's actions in such a way that makes them subject to the discernment and judgment of human reason or taste. Categories like God hidden and God preached, and a theologian of glory and a theologian of the cross are helpful in maintaining the priority and authority of God when we speak about him.

So by appealing to God's own act, I have given Christians reasons for the faith (reasons that are wholly catholic) that precede our intellectual and aesthetic sensibilities. In that sense, these reasons are external to us. They come to us through a spoken word that has been handed down from the man Jesus himself. They have been written down and collected in the apostolic Scriptures, and they give us our presuppositions for reading the Scriptures in light of God's actions. They might not be intellectually or existentially satisfying. But that is half the point. They do not enshrine the human subject as lord and judge over God. They let God have his way with us. They let God speak for himself. The other half of the point has to do with God's actions. A primary occupation of my argument has been to give reasons why we say that God acts in Jesus of Nazareth, and while those reasons are consistent and can be defended, they are never absolute and impervious to doubt. But to have reasons that are impervious to doubt is the false hope of Constantinian Christianity and foundationalism. Christians do not have reasons that can transform our society back into Christendom and eliminate the context that burdens us with choice. But within this context, Christian theology can have reasons that do not underwrite nihilism. Simply put, in an age of normal nihilism Christians can live through faith in the external, spoken word of God.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY


Augustine. *The City of God: Against the Pagans*. Translated by Henry Bettenson. London: Penguin, 1984.

———. *The Trinity*. Vol. 5 of Part I, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*. Edited by John E. Rotelle, Translated by Edmund Hill. Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991.

Aquinas, Thomas. *Disputed Questions on Truth*, in *Selected Writings*. Edited and translated by Ralph McInerny, 163–242. London: Penguin Books, 1998.

———. *On Boethius* On the Trinity, in *Selected Writings*. Edited and translated by Ralph McInerny, 109–41. London: Penguin Books, 1998.

———. *Summa Theologiae*. Edited and translated by Blackfriars. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964.

Bainton, Roland H. *Erasmus of Christendom*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969.

Bauckham, Richard. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.

Bauerschmidt, Frederick Christian. "Thomas Aquinas: The Unity of the Virtues and the Journeying Self." In *Unsettling Arguments: A Festschrift on the Occasion of Stanley Hauerwas's 70th Birthday*, edited by Charles R. Pinches, Kelly S. Johnson, and Charles M. Collier, 25–41. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010.

Bayer, Oswald. "God's Omnipotence." Translated by Jonathan Mumme. *Lutheran Quarterly* 23 (2009): 85–102.

———. *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

———. *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*. Translated by Thomas H. Trapp. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

———. "The Plurality of the One God and the Plurality of the Gods." Translated by John R. Betz. *Pro Ecclesia* 15 (2006): 338–54.

———. *Theology the Lutheran Way*. Edited and translated by Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

Behr, John. *The Way to Nicaea*. Vol. 1 of *Formation of Christian Theology*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001.

Blackburn, Simon. *Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

———. *Truth: A Guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Burrell, David B. *Aquinas: God and Action*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979.

———. "Argument in Theology: Analogy and Narrative." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion Thematic Studies* 49 (1982): 37–52.

———. *Deconstructing Theodicy: Why Job Has Nothing to Say to the Puzzle of Suffering*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008.

Chesterton, G. K. *The Incredulity of Father Brown*. In *The Father Brown Stories: Part II*. Vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, 29–110. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005.

Descartes, Rene. *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason*. Vol. 1of *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*. Translated by Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, 79–130. New York: Dover Publications, 1955.

———. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Vol. 1 of *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*. Translated by Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, 131–200. New York: Dover Publications, 1955.

DeHart, Paul. "On Being Heard but Not Seen: Milbank and Lash on Aquinas, Analogy, Agnosticism." *Modern Theology* 26 (2010): 243–77.

Dreyfus, Hubert, and Sean Dorance Kelley. *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*. New York: Free Press, 2011.

Edwards, James C. *The Authority of Language: Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and the Threat of Philosophical Nihilism*. Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1990.

