

## SEMINAR PAPER

### EXPERIMENTING ON MORALITY

No one whose exposure to Christianity extends beyond its most modern phase can be unaware that the idea of temptation has been for Christians an extremely important one. The traditional moral literature of Christianity, Eastern and Western, Protestant and Catholic, abounds in references to temptation, and hardly less so in theological discourses than in pastoral instructions. Against an abundant background of biblical and patristic references, temptation finds its way with equal ease into the *Summa Theologica* and the *Institutes of Christian Religion*, and is taken as seriously by Luther's *Catechism* as by that of the Council of Trent. I have made no elaborate attempt to map out historically the relative frequency of this idea, but even a superficial view suggests that references to it diminish rapidly in domains of thought influenced strongly by Protestant Liberalism or Catholic Modernism. In more traditional Protestant milieux, as in Catholicism generally, the idea seems to have held its own until recently, when, rather suddenly, it has become a rarity. Many of my Christian church-going undergraduate students (among whom Catholics and Baptists predominate) tell me they recall no discussion of temptation in sermons or religious instructions, and I notice that the word does not appear in the index of the recently published Common Catechism. Yet in my own Catholic church-and-school-going boyhood, temptation was talked about incessantly, to the point of creating an official picture of Christian moral existence as quite simply a program of resisting temptations and repenting as often as one yielded to them. That such a portrayal of moral life can achieve a high degree of psychological and ethical subtlety has been repeatedly demonstrated, perhaps best of all by that most popular of modern Christian moralists, the late C. S. Lewis.<sup>1</sup>

We seem to be witnessing the fairly rapid demise of a once-thriving Christian idea, and it is natural, and may be instructive, to ask why. Did temptation refer to, or necessarily imply some belief or beliefs that are no longer tenable? Or did it refer to some fact or facts that are no longer encountered? Or did it refer to some experience or experiences that are no longer reflected upon? At all events, since I am not aware of any closely equivalent expression that has replaced temptation in Christian vocabulary, I am led to suppose that the word's approach to extinction implies the extinction of certain ideas that were once widely entertained. What were these ideas, and what became of them, and what difference do they make to Christian ethics?

The whole range of ideas associated with temptation is very largely anticipated in the biblical literature. Although the relevant Hebrew

<sup>1</sup> Lewis uses the temptation motif very frequently in many of his writings, but most concentratedly in *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1943).

vocabulary (The noun *maṣṣāh* and the verbs *niṣṣāh* and *bāhan*) found ready equivalents among Greek words (related mostly to *peira* and occasionally to *dokimos*), biblical usage of these words is very different from that of secular Greek. The basic idea is that of trying or attempting in the most general sense. That idea leads quite naturally into the more complex notion of discerning something or demonstrating something by means of trial or attempt, i.e. experimentation, in the simplest sense of that word.

The main features of the idea are nicely conveyed by the familiar biblical metaphor derived from the technology of Palestinian metalsmiths.<sup>2</sup> The metaphor introduces no fewer than five appropriately interrelated points of comparison. First there is the material that is tried or tested. Second there is the fire which is used to try or test it. Third there is the artisan who does the trying or testing. And fourth and fifth are the distinct but closely connected results called respectively assaying and refining. That is, the process both discovers the content of precious metal within the material, and at the same time disengages that valuable content from its surrounding impurities. What the fire accomplishes is both analysis and purification. It is a method of proof which is likewise a method of improvement. "I will refine them and test them," says the Lord to Jeremiah.<sup>3</sup> Or in Isaiah's words: "I have refined you but not like silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction."<sup>4</sup>

In this last respect, as combining the ideas of proof and improvement, this metaphor achieves greater scope than a number of others which might be classed with it in a broader category of biblical metaphors. Common to them all is likening divine judgment to the separating of a mixture into more desirable and less desirable ingredients, as in the familiar references to sifting or winnowing grain, pruning foliage, or separating wheat from tares, fish from flotsam, and sheep from goats.

