

# **Letters from a Theist**

*Against the Idolization of Jesus*

Tod E. Jones

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# Letter I

## *On Preliminary Matters*

You are right in saying that I do not hold Jesus to be “divine, without sin, or perfect in either word and deed.” Yet, because I would not describe any man in these terms, I must add that, at all times, *many* teachers are more to be trusted than *one* and that, in our time, many may be found who are superior to Jesus as religious and moral guides. But, as the issue before us is whether the evidence of the Gospels is sufficient to justify implicit faith in Jesus (and not whether Jesus or Socrates or the Dali Lama is the better teacher), you need not fear that I will try your patience with endless quotations.

I agree that we should confine our discussion to the Jesus represented in the Gospels, those that are recognized as authoritative by the Christian Church. It is *that* composite Jesus, not one of the many others found in apocryphal gospels or reconstructed by historians, that is placed on a pedestal as a person worthy of adoration and worship. Yet, as we cannot even understand the four canonical Gospels without occasionally making historical inferences from them, I have to admit that I do not yet see how we shall altogether avoid constructing our own Jesus of history. Even so, as much as possible, let us both try to support our observations by reference to the Gospels.

I see that you do not follow your own suggestion, but direct me to various other parts of the New Testament as of equal authority to the Gospels. Of course, there is much about Jesus in the Acts, Letters, and Revelation that cannot be found in the

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Gospels; however, since we both wish to confine our discussion within limits, let's restrict ourselves—at least for the time being—to the Gospels. If the entire New Testament is open to us, we shall soon be discussing the religion that has grown up around the person of Jesus, rather than the person who is the subject of that religion.

For the same reason, I wish that I could persuade you to put aside the Gospel of John and trust yourself to the evidence of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Since these are nearly agreed in many particulars (as is conveyed by the term *synoptic*, which means that they see together or share the same view), since they were written nearer in time to the life of Jesus, and since they are, at least in appearance, more committed to the preservation of historic traditions than to the expression of Christian theology, I believe that we might obtain from them an account of Jesus's words and deeds that is—comparatively, at least—more reliable.

You encourage me to engage in this exchange, for I think that I recognize in you a real lover of truth and goodness. Moreover, I get the impression from your letter of introduction that you chose to write not because you have been misled into imagining that in me you will find an easy convert, but rather because you are puzzled at the report you have heard—That he who preached Jesus in the past now teaches against the very faith he once tried to advance—and because you sincerely wish to understand and evaluate the reasons I can give for having changed my mind in a matter that concerns the well-being of my soul. And let me assure you that, like yourself, I too am genuinely concerned with the soul and its relationship with God. How else can the soul prosper except in right relation to its creator?

## Letter II

### *On Jesus as the “Son of God”*

You were right in delaying your response while you attended to your health. I confess that the thought occurred to me that I had frightened you off by all the preconditions I wished to establish. Contrary to the opinion of your friend (which I thank you for treating with humor), these conditions do not serve any “devilish trickiness” on my part, designed to lead you into making conclusions against your will and better judgment. I intended them merely as guidelines to facilitate discussion, rather than as strict rules to circumscribe thought itself. It comes as some relief to me to know that you were not discouraged. But now I wonder whether this is the right time for you to pursue an inquiry that demands a quietness of mind and degree of disinterestedness that scarcely can be expected even in a man of sound health. Even so, since you tell me that you are better every day, I will let you prescribe for yourself what sort of mental diet can be easily digested.

You say that Jesus defined himself in no uncertain terms, but boldly claimed the title “Son of God,” and then, as though you would press the matter to a quick resolution, tell me that, since I do not accept Jesus’s claim, that I must either believe that he was (a) an outrageous liar or (b) a raving lunatic. I half suspect that your friend, taking advantage of your weakened condition, has put you up to advancing in this silly way. Does he imagine that the cause of truth is served by treating it as a game of chess? If I choose to move in the direction of option a, then—following his Handbook of Christian Apologetics—you

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are to argue 1, 2, and 3; if I choose to move in the direction of option *b*, then you are to argue 4, 5, and 6. Soon you will have me in checkmate, and I will be constrained to confess that Jesus is “Son of God.” I suppose that Christian apologists learn their tricks from observing their master, who often enough wins a pyrrhic victory in debate by playing fast-and-loose with the facts or by bewildering his opponents with riddles. But, truly, these tactics are unworthy of you. Even so, you probably want to know how I extricate myself from this apparent quandary.

Have you thought about what Jesus means when he refers to himself as “Son of God”? I call to the stand your favorite witness, the Gospel of John. In response to Jesus’s claim to be one with the Father, the Pharisees, threatening to stone him, say, “You, a mere man, claim to be God.” To this Jesus answers, “Is it not written in your own Law, ‘I said: You are gods’? Those are called gods to whom the word of God was delivered. . . . Then why do you charge me with blasphemy because I . . . said, ‘I am God’s son’?” (10.30-6). Here we see Jesus escaping from the charge of blasphemy by denying that he claims for himself any unique status. If his defense has any meaning, it is that his claim to be one with the Father is to be understood in the same sense that a magistrate or king (who is responsible for dispensing justice in accordance with God’s Law) may be called, even ironically (as in Psa. 82.6), “a god.” When Moses dispensed justice in accordance with the Law that he received directly from God, he was doing the work of God, acting in the place of God, and—insofar as he did so—could be called a god. The same might be said of any of Moses’s successors. Jesus is here telling the Pharisees that he too does the work of God and, therefore, might legitimately refer to himself as God’s son. Did Jesus deliberately misrepresent himself, or did he have no consciousness of his divinity? Before

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*you* attempt to extricate yourself from an apparent quandary, consider some other passages that, I believe, will help you to understand Jesus's concept of "sonship."