———. *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

Erasmus, Desiderius. *A Discussion of Free Will*. In Vol. 76 of *Collected Works of Erasmus*. Edited by Charles Trinkhaus and translated by Peter Macardle, 1–89. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.

Fish, Stanley. *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989.

Forde, Gerhard O. *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage*. Edited by Steven D. Paulson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.

———. *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*. Edited by Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.

———. *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.

———. *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*. Edited by Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

———. *Theology Is for Proclamation*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990.

Fossett, Robert L. "Doctrine after Foundationalism." PhD. diss., Concordia Seminary, 2011.

Fowl, Stephen E. *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.

Frei, Hans. *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974.

———. *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Basis of Dogmatic Theology*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975.

———. *Types of Christian Theology*. Edited by George Hunsinger and William C. Placher. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

Gaventa, Beverly Roberts. "Learning and Relearning the Identity of Jesus from Luke-Acts." In *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, edited by Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays, 148–65. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

Gerrish, B. A. "Piety, Theology, and the Lutheran Dogma: Erasmus's Book on Free Will." In *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage*, 11–26. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Gillespie, Michael Allen. *The Theological Origins of Modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Green, Garrett. *Hermeneutics, Theology, and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation and the End of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Griffiths, Paul J. "Witness and Conviction in *With the Grain of the Universe*." *Modern Theology* 19 (2003): 67–75.

Hart, David Bentley. *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

Hauerwas, Stanley. *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.

———. *A Cross-Shattered Church: Reclaiming the Theological Heart of Preaching*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009.

———. *Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010.

———. "Hooks: Random Thoughts by Way of a Response to Griffiths and Ochs." *Modern Theology* 19 (2003): 89–101.

———. *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.

———. *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.

———. *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004.

———. *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.

———. *Wilderness Wandering: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997.

———. *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001.

———. *Working with Words: On Learning to Speak Christian*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011.

Hauerwas, Stanley and William H. Willimon. *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989.

———. *Where Resident Aliens Live: Exercises for Christian Practice*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

Healy, Nicholas M. "Three Theological Appropriations of Analytic-Philosophical Readings of Thomas Aquinas." In *Analytical Thomism: Traditions in Dialogue*. Edited by Craig Patterson and Matthew S. Prugh. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper, 1962.

———. *Nihilism*. Vol. 4 of *Nietzsche*. Edited by David Farrell Krell. Translated by Frank A. Capuzzi. New York: Harper & Row, 1982.

———. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Translated by William Lovitt. New York: Harper Perennial, 1977.

———. "What is Metaphysics?" In *Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell. London: Harper Perennial, 1977.

Hemming, Laurence Paul. "Nihilism: Heidegger and the Grounds of Redemption." In *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, edited by John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, 91–108. London: Routledge, 1999.

Hinlicky, Paul R. *Luther and the Beloved Community: A Path for Christian Theology after Christendom*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010.

———. *Paths Not Taken: Fates of Theology from Luther through Leibniz*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.

Hyman, Gavin. "John Milbank and Nihilism: A Metaphysical (Mis)Reading?" *Literature and Theology* 14 (2000): 430–43.

———. *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

Irenaeus. *Against Heresies*. In Vol. 1 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980.

———. *On the Apostolic Preaching*. Translated by John Behr. Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997.

Iwand, Hans Joachim. *Um den rechten Glauben, Gesammelte Aufsätze*. Edited by Karl Gerhard Steck. Munich: Kaiser, 1959.

Jenson, Robert W. "Hermeneutics and the Life of the Church." In *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, edited by Carl E. Braatan and Robert W. Jenson, 89–106. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.

———. "The Hidden and Triune God." *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2 (2000): 5–12.

———. "Identity, Jesus, and Exegesis." In *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, edited by Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays, 43–59. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

———. "An Ontology of Freedom in the *De Servo Arbitrio* of Luther." *Modern Theology* 10 (1994): 247–52.

———. *Systematic Theology*. 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997–99.