Inasmuch as the similitude derived from metallurgy represents all the main aspects of the idea of temptation, it may serve to introduce the main sorts of issues raised about that idea. First, there is the subject of the action, the tester, counterpart of the metalsmith. And the question of who it is that tempts or tests. Second, there is the object of the action, counterpart of the complex sample from which metal is to be extracted. And the question of who are tempted or tested. Third, there is the means of the action, counterpart of the furnace or its fire. And the question of how the tempting or testing is carried out. Fourth, there is the analytic or assaying function. And the question of what information tempting or testing discovers. Fifth, there is the refining or improving function. And the question of what good tempting or testing does. The validity of the idea of temptation depends on the plausibility and consistency with which these questions can be answered, and deficiencies in either respect lead naturally to modification or rejection of the idea.

<sup>2</sup> For representative texts, see Ps 66: 20, Jer 6: 27, Zech 13: 9, 1 Pet 1: 7.

<sup>3</sup> Jer 9: 7.

<sup>4</sup> Isa 48: 10.

The earliest theological uses of this idea in the Bible are rooted in covenant theology. The tribulations of the exodus are repeatedly interpreted as testings or temptings.<sup>5</sup> It is God who does the testing and his chosen people who undergo it. The means of their testing are sufferings or dangers of suffering, first from natural perils and afterwards from human hostilities. What is being tested is fidelity or faith, the covenant virtue. And what this means practically is both passive reliance upon God's providence and active obedience to God's commandments.

This fundamental motif of God's testing his people's fidelity is retrojected in Genesis to legends of the patriarchs. The outstanding instance is that of the outstanding patriarch, Abraham, who becomes in Jewish tradition both the paragon of fidelity and the chief paradigm of temptation.<sup>6</sup> Although the terminology of tempting or testing is not used in the creation accounts, it is clearly the temptation motif that contributes theological structure to the garden of Eden narrative, in which the account of a primordial and prototypical temptation is developed with extraordinary psychological subtlety.

It is again the covenant theology that leads to an ironic contrast between God's tempting his people, which is seen as consistent with their respective roles in the covenant relationship, and the people's tempting of God, which is seen as outrageously inconsistent with that relationship and indicative of gross infidelity.<sup>7</sup> What is exhibited by the people's testing of God is precisely their failure of God's testing of them, under the two basic forms of that failure, distrust and disobedience.

Although apocalyptic literature presents temptation in a transformed eschatological context and surrounds it with mythological innovations, the original idea clearly persists, of an ordeal that tests fidelity and thereby furnishes experimental confirmation of divine judgment.<sup>8</sup> There is, however, one respect in which the characteristic mythology of apocalyptic must be referred to in even a summary account of biblical thought concerning temptation. This mythological aspect corresponds to the moral dualism of apocalyptic, and its most vivid expression in terms of the satanic or diabolical. For our purposes, this factor may be sufficiently considered by recalling how the Satan's role develops in contexts pertaining to temptation.

Satan's grand entry into biblical literature is in Job, a book whose whole dramatic structure is determined by the motif of temptation. In the prologue we find the Satan introduced as one who conceives and executes the whole design of the temptation, but does so as a kind of heavenly functionary, who depends entirely on divine authorization. What the prologue clearly implies is its author's reluctance to conceive God wholeheartedly as Job's tempter. As a result the God of the prologue is portrayed as a well-meaning, soft-headed potentate, pleased

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Exod 16: 4, 20: 20.

<sup>6</sup> According to an early tradition, Abraham underwent ten distinct temptations; see Avot 5: 3; Testament of Joseph 2: 7. The specific tests vary in different rabbinical listings.

<sup>7</sup> See Exod 17: 1-7, Num 14: 22, Deut 6: 16.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Rev 2: 10, 3: 10.

with his exemplary worshipper in the land of Uz, but readily persuadable that a kind of dirty-work foreign to his dispositions is judicially expedient.

