

SMALL HEARTS AND ULTIMATE POWERS A Response to William Spohn

When Roger Haight originally invited me to respond to Bill Spohn's paper, I said I couldn't possibly do so: "I'm not Catholic and, anyway, I don't think Jesus has anything much to do with ethics." Exercising exemplary jesuitical logic, Roger accepted my reasons as perfectly good, valid, and pertinent but disputed my assessment of their bearing. Carefully and fairly examined, he said, they were clearly reasons for accepting the opportunity rather than refusing it. So, I am here to raise questions about premises.

What I meant (or thought I meant) when I said that Jesus doesn't have anything to do with ethics was that I hold ethics to be an essentially autonomous discipline deriving from the exigencies of life in common—it is a function of what Hannah Arendt calls worldliness and plurality.¹ If all memory of Jesus were magically erased from the Western cultural record, Western human beings would still be moral beings, and there would still be spirited exchanges about ethical problems and dilemmas. One of the war horse empirical arguments of atheism is that religious people are not demonstrably better, morally, than other people; indeed, quite frequently religious people are rather worse, morally, than other people. Of course, we would have to examine what criteria of "religious" are functioning here and what criteria of "moral," but fine-tuning the terms doesn't much alter the point. Jesus is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for ethical reflection or moral virtue. Virtue and salvation are not, after all, the same thing.

I do not, however, number myself among those who hold that *reason* constitutes the necessary and sufficient condition of ethical reflection and moral virtue. I grant, on the contrary, that at bottom certain rationally undemonstrable bedrock values function in all human lives. If one names these bedrock values "faith," then the moral life surely derives, in some deep sense, from a person's faith and is unintelligible apart from that faith. These bedrock values both reflect and imply beliefs about "the way things actually are." While I am not embarrassed to talk about "the way things actually are," I am prepared to admit that "the way things actually are" is problematic in at least two senses: (1) I grant that the complexity of "what is the case" is inexhaustible and, in its depths, mysterious (no one person and no one community can know it exhaustively or incontestably) and (2) I am convinced that while some dimensions of reality stand obdurately over against us, other dimensions of reality (including what used

¹Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) 7-11.

to be called "the nature of man") are dependent upon our willing participation and are constructed differently in different times and places.

So I was going to come before you to make the case—with due acknowledgment of my debt to H. Richard Niebuhr and James Gustafson—that Jesus has little to do with normative ethics however much he may have to do with the faith of the Christian and with the Christian's convictions concerning "the way things actually are." I had it in mind to argue that although these primordial beliefs about *what is* and *what matters* constitute the formal conditions of possibility of there being moral discourse and ethical reflection at all, the material house of ethics (which has to do with the regulation of human relationships and the preservation of social order) is erected and maintained in a more or less autonomous fashion according to the requirements of social life as those are instantiated in social practices and discernible by reflective thought.

Arguing from this point of view, I would not go nearly so far as Spohn has gone in insisting on the place of Jesus in moral reflection (not even in the moral reflection of Christians). Nonetheless, if I were going to make a place for Jesus in the sphere of ethics, I would make it more or less where Spohn has—namely, in the domain of character development: the forming and the education of the sensibility within a particular community. These bedrock commitments, which are the substance of personal faith, structure the character to the extent that they establish the range of possible (and probable) responses the agent will typically entertain.

Yet all the time I was busily assembling this argument in my bright clearing, something shadowy kept moving in the thickets at the woody margins—something indecipherable, discomfiting, and disruptive. At first I thought it was just the stubborn discontent that always accompanies conceptual muddiness, so I worked harder to distinguish effectively between the socio-moral and the religio-moral, and I worked harder to specify the essential but limited role of the supramoral in funding an ethics that nonetheless functions in its own public and independent way. But the turmoil in the thickets only grew more pronounced. By the time I was finally able to identify the prowling menace as resentment, I was also able to identify its cause, and I saw that I would not be able to get through this assignment without admitting and examining the fatal attraction the Sermon on the Mount exerts on me. When I said to Roger Haight, "I don't think Jesus has anything much to do with ethics," I was not (as both he and I thought at the time) confessing some established convictions concerning the autonomy of ethics; I was voicing some deep denial of the explicitly normative vision taught by this man Jesus and preserved in the scriptural accounts. What I really meant was that I find it difficult to impossible to use the life and teachings of Jesus ethically because I find the ethics advanced in his name to be a shocking, unreasonable, irresponsible, and humanly impossible ethics. Whereas I began by thinking that I would not be able to go so far as Spohn goes in affirming the pertinence of Jesus for ethics, I learned from the discovery of the depth of my resentment that

I actually go much further. I do attribute to Jesus a quantity of powerful, specific, normatively imperative teachings about conduct that, to be taken seriously, would have to be acknowledged to be binding on our activity today. But taking these normative teachings seriously, I find them insupportable. I can't live with the Sermon on the Mount and I have no Jesus without it. This set of teachings is, I confess, more of a scandal and offense to me than the cross itself. Perhaps I am alone in this. I wonder whether I am.