———. "What is a Post-Christian?" In *The Strange New Word of the Gospel: Re-Evangelizing in the Postmodern World*, edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, 21–31. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

Katongole, Emmanuel. *Beyond Universal Reason: The Relationship Between Religion and Ethics in the Work of Stanley Hauerwas*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000.

Kleinhans, Kathryn Ann. "Necessity, Sin, and Salvation: Luther's Critique of Reason in The Bondage of the Will." PhD. diss., Emory University, 1995.

Kolb, Robert. *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.

———. *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Lash, Nicholas. "Ideology, Metaphor and Analogy." In *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology: Essays Presented to D. M. MacKinnon*, edited by Brian Hebblethwaite and Stewart Sutherland, 68–94. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Luther, Martin. *The Bondage of the Will*. Vol. 33 of *Luther's Works*. Edited by Philip S. Watson and translated by Philip S. Watson and Benjamin Drewery. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972.

———. *A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels*. In Vol. 35 of *Luther's Works*. Edited and translated by E. Theodore Bachmann, 113–24. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960.

———. *Heidelberg Disputation*. In Vol. 31 of *Luther's Works*. Edited and translated by Harold J. Grimm, 35–70. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.

———.*Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990.

———. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988.

Magee, Bryan. *Confessions of a Philosopher: A Personal Journey through Western Philosophy, from Plato to Popper*. New York: Modern Library, 1997.

Marlow, A. N. "Appendix: On the Adagia of Erasmus." In *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, edited and translated by E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969.

Merrick, James R. A. "*Sola Scriptura* and the *regula fedei*: The Reformation Scripture Principle and Early Oral Tradition in Martin Chemnitz' *Examination of the Council of Trent*." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63 (2010): 253–71.

McSorley, Harry J. *Luther: Right or Wrong?: An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther's Major Work, The Bondage of the Will*. New York: Newman Press, 1969.

Michalson, Gordon. "Re-Reading the Post-Kantian Tradition with Milbank." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 32 (2004): 357–83.

Milbank, John. *Being Reconciled: Ontology and pardon*. London: Routledge, 2003.

———. *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009.

———. "The New Divide: Romantic versus Classical Orthodoxy." *Modern Theology* 26 (2010): 26–38.

———. Review of *Character and the Christian Life* and *Against the Nations*, by Stanley Hauerwas. *Modern Theology* 4 (1988): 211–16.

———. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1990.

———. *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997.

Milbank, John, and Catherine Pickstock. *Truth in Aquinas*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Milbank, John, and Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds. R*adical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Nafzger, Peter H. "'These Are Written,' Toward a Cruciform Theology of Scripture." PhD. diss., Concordia Seminary, 2009.

Nestingen, James A. "Introduction: Luther and Erasmus on the Bondage of the Will." In Gerhard O. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther versus Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage*, edited by Steven Paulson, 1–21. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*. Edited by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman. Translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

———. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Edited by Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman. Translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

———. *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage, 1974.

———. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Translated by Douglas Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

———. *The Will to Power*. Edited by Walter Kaufman. Translated by Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Random House, 1967.

Ochs, Peter. 'On Hauerwas' *With the Grain of the Universe*." *Modern Theology* 19 (2003):77–88.

Oliver, Simon. "Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: From Participation to Late Modernity." In *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, edited by John Milbank and Simon Oliver, 3–27. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Paulson, Steven D. "Analogy and Proclamation: The Struggle over God's Hiddenness in the Theology of Martin Luther and Eberhard Jungel." PhD diss., Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1992.

———. "Internal Clarity of Scripture and the Modern World." In *Hermeneutica Sacra: Studien Zur Auslegung Der Heiligen Schrift im 16. Und 17. Jahr Hundert/Studies of the Interpretation of Holy scripture in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, edited by Torbjorn Johansson, Robert Kolb, and Johann Anselm Steiger , 89–109. Berlin: DeGruyter, 2010.

———. "Lutheran Assertions Regarding Scripture." *Lutheran Quarterly* 17 (2003): 373–85.