Behind this naive anthropomorphism, one detects the mythological effort to ease a tension in the writer's mind between his understanding of temptation and his understanding of God. Although belief in God's unqualified sovereignty prevents him from making Job's temptation independent of God, he does all he can to keep God at an antiseptic distance from the outrageous ordeal by having Satan think it up and carry it out. Like Job himself in the poetic dialogue, the author of the prologue is scandalized by the idea of a God who makes it atrociously hard for the best of men to trust him. However, no such misgivings trouble the author of the poetic dialogue, who accordingly makes no reference to satanic agency, and precisely stresses that implication of divine responsibility which the prologue seeks to minimize.<sup>9</sup>

The use of Satan to extenuate God's complicity in temptation is well exemplified by the two texts describing David's decision to take a census of the people. According to 2 Samuel, that action was not only suggested but ordered by God himself, angry with his people and seeking a pretext for severity.<sup>10</sup> But in the chronicler's retelling of the story it becomes Satan who, "setting himself up against Israel, incited David to count the people."<sup>11</sup> Once again, instincts of theodicy lead to narrative adjustments. Similar passing of the buck of temptation to Satan is exemplified elsewhere in Jewish literature, testifying to a strong retention of the idea that we are tempted, combined with a strong revulsion from the idea that God is our tempter.

The placing of Satan somewhere between God and humanity in the context of temptation obviously can explain nothing of fundamental theological importance. It is monotheism's flirtation with dualism in the interests of theodicy, a form of mythological sophistry. A Satan who tempts by divine authorization cannot alter the implication that God is our tempter. And a conception of human sin as elicited by satanic urges only transposes the simple question of why people sin into the more complex one of why they accede to satanic promptings. As long as one's understanding of temptation presupposes both divine uniqueness and human freedom, bringing in Satan can never be more, theologically speaking, than a diversionary tactic or rhetorical device.

Although the introduction of Satan in the role of tempter is best understood as expressing critical misgivings over the idea of a temptitious God, it is only in the later wisdom literature that references to the idea of temptation become explicitly interpretative. Proverbs retains the traditional idea that "the crucible is for silver and the furnace for gold and the Lord tries hearts."<sup>12</sup> Ecclesiastes gives the idea a characteristi-

<sup>9</sup> Significantly, what the chastened Job's final confession acknowledges is precisely the divine omnipotence: Job 42: 2.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Sam 24: 1.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Chr 21: 1.

<sup>12</sup> Prov 17: 3.

cally cynical twist, observing of "the sons of men that God is testing them to show that they are but beasts."<sup>13</sup> Wisdom of Solomon moves the traditional idea, of temptation as providing evidence for divine judgment, into the context of hellenistic belief in a spiritual immortality—thus supplying a handle for later Catholic theories of a post-mortem purgatory.<sup>14</sup> A later passage in the same book represents the trials of the exodus as instructive rather than probational experiences, and this notion of temptation as a divine educative process is taken up vigorously by that remarkable and neglected sage, Jesus ben Sirach.<sup>15</sup>

In the book of Ecclesiasticus testing becomes an essential element of Wisdom's tutelage, and for that reason it is implied that the tests will not be failed as long as fear of the Lord is preserved.<sup>16</sup> The possibility of failure is predicated on human freedom, which this author affirms with unprecedented clarity and emphasis, while at the same time relating it to tradition by referring to the Deuteronomic theme of a life-and-death option posed by the covenant and its commandments.<sup>17</sup>

With Ecclesiasticus, there is a resolute shift of emphasis from the aspect of testing to that of refinement, from the proving function to the improving function of temptation. Moreover, the idea of testing is subordinated to that of refinement not in emphasis only, but in its very conception. For here the crude anthropomorphism of divine judicial investigation has been to a great extent left behind. The information derived from testing is not for divine but for human enlightenment. What can be seen from one point of view as divine moral experiments are perceived from another and more practical point of view as simply human moral experience, the experience, that is, of significant moral options. The morality in question remains throughout a religious morality, inasmuch as the standard of moral values is identified with divine law, and the making of moral choices is supervised and assisted by divine Wisdom.

It might be suggested that in Ecclesiasticus, and elsewhere in the wisdom literature, the mythology of a misanthropic Satan is in important respects replaced by the mythology of a philanthropic Wisdom. Significantly in this respect, the sages' functional counterpart of Satan, Dame Folly, never becomes more than a vivid figure of speech, while her antithesis, Lady Wisdom, acquires through ever-intensified realism a virtually hypostatic character. Thus the background figure of the cynical tempter gives way to that of the sympathetic tutor, whose very severities are compassionate and constructive, judicious rather than judicial. The course of testing in human life is envisaged not as a sequence of elimination trials, but as a sort of programmed learning, a providential curriculum for progressive acquirement of wisdom.

Ecclesiasticus thus presents an account of moral life that has on one level much in common with classical and Enlightenment moralizing.

<sup>13</sup>Eccles 3: 18.

<sup>14</sup>Wis 2: 23-3: 9.

<sup>15</sup>Wis 11: 8-10.

<sup>16</sup>See, for example, Eccles 2: 1; 4: 17; 33: 1.

<sup>17</sup>Ecclus 15: 11-20; compare Deut 30: 19-20.

Human moral perfectability is not in question. But the principle of moral perfection is sought not in the nature of human reason but in the grace of divine Wisdom. The world of experience is the school of morality, but its lessons can be learned only through docility to the divine tutor and adherence to the divine text of the Law. The hardest of these lessons are appropriately designated temptations or testings. Nevertheless, lessons they remain, designed for the learner's good and guaranteed by the tutor on the condition of docility. Wisdom is the divine Mistress. Temptation is the cost of discipleship. And as Wisdom's existential guidance increasingly occupies the foreground whence the Law withdraws increasingly towards the background, biblical morality moves interestingly in the direction of contextual ethics.<sup>18</sup>

The most obvious trouble with such an account of morality, as with those classical and Enlightenment accounts it has been said to resemble, is that its understanding of temptation harmonizes so much better with ideal dogmas than with what some people, at least, perceive to be everyday life. Understanding temptations merely as rigorous lessons in God's school of hard knocks would scarcely satisfy an Augustine or a Luther, a Pascal or a Kierkegaard. And rabbinical literature tends to confirm a presumption that such characters did not lack counterparts in Judaism. Even with particular divine tutelage supplementing general divine legislation, morality did not always seem achievable by docility and diligence. For all that they might fear the Lord and hearken unto Wisdom, human beings continued to see what was better and approve it, only to do what was worse. Knowledge did not prove to be virtue even when God imparted it. Flesh persisted in lusting against the spirit. Apparently there was indeed another law that dwelt in their members, at war with the law in their minds.

Christianity seems to have been always familiar, and sometimes fairly obsessed, with the idea of a general perversity in human beings, by which their moral choices are biased against the direction of God's Wisdom and the demands of God's Law. The Christian theological term for it is concupiscence, from the Latin rendering of *epithumia*, whose many occurrences in the New Testament are usually rendered in terms of desiring, coveting or lusting. Whereas most of these references are to quite particular cravings, some of which have no moral overtones, what concerns our subject is the general sense often implied of an habitual human propensity tending to pervert moral choice. An equivalent idea assumed great importance in Rabbinic Judaism where, under the name of *yēzer*, it established itself permanently as a fundamental concept of Jewish religious ethics. Thus the author of a modern Jewish article on sin can simply state in the name of his tradition that "sin is caused by the evil inclination (*yēzer hā-ra*), the force in man which drives him to gratify his instincts and ambitions."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup>With regard to the "ethical" character of this literature, see G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), chapters 5 and 13.

<sup>19</sup>L. Jacobs, "Sin," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* Vol. 14 (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), p. 1592.

Although this general idea is not conspicuous in the anthropology one can discover in the Old Testament, rabbinic discussions of it are regularly referred to two classical loci of Genesis, one just preceding and the other just following the account of the deluge.<sup>20</sup> In the first, an irate God was prompted to exterminate every human being because "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." But in the second, a repentant God renounces such drastic measures for the remarkable reason that "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." Thus the same idea of the *yēzer* is successively interpreted as the offense of human wickedness and as a kind of excuse for human wickedness. It is envisaged first as an intolerable moral defect, and second as an inherent psychological disposition which makes human immorality not so intolerable after all. The curious ethical ambiguity of these texts, implying a moral ambivalence in the idea itself, has had a long history in Jewish thought, closely paralleled by Christian thought about concupiscence.<sup>21</sup>

The fact that these parallel lines of thought concerning religious morality remained separate is due not only to the cultural insulation of Christianity from Judaism, but also to the fact that Christianity, mainly on the strength of Augustine's anti-Pelagian exegesis of Romans, adopted a dogma of innate human sinfulness somehow inherited from that incurred by Adam through his transgression. Hence, even as for Jews concupiscence was becoming the last word in explanations of sin, for Christians it was becoming at best the second last word, to be explained in turn by the Adamic heritage of unrighteousness. Thus in rabbinical Jewish perspective, Adam's guilty act has itself to be explained by the *yēzer*. Whereas in Augustinian-Christian perspective, concupiscence finds its explanation in Adam's guilty act. On the whole, this difference has much to do with the respective simplicity and complexity, coherence and paradox of Jewish and Christian deliverances on the subject of sin.

Leaving aside the complication of its relationship to original sin, the idea of concupiscence remains a common tenet of biblical religious traditions. Among Christians, and to much less extent among Jews, the idea came in for reinterpretation, under neo-Platonic and Stoic influence, in terms of a body-soul dualism that contrasted unruly passions of the flesh with orderly reasonings of the spirit. But important as they may be in other respects, these philosophical variations make small practical difference to the persistent and general idea that attributes to concupiscence the peculiar poignancy and potency of what is commonly meant by temptation.

Although documentation for the inter-testamentary period is inadequate to prove it, it seems likely that the kind of thinking about the *yēzer* that we find in later rabbinical writings was already current in the New Testament period. In any case, a number of New Testament passages express similar ideas without in the least suggesting that they

<sup>20</sup> Gen 6: 5-7; 8: 21.

<sup>21</sup> For an excellent survey of uses to which the rabbis put this idea, see E. E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975), pp. 471-83.

are original ideas. Even Paul's argument that he "should not have known what it is to covet if the Law had not said, 'You shall not covet!'" appears to be a polemic against a view epitomized in the rabbinic saying that God "created the evil inclination, and he has created the Torah, its antidote."<sup>22</sup> Indeed that whole famous passage of Paul's in Romans 7 is an impassioned declaration of the power of the *yēzer* in the context of temptation, expressed in terms of a hellenistic dualism that the later rabbis were to discard.

Where *epithumia* is used in a moral context by New Testament writers it is nearly always understood pejoratively. This is often the case with *yēzer* among the rabbis but they distinguish between the evil inclination (*yēzer hā-ra*) and the good inclination (*yēzer hā-tov*) and appear to differ as to whether these terms refer to separate entities or to distinct aspects of the same reality. And indeed Paul does use the one verb *epithumei* for both clauses of his statement that "the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the spirit are against the flesh."<sup>23</sup> Among the rabbis, this sense of ambivalence stimulated much thought, out of which emerged the idea of a *yēzer* that is the very dynamism of all human striving, whether good or bad, so that its elimination, far from being prerequisite for a good life, would mean the extinction of all that we experience as vitality. Accordingly, a number of modern writers have equated the rabbis' understanding of *yēzer* with Freud's understanding of libido, as essentially unbiased psychic energy which can be directed in morally opposite ways.<sup>24</sup> Similar ideas are not absent from Christian reflection, although historically, doctrinaire Augustinianism in both Lutheran and Thomistic forms prejudiced the issue from the time of the Reformation. Nevertheless, Tertullian, who apparently introduced *concupiscentia* into the technical jargon of Latin theology, treats it as morally neutral, and assumes that it was part of the human makeup of Christ himself.<sup>25</sup> This understanding is defended against Augustine not only by the Pelagian Julian,<sup>26</sup> but also by the Antiochene Theodore of Mopsuestia<sup>27</sup> and, in the Middle Ages, by the scholastic tradition originated by Duns Scotus, which carried the debate with the Thomists into the Council of Trent.<sup>28</sup> In recent years some modern theologians have tried once again to establish a reinterpretation of concupiscentia as intrinsically natural and morally neutral.<sup>29</sup>

That the evil inclination is the source of temptation is a commonplace of rabbinical writings, one of which even identifies Satan with

<sup>22</sup>Rom 7: 7; Sifrei Deut: 45, 103.