Jesus, to further support his claim "I am God's son," appeals to his deeds: "If I am not acting as my Father would, do not believe me. But if I am, accept the evidence of my deeds, even if you do not believe me, so that you may recognize and know that the Father is in me, and I in the Father" (Jn. 10.37-8). For Jesus, being the son of  $x$  is equivalent to having the character of  $x$ , which is demonstrated by doing the deeds of  $x$ . Although there is nothing particularly abstruse in this equation, it is nonetheless idiosyncratic. Jesus, however, never bothers to define his terms. In fact, he makes no effort to communicate with the Pharisees on a collegial basis, but on the contrary, does all that he can to test their patience. He is like the foreign idealist philosopher who, during a visit to London, jumps into debate with Members of Parliament,—who, as you might imagine, are pragmatists and economists. Of course, even when they suppose that they understand the idealist, they do not. Worse still, their visitor cannot conceal his arrogance, and his condescension and amusement at their expense finally drives them to raise their Blue Books in the most threatening manner.

Perhaps, it would be useful to examine what the Pharisees meant by the phrase "son of Abraham." Obviously, it was a boast, but *of what* is not so evident. As you know from your Old Testament, by the end of Solomon's reign, the Hebrews had divided into two separate kingdoms, with Samaria in the north and Judea in the south. After the Assyrian conquest and forced resettlement of Samaria (722-720 B.C.), only the Jews could boast of ethnic purity. But, after the Chaldean conquest and destruction of Jerusalem (597 B.C.), followed by seventy

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years of captivity in Babylon, very few of the Jews would have had access to reliable genealogical documentation that stretched beyond a few generations. With good reason the claim to be a descendant of Abraham is treated with disdain by John the Baptist (Mt. 3.9; Lk. 3.8). Not only was the claim easy to make and virtually impossible to verify, but most Jews had come to define their Jewishness in terms of religion rather than of race. What separated them from the Samaritans was not that these northern neighbors had intermixed with Mesopotamians, but that they failed to recognize the authority of the Prophets. Thus, when the Pharisees claimed to be “sons of Abraham,” they were boasting in their Judaism as the legitimate, God-ordained, or providential development of the religion of Abraham, and—probably as a supposed proof of this—they were boasting in their ethnic purity.

We see in the Gospel of John (8.39-48) that, when Pharisees claim to have Abraham as their father, Jesus retorts, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would do as Abraham did.” Jesus, imposing his own concept of sonship on the phrase “child of Abraham,” means by it being possessed of and animated by the character or spirit of Abraham. However, since he is giving a new meaning to an old phrase, it is his responsibility to clearly explain himself. But he doesn’t, and as a result he and the Pharisees end up speaking at cross-purposes. Their conversation quickly degenerates into name-calling. Jesus insinuates that the Pharisees are dim-witted because they don’t understand his arcane terminology. Then, knowing that they don’t understand it, he converts it into a catapult with which to hurl insults: “Your father is the devil and you choose to carry out your father’s desires.” Is it not clear that what Jesus means here is that the Pharisees are sons of the devil in the same sense that

he is the son of God—that is, they demonstrate through their words and deeds that they are possessed of the spirit of their father. The Pharisees, then, respond in kind by calling Jesus a demon-possessed Samaritan. At this point, even the *possibility* for communication has been lost. The scene might be tragic were it not so comic.

I feel myself catching a second wind and think that I could run much farther with my argument. But, instead, I remind myself to pause and make certain that I have not run too fast or too far ahead.

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## Letter III

### *On the Love of Truth*

There is no need to apologize. I understand the concern of your friend and am only surprised that you wish to continue this dialogue. When I was a few years in the Christian faith and zealous for its defense and propagation, I thanked God that he had given to me a love for the truth and had, through his wonderful grace, revealed it to me. Years later, when I had come to know too much to be certain of much, and too little to be certain of what I knew, I prayed God that he would never allow me to be persuaded, in any essential matter, contrary to the Christian creed. To punish my presumption and cowardice, God gave me more truth.

No doubt, you are familiar with the passage that speaks of those who are doomed to destruction: “Destroyed they shall be, because they did not open their minds to love of the truth, so as to find salvation.” What I want to draw your attention to is that

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the writer correctly identifies the great impediment to finding truth—the love of sin: “God puts them under a delusion, . . . all who do not believe the truth but make sinfulness their deliberate choice” (2 Thess. 2.10-12). We *know* that in God is perfect goodness and truth. There is no arrogance in this claim, for our very apprehension of God involves (among other things, perhaps) a vague conception of perfect goodness and truth. Knowing this, we rightly conclude that our physical, mental, and spiritual well-being depends, in great measure, upon our ability to discriminate truth from falsehood. But truth and goodness are so intertwined that one must seek them together, and only the person who loves and pursues them both at the same time will find them. In fact, one cannot love truth and goodness without loving God, and what I hope to impress upon you is that it is not those who love their creed that God invites into his kingdom, but only those who love him.