Pieper, Francis. *Christian Dogmatics*. Vol. 1. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950.

Pinches, Charles. "Christian Pacifism and Theodicy: The Free Will Defense in the Thought of John H. Yoder." *Modern Theology* 5 (1989): 239–55.

Pickstock, Catherine. *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1998.

Placher, William C. "How the Gospels Mean." In *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, edited by Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

———. *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996.

Plato. *Euthyphro*. In *The Last Days of Socrates*, translated by Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant, 1–27. London: Penguin Books, 1954.

———. *Meno*. In Vol. 1 of *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated by B. Jowett, 249–301. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964.

———. *Republic*. In Vol. 2 of *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated by B. Jowett, 163–499. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964.

Preller, Victor. *Divine Science and the Science of God: A Reformulation of Thomas Aquinas*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967.

Prothero, Stephen. *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

Rayment-Pickard, Hugh. "Derrida and Nihilism." In *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric and Truth*. Edited by Wayne Hankey and Douglas Hedley, 161–75. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005.

Reinhuber, Thomas. *Kampfender Glaube. Studien zu Luthers Bekenntnis am Ende von De servo arbitrio*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000.

Reno, R. R. "Series Preface." In Douglas Harink, *1 & 2 Peter*, Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009.

Rieff, Philip. *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006.

Rorty, Richard. *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

———. *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

———. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

Rummel, Erika. *Erasmus*. New York: Continuum, 2004.

Sanchez M., Leopoldo A. "The Global South Meets North America: Confessional Lutheran Identity in Light of Changing Christian Demographics." *Concordia Journal* 37 (2011), 39–56.

———. "Receiver, Bearer, and Giver of God's Spirit: Jesus' Life and Mission in the Spirit as the Ground for Understanding Christology, Trinity, and Proclamation." PhD. diss., Concordia Seminary, 2003.

Schweitzer, Albert. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Edited by John Bowden. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001.

Siggins, Ian D. Kingston. *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970.

Smith, Christian and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Smith, James K. A. *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004.

Stout, Jeffrey. *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

———. *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.

———. *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*. Boston: Beacon , 1988.

Surin, Kenneth. *Theology and the Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007.

Thiemann, Ronald F. *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985.

Toole, David. *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998.

Watson, Francis. "*Veritas Christi*: How to Get from the Jesus of History to the Christ of Faith without Losing One's Way." In *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, edited by Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays, 96–114. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

Webster, John. "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51 (1998): 307–41.

———. *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Wells, Samuel. *Transforming Fate into Destiny: The Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas*. Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1998.

Wengert, Timothy J. *Law and Gospel: Philip Melanchthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over* Poenitentia. Grand Rapids and Carlisle: Baker and Paternoster, 1997.

Westphal, Merold. *Overcoming Onto-theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2001.

———. *Whose Community? Which Interpretation?: Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009.

Williams, Stephen N. *The Shadow of the Antichrist: Nietzsche's Critique of Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Wright, John W. *Telling God's Story: Narrative Preaching for Christian Formation*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007.

Wright, N. T. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Vol. 3 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.

Yeago, David S. "The Bible." In *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church*, edited by James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago, 49–94. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.

Yoder, John Howard. *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.

———. *The Politics of Jesus:* Vicit Agnus Noster. Second Edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.

———. *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.

———. *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical*. Edited by Michael G. Cartwright. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998.

# VITA

Joel Phillip Meyer

November 5, 1981

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

**Collegiate Institutions Attended**

Valparaiso University
Valparaiso, Indiana
Bachelor of Arts, 2003

**Graduate Institutions Attended**

Concordia Seminary
Saint Louis, Missouri
Masters of Divinity, 2007

**Previous Theses and Publications**

"Why Theology Is Indispensable to Theological Education." *Lutheran Forum* 43 (2009): 28–30.

Review of *Believing Again: Doubt and Faith in a Secular Age*, by Roger Lundin. *Missio Apostolica* 19 (2011): 66–67.