

## THE TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD AND THE VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE

Throughout this paper I shall keep in view two general areas of reference, two sources of understanding. One is human experience: of the values of human life, and of valuing. The other is Christian theology, or at least certain affirmations made in the intellectual life of faith which pertain to the valuing of human life. Any discourse which attempts to move between theology and ethics by necessity must keep these two areas and sources in view. If theological principles and affirmations pertain to human moral values, they do so in two ways. Either they are principles and affirmations which include within the divine purposes those purposes which are moral, that is, which stipulate human moral values, ends, rules, etc., or the religious community infers certain moral values, ends, rules, etc., to be consistent, coherent, harmonious, consonant with affirmations about God. If claims are made for transformation, emanation, penetration, alteration, re-orientation of human experience through religious faith, those claims are in principle subject to virtually empirical investigation. There are two pitfalls in the efforts to relate theology and ethics in general which I wish to avoid. On the one hand are the temptations to deduce too much from theological principles for ethics, a pitfall more characteristic of the religious rhetoric of some continental Protestants more than of either Roman Catholic or American Protestant theologians, e.g., the claim that what is morally right is determined by the command of God in the moment. On the other hand are the temptations to separate the ethical discourse from the theological, confining the significance of the theological to soteriology, and finding the resources for the ethical only in what (hopefully) all men can accept in common as the human and the moral.

My procedure will be to discuss three general affirmations in an exploratory way, seeking to make clear the relations between Christian belief in the transcendence of God (and the God who is transcendent) and human experience in each. The first is: Human physical life is not of absolute value, but since it is the indispensable

condition for human values and valuing the burden of proof is always on those who would take it. The second is more complex. Human life has *many values*. Some of these adhere to individuals, others adhere to the relations between persons in interpersonal situations, others adhere to human collectivities, and some adhere to all three. These values are not always in harmony with each other in particular human circumstances. The third is this: Human valuing of others involves several kinds of relations, and several aspects of individual experience; it is no simple single thing either descriptively or normatively.

#### I. HUMAN PHYSICAL LIFE IS NOT OF ABSOLUTE VALUE

Human physical life is not of absolute value. But it is the indispensable condition for human values and valuing, and for its own sake is to be valued. Thus the burden of proof is always on those who would take it. The delicacy of discerning what value is to be given to human physical life under particular circumstances when it is not valued absolutely presents one of the principal practical moral problems men have to face.

H. Richard Niebuhr, in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, stated the broad outlines of the affirmation of the non-absolute value of all created things from a theological perspective. He closes his chapter, "The Idea of Radical Monotheism," with the following words. "Radical monotheism dethrones all absolutes short of the principle of being itself. At the same time it reverences every relative existent. Its two great mottoes are: 'I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt have no other gods before me' and 'Whatever is, is good.'"<sup>1</sup> The theme is a very familiar one in a great deal of Protestant theology. Kierkegaard wrote about the difficulties of being absolutely related to the absolute, and relatively related to the relative; Paul Tillich's idea of the "protestant principle" functioned to provide men with a point of transcendence from which all finite gods could be assessed with presumed freedom and objectivity.<sup>2</sup> Nothing has

<sup>1</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*. New York: Harper, 1960, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1944, pp. 358-68. Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1948, pp. 161-81.

been exempted from the edges of this theological sword, including religion (as it is distinguished in Barth, Bonhoeffer, and many followers, from faith). The intentions of many Protestant writers in this vein has been primarily religious and theological; they intend to preserve the majesty of God from confusion with lesser majesties, they intended to make the claim that God alone is worthy of absolute trust and reliance, that is, of absolute faith; they intended to drive men to faith in God by preaching the unworthiness of lesser gods. A few writers have moved on to develop some of the ethical inferences that can be drawn from the theological point; the Niebuhr brothers, for examples, show in part what it means for the political community to confess that God alone is the Lord. It is not unfair, however, to charge almost all of the Protestant giants who perceived the dangers of idolatry with failing to deal with many of the hard cases in which men must judge what the proper reverence is for various relative existents.

Here we see the serious ethical limitations of affirmations of the transcendence of God if the moral inference drawn from it is vaguely the relativity of all things that are not God. A veritable host of conclusions could be drawn from this vagueness. Some of these can be easily listed. 1) Since only God is absolute, all other things are *equally* relative to him and to each other. No one, however, wishes to take this line. 2) Quite different would be this; since the importance of the doctrine of transcendence is to show the majesty and virtual mystery of God, once we see the relativity of all things in relation to him, we have exhausted the theological resources for determining the values of the relativities of life. We are on our own to explore pragmatically the great varieties of human schemes for the ordering of existents in relation to each other: reason, power, utility and other values, and many other things can be brought together in whatever combinations keep life surviving. 3) God, in his absoluteness, had the good sense to foresee the problem of the relativity of all things, and had the good judgment to designate certain persons and institutions with the authority to order the relativities in relation to each other. So men ought to obey these divinely authorized minds and powers, whether ecclesiastical or political. 4) Since man, according to Scripture and his own estimate of himself, is "highest"

being in the created order, all relative things are to be ordered according to his valuations. These empirically might be wrong; but if we can know what man is essentially we can know how normatively all relative things are to be ordered for man's well-being. Which conclusion one accepts will set something of the course he takes in dealing with the question of when human physical life can be taken.

When we turn from theology to human experience, we see that it is not necessary for a person to believe in the transcendence of God in order to affirm the relativity of institutions, religions, morals, physical life, and what have you.<sup>3</sup> Historical and cultural relativism, whatever their intellectual origins might be, are part of the conventional wisdom. And even long before there were tags to put on these notions, men had learned that circumstances of human experience often required them to alter things they professed to be of absolute value, whether these were physical life processes or institutions. "Kill or be killed," the slogan drummed into some of us during the Second World War, has a natural history pre-dating myths of creation. One's own life is to be valued more than the life of the one who attacks, at least under most conditions—if he attacks first, if he has malicious intent, if he seeks to destroy not only one's own life but those of others, if you are under orders to kill him before he kills you in the game of war, etc. But many other things have been valued above human life; the honored legends and narratives of the things men have been willing to die for, all point to the development of human convictions about things to be valued more than physical life itself—justice, liberty of conscience, exemplary witness to a belief, as well as things valued less highly by most people. It is not hard for most men to believe that physical life is not of absolute value, though in the time of assassinations, it is hard to accept the fact that others do not believe it.

How might belief in the transcendence of God qualify, alter, modify, man's understanding of, and response to, the non-absolute

<sup>3</sup> Theologians of various religious persuasions seem to take some pride in the possible historical connection between the belief in God's transcendence and the "secularization" of life, which might be restated "the relativization of all of life" in actual practice. It may make them personally happier to be with the world, but their positive attitude does not in itself resolve the problems of how to differentiate the better and the worse in the secular.

human values, and particularly the value of human physical life? If there are theological grounds for accepting the finite values as non-absolute, and if there is experiential grounds for this, in what ways might the religious belief qualify the human experience? I shall not give all the possible answers to these questions, but only some which I deem to be very important.

First, created life is accepted as a gift; it has an author and a source beyond itself, and we and all the other forms of life are dependent on that author and source. Life is given to us; even if man succeeds in creating new physical life, he remains the recipient of a multitude of gifts which make this possible. Thus one could spell out a number of the characteristics of the relationship between man and God which in turn would qualify man's disposition toward the created values around him: man is a *dependent* creature, dependent upon God and upon his fellows—this he remembers in his relationships and responses; man is the recipient of good things which are not of his creation, including his own physical life—this brings a response of *gratitude* both to God and the persons and institutions which sustain the goodness of his life, etc.

Second, since only God is absolute, man must remember his finitude, not to mention his deformed existence. This, as the Protestant theological interpreters of culture remind us, requires that man always be brought under question by himself and by others, that he never absolutize his powers, his acts, his judgments. The requirement, in traditional religious terms, of humility constantly qualifies his tendencies to absolutize the relative.

Third, man is *accountable* to the author and source of life for his use and cultivation of life, including human physical life. He is responsible (in terms of accountable) to God for the ways in which he cares for, preserves, sustains, cultivates, and, in his limited capacity, creates life around him. His disposition is that of the free servant; not servile but acknowledging that his human vocation is under God.

Fourth, in his participation in the created order, man is *responsive* to the *developments and purposes which are being made possible* for him under the power and gifts of life from God. He responds not only to the immediacies of possibilities, but to the



course of developments which the transcendent God is making possible and ultimately governing. This fourth brings us to a critical point, in my judgment, in Protestant theologies which most substantiate the first affirmation of this paper. That is, insofar as the transcendent God is the One beyond the Many (H. R. Niebuhr), or the unspeakable ground of being (Tillich), he is peculiarly devoid of meaningful content, and thus man is left almost no substantial theological resources in the determination of the values and purposes which ought to govern his participation in the created order, including his use of human physical life. The human ingenuity left for man to depend on in the absence of theological resources is not to be denigrated; out of reflections on human life man does develop views of the "values" which are human, and which are to be developed and sustained. But the God who is transcendent is not the totally unknown God, and thus there are more resources than man's reflection on his own existence alone.

Since the *sine qua non* of other relative values and of valuing is the existence of human physical life, it is valued and is to be valued with a high priority. To take it is to render it impossible for the other person to experience any values, and for him to contribute to the life of the community in such valued ways as it might be possible to do. Thus, while human physical life is not an absolute value, it is to be preserved unless there are substantial grounds for regarding other values to be of greater significance in the particular circumstances in which judgments are made. Human physical life is the primary gift of God on which all other gifts to man are dependent; this vacuous platitude suddenly becomes cogent when assassin's bullets remove from the human community the values of a great man's life, not only values to himself but to the human community.

## II. HUMAN LIFE HAS MANY VALUES

Human life has many values. These values are not always in harmony with each other in particular circumstances. Indeed, there is no fixed timeless order of priority of the values of human life which *a priori* determines what ought to occur in all particular circumstances. Put theologically, while God's purposes for man might be summed up in some generalized unitary conception, such as "He

wills man's good," man's good is a complex and not simply notion. Indeed, the religious consciousness of Christianity and Judaism has always recognized that God's purposes are multiple and not single in human life. Put in the language of human experience, men have always been aware that human life cannot exist without both freedom and order, without both love and justice, without both peace and freedom or peace and justice, and that these sometimes conflict with each other and with the value of particular human physical lives in particular circumstances.

The God who is transcendent is not a totally unknown God. People who have acknowledged him to be the Lord have historically discerned his activity in the course and purposes of events, in the lives and deeds of particular men, in the responses men have made to each other and to him. They have written accounts of human life in which they have interpreted experience in the light of the purposes of God, the values God confers upon life. They have written in propositional form some of the predicates which they have deduced from the activities of God; God is love, God is just, God is merciful, God is wrathful, God is the creator, God is the redeemer, God is the judge, God is righteous, etc. Many of these accounts and purposes are directly moral in their content; they pertain to what God wills that human life should be if it is in accord with his activities and his purposes, his will in the double sense of what he does and what he requires. To be sure, certain purposes of God are more dominant than others: his redemptive purpose triumphs over his wrath, for example, as Jonah was disappointed to find out. But in particular circumstances the significance of his redemptive purposes might well include his wrath, as religious sentimentalists often fail to see. He is loving, but the forms of his loving are at least as complex as the forms of human loving—sometimes he loves through the provision of an order, a pattern of rules for life, sometimes through spontaneity and boundless mercy, sometimes through the preservation of peace, and sometimes through the break-up of oppressive and unjust peace. Religious men, like others, long to leap to a simple unitive understanding of God's will and purpose, for if they can be true believers in such, they can provide simpler statements of what life in the

human world is to be. But the impulse violates both Christian beliefs about the God who is transcendent and the complexity of the life created by him in which his purposes are to be fulfilled. God values many things in human life.

In my judgment, the most current simplification is that God wills the human, a simplification which has ecumenical auspices. The human, it turns out, is either something men are presumed to know intuitively, or it is something which must be spelled out in more rationally defensible terms—which is to open the door to complexity. It may well be that God wills the human, but the human, like the good, is not a simple notion.<sup>4</sup>

The things which human beings value, quite properly, are at least as many, and at least as inconsistent with each other in particular circumstances as are the purposes of God. What common human experience knows about this was depicted philosophically several decades ago by Nicolai Hartmann.<sup>5</sup> Not only is there a plurality of values which are abrasive to each other, but there is a plurality of virtues; indeed, Hartmann wrote about the antinomy of values and of virtues. In his rigorous atheism and his rigorous assertion of the moral autonomy of men, Hartmann painted one of the most awesome pictures of human responsibility I have encountered. One might, however, learn from his phenomenological accounts of moral life without necessarily agreeing with his metaphysics and his anthropology. Human values are many, and many things which men value can be ethically and theologically justified. They do not fall into a neat pattern of priorities which smooths the abrasiveness of particular situations.<sup>6</sup>

Do the Christian beliefs about the God who is transcendent bear

<sup>4</sup> I have given some attention to this in two recent articles. See J. M. Gustafson, "Two Approaches to Theological Ethics," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. 23, pp. 337-48, June, 1968, and "New Directions in Moral Theology," *Commonwealth*, Vol. 87: pp. 617-23, Feb. 23, 1968.

<sup>5</sup> N. Hartmann, *Ethics*, Vol. II, *Moral Values*, London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1932, esp. pp. 407-43.

<sup>6</sup> See J. M. Gustafson, "A Christian Approach to the Ethics of Abortion," *Dublin Review*, No. 514, pp. 346-64, for the way in which this affirmation of plurality affects a particular moral decision and how it is made.



any importance upon the choices men make in the ordering of human values in the conduct of life? Or, is one left with a plurality in the transcendent matched by a plurality in the human sphere? In this brief paper I cannot explicate my answers fully. They would, however, take the following line. Since the transcendent God is not a capricious being, man can discern the fundamental directionality of his purposes for human life. There is an orientation, an intention, which sheds its light upon which intentions and values are proper for man. And, as I indicated in the first part of this paper, man is accountable to God, whose purposes can be in part explicated, in the conduct of his affairs. One also receives his knowledge of God's purposes as a gift of light and direction in the conduct of his actions. But this directionality, which can be translated into a generally applicable ordering of human values, does not resolve the conflicts that are bound to be present in the hard cases of moral judgment. Although God is loving, and wills that men shall be loving, love is not *prima facie* consistent with the preservation of human life under all circumstances. If one chooses to say that love is consistent with man's well-being, one has only moved the problem over from one term to the other, without specifying it more carefully.

Further, the transcendence of God has personal meaning only if one has trust in the God who is transcendent, only if there is a gratitude to him, loyalty to him, a sense of obligation to him. Given this faith, then, the religious believer is obligated to seek to discern (not alone, but in the company of the people of God) what the transcendent God's purposes are for the conduct of life with its plurality of human values. But given a measure of plurality of God's purposes, there is no guarantee of man making a risk-proof moral judgment, either in God's or in men's sights. There is no prior guarantee of hitting the mark morally. Given the finitude of men, and the plurality of values discerned in human experience, there is no guarantee *a priori* of moral rectitude in all circumstances. Given man's sin (not explicated here), there is need both for guidance from the communities' beliefs about God, and for the mercy which he grants to all people. The Christian beliefs about the God who is transcendent give guidance in the ordering of life with its plurality of values.

## III. HUMAN VALUING

Human valuing is complex and not simple. It involves several kinds of relations, and several aspects of individual experience. A rehearsal of the theories of human valuation is no more possible than a rehearsal of theories of value in this brief paper. To keep the topic manageable I shall confine my discussion to two principal aspects of the experience of valuing. One is valuing things and other persons for their utility for not only one's own purposes, but for purposes of the human community. The other is valuing things and persons for themselves. My interest in this distinction here is to suggest some of the different characteristics of human responses, and of personhood, which are properly involved in each of these two aspects. The first suggests a mode of life which is largely one of problem-solving, of achievement of specific purposes or ends, and tends to slip into a flat, mechanistic, view of experience. It reduces the sense of awe and wonder. The second suggests a mode of life which is spiritually profound, but tends to slip into the denigration of rationality, of the necessity for specification of ends and means. Both modes of life are advanced under religious auspices; the first is strong in the proposals of those who affirm the advances of technology and urbanization, and share the optimistic spirit that sometimes pervades successful problem solvers. (My personal conviction is that the thinness of such theologically sponsored views in becoming clear with the compounding of human failures and tragedies.) The second is strong in the proposals of radically personalistic Christians, who, in some of their rhetoric, appear to suggest that the organization of persons to be useful to achieve certain ends (particularly in the church) compromises what men are meant to be for each other. The double tendency is not new, of course; one can gain insight into it from reading the theology of St. Augustine, among others from the past.

It would be folly to try to argue that only a belief in the transcendence of God can justify the more personalistic vision of life, with its responses to other persons of awe, wonder, joy, reverence, and profound respect. Certain aspects of contemporary youth culture manifest this kind of valuing while at the same time rebelling against traditional religious beliefs; the relations between young people are

"beautiful" in a meaningful way to them. (My son, for example, wrote recently to a friend, "The real world is beautiful, and you are part of it.") The grounds for the fresh appropriation of the Kantian principle that persons are to be treated as ends in themselves and not as means, are more a revulsion against the institutionalization of values of utility which appear to be "dehumanizing" than they are religious beliefs.

I believe it would be equally a folly to argue that no theological support can be given for the instrumental value, the utility value, of persons. If God is intent upon the preservation and cultivation of life, including as it must, men's lives in relation to each other and in relation to the rest of nature, a view of men as functionaries for the achievement of purposes consistent with those larger purposes is proper, and in order. There is an ordering activity in life, with its impositions of duties and obligations, its assignment of tasks and the requirement of their fulfillment, which is part of God's purpose for men.

The general phenomenon of valuing, then, has many aspects, and cannot be reduced to a simple notion, nor be grounded in a simple set of ultimate requirements. In "using" another person one is valuing him for his function in the social economy of life; one values his wife, even, in part of her utility—in providing for the mundane needs of the family (doing laundry, cooking meals, shopping, cleaning the house, etc.) and in fulfilling needs for affection and even sexual gratification. But relations other than utility between persons also include valuing; not all valuing of persons is reducible to utility. To respect another is to acknowledge his value, as is to reverence another, appreciate another, care for another, preserve the life of another, sustain another, love another, honor another. The valuing carried by these notions suggests in each instance an aspect of the value of the other for his own sake, an intrinsic value to the other. These notions suggest aspects of the experience of valuing, and the relationship with the other, which acknowledge the mystery, the autonomy, the value of the existence, of the other. They also suggest that the self, in such valuing, is not simply calculating in a rational way how the other fulfills one's own desires, interests, and needs, or

even the interests and needs of the society. Rather they involve the affections, the emotive life of the person.

*Belief* in the transcendence of God is not a necessary personal condition for proper maintenance of either the utility or the intrinsic values of persons. To claim that it is a necessary condition would be to take on the obligation to prove that those who believe in the transcendence of God are better "valuers" than are those who do not believe. Christian belief in the God who is transcendent, however, does, can, should, and ought to inform and direct the valuing experiences of Christians, and the relations they have with each other and with nature.

To spell this out, I would develop two themes. One is the effect of this belief on the dispositions of the persons who believe it. To accept life as a gift, to acknowledge dependence on God for life, to acknowledge one's finitude and disobedience in humility, would all (if there is some wholeness to the person) predispose one to have respect, reverence, honor, appreciation, and love for others, and for the world. In the life of praise and adoration, of confession and repentance, which are part of the expression of this belief, of the response to the transcendence of God, the affections are nourished, and the dispositions directed toward the responses of respect, honor, appreciation, etc. The calculative rationality of valuations for utility is tempered and impregnated by the sensibilities, dispositions, and affections nourished in religious faith.

The second theme is the effect that the beliefs about the God who is transcendent would have in conditioning the ends and purposes for which the experiences of utilization of others would be directed. Since these ends and purposes can be specified in consistency with the purposes of God who is known in Christian faith, and since ends and purposes which are inconsistent with such knowledge of God would be illicit, the utilization of other persons and of nature would be informed by the affirmations made about the God who is transcendent.

The legitimate claims of Christian thought with reference to God's transcendence and the values of human life, could be summarized in the following terms. All created things, including human physical life, are of non-absolute value. Yet as gifts of God

they are to be nourished, cared for, protected, developed, etc. The transcendent God is a known God, and the knowledge of his purposes gives direction to the ordering of life's values, but with such clarity that man is exempted from the responsibility to judge and act in his finite condition. The relation of the believers to God in trust, gratitude, obedience, etc., places upon them the willingness and the obligation to make their orderings of values cohere with God's purposes. It also effects their personal existences, impregnating their affections and intentions, their dispositions and their purposes.

That these explorations require further precision, elaboration, and correction, goes without saying. Their fundamental warrant is this: they maintain the interaction between the positive theological affirmations of the Christian faith on the one hand, and human experience of values and of valuing, on the other.

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