As long as you maintain your love of God, you need never fear of being persuaded by a lie. Let me explain. When you were a child, you were selfish and ignorant. Do you deny it? No doubt, you hope that, when your hairs are grey, you will be full of virtues and wisdom. The pathway from the one condition to the other is long and rarely smooth or straight, and just as you expect to make many errors of conduct along the way, so too you must expect to make many errors of intellect. Only the error that is loved is fatal to progress. Therefore, as much as is possible, do not love the things that are of yourself (what you do and what you believe), but love only the things that are of God (goodness and truth). As long as you maintain your love of God, why should I concern myself whether anything I say persuades you or not? Why should your friend concern himself—unless he cares only that you believe as he believes? Even so, be assured

that I will continue our discussion as long as you wish, for I fear that some of your friends may respect your love for truth *only so far* as it leads you to love Jesus and, thus, may unwittingly be encouraging you to love a creed more than truth.

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## Letter IV

### *On Sonship and the Imitation of God*

It occurs to me that, if you do not understand Jesus's concept of sonship, you will have difficulty in making sense of the scene in which Jesus condemns the religious authorities of Jerusalem for building "the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers murdered." Jesus castigates the Pharisees and doctors of the Law, saying to them that, by building or adorning the tombs, "[you] testify that you approve of the deeds your fathers did; they committed the murders and you provide the tombs" (Lk. 11.47-8; cf. Mt. 23.29-32). Adopting the *apparent* logic of Jesus, one might say that, when the Protestants set up the Martyrs' Monument in Oxford, the Anglican Ritualists had no cause to take offence, for the Protestants were actually demonstrating their approval of the persecutions carried out during the reign of Mary. Of course, this is nonsense. But, in fact, Jesus is not condemning the religious authorities for building the tombs; he is condemning them merely for calling their predecessors "our fathers." Even though the lawyers and Pharisees disapprove of the murders of the prophets, even though they intend to honor the prophets, Jesus finds fault with them because, in calling the murderers "our fathers," they allegedly admit to sharing their values—or to being animated by their spirit. Adopting

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the *actual* logic of Jesus—which is here and in many other cases *verbal*—one might say that, in calling Jefferson, Adams, Madison, Franklin, and Paine our “founding fathers,” we confess that the United States is a nation of Deists. By either interpretation, Jesus’s logic is flimsy, and in using it as a basis for so grave an accusation, Jesus is being unnecessarily, even perversely, antagonistic. Yet, when we read this passage in the light of what we understand to be Jesus’s notion of sonship, then, at least we can recognize the verbal mechanism that set Jesus’s tirade into motion.

But, you rightly observe, this “isn’t the idea of Jesus as Son of God taught by the apostles.” What we see, even restricting our examination to the Gospels, is a development that ultimately robbed the concept of its metaphorical signification.

Jesus, in his assumed role as master of a school, might be compared to Samuel, Zoroaster, Confucius, or Zeno. However, Jesus did not limit himself to preaching, and as a proponent of the *imitatio dei* (imitation of God)—which is, of course, intrinsic to Jesus’s concept of sonship—he frequently appealed to his own conduct as a heuristic in conveying his message. As part of the training of his disciples, Jesus called upon them to follow his own example in their imitation. This can be seen even through the theological mist of the Gospel of John (14.8-12), where we are given Jesus’s response to a disciple’s request, “Lord, show us the Father and we ask no more”:

Jesus answered, “Have I been all this time with you, Philip, and you still do not know me? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. Then how can you say, “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? I am not myself the source of the words I speak to you: it is the Father who dwells in me doing

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his own work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else accept the evidence of the deeds themselves. In truth, in very truth I tell you, he who has faith in me will do what I am doing; and he will do greater things still because I am going to the Father.

What is inherently plausible in this passage is the impatience of Jesus with his disciples, who—unable to grasp to their own satisfaction the practical demands of the *imitatio*—repeatedly asked for illustrations, and the heavy demand that Jesus placed upon his disciples, that they must carry forth, to greater levels of practical perfection, the principles of that art.

In the weight of this commission we see Jesus's incapacity to fairly appreciate the individual personalities, talents, and limitations of his disciples. Jesus, in pursuit of quick success in becoming the master of his own school, had looked to find his disciples among illiterate rustics rather than from among the brightest and most talented. His plan worked, and by wasting little time in gathering his disciples, Jesus had more leisure to teach and train. Moreover, the loyalty of his disciples encouraged him in the hope that they could be trusted to go forth and, in his name, spread by word and deed the gospel of the kingdom (reign or rule) of God. But the longer that Jesus remained with his disciples, the more his hope of being honored through them diminished, for neither style and grace nor confidence and authority can be imparted so easily as doctrine. No matter how impatient and irritated Jesus became with them, the disciples simply could not imitate God in the same way that their master did. That is to say, they could not imitate Jesus himself. Even the most devoted of Jesus's disciples could never bring themselves to feel that they had reached their master's

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level in the *imitatio dei*. In fact, after they were bereaved of Jesus, the disciples' devotion to his memory compelled them to refer to *his conduct*, rather than their own, as not only the better, but *the best possible imitation of God*.

Thus, by the time that the Gospel of John was written, Jesus had been transfigured in the vision of his disciples. Having ascended the mountain as a reformer of Judaism and founder of a school, he descended as the quintessential “son of God,” the most sublime impersonation and expression of the Father. This transition, from a call to learn from Jesus the *imitatio dei* to a call to believe in Jesus as the *imitatio dei*, had taken place, as it were, while the disciples slept. Jesus's identity became the message in a nutshell. It was a glorious simplification, but the transformation in Jesus's sonship did not end there.