Ernst Troeltsch builds the whole massive edifice of *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* on Christian efforts to deal with Matthew 5-7. He doesn't say this straight out, but when you stop and look closely at chapter 1, it is easy to see that the problematic teachings which will give endless grief to the churches are the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.²

Günther Bornkamm has catalogued the evasions by means of which Christians over the centuries have tried to domesticate the "menacing" "volcano" of these severe imperatives:

They all aim at limiting its application, they all contain a characteristic "only." Jesus' demands . . . apply only to the historical assumptions of an age not yet mechanised and under an apocalyptic view of history; they demand only a change of mind; they are to be understood only as a mirror of sin, only as a description of the new man who is Jesus Christ alone. This manifold "only" is obviously highly suspect. Again and again it became a shock absorber, which made the real meeting with Jesus' word bearable and therefore illusory, and which, in advance, dissolved this meeting into historical and theological reflection.³

What is it that makes the ethic taught in these chapters so unbearable, so menacing, so scandalous, so offensive? Well, to start with: its absolutism, its perfectionism, and its falsity. Let me say a brief word about each complaint in turn.

(1) *Absolutism*. Max Weber, in "Politics as a Vocation," draws a famous contrast between an ethics of responsibility and an ethics of ultimate ends or an absolute ethics. The absolute ethics of the Sermon on the Mount "is uncondition-

²Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2 vols., trans. Olive Wyon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931, 1960) 1:51-64. This section ends with this passage: "Before this idea [viz., that followers of Jesus are summoned to prepare for 'the glory of God's final victory' by establishing 'a purely religious fellowship of love' (1:61)] could become influential, however, the religious-sociological idea itself needed to be much more stable and fully developed than it was in the Gospel, where it was dimly perceived as a sublime and stern, but loosely defined, ideal about the seriousness of preparation for the coming of the Kingdom of God, and which later on no Christian religious organization has ever been able to take over and carry forward, as it was first preached in the Gospel in heroic greatness and childlike freedom" (1:64).

³Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Irene and Fraser McLuskey with James M. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960) 224-25.

al and unambiguous: give what thou hast—absolutely everything.”⁴ It is characteristic of an absolute ethics that it “leaves the results with the Lord,” “just does not *ask* for ‘consequences,’ ” and denies moral ambiguity by insisting on purity of deed and intention.⁵ The ethics of responsibility, in contrast, assumes responsibility for combatting evil in the world rather than leaving it to the Lord, takes account of consequences, and undertakes to live reasonably with moral ambiguity. While Weber does not patently reject absolutist ethics, he clearly believes that ethics of this variety entails and engenders grave dangers in the domain of human well being.

The explicit ethics of the Gospel narratives is absolutist in another sense as well. I take it to be the case that the moral life is, within the conditions of finitude, very much an affair of achieving balances. All goods cannot be had simultaneously and to their full measure. Moral wisdom is the ability to constellate goods in the optimum balance—that is, in such a way that all commensurate goods are maximized to the extent that circumstances allow and none is neglected utterly. It seems to me that we do, in actual practice, consistently measure the well-lived life in terms of the balance that the person manages to achieve. The teachings of Jesus offer us no aid in the difficult matter of balancing goods; rather, a limited number of goods are held out as the only goods, and we are counseled to pursue these goods at unlimited cost to other goods. It is an ethics tailor-made for extremists. That the truly devout are so often viewed as fanatics is not merely the passing prejudice of an excessively rationalistic age.

(2) *Perfectionism*. Depth psychologists as different as Sigmund Freud and Erich Neumann agree that the Christian ethic is a more or less fanciful and wholly disastrous invention which cavalierly disregards the real limits and liabilities of the human psyche. It is, they argue, an ethic that frames as imperative demands requirements that no human being is constitutionally able to satisfy. The mind simply breaks under the weight of such requirements—or it takes refuge in lies. This ethic contributes to mental illness (Freud) and is a powerful, though unrecognized, source of evil in the world (Neumann).⁶

⁴Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946) 119.

⁵*Ibid.*, 120.

⁶For Freud’s views, see: Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1961). Freud represents religion in various ways in this volume: as a means to achieving submission to unhappiness (31-32), as a system of thought which at least has the virtue of acknowledging guilt (82-83), as a source of “extreme intolerance” (61), and as a “misconception of human nature” (90). The command “to love one’s neighbour as oneself” is discussed on p. 59 (“nothing else runs so strongly counter to the original nature of man”) and p. 90

(3) *Falsity*. Clearly Freud and Neumann are arguing that the Christian ethic is a false ethic. In their view, it represents a theory about potential human behavior which can now be recognized to be incompatible with known and indisputable facts concerning both the human mind and the dynamics of individual and group interactions. There is, however, a second sense in which this ethic can be argued to be false. It supposes that in the perfected human community, all interests will be in harmony—that conflicts are always the consequence of a failure of virtue. It seems to me that there are very good reasons for doubting that this is a reliable or sustainable picture of “the way things are.” The better we come to understand the ways in which systems function, the less able we are to sustain the notion of happy equilibrium in nature or anywhere else. The more clearly we grasp the significance of the human condition of plurality, the less able we are to imagine unity of intention.

So it is no wonder that Christians have been, both late and soon, so busy about setting limits to the seriousness of Jesus. Of all these strategies, that of Reinhold Niebuhr seems to me to be the most honest in admitting the undeniable. The ethics of Jesus, Niebuhr says, presents to us an “impossible possibility.”⁷ It must be taken with unbending seriousness on its own terms, and it must be recognized to be utterly impossible. In effect, Niebuhr raises the teachings of

(“impossible to fulfill”—a demand that produces “a revolt . . . or a neurosis”). For Neumann’s views, see Erich Neumann, *Depth Psychology and a New Ethic*, trans. Eugene Rolfe (New York: Harper & Row/Harper Torchbooks, 1969). Neumann describes Christianity as the “old ethic” which by the mechanism of repression has produced the “lake of blood which swallowed Europe and threatens to engulf the entire world” (25). The new ethic must begin with a right understanding and acceptance “of both the positive and the negative forces in the human organism” (94). “The inflationary exaltation of the ego has to be sacrificed, and it becomes necessary for the ego to enter into some kind of gentleman’s agreement with the shadow—a development which is diametrically opposed to the old ethic’s ideal of absolutism and perfection” (80).

⁷Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1935) 37: “They [the mistakes made by the churches both on the side of clinging to ‘historical illusions’ and on the side of excessive compromise with the relativities of history] merely present Christian ethics afresh with the problem of compromise, the problem of creating and maintaining tentative harmonies of life in the world in terms of the possibilities of the human situation, while yet at the same time preserving the indictment upon all human life of the impossible possibility, the law of love.” While it is true that Niebuhr accented the distance between “the ethic of Jesus” and the realities of responsibly using power to address social and political problems, the “law of love” is shown to be an impossible possibility in the personal domain as well. There is, according to Niebuhr, no escape from the “uneasy conscience.” The self in its most transcendent moment is not a self that rises to love but a self that rises to the knowledge that it falls short of love. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, vol. 1 of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941) 274-80.

Jesus to the metaethical level. Jesus' unrealizable commands do not constitute normative imperatives; rather, they provide the measures by which we may judge the adequacy of our actually functioning moral norms. The commands establish the towering, chastening ideal that casts a humbling shadow across all our proud efforts; this luminous ideal enables us both to keep our necessary but sadly flawed moral judgments in perspective and to recall that moral judgment and moral rectitude are not ends in themselves. By paradox, then, the absolutism, perfectionism, and falsity are transmuted into Christian realism and an ethics of responsibility. That much of Niebuhr is well known.

What is less well known, or at least less widely remarked, is Niebuhr's insistence that *something* of this Gospel vision is possible even under the circumstances of sin. He does not say that the Gospel sets before us a pseudo-possibility that on second look is recognized to be an out-and-out utopian fantasy. So, what, precisely, is the possibility that does function as a plausible human imperative? What is possible is the reorientation of the personality around a new understanding of self-realization: the person who has pursued self-realization through defensive aggrandizement can and should pursue self-realization through trusting generosity. Brought to confess the inversely related rebellions of pride (idolatry) and sensuality (escape), we may begin to "find ourselves" (our true individuality and our true freedom) in relation to the divine will.⁸ What remains impossible (under the conditions not only of sin but also of finitude) is fully successful self-realization in this new posture. The posture itself, however, is both possible and obligatory, and it is obligatory not only religiously but also morally.

So it must seem that by commending to you Reinhold Niebuhr's resolution of the problem, I not only dispatch the cause of my resentment but also establish myself to be standing neither west nor east of Spohn but solidly behind him. Certainly, in his balanced, thoughtful, and humane representation of the bearing of the narrative of the life of Jesus on our contemporary existence as moral beings, Spohn, like Niebuhr, offers me what Nel Noddings has called, in quite a different context, "a god we can live with"⁹—rather than, say, "the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus" insisted on by Flannery O'Connor.¹⁰

Yet recall Bornkamm: "They all aim at limiting its application, they all contain a characteristic 'only.' . . . Again and again [that 'only'] became a shock absorber, which made the real meeting with Jesus' word bearable and therefore

⁸See esp. *Human Nature*, 123-49, 269-80. Also Reinhold Niebuhr, *Human Destiny*, vol. 2 of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943) chap. 3, esp. 68-70.

⁹Nel Noddings, *Women and Evil* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989) 17.

¹⁰Flannery O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*, in *Three* (New York: New American Library, 1960) 357.

illusory." I cannot help wondering whether Spohn's argument, Niebuhr's argument, my argument are shovels-full of sand thrown into the throat of that volcano. To represent the word as bearable, even inviting, may be, indeed, to render it illusory. Perhaps in the small hope of belonging, we all only drape the garments of consent over the body of denial.

D. M. YEAGER
Georgetown University
Washington, D.C.