<sup>23</sup>Gal 5: 17.

<sup>24</sup>N. W. Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin* (London: Longmans, 1929) considers the Jungian revision of Freud's idea of libido to be more amenable to this comparison.

<sup>25</sup>P.L. 2.2, XVI, 715.

<sup>26</sup>P.L. 45.10, II, 1067-89.

<sup>27</sup>P.G. 66, XV, 991.

<sup>28</sup>H. Jedin, *A History of the Council of Trent*, Vol. 2 (St. Louis: Herder, 1957), pp. 144-51.

<sup>29</sup>See, for example, K. Rahner, "The Theological Concept of Concupiscentia," *Theological Investigations*, I (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), 347-82.



the *yēzer hā-ra*.<sup>30</sup> Understanding concupiscence similarly as the force behind temptation is clearly implied at a number of points in the New Testament. But it is the letter of James which asserts the point didactically. That letter begins by telling its readers to rejoice when they meet "various trials."<sup>31</sup> The trials are then interpreted as testings of faith, which produce a "steadfastness" whose full effect is perfection.<sup>32</sup> The choice of a term like steadfastness to express the happy outcome of the trials suggests that they are conceived primarily rather as sufferings to be endured than as actions to be performed, but it does not justify the assumption sometimes made that only actual persecution is here envisaged. This teaching is in the spirit of the later wisdom writers, like the advice which immediately follows, to ask God confidently for wisdom. A decidedly eschatological note is sounded a few verses later, when a beatitude is pronounced on "the man who endures trial" because "when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life," a passage similar to that referred to earlier from Wisdom of Solomon.<sup>33</sup>

But at this point, rather surprisingly for a writer who has been referring to trials so favorably, he warns that no one may "say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one."<sup>34</sup> The obvious rejoinder, If God does not tempt, who does? is then answered by a statement typical of the rabbinical doctrine already referred to. "Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire."<sup>35</sup> This desire is then presented in a wholly bad light, as that which "when it has conceived, gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown brings forth death."<sup>36</sup> Presumably it is to explain why temptation, being based on such malignant desire, cannot be from God, that the author then asserts that "every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above."<sup>37</sup> Although if such a connection is intended, it is odd that "every" good gift rather than "only good gifts" are said to come from above; but be that as it may.

Here, then, is the Bible's last and, for all its brevity, fullest explicit pronouncement on the subject of temptation. The Revised Standard Version (which I have consistently cited) here renders the same Greek first as trial or test, and then as temptation, to express the sudden shift of perspective in this passage. We have first the idea of a testing of faith, so beneficial and salvific that it surely deserves to be classed among the good and perfect gifts which come from above. But just afterwards we have the idea of a tempting, derived not from God but from a human desire that issues in sin and death. The passage taken as whole, answers questions about temptation in a way that raises other questions. There are trials which, being wholly salutary, are occasions for rejoicing and

<sup>30</sup> B. B. 16a; elsewhere in the Talmud, it is identified with the angel of death: Suk: 52b.

<sup>31</sup> Jas 1:2.

<sup>32</sup> Jas 1: 3-4.

<sup>33</sup> Jas 1: 12; compare Wis 3: 4-8.

<sup>34</sup> Jas 1: 13.

<sup>35</sup> Jas 1: 14.

<sup>36</sup> Jas 1: 15.

<sup>37</sup> Jas 1: 17.

presumably God-sent. And there are temptations, not God-sent, but arising from a personal desire which spawns mortal sinfulness. To the two most obvious questions, James offers no response. First, how do those good, God-sent trials work, if not on the basis of human desire? And second, where could that human desire which produces ungodly temptations come from, if not from God? The rabbinical writers, as we have seen, found a principle of compatibility for such ideas in their conception of the *yēzer*, created by God, but morally ambivalent, and having to be deflected from its evil turnings by the remedy of the Law. This conception achieves further adequacy by adding such teachings as those of Ecclesiasticus, which relate moral ambivalence to human freedom, and correction of perversity to the acquirement of wisdom.

My first conclusion of this essay is that such a synthesis as the one just outlined, nowhere fully expressed in the Bible, represents the most adequate account of temptation that can be given by a theological ethics which confines itself to biblical conceptions.

My second conclusion is that although the Bible does not arrive at any such synthesis, it not only provides the basic ingredients, but also implies procedures of thought which lead the sympathetic reader towards such a synthesis. It begins from the simple realization of tension between belief in one benevolently governing God, and experiences of life that make God's benevolence hard to trust and his government hard to obey. It looks for one kind of mediating factors to sufficiently separate that kind of God from those kinds of experiences, and finds them in a mythology of Satan, a philosophy of freedom, and a psychology of desire. It looks for another kind of mediating factors, to sufficiently involve that kind of God with those kinds of experiences, and finds them in the general guidance of the Law and the particular guidance of divine Wisdom or its Christian counterpart the Spirit. And finally it looks for justifying factors, to reconcile that kind of God with those kinds of experiences, and finds them in a mythology of judicial testing and an asceticism of moral and religious maturation. The two factors I have called mythological are especially hard to reconcile with the God of Judaism. The figure of Satan threatens monotheism, and the notion of judicial testing threatens divine omniscience. Since the explanatory functions of these factors are readily transferred to others, notably freedom, desire and asceticism, there is a *prima facie* case for a certain amount of demythologizing. Once that demythologizing is done, the synthesis referred to is largely established.

My third and final conclusion—which would be the logical point of departure for a constructive essay to follow this reconstructive one—is that the synthetic conception of temptation towards which the Bible leads is worth holding onto. Part of the case for preserving it arises from the mere fact that its presence in Judeo-Christian traditions is so ancient and persistent. To ignore it is to be ignorant of a major motif in our religious thought which has often interacted with other motifs no less important. Even if it made no sense, it would be important to expose its nonsense. And if, as I think, it makes sense, though by no means perfect sense, it is important to elucidate it and explore its implications.

But this idea of temptation deserves attention not only because of where it has been historically, but where it is conceptually, at a major intersection in the ways of Judeo-Christian thought. It is an idea which constrains us to examine relationships among theology, morality, psychology and ethics, and makes us hesitate to strip moral choices of too much reality by reducing them to ethical dilemmas, detached from both the theological and anthropological implications.

It is interesting to observe that even as references to temptation have been vanishing from the indices of religious literature, they have been multiplying in those of psychological literature, evoking a whole pattern of experimentation in which temptation has become a technical term that is an exact secular counterpart of the more immanent aspects of its biblical meaning. The famous Milgram experiments were widely appreciated for their satanic flavor, but lots of humbler laboratories have been staging all sorts of temptations, calling them precisely that.<sup>38</sup> If one adds the technical and theoretical literature on brain-washing, propaganda and advertising, it becomes evident that temptation on a larger social scale also attracts considerable psychological attention. In the same connection, one might mention increasing criticism of studies of moral development associated with Kohlberg, which resolutely ignore the role of affective propensities on both the formation and the implementation of moral judgments.<sup>39</sup> Much of what is said in this connection is almost a paraphrase of Aristotle's common-sense objections to Socratic moral intellectualism, or even of Romans 7. All in all, there would seem to be little doubt that if what we have come to call the scientific study of religion should take up the theme of temptation, it would find plenty of relevant material.

The idea of temptation also has interesting applications in the realm of law. A recent student of the history of penal institutions brings this out convincingly with respect to a practice that has only recently lost legal respectability. "Torture," he concludes, "was a strict judicial game. And, as such, it was linked to the old tests, or trials—ordeals, judicial duels, judgments of God—that were practised in accusatory procedures long before the techniques of the Inquisition. . . . If the patient is guilty, the pains that it imposes are not unjust: but it is also a mark of exculpation if he is innocent."<sup>40</sup> In this connection, an extensive history might be compiled of the institutionalized uses of temptation by the infliction of pain, quite in the manner of Job's Satan, not in criminal processes only, but also in a vast array of initiatory ordeals employed by primitive tribes and by post-primitive military, academic, religious and fraternal societies.

<sup>38</sup> A brief survey of this kind of experimentation is provided by D. Wright, *Psychology of Moral Behaviour* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971), ch. 3.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, J. Aronfreed, "Moral Development from the Standpoint of a General Psychological Theory," in T. Lickona, ed., *Moral Development and Behavior* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), pp. 54-69.

<sup>40</sup> M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon, 1977), p. 40.

Mention must also be made of a point of view from which law is viewed as temptatious in quite another sense than that of Paul's idea that prohibitions stimulate concupiscence. Thus a very distinguished figure in modern jurisprudence commends legal prohibitions as testing by their sanctions the credibility of moral opinions which oppose them. "When such opinions accumulate enough weight," he observes, "the law must either yield or it is broken. In a democratic society . . . there will be a strong tendency for it to yield—not to abandon all defenses so as to let in the horde, but to give ground to those who are prepared to fight for something that they prize. To fight may be to suffer. A willingness to suffer is the most convincing proof of sincerity. Without the law there would be no proof. The law is the anvil on which the hammer strikes."<sup>41</sup> On such a view, the evolution of morally enlightened law depends on the survival of the fittest, the fitness of moral opinions being determined by the capacity of those who hold them to stand up under the law's punishment. The seed of legal reform, it would appear, is the blood of martyrs, and not only as a matter of fact but as a matter of jurisprudence.

But there are jobs in this field for theology, no less than for behavioral and ethical studies. Karl Barth is certainly right, on biblical grounds, in insisting that "it needs faith to participate in temptation."<sup>42</sup> That is, temptation in its traditional religious sense is always understood as being against—or as testing—faith. The inadequacy of Roman Catholicism's scholastic understanding of faith is visible in its moral theologians' tendency to present it as merely one in a list of virtues against which one might be tempted. And yet obviously the Bible does envisage, even in the account of Jesus' temptations, a variety of specific objectives for temptatious inducement or deterrence. If these data are consistent, one has to conclude that, and ought to explain how, temptations to all sorts of things are reductively temptations against faith. Thus, exploring the idea of temptation might offer a fresh way of broaching notoriously many-sided questions of the relationship between faith and works, or between religion and ethics, or among immorality, sin and infidelity.

Closely related to the question of temptation's relationship to faith is that of its relationship to God. Here again, the biblical material, critically synthesized, supports Barth's assertion that "temptation is a divine work."<sup>43</sup> Consistently with his disdain for natural theology, Barth seems interested only in why God does it and how faith responds to it. But one who conceives theology more broadly may wish to inquire further, how God does it, and how his doing it can be justified. Here, considerations of temptation invite reexamination of the kind of thinking behind Schleiermacher's refusal to respond either negatively or evasively to questions about divine causality of sin.<sup>44</sup> Of the theologians I

<sup>41</sup> P. Devlin, *The Enforcement of Morals* (London: Oxford, 1965), p. 116.

<sup>42</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II, 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), p. 247.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, Vol. I (New York: Harper, 1963), pp. 325-41.

know, the most penetrating of this problem is Reinhold Niebuhr, himself greatly indebted to Kierkegaard. For Niebuhr, "the temptation to sin lies . . . in the human situation itself" wherein "man as spirit transcends the natural and temporal process in which he is involved" so that "his freedom is the basis of his creativity but it is also his temptation."<sup>45</sup> In tune with my earlier suggestion is Niebuhr's insistence that "the full complexity of the psychological facts which validate the doctrine of original sin must be analyzed first in terms of the relation of temptation to the inevitability of sin."<sup>46</sup>

Finally, it may be that even ascetical approaches to temptation, prominent in monastic traditions and Christian borrowings from Stoicism, but widely scorned since the Reformation, may be finding their way back through a side door that has been opened by interest in Eastern religions and especially Hindu and Buddhist conceptions of yoga.

These remarks make no pretensions of outlining a reliable prospectus for future work. They are meant only to suggest that some new looks at some of the old ideas about temptation might open to students of traditional and fundamental aspects of Judeo-Christian ethics vistas that are both broad and deep.

JAMES GAFFNEY  
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<sup>45</sup>R. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I (New York: Scribners, 1964), p. 251.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*