Although liberal Christian sentiment may favor a return to the perception of Jesus as pre-eminently “*the son of God*” in a metaphorical sense of the phrase, it is the object of the birth narratives (the prefatorial postscripts of the Gospels) to establish that Jesus is a *son of God* quite literally—not because he is begotten through divine *intervention*, as was Isaac, but rather because he is begotten through divine *intercourse*. The idea of such a phenomena as this could not have occurred to any Jewish writer before Greco-Roman mythology was introduced into Palestine. Zeus had at least fifty mortal children, of which a few, including Heracles, were granted immortality upon their death, thereby becoming minor gods. But not until Alexander the Great did any mortal claim to be conceived miraculously by Zeus. Jesus made no such claim on his own behalf, but if the divinity of Jesus was to be successfully preached among the Gentiles, it was imperative that Joseph the poor carpenter be set aside quietly. Thus, the Spirit of God overtook the virgin

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Mary and—without her consent or knowledge, according to Matthew—God took the form of an embryo within her womb.

In the Gospel of Luke, God has the decency to inform Mary of his plans in advance of implementing them. The angel Gabriel appears before her with the news, “You shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall give him the name Jesus. He will be great; he will bear the title ‘Son of the Most High’; the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David, and he will be king over Israel for ever” (1.31-2). This declaration is reminiscent of the song of the Centaurs to Thetis, the virgin nymph: “O daughter of Nereus, the seer that is skilled in the lore of Phoebus, even Chiron, has proclaimed that you will bear a son that shall be a great light for Thessaly. He shall come to the Trojan land with the spears and shields of his Myrmidons, and shall set the land of Priam ablaze.”<sup>1</sup> Achilles, the child of prophecy, part mortal, part god, would be a conquering hero and, after paying the debt owed to his mortality, would become fully divine. Jesus too is represented in Luke as a child of prophecy, “a deliverer of victorious power” who—according to the Song of Zechariah (sometimes called the “Benedictus”)—will “deliver us from our enemies, out of the hands of all who hate us” (1.68-72).

The story of Jesus’s divine conception (*sans semen*) might satisfy the Gentiles, but it would not please the Jews *unless* a passage of sacred scripture could be wrested from its context and made—as through a glass, darkly—to foretell the event. The author of Matthew appealed to Isaiah 7.14. To Jews without access to scripture, other than the isolated passages read aloud in their synagogues, the reference may have appeared plausible enough. Even so, if you will read the passage in its context, you may see for yourself that the prophet Isaiah, in his unsuccessful effort to instill courage and faith in Ahaz, king of Judah, informs

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him, *first*, that a young woman, currently of a marriageable age, will soon bear a son; *second*, that this son—as a sign to the king—will be named Emmanuel, “God-with-us”;<sup>2</sup> *third*, that by the time this son reaches adolescence, the military powers that Ahaz now dreads (*i.e.*, Ephraim and Damascus) will already be decimated. Isaiah does not identify the young woman, and truly, her identity is unimportant. The point of Isaiah’s prophecy is that Ahaz misplaces his faith when he trusts the Assyrians, rather than God, to defend Jerusalem against her enemies. When Matthew claims that the miraculous birth of Jesus “fulfilled” Isaiah’s prophecy, he tells us that this prophecy was *never* fulfilled.

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1. Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, 1063-64. In *Ten Plays by Euripides*, trans. Moses Hadas and John McLean (New York: Bantam, 1960), p. 386.

2. The symbolic significance of the child “God-with-us” may be alluded to in the Gospel of Luke, when Simeon says to Mary, “This child is destined to be a sign which men reject” (2.35).

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## Letter V

### *On the Sophistry of Jesus*

You have an inquisitive mind, but it is easier to listen than to speak, and it is easier to do either of these than to force oneself to think. Real thought takes time. It took months for me to convert to Christianity, but it took twenty years (*after* I had given up the inerrancy of scripture) before I felt compelled to surrender the name “Christian.” And only *then* did I feel

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myself completely free to read the scriptures as I would any other ancient literature. I fear that, were I to write a book in answer to your questions, you would read it overnight and be little better off in the morning.

For instance, you ask me whether a belief in the resurrection of Jesus would, to my mind, be sufficient to prove his deity. I ask you, Have you not understood what I have already written? Of course you have—and yet, you have not. Do you believe in the resurrection of Lazarus? of the son of the widow of Nain? of Jairus's daughter? of the many holy people who, rising from the dead on the same morning, walked into Jerusalem and were seen by many (Mt. 27.52-3)? If so, does the resurrection of any one of these people prove, to your mind, that person's divinity? I suppose not. What, then, makes the story of Jesus's resurrection so special? Is it not because you *already* have a preconception of his divinity? Let us, therefore, take our time in getting to the tomb of Jesus, and not run with Peter and John. If you will walk slowly beside me, I promise that, when we arrive, you will find nothing to astonish or startle you.

You also ask me to elaborate on what I merely alluded to when I wrote that Jesus plays "fast-and-loose with the facts" and silences his opponents by confusing them with nonsense and riddles. This I will gladly do, for I think that a great amount of mischief is done in the name of religion by substituting stained-glass windows and candle-light for sunlight, the aroma of incense for the odors of bodies and mildew, and the vague sense of awe and wonder for prosaic truth. I believe that—if I can show you that what is held up to our imaginations as deep and profound is really only hollow and foolish—I might do you some service, for a faith built upon illusions is like a house built upon the sand.

