

## RELIGION AND THE SENSE OF THE SACRED

As Frank Kermode has pointed out,<sup>1</sup> Wallace Stevens in his poetry describes the cycle through which man's imaginative activity must constantly turn. In Stevens' lexicon of symbols, the cycle is represented by the succession of the seasons.

First comes winter. What is primary in the imaginative process is the effort of abstraction. Abstraction is the return to the plain sense of things without evasion by metaphor; it is the way through to pure reality by pushing aside all the obsolete images, which have become imaginary accretions blocking the vision of reality. The abstracted reality is as bare as winter:

after the leaves have fallen, we return  
To a plain sense of things. It is as if  
We had come to an end of the imagination,  
Inanimate in an inert savoir.<sup>2</sup>

The poem, however, goes on to say:

Yet the absence of the imagination had  
Itself to be imagined.<sup>3</sup>

There is no question of going outside the realm of the imagination. For Stevens, imagination and reality are inseparable. He explains in an essay: "It is not only that the imagination adheres to reality, but, also, that reality adheres to the imagination and that the interdependence is essential."<sup>4</sup>

And the wintry bareness of abstraction is followed by spring and then summer. The activity of imagining begins again and covers the outlines of winter with fresh colours. Summer represents reality as re-imagined: "The summer night is like a perfection of thought," bringing the satisfaction of a union between imagination and reality and thus reconciling poet and the world:

The house was quiet and the world was calm.  
The reader became the book; and summer night  
Was like the conscious being of the book.  
The house was quiet and the world was calm.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Frank Kermode, *Wallace Stevens, Writer and Critics* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1967), pp. 112-4.

<sup>2</sup>Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1945), p. 502.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 503.

<sup>4</sup>Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1951), p. 33.

<sup>5</sup>*Collected Poems*, p. 358.

The richness of summer is followed by a weakening of power. Images begin to fade. The need arises for a new cleansing by abstraction. The sun must be

Washed in the remotest cleanliness of heaven  
That has expelled us and our images...<sup>6</sup>

As Frank Kermode puts it:

Thus the cycle runs from abstraction to re-imagining, to loss of power through the "evasions of metaphor," to a renewed effort of abstraction, and so on.<sup>7</sup>

Abstraction remains basic in the work of imagination, because constant change continually renders images obsolete. They must be stripped away, so that reality may be made available to us for new fictions through which we can transform the world and make it our own.

The cycle of the imagination is linked in the writings of Stevens with his conviction of the death of God, or, to use his own words, "the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe."<sup>8</sup> But: "If one no longer believes in God (as truth), it is not possible merely to disbelieve; it becomes necessary to believe in something else."<sup>9</sup> Hence, as Lucy Beckett has argued,<sup>10</sup> the whole of Stevens' work is concerned with the problem of belief, "the act of finding / What will suffice."<sup>11</sup> He was convinced that poetry must create a satisfying substitute for religion. As he expressed it towards the end of his life: "The author's work suggests the possibility of a supreme fiction, recognised as a fiction, in which men could propose to themselves a fulfilment."<sup>12</sup> For him, "final belief / Must be in a fiction";<sup>13</sup> or, to put it in another way, "It is the belief and not the god that counts."<sup>14</sup>

It is not to my purpose here to trace the subtleties of Stevens' attitude to God and traditional religion. My subject is not Stevens

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 381.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>8</sup>Holly Stevens, ed., *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 348.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 370.

<sup>10</sup>Lucy Beckett, *Wallace Stevens* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 1 and *passim*.

<sup>11</sup>"Of Modern Poetry," *Collected Poems*, p. 239.

<sup>12</sup>Quoted by Lucy Beckett, *Wallace Stevens*, p. 1, without detailed reference.

<sup>13</sup>"Asides on the Oboe," *Collected Poems*, p. 250.

<sup>14</sup>Samuel French Morse, ed., *Opus Posthumous by Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1972), p. 162.

or his poetry. But what, I think, Stevens makes us realize in a profound fashion is, as Joseph Riddel formulates it:

the constantly altering experiential relations of the self to its world,  
the imaginative adjustments of a man standing joyously in process,  
seeking "what will suffice."<sup>15</sup>

I want, therefore, to take what I consider to be Stevens' true insight concerning the cycle of imaginative activity and use it as a point of entry into the problem of the sacred today.

By the sacred I mean the complex of images that for a particular time and culture express and mediate the sense of mystery. The sacred, because, like the rest of our human world, an imaginative construction, is subject to a recurrent cyclic succession of abstraction and re-imagining.

At present we live in a time when from a variety of causes abstraction is called for in regard to religious imagery. Many of our sacred images have lost their power. They have become obsolete, and consequently have become imaginary accretions that must be stripped away if the reality they previously mediated is to be again available. However, those who in this icy winter of the spirit, bare of sacred colours, proclaim the end of religion and the coming of secular man make a twofold mistake. First, they suppose that men can live in a world without the imagination, a neutral, factual world, verified not constructed. But the so-called world of bare facts is itself imagined and subject to the loss of its imaginative power. The world of secular man is indeed fading today more rapidly than did the world of traditional religion before it. Second, while heralds of a secular age are right in seeing the end of an era of sacred imagery, they forget the continuance of the cycle of the imagination. The present effort of abstraction will lead to a process of re-imagining and a rebirth of sacred images.

In speaking of the imagination here I do not mean the faculty of picturing absent objects of perception and of recombining them into new fantastic forms. I refer instead to the creative power of men and women to shape a world in which to live and give it meaning. This they do in interaction with a reality not of their own making, but that reality is constructed into a meaningful world only by the shaping spirit of men and women. The same imagination likewise forms their own self-image and establishes their relation-

<sup>15</sup>Joseph N. Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 164.

ship to that world. Images are the constitutive elements of the world of human meaning. They are formed as we shape the world; they change as our world changes; they become obsolete when the world to which they belonged is now past.

To give some examples of images in this sense. The image of woman we have determines the social order and affects the lives of all of us. Image in that sense is not just knowledge, such as is retailed in anatomy, physiology, psychology, sociology or history. In some respects it precedes knowledge and guides the knowing process. Again, an image selects items of knowledge and arranges them into a pattern. An image also includes a sense and choice of particular values. But it is more than a value-judgment. The image of woman is that set of facts and values which have been shaped into a pattern so as to become a constitutive element in the world of meaning of a particular society, culture or civilization. Hence it brings with it a train of associations and is heavily laden with affect. What I have said of the image of woman may be also said of such images as work, the self, death, childhood, youth, old age, nature and so on. The same names, of course, are referring to different images when the content changes. Some new images bring a new vocabulary with them, as was the case with the image of evolution. Others just modify an old vocabulary and fill it with new meaning.

The sacred is the set of related images that carry the sense of mystery. Sacred images are those that open a world to the transcendent. They mark the limits of the human world and the boundary points where men and women meet the unknown but felt reality that encompasses their world. I am presupposing a permanent sense of mystery and the consequent universality of religious experience. To the question that raises I will return. I am also distinguishing mystery as transcendent reality from the sacred, the sacred being understood as those images in a particular human world that mediate and express that mystery. The sacred, therefore, consists of those images which constitute a world as religious. They are used by men and women when they construct a world with religious meaning. Thus, the sacred images of God, Christ, incarnation, trinity, sin, grace, redemption and so on constituted the world of Christendom. They were the work of the creative imagination in its encounter with mystery, but are now under the imperative of change in the cycle of imaginative activity. It is important, then, to look at the dimensions of the change now

being demanded of the religious imagination in this time of abstraction, that is, of the stripping away of images.

William Lynch in his *Christ and Prometheus*<sup>16</sup> declares that the religious imagination has "need of a vast desymbolizing process," which "will at first have all the feelings of a 'descent into hell' as this imagination puts off old habits."<sup>17</sup> The reason he gives is that traditional religious images prevent the emergence of the secular in its rightful autonomy. Those images have stressed the conditionality of the world and have been unable to "tolerate the basic secular notion of *constitutive* autonomy and unconditional, self-contained novelty."<sup>18</sup> In other words, traditional religious images have exclusively related everything in the world to a center, a principle or condition outside itself as alone giving it meaning, so that the intrinsic, constitutive meaning of secular realities has not been acknowledged or developed. Hence religious images have blocked the secular project, namely, "the march of mankind, in the autonomous light of its own resources, towards the mastery and humanization of the world."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the religious imagination has done worse than just block the secular enterprise; it has devalued it and burdened it with negative images.

If to the careful analysis of William Lynch we add the earlier analysis of traditional, other-worldly spirituality in Teilhard de Chardin's *Le Milieu Divin*,<sup>20</sup> the account of the transition from classicist to modern culture and its religious implications in the writings of Bernard Lonergan and the extreme though partially justified anti-religious critiques of Marx and Freud, a convincing picture emerges of an incompatibility between traditional Christian images and modern secularity in its legitimate demands. Under modern secularity I include the modern history of freedom,<sup>21</sup> the rise of empirical rationality with its scientific and technological implications and the emergence of critical reflection as the appropriation of the freedom and creative autonomy of the self in its world.<sup>22</sup> Christian images are suffering from obsoles-

<sup>16</sup>(Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970.)

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 27. Lynch's italics.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup>(Fontana Books. London: Collins, 1964.)

<sup>21</sup>Cf. J. B. Metz in his essay, "Kirchliche Autorität im Anspruch der Freiheitgeschichte" in Johann Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann, Willi Oelmüller, *Kirche im Prozess der Aufklärung: Aspekte einer neuen "politischen Theologie." Gesellschaft und Theologie, Systematische Beiträge, Nr 1* (München: Kaiser/Mainz: Grünewald, 1970).

<sup>22</sup>Cf. my essay, "Toward a Critical Theology" in *American Academy of*

cence, namely, they have lost the power to shape our actual, lived experience, because they do not give sufficient place to those developments. Sin, grace, faith, revelation, authority, tradition, Church, dogma are some images that immediately come to mind as having a traditional content incompatible with modernity.<sup>23</sup>

I have already rejected the contention of those who argue for the end of all religion and welcome secular man as living without any sacred dimension at all. As Langdon Gilkey has pointed out,<sup>24</sup> a confusing ambiguity complicates the crisis of modernity now confronting the Catholic Church. There is the necessity of change because all religious forms are historical, and it is of that change I have been speaking. But there is also the attack of modern secular culture upon religious faith as irrelevant and futile. This, I believe, should be met by resistance to a secular world constructed by the narrow imaginations of men without religion or poetry, who suppose that a purely instrumental rationality blind to goals or values can create a world fit to live in. It is for Christians to prepare a critique of modern society, showing the destructive, inhuman consequences of the neglect of transcendent values. At the same time, it must not be forgotten that it was the refusal of religious people, in particular of religious leaders, to make room for the legitimate demands of modern secularity that resulted in the excesses of the onesided development from which we are suffering.

Hence the painful situation we face today. Unavoidable is the purification of the religious imagination to expiate its overweening pretensions. Though fear of modern irreligion makes us cling to our traditional images, there has to be an effort of abstraction, a vast desymbolization, a stripping away of images now so obsolete by the refusal to change as to require a long period of quiescence before they can be requickened. We have to

wait without hope

For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.  
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought. . . .<sup>25</sup>

*Religion. Philosophy of Religion and Theology, 1975 Proceedings.* Compiled by James Wm. McClendon, Jr. Pp. 213-29.

<sup>23</sup>For an account of the crisis of modernity as affecting the Catholic Church, see Langdon Gilkey, *Catholicism Confronts Modernity: A Protestant View* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, chapter I.

<sup>25</sup>T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 200.

From the darkness will come the power to re-imagine.

When spring and summer come around again to the religious imagination, the new world of religious meaning it will construct will not be a return to the past. To allow for the rightful insights and demands of modernity, a differentiation will have to be kept between the secular and the sacred, so that the secular is not smothered by the sacred as it was in an undifferentiated sacral society.

The distinction between secular and sacred is not a distinction between two worlds. The two-storied or three-storied universe is in fact an image belonging to a now obsolete sacral order. In a differentiated order, there is one world, but open to the transcendent. Secular and sacred then represent two modes of consciousness or, from an objective standpoint, two different contexts in which to place objects, persons or events. Objects, persons and events are secular when taken in their constitutive, inner-worldly meaning and function; they are sacred in any sacramental, hierophantic meaning and function they acquire. The same objects, persons and events may be experienced as secular and as sacred, though some of them usually become a focus of religious experience and bearers in a special fashion in the sense of mystery. All the same, since sacred images exist and function within the one world, they are subject even as sacred to empirical study by reason in its secular functioning and consequently never lose their secularity.

The incorporation of modernity into a world of religious meaning by the differentiation of secular and sacred is not the only problem facing Christians today. A grave question affects the central Christian sacred image, Christ, namely, what is the status of traditional christology?

I find a basic harmony between Stevens' cycle of imaginative activity and what John Dominic Crossan has to say about myth and parable. In his brilliant little book, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story*,<sup>26</sup> he contrasts myth and parable in this way: myth establishes world, parable subverts world. Myths are agents of stability; they construct the worlds in which we live. Different myths, different worlds. Since we have to live in a world and since any world is a construction of the creative imagination, the role of myth is indispensable. But the temptation constantly threatening men and women is to forget the limitations of every world. Either

<sup>26</sup>(Niles, Illinois: Argus Communications, 1975.)

from pride or from fear of insecurity, men and women confuse their world established by myth with total truth and refuse both the plurality of worlds and the law of history and change that affects each world. Hence the constant need for parable. Parable subverts world; it is "a story deliberately calculated to show the limitations of myth, to shatter world so that its relativity becomes apparent."<sup>27</sup> Parable is not an antimyth; it does not replace one myth with another. For that reason "it is not possible to live in parable alone. To live in parable means to dwell in the tension of myth and parable."<sup>28</sup>

Crossan ends by suggesting a distinction

between mythical religion, a religion that gives one the final word about "reality" and thereby excludes the authentic experience of mystery, and parabolic religion, a religion that continually and deliberately subverts final words about "reality" and thereby introduces the possibility of transcendence.<sup>29</sup>

The contrast is too stark and does not correspond to what he has previously said about myth and parable. There is a rightful mythical function of religion, mediating and not excluding transcendence. Men and women should build religious meaning into their world, and consequently sacred images should be constitutive elements in any human world. No world constructed by myth as a context in which to live should be purely secular. There should be sacred images embodied in language, rites and institutions, expressing the encounter of men with mystery and the transformation of values such encounter brings. But the danger of forgetting the limitations of myth is particularly great in the case of sacred images and their meaning. Their sacred function leads to a confusion between the images themselves and the transcendent mystery they mediate, so that the limits and changeability that mark them as images within a human world are denied. The sacred world becomes closed in upon itself as idolatrous. Hence the constant need for parable to subvert the sacred world of religious myth, to remind us of its limitations and to keep open the possibility of authentic transcendent experience.

That account of myth and parable is most pertinent to understanding the role of Christ. In one of the great achievements of New Testament scholarship Joachim Jeremias has traced the history of the tradition of the parables, showing how the parables

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 128.



reached the form they have in our written gospels and reconstructing what they must have been like originally as taught by Jesus. It is now widely agreed that the parables as reconstructed are one of the ways we come closest to an historical understanding of Jesus.<sup>30</sup>

For an understanding of the historical Jesus on the basis of the parables, we may turn to another book by Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*.<sup>31</sup> There we find it argued that the role of Jesus was to subvert mythical religious worlds. Crossan writes:

It has always been clear that Jesus criticized many of the options open to the religious experience of his contemporaries: the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Zealots, the Essenes. But usually, and especially since Paul and the Reformation, it is his critique of Law that is to the forefront. It is here suggested that the basic attack of Jesus is on an idolatry of time. . . .<sup>32</sup>

The point of that last remark is that, unlike what many have thought, Jesus opposed and denied the current apocalyptic eschatology of his contemporaries. As Crossan puts it:

Jesus was not proclaiming that God was about to end *this* world, but seeing this as one view of world, he was announcing God as the One who shatters world, this one and any other before or after it. If Jesus forbade calculations of the signs of the end, it was not calculations, nor signs, but end he was attacking. God, in Kingdom, is the One who poses permanent and unceasing challenge to man's ultimate concern and thereby keeps world free from idolatry and open in its uncertainty.<sup>33</sup>

That interpretation of the parables is in harmony with Norman Perrin's interpretation of the sayings in which Jesus proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom. In rejecting the apocalyptic practice of sign-seeking and refusing to calculate the time of the Kingdom, Jesus freed the symbol of the Kingdom from any interpretation that would tie it to a literal temporal scheme. Using Wheelwright's distinction between steno-symbols and tensive symbols, Perrin sees the apocalyptic tradition as making the Kingdom a steno-symbol, signifying particular events in a literalist fashion, while Jesus gave the symbol its fluidity as a tensive symbol, capable of bearing a whole set of significations and possessing a permanent power to mediate experience.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Norman Perrin, "The Parables of Jesus as Parables, As Metaphors, And As Aesthetic Objects: A Review Article," *The Journal of Religion* 47 (1967), 340-7.

<sup>31</sup>(New York: Harper & Row, 1973.)

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. Norman Perrin, "Eschatology and Hermeneutics: Reflections on

Briefly, then, it would seem that the preaching of Jesus was not the presentation of a new religious myth. His concern was not the establishment of a new religious world. His immediate role was a parabolic subversion of contemporary religious worlds in order to open them to the transcendent. His permanent message is an insistence upon God's active Rule or Kingdom as shattering every human world, however sacred.

If now one follows the development of christology in the first Christian communities, as set forth admirably in R. H. Fuller's *The Foundations of New Testament Christology*,<sup>35</sup> then undoubtedly, in the terms I have been using, one is tracing the formation of a new myth. Gradually from biblical and Hellenistic elements a story of Christ was created, upon which to found a world. In its full form it told of the pre-existent, only-begotten Son of God, through whom all things were created, who came down from heaven and was born of a virgin as man, who taught men and worked miracles, until he suffered on the cross to atone for sins, who was raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of the Father, who now reigns in heaven as risen Lord and is present in the Church by the Spirit and who will come again at the end of time to bring all to completion. That story, shaped in the first Christian decades, lies behind all the later christological discussions. Upon it was built the religious world of Byzantine civilization and later of Western Christendom.

It represents, however, a shift from the preaching of Jesus himself. Although he speaks of an implicit christology in the self-understanding of Jesus, Fuller agrees with Bultmann and others that Jesus did not teach any explicit christology and made no explicit messianic claims. We may also notice that the change from Jesus' parables of the Kingdom to the Church's christological myth is in fact reflected in what happened to the parables themselves. The history of the parabolic tradition shows how the primitive Church changed the parables into moral examples or exemplary stories or historical allegories.

The shift from Jesus to the early Church involved a double change. The first is summed up in the phrase of Crossan, "the parabler becomes parable."<sup>36</sup> Through the cross Jesus himself became a great parable of God, declaring the shattering of every Method in the Interpretation of the New Testament," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974), 3-14.

<sup>35</sup>(London: Lutterworth Press, 1965.)

<sup>36</sup>Crossan, *The Dark Interval*, p. 123.

world in his death and showing the opening to transcendence in his resurrection. In the gospels the evangelists uncovered that meaning in his whole life, so that in his earthly words and deeds Jesus is seen as representing the incursion of transcendence in the reversal of ordinary values and the upsetting of human expectations. The written gospels, therefore, give us Jesus as parable. The change of context from the life of Jesus to the life of the Church leads to a re-interpretation of the parables themselves, but the parabolic force released by Jesus remains in so far as the gospel of Jesus Christ, parable of God, stands permanently as a critical principle subverting world.

The second change was the emergence of christology as a mythical formation establishing world. That was an understandable and fruitful development. We must live in myth. We cannot live in parable alone, though we should live in the tension of myth and parable. Christology was a remarkable achievement of the creative imagination as it strove to express the experience of the transcendent as felt overwhelmingly in the first Christian communities. It co-ordinated a set of sacred images that mediated and expressed transcendence for many generations, producing a transformation of values that again and again broke through the narrow confines of social prejudice and convention. Certainly, traditional christology contains a wealth of meaning that puts it beyond comparison with what George Lindbeck called "the flat, moralistic reasonableness of liberal religion, or the mechanical triviality, superficiality and sensuality of commercialized American secularism."<sup>37</sup>

All the same, the cycle of the imagination has continued its round. There have already been many modifications of christology, leading to a succession of different images of Christ. But we are now experiencing, not summer variations, but the icy barrenness of winter. The sacred images of traditional christology have lost their power for many. People, I think, often wrongly diagnose their unease. They think that their difficulty is a difficulty of believing in the literal truth of the story of Christ, whereas the basic difficulty is that this story no longer shapes their actual, lived experience. If it did, they would not worry about the first question, with its inadequate posing of the problem of interpretation.

The inbuilt obsolescence of traditional christology has indeed become most apparent in the way in which its naive account of the uniqueness of Christ has so far been unable to free itself from an

<sup>37</sup>"The Catholic Crisis," *Commonweal*, 13 February 1976, p. 108.

increasingly untenable, literal exclusiveness of the Christian religion. In the story of the pre-existent Son of God, who became man to redeem all men, Christ is clearly unique and his work definitive for all human history. To deny his uniqueness and finality is to render the story incoherent as a story. But it is the story as a whole that is a limited, relative, figurative expression of the relation of men and women in history with transcendent mystery. And there are other stories.

In a recent article, Maurice Wiles raised the question, "Does christology rest on a mistake?" and answered it in the affirmative.<sup>38</sup> He makes a comparison between christology and the older forms of the doctrine of the creation and the fall. It was thought that the religious meaning of creation and fall was tied to particular events, with a specific divine action of creation, an historical Adam and Eve and their unique actions in history. We see now that it is a mistake to tie the religious content of those doctrines to once-for-all events. Wiles goes on to suggest that it is likewise a mistake to hold that "the full divine character of redemption in Christ could only be maintained if the person and act of the redeemer were understood to be divine in a direct and special sense."<sup>39</sup> The story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is a story designated to illuminate the human story as a whole as a true story of divine redemption.

The question, therefore, we are left with after reading Wiles is whether we can continue to tell the story of Christ, using it to shape our actual, lived experience, while disengaging it from a literal interpretation of unique divine sonship and once-for-all atonement, just as we continue to use the Genesis story without holding that it refers to datable events. The question has not yet been solved, because christology is less manageable than the Genesis story. Hence many feel the need at present to distance themselves from the traditional images in an effort of abstraction.

To question a literal interpretation of the Christ story does not turn all the past christological discussions and controversies into a pointless waste of time. The understanding of a narrative—and christology is basically a narrative—is a complex process. There is the world created by the narrative itself, which constitutes the immanent meaning of the narrative. There is the world of our

<sup>38</sup>This first appeared in *Religious Studies* 6 (1970), 69-76. It was then reprinted in W. W. Sykes and J. P. Clayton, eds., *Christ: Faith and History: Cambridge Studies in Christology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1972), pp. 3-12.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 8.

actual lived experience and real existential possibilities, to which the narrative in some fashion or other refers. To interpret a narrative is to find the appropriate relationship between the world of the narrative itself, its immanent meaning, and the real world of our actuality and possibilities, which provides its reference. That relationship will differ between the case of an historical narrative and the case of a fantasy—to take two extremes as examples. Now, an alteration in the content or immanent meaning of a narrative has repercussions upon its reference. The Church as guardian of the myth, namely of the Christ story, had to protect the narrative against changes that would falsify its reference. For example, docetism in telling the story in a way that denied that Christ was truly a man was declaring that the body was evil and unredeemable. Arianism in making the Logos a creature was in effect excluding the immediacy of our relation to the transcendent. What was at stake in the various christological debates is not always apparent on the surface. We need both to take the debates seriously and to re-examine their implications in the light of later understanding.

People today are trying to meet the problem of christology by altering the content or immanent meaning of the narrative; for example, by excluding the personal pre-existence of Christ and reviving a form of adoptionist or exaltation christology. Since, as New Testament scholarship has shown, there was a plurality of christologies from the beginning, I should not want to exclude the devising of a new christology. Indeed, if christology is again to shape our lived experience, it will have to be modified. But the basic hermeneutical question, having now been raised, demands first to be solved: how does the Christ story as a story refer to the world in which we live? Does it do so as a factual narrative, to be interpreted in a literal fashion? Or, is it a figurative expression of a dimension of the world of human existence that is not patient of literal description? In other words, is it a steno-symbol, with a fixed signification for each element, or is it a tensive symbol, with a fluidity enabling it to stand for a range of concrete experiences and events in the human world?

But this talk of the reference of christology brings us before the question of the reference of sacred images in general. I have said that sacred images express and mediate the sense of mystery. What, then, is mystery? I will define it as positive nothingness.

To explain this, let me distinguish between pre-religious and religious experience. Pre-religious experience is all the feelings,

responses and actions that flow from a negative awareness of human limits or finitude. By a negative awareness I mean a sense of the nothingness surrounding human existence and human meaning. In whatever direction we move when we pursue the objectives or achievements of this world or follow the onward drive of human questioning or meaning, we plunge into an abyss of nothingness, a dark void beyond all humanly apprehensible reality and meaning. There is thus an experience of limits, in the negative sense of the blank ending of the world in which we live. All human lives come to an end, together with all the relationships that bind human beings to one another. Human societies are transient. Every human achievement eventually decays or is destroyed. What is human life and meaning but a group of dying men and women huddled around a candle in a dark night?

The negative sense of nothingness, the experience of the limits of human life and meaning is, I think, pre-religious. It need not be interpreted religiously. It can remain without a religious sequel. Some have derived a nihilistic option from it, accepting and proclaiming a final meaninglessness. Others turn aside from it, so that it remains merely a vague sense of deep unease beneath the surface of everyday preoccupations and activities.

The experience of limits may, however, lead to or—as often in practice—be merged with an experience of the utter reality of what lies beyond those limits. Religious experience is not just a sense of finitude. The nothingness, which remains nothingness in so far as it is still without humanly graspable reality and meaning, is experienced by the religious person as supremely real and a source of bliss and joy. Hence the nothingness becomes a positive nothingness or mystery, the felt presence of an encompassing, incomprehensible reality.

To judge from the witness of more than one religious tradition, religious faith is not the product of any intellectual argument that there must be a reality beyond the limits of the human world, but the result of a transforming response to a felt reality. Despite the absence of humanly apprehensible reality, men and women find themselves strangely drawn towards the nothingness. The vast beyond seems to come forward to meet them, so that it arouses deep positive affections and is experienced as of surpassing value.

What I have given, it must be understood, is an abstract account, based upon a particular interpretive analysis. Religious experience does not exist in the concrete in that purely generic

form. It exists only as mediated by the different images found in the various religious traditions. Even pre-religious experience comes in diverse forms. The points where human beings meet the boundaries of their human world and meaning differ from age to age and from culture to culture. There is no single experience of limits. Likewise, the response to the transcendent in the experience of positive nothingness is linked in the concrete to a wide variety of objects, events and persons as hierophanies. These hierophanies as sacred images have been ordered into a plurality of narratives or myths, the meaning of which has been conceptualized in a variety of doctrines or beliefs. Even when religious experience has been considered generically and analyzed, different analyses have resulted in different general types, such as a feeling of wholeness or totality, a feeling of depth, a sense of awe or of the holy, a feeling of absolute dependence, a sense of ultimate rightness, a strange sense of causeless, objectless joy. In my analysis, the generic form is given as the experience of positive nothingness, because in authentic religious experience as distinct from idolatry all the sacred images must be relativized as pointing beyond themselves and beyond the world of human meaning to transcendent, inapprehensible reality.

Because, then, mediated by sacred images, myths, doctrines, rites and practices, the awareness of mystery, which I have abstracted as the constitutive element in religious experience, occurs only in the context of some scheme of meaning, interpreting and shaping the complex existence of men and women. Religions in the concrete are interpretive systems, ordering the lives of societies and of individuals. Since they are religious systems, they establish a world in relation to ultimate reality as symbolized in a particular fashion and spell out the transformation of values that relationship brings. But as comprehensive schemes of meaning they reach out into all the different realms of human existence and meaning, drawing these into relation with the distinctively religious elements. The religious awareness of mystery is thus embodied in a world of human meaning, which it pervades and animates and which in its turn expresses and mediates it.

The entry of mystery into a world of human meaning is understood religiously as a sacred communication. The very word "mystery" carries the connotation of a secret in process of transmission. Here in a theistic context we meet the concept of a revelation from God, of a body of religious language, whether oral

or written, as being the word of God, a message from God to man. So, in the New Testament, the word "mystery" means the secret purpose of God formerly hidden but now made known in Christ.

At this point Christians want to place their religion apart from others as being in an exclusive sense a divine revelation or at least the definitive revelation. One approach is to admit that God's gift of grace and love is found universally and therefore in people of all religions, but that in other religions (with the exception of Judaism) the gift is wordless, a change in consciousness without an objective communication of an articulate kind. Hence in those religions the various images, myths and doctrines are the result of a purely human process of objectification of the inner experience of a consciousness modified by grace. In the Christian tradition, the argument continues, God does not give himself only in wordless communication of his grace and love. He also discloses himself in the objective order in revelatory events and in the prophetic word interpreting those events and, above all, in the Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ.<sup>40</sup>

There are two objections to this approach. First, there is no discernible difference as regards the processes of religious expression between Christianity and other religions. Students of religion find no difficulty in including Christianity when they study how sacred images originate in the experiences that found a tradition and when they follow the elaboration of such images into myths and doctrines. Second, God's action in revelation should not be conceived as replacing human action or as occurring in gaps left in the human cultural process. To do so would be to insist upon a literalist interpretation of the metaphor of God speaking. Any communication from God will be in and through the activity of human creative imagination in its function of articulating the lived experience of men and women. Consequently, the gift of God's revelation should not be separated from the work of the religious imagination. Belief in God's revelation means that the creativity of the religious imagination is interpreted as a divino-human process; in other words, the belief that the ultimate source of human religious creativity is the transcendent Spirit.

It follows that the process of human history, not just of Christian history, is a mystery in process of revelation. But is not Christ

<sup>40</sup>For an approach along these lines, though with some hesitations and qualifications, see my *Christ and the World Religions* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), pp. 119-23.



the center of that history and Christian revelation, if not the only, at least the definitive revelation? That conviction, in my opinion, blocks the creativity needed if people with religious faith are to play their part in constructing the emergent world order. For that reason, I suggest the following points for reflection.

Christianity is not alone in making an absolute claim; some other religions do so. Considered dispassionately, such claims are simply a somewhat confused expression of the conviction that religious experience is a relationship with the transcendent. To put it in another way, the exclusive claim is a mythical expression of the unconditionality and universal validity intrinsic to religious faith. Thus, in the Christian story, Christ as the embodiment of God's presence on earth is represented as the only-begotten Son of God and thereby as unique. His uniqueness belongs to the context of the story; it cannot be isolated from that figurative, mythical context and made into a literal factual proposition.

It is possible that the Christian tradition has a central, decisive contribution to make in world history. However, to put forward a *prior* claim of that kind savours of ethnocentricity and cultural imperialism. It also runs up against serious difficulties of hermeneutic or epistemological principle, because in effect it attempts to bypass the mediation of history and *praxis* in our coming to the truth. Only in the actual process of the emergence of world order shall we be able to discern the precise role of existing elements.

As far as one can assess the present complex struggle towards convergence in the world, the demands it is making call for a thoroughgoing transformation of the Christian tradition as well as of the other religious traditions. That does not mean that there is no religious truth or that anything goes in matters of religion. The history of religion is not just a history of authentic religious experience and achievement, but of religious aberration. A work of discernment and purification is needed. But the judgment of truth in religion must take account of the figurative nature of religious expression and the relativity of every human world, even when religious.

There is a danger that religious people in their anxiety to give their religious myth a literalness and unchangeability that does not belong to it should simply reinforce the narrow positivism that is destroying our civilization. The vice of positivism is its overlooking of the role of the free, creative imagination in the construction of any human world. Having excluded human creativity and the

striving to embody meaning, ideals and values in reality, positivists then proceed to construct a world on the narrow basis of empirical reason. They fall into the mistake of supposing that the world when taken as merely physical or measurable is the real world, somehow objectively out there, the literally true, and that the world as symbolic and as mediating religious or aesthetic experience is less real. But both worlds arise from an interaction with realities independent of man, and each world is the product of a particular mode of apprehension, together with a constructive or world-making activity by men and women. The difference is that the world as symbolic is apprehended in a total response, at once bodily and spiritual, and the world as purely physical is apprehended by that partial, limited response we call intellectual. (Empiricism is a hypertrophy of intellect, not a respect for materiality or bodiliness.) Further, the world as symbolic is constructed through the poetic, imaginative, sensuous faculties of men and the world as purely physical is the product of reason in its abstract, mathematical and logical functioning. A literalist interpretation of religious myth is the natural ally of positivism, because it represents the same narrow understanding of human life and knowledge.

Likewise, in my opinion, those theologians who proclaimed the coming of a secular age and the end of religion overlooked the role of men and women in creating the human world. Certainly, if a world is constructed on positivistic principles, it will be exclusively secular and without God or religion. But there is no reason why we should accept such a world as a given and every reason from past history and present disorder to indicate that such a world is achieved only by the suppression of much of our humanity. Religious experience is indeed not a universal given in the sense of an element prior to and independent of human creativity. That it is, however, a universal human potentiality and exigency is a far more probable hypothesis than its opposite.

The element of truth in the theological proclamation of an age of secularity is the at least partial loss of power of our traditional sacred images. But if we are to welcome the spring of a fresh religious imagery when it comes, we must not protest the autumnal stripping and winter barrenness. Reflection upon the parabolic role of Jesus may help us in that. Meanwhile, in the contemplative darkness winter brings, we might meditate upon the two areas where renewal is needed because obsolescence is most evident: the acceptance of human autonomy, freedom and creativity against the

smothering of these in a sacred order; and the move from exclusive to inclusive sacred images in their relationship to the plurality of human cultures.

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I am in full agreement with that earlier discussion of the need for critical examination of all the religious traditions in their full complexity of mythical myth, symbols, rituals, mystical techniques, doctrinal beliefs, and normative behaviors. I find no reason to contest Professor Davis's judgment that the traditions we receive are not only places of truth and freedom but also places of untruth and unfreedom. I agree that it is part of the theological task to discriminate within the living tradition. This need for discrimination leads to the hermeneutical task.

The role of creative imagination in the development of the classical worldview and classical christology is a second area that invites response. I want to cite only two elements in his brief explanation of christology that I find both significant and constructive for this group of theologians. First, I agree with Professor Davis that the Christian people and the theological community among them have no choice but to risk raising again the basic hermeneutical question: how does the Christ story refer to the world in which we live? All but a few of us have long outgrown that world in which classical christology was generated, a dualistic world which distinguished and prioritized between things cognitive and things affective, things spiritual and things material, the male and the female, a world which absolutized its distinctions with talk of the essences of things and then exalted and diminished ordinary human beings accordingly.

Secondly, I believe Davis offers the community of Christian believers and Catholic theologians among them strong validation for participating in this work of questioning our entire religious enterprise. Nothing less than the authority of the Lord Jesus

<sup>1</sup> This paper was read at the 1975 Proceedings of the Philosophy of Religion and Theology section of the American Academy of Religion, compiled by James A. McClellan, Jr., pp. 213-28.