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As a teacher of practical and religious ethics, Jesus must have given the problem of Roman taxation more than a little thought. The problem itself can be briefly stated. Judaism was theocratic, recognizing no king but God. However, the act of paying taxes to Rome implied a recognition of and support for the rule of its pagan emperor. For such a reason, it fell under the proscription of Deut. 17.15. On the other hand, a Jew's failure to pay taxes would be perceived by Rome as an act of defiance and rebellion, which—if left unpunished—might prove to be a seed of insurrection. Was, then, defiance and consequent martyrdom or utter subjugation under Roman power the only *religious* option available to the Jews? The principle that the Torah was made for man, not man for the Torah, suggested otherwise. Even so, the Roman presence in Judea was oppressive and disgusting to the sensibilities of the devout, who could never quite reconcile their conscience to the foreign tax. How might Jesus himself have dealt with the problem—if, in fact, he found a way to do so that was satisfying to his conscience? Probably, by neither condoning nor condemning the payment, but instead, by taking refuge in the realization that the Shepherd knows his sheep and by placing trust in divine mercy. Yet, we shall never be certain, for when Jesus was questioned, “Are we or are we not permitted to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor? Shall we pay or not?”, he failed to see that God had given him a unique opportunity to share his wisdom. His answer, impressive to admirers of wit and sophistry, must always be disappointing to those who expect sweetness and light from Jesus: “‘Fetch me a silver piece, and let me look at it.’ They brought one, and he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose inscription?’ ‘Caesar’s,’ they replied. Then Jesus said, ‘Pay Caesar what is due to Caesar, and pay God what is due to God.’” Understandably,

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“they heard him with astonishment” (Mk. 12.13-17; cf. Mt. 22.17-21, Lk. 20.21-5).

Francis Newman observed, “To imagine that because a coin bears Cæsar’s head, *therefore* it is Cæsar’s property, and that he may demand to have as many of such coins as he chooses paid over to him, is puerile, and notoriously false.”<sup>1</sup> Even so, if you believe that the proper role of a public teacher is to silence interrogators by rhetorical legerdemain, then I suppose that you will perceive Jesus, on this occasion, as having been superlatively successful. If, however, you—in company with Francis Newman and myself—believe that it is the teacher’s role to satisfy his hearers by imparting wisdom, then I don’t see how you can avoid the conclusion that Jesus, in this instance, failed miserably.

Perhaps you will urge, in Jesus’s defense, that his interrogators were not truth-seekers, but were motivated by an ignoble desire to ensnare Jesus in his own words. This I readily grant. But, what follows? Jesus used the same tactic when he asked the chief priests, “The baptism of John: was it from God or from men?” (Mt. 21.23-7). Christian readers are agreed in condemning the chief priests for deliberating upon the theoretic and practical consequences of their response, rather than answering in accordance with their genuine belief. Yet, we have seen Jesus doing exactly the same. When the responses of Jesus and the chief priests are compared, the only real difference is that the latter made no effort to mislead or bewilder the audience. “We do not know” (or, as Americans say, “pleading the fifth”) is *always* to be preferred to evasive sophistry.

Jesus doesn’t fare much better when asked whether he pays the temple-tax. Turning to Peter, he inquires, “From whom do earthly monarchs collect tax or poll? From their own people

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or aliens?” Jesus’s question here fails altogether to address the pertinent issue, confusing the *foreign* tax with that imposed by local authorities for the administration and maintenance of the Jerusalem temple. The latter had its origins in the tax levied by Moses (Ex. 30.13, 38.26) and was a religious duty. Yet, when Peter answers, “From aliens,” Jesus gives his assent, adding, “Why then, their own people are exempt!” (Mt. 17.24-6). Did Jesus really suppose that Gentiles should have been made financially responsible for the Jewish temple?

The Synoptic Gospels are agreed in pairing Jesus’s answer to Pharisees concerning the payment of taxes to Rome with his answer to Sadducees concerning the doctrine of the resurrection (Mk. 12.18-27; Mt. 22.23-33; Lk. 20.27-39). Both dialogues are evidently intended to represent the marvelous wisdom that Jesus displayed upon being confronted by skeptical interrogators. In fact, both demonstrate Jesus’s proclivity toward paradox.<sup>2</sup> In his attempt to prove the resurrection, Jesus makes his argument from Ex. 3.6, in which God, speaking from within the burning bush, says to Moses, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” This declaration was delivered long after the death of the patriarchs, and yet, says Jesus, “God is not God of the dead but of the living.” Jesus’s grammatical error consists in extending the present-tense verb “am” from the subject of the sentence to the subject of the prepositional phrase in the predicate, so that it is made to do double-duty, indicating the present existence of God *and* of the patriarchs. Consider, if you will, the phrases “Bethlehem is the city of David” or “The Torah is the Law of Moses.” Would Jesus say, *in proof that David and Moses are alive*, “Bethlehem is not the city of the dead, but of the living,” and “The Torah is not the Law of the

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dead, but of the living”? If so, then we might imagine him being introduced to Monticello: “Sir, this is the house of Thomas Jefferson.” “You are greatly mistaken,” says Jesus in reply, “for Mr. Jefferson, having disbelieved in my unique power and authority, was not judged worthy of a place in the other world and of the resurrection from the dead” (cf. Lk. 20.35-6).

Observe also that, if Jesus’s argument is valid, it must prove that the dead are *already* resurrected—not in prospect or in promise, but in fact. Yet, the Sadducees, in challenging the idea of a resurrection, refer to it as a *future* event, and this they do in order to accurately represent the doctrine (cf. Isa. 26.19; Dan. 12.2; Jn. 5.28-9, 11.24). Moreover, it will not do to say that the declarative sentence “I am the God of Abraham” implies no more than the survival of Abraham’s personality, for *unless* one defines “resurrection” as synonymous with “immortality” (the survival of the personality after physical death), the two concepts cannot be treated as one.

In truth, though, it must be admitted that a *bodily* resurrection is no more an essential part of Jesus’s religious teaching than its *futurity*—except insofar that, as no resurrection can take place until after physical death, it must be consigned to every living person’s individual future. What is essential in Jesus’s teaching is the survival of the personality or soul, so that it may be susceptible to divine judgment and *eternal* rewards or punishments. The doctrine of an after-death postponement of eternity appears, to most minds, as without meaning. This is evident in their speech, for we never hear it said of the deceased, “They have gone (from this world) *and will go* to their reward.”

Jesus attempts to entrap the Pharisees in a similar conundrum in Mt. 22.41-5 (cf. Mk.12.35-7):

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“What is your opinion about the Messiah? Whose son is he?” “The son of David,” they replied. “How then is it,” he asked, “that David by inspiration calls him ‘Lord’? For he says, ‘The LORD said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.’” If David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be David’s son?”

The exegetical argument here is on Psa. 110, which was prefaced by the writer or compiler as “A Psalm *of* David.” Jesus assumes the popular interpretation, that this means “A Psalm *by* David,” as opposed to “A Psalm *about* David.” The descriptive prefix should, however, be understood in the light of the psalm, not *vice-versa*. Its author was in the service of David and, therefore, refers to him as “lord” (master). Besides, unless Jesus is suggesting that a son cannot be greater than his father, and that, therefore, the Messiah cannot be the son of David, then his question serves no teaching purpose. In fact, however, what Jesus has given us is not an argument at all. Rather, it is a riddle, and its *only* purpose is to make the speaker appear clever at the expense of his audience.

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1. Francis William Newman, *Phases of Faith*, in *The Works of Francis William Newman on Religion: A Critical Edition*, 10 vols., ed. Tod E. Jones (Charlottesville: The Philosophy Documentation Center, 2009), 3: 156.

2. “A paradox,” wrote Baltasar Gracian, “in essence is a species of pious fraud, which is admired because of its freshness and piquancy. But later, when its trickery is discovered, it fares so badly that it is scorned” (*The Art of Worldly Wisdom* [1647], trans. Martin Fischer [New York: Barnes and Noble, 2008], 48).

## Letter VI

### *On Fellowship and Freedom*

Your pastor and friends are concerned for your welfare. I do not doubt their sincerity. From their perspective, in discussing spiritual matters with me, you are playing with fire. Already you are singed; if you continue, will you not be reduced to ash? They offer you a close fellowship and guardianship, a religious routine, a spiritual discipline, and an authoritative guide (as they suppose) for “all things pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1.3). What do I have to give? How can I compete? In truth, I have no interest in competing. You have asked me to share my thoughts with you. Do you now find these dangerous? If so, what do they threaten? Have I in any way attempted to rob you of your love for truth or for goodness? God forbid! Let me be thrown into the sea with a millstone around my neck before I do such a thing.

Your pastor also appeals to your intellect and conscience. Very good, but for what purpose? Is it not to persuade you to place implicit trust in a miraculous revelation—the Bible or Jesus? Once you do, you will have all that the Church can offer. No doubt, you will also experience a great sense of relief and peace, because the great purpose for which God has given you intellect and conscience will be, then, either fulfilled or annulled. Of course, you will still have need for these twin guides, but the unceasing imperative for you to use them will diminish in proportion to your trust in revelation. From thenceforth, your first question will not be “Is this true?”, but rather “How can this be true?”, for having already settled upon an authoritative standard of truth, your first concern in regard to every propositional

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statement will be whether or not it is in accord with that standard. As to the claims made by that authoritative guide, you will no longer ask, “*Is this right and true?*” Your only concern will be, “*How is it right and true?*” In answering this question, you will have plenty of opportunity to use your reason—if you so choose. In the end, however, you will have the same conclusions as those who choose not to reason but simply to believe. Such is the concord of believers. Who would not want to find a home within such a bond of concord? Who would not want to find such lasting peace? Is this not a pearl of great price? Indeed it is; but *consider* its price.

If you prostrate your mind before a guide that is, like every human being and every production of humanity, a mixture of truth and falsehood, goodness and evil, then—even if the preponderance is on the side of truth and goodness—you will never rise above your guide. As Jesus said, “A pupil is not superior to his teacher; but everyone, when his training is complete, will reach his teacher’s level” (Lk. 6.40; cf. Mt. 10.24, Jn. 13.16). You have heard that every person who refuses to bow the knee to Jesus will have to answer to God. But I say to you that every person who bows the knee to Jesus will have to answer to God—for the gifts of God are provided to bring us into discernment, not into submission. Did Jesus announce to his followers, “He who is not with me is against me” (Mt. 12.30, Lk. 11.23)? Then Jesus was a despot, who would have no admirers, but only subjects and enemies. Perhaps, though, what he really said was, “He who is not against us is for us” (Mk. 9.40). Are we not, in common with Jesus, free to mix criticism with admiration, to accept with the one hand and to reject with the other, to be neither *with* nor *against*? Do we not have this freedom from our Father?

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Are you impressed by the love of Christians? To his disciples, as to his family, Jesus gave “a new commandment: love one another; as I have loved you, so you are to love one another. If there is this love among you, then all will know that you are my disciples” (Jn. 13.34-5). This “new commandment” differs from the second greatest commandment of the Torah (Lev. 19.18) only in that it is specific to the disciples. Jesus is calling for his disciples to love one another in a way that is different from the love that they are to have for their neighbor. By Jesus’s own admission, however, there is little virtue in obedience to this “new commandment”—for, “If you love only those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them” (Lk. 6.32; cf. Mt. 5.46).

It is clear from the Gospels that Jesus wished to create a little community of followers tightly knit together in the bonds of friendship. Certainly, nothing can be wrong with friendship, when it is formed on a proper basis. If we would have for friends only those who are friends of God, then they will be lovers of truth, justice, and every sort of virtue. If, however, we begin with the arrogant and destructive presumptions (*a*) that God has nothing further to reveal to us, and (*b*) that our *present* understanding of what is and is not truth, justice, and virtue, will be our *final* understanding, then we will seek friends who share our current beliefs. In this case, friendship ceases to have as its basis the love of God; instead, its basis is made to be a love of particular conclusions or doctrines. And this, unfortunately, is the friendship of disciples. Each disciple is loved by the other because he or she sustains the presumptions upon which their friendship is based. The moment that a disciple begins to demonstrate a greater love for truth *as such* than for the specific doctrines of Jesus is the very moment that he or she will begin

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to be dreaded by his or her so-called friends as the “little leaven [that] leaveneth the whole lump” (Gal. 5.9, 1 Cor. 5.6).

Yet, nothing can be more fatal to one’s personal development than to be surrounded by those who share one’s conclusions rather than one’s love for truth itself. In such a situation, the leaven of moral and spiritual corruption is already at work, and the one who began by reaching conclusions out of a love of gaining truth will end by sustaining those same conclusions out of a fear of losing friendship. A great problem of discernment is being able to recognize those whose love for truth, justice, and virtue is genuine. Fellowship with one who, while holding wrong conclusions, has a deep and sincere love for truth should always take precedence and be preferred over fellowship with one who, while having no real love for truth as such, has reached right conclusions. Two people whose friendship is based on their prior and individual friendship with God are likely to find that, while they are always agreed upon principles of vital interest to each, are never agreed upon much else. Their conclusions will change along with their education and experiences, and each will be a help to the other by providing challenges and encouragement. This is as it should be, but it is the antithesis of the friendship of disciples under a guru.

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## Letter VII

### *On Jesus as a Moralist*

You ask me what I find objectionable in Jesus as a moral teacher. As you know, the prospect of pain in Hell or pleasure in Heaven is a recurrent theme in Jesus’s teaching, both public

and private. In the “Sermon on the Mount,” he declared, “Be careful not to make a show of your religion before men; *if you do, no reward awaits you in your Father’s house in heaven*” (Mt. 6.1). The meaning here does not appear to be, “Be careful to be virtuous,” but rather, “Be careful not to lose your future reward.” The prominence of eternal rewards and punishments in Jesus’s public teaching cannot but lower our estimation of Jesus as a teacher of ethics. There are three reasons for this: (1) It alienates the motivation for virtue from the good itself. (2) It fails to recognize, or diminishes the significance of, the fact that, because goodness is in no small degree natural to our human condition, it conduces to our health and happiness in this life. In doing this, Jesus’s teaching (a) also suggests an unreal postponement of ethical consequences and (b) overlooks our natural and spiritual communion with and inspiration by goodness. Finally, (3) it denies the temporal character of moral guilt, making evil triumphant in its eternity, and in doing so justifies a false notion of justice.

First, just as a son whose obedience to his father is motivated by the prospect of an inheritance cannot be said genuinely to love his father, so too the person whose obedience to God is motivated by future prospects cannot be regarded as a true lover of God. The person who says, “I love God because he has been [or, ‘will be’] good to me,” must not be confused with the person who can sincerely say, “I love God because he is good.” Only the love of the latter is disinterested, without tincture of self-love. There is no pure love of God without a love of goodness *for its own sake*. Frances Cobbe argued this point persuasively in her *Essay on Intuitive Morals*:

Virtue is not only “voluntary obedience to the law,” but “*disinterested*” obedience to it. To *be* virtue it must be an obedience motivated by

## *On Jesus as a Moralist*

reverence for the inherent right of the law. . . . The sacrifice which the virtuous man makes of his gratification to the law is wholly unconditional on a future increase of happiness to be gained thereby. The surrender is complete, and grounded solely on the right of the law so to command him. If he be tempted to act from desire of future happiness, his action ceases to be virtuous; if he act without any prospect or chance of future happiness, his action becomes more and more virtuous as such happiness recedes from his prospects.<sup>1</sup>

The language of moral philosophy tends toward abstraction, but the point is not so abstruse as to have been beyond the grasp of Jesus's audience. In fact, it is sufficiently simple to convey by parable:

There was once a Hebrew slave named Joseph who, on account of a false accusation brought against him by Zelicha, the wife of his master, had been cast into a dungeon and left there to perish. Over the course of several weary nights, Joseph carefully recounted to his jailer the full story of his misfortune. Having heard similar accounts of Zelicha's seductive and manipulative ways from other young men, and being persuaded of his prisoner's innocence, the jailer decided to bring Joseph's case to the attention of Pharaoh's attendants—for, said he, "Although I dare not presume to unlock the king's heart, yet I must bring darkness to light, lest wickedness run unfettered." First, he rehearsed Joseph's story in the hearing of Pharaoh's charioteer. The charioteer sent to Joseph, saying, "Of your innocence I have no doubt. What will you give me to bring your case before the king?" To this, Joseph replied, "I am a prisoner and a slave. What do I possess, except my integrity, which I cannot give?" When the charioteer heard this, he became indignant with the jailer and said, "Would I run the king's horse before it is fed? Yet *you*, who have come with

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neither oats nor straw, would set a spur to *me*? Be gone, before I have you whipped!” The jailer, recovering his courage, then approached Pharaoh’s cupbearer. The cupbearer sent to Joseph, saying, “Of your innocence I have no doubt. Although you have nothing to give, yet I might bring your case before the king. But first, tell me, if the king sets you free, what reward might I expect from your brothers?” To this, Joseph replied, somewhat puzzled, “My brothers? They cast me into a pit and, for money, into slavery. To them you must not look for reward.” When the cupbearer heard this, he grew furious and said to the jailer, “I would not set the wine of my enemies before the king without first drinking from it myself, and yet *you*, without wetting the tip of your tongue, have filled *my* cup with vinegar. Be gone, before I have every drop pressed from your bones!” The jailer, not a little disconcerted, fled from the palace. That night, at his post, he kept guard over Joseph while pondering in his heart what to do. Finally, he said to himself, “So strong is the wickedness that runs among men, I know not what to expect. Yet I must bring darkness to light, and *therefore*, I shall bring Joseph’s case to the attention of the king. Perhaps I shall unlock his heart.” On the following morning, the jailer returned to the palace and, following through with his good intentions, walked directly into Pharaoh’s presence. But, despite the courage and sincerity of the jailer, the heart of Pharaoh was not opened, for (as you might imagine) he was a busy man and could not be bothered by the troubles of a Hebrew slave. Of course, he had the jailer removed from his post, and Joseph, who never saw him again, remained in prison.

The point is simple. Doing the right thing, because it is right, is virtuous. Good people are attracted toward virtue. To them it is beautiful. They cultivate it in themselves, and in them this saying is fulfilled: “The man who has will be given more.” Lovers

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of goodness for its own sake, even if they are not religious, are the true lovers of God. If they do not speak to God, yet God speaks to them, and they are not far from his kingdom. They may appreciate whatever rewards come their way, and they understand that those whose love for God is weak may require incentives for good conduct, but they also know that this is not the way of virtue or the path of perfection. The fact that Jesus, not just on occasion or to certain persons, but always and to everyone, bases ethics upon future rewards and punishments, is the clearest indication that he himself had failed to discern the true nature of virtue.

Of course, if *disinterested* virtue were impossible, and our only alternatives were either to do good in order to receive the immediate reward of others' admiration or to do good in order to receive the future reward promised by faith, then—in observing the principle expressed by Cobbe, that a good act has the quality of virtue in inverse proportion to its prospect of reward—we must regard the latter as more praiseworthy. Yet, when Jesus, upon condemning the Pharisees because their righteous conduct was, as he believed, motivated by a desire to impress others, he wrongly adds, “for what sets itself up to be admired by men is detestable in the sight of God” (Lk. 16.14-15). A right act is never detested by God. Paul takes the correct viewpoint when, after noting that some preach Christ through mixed motives, concludes, “What does it matter? One way or another, in pretense or sincerity, Christ is set forth, and for that I rejoice” (Phil. 1.17-18). To use another illustration,—one man makes a donation to a non-profit corporation because he believes that its purposes are good, whereas another makes his donation in order to gain a tax deduction or the praises of his wife. In either case, the act of donating is good, even though

the virtue demonstrated is unequal. The quality of an act may be defined by its results; the quality of our character may be defined by our motives. Our motives cannot define the act, and the results of an act cannot define our character.<sup>2</sup>

This brings me to my second point against Jesus's ethical teaching—that it fails to recognize the fact, or the significance that inheres in the fact, that, because goodness is in no small degree natural to our human condition, it conduces to health and happiness. Even in the case of the jailer of the proverb, doing the right thing was essential to his health and happiness. Had he refused the dictates of his conscience, he would have suffered in mind, which sufferings would, in turn, have made themselves felt within his physical constitution. But, through obedience to the law of reciprocity or Golden Rule (as that law is immediately expressed to us in the inarticulate syllables of the conscience), the jailer gained the inner peace and satisfaction that derives from *integrity* or wholeness of being. One might oppose, "Yes, perhaps. But what is clear from the story is that the jailer lost his post and, presumably, income or the prospect of vocational advancement. Might not this loss pose a greater threat to his health and happiness than any loss of virtue he would have incurred through ignoring the demands of his conscience?" There is no avoiding the force of this objection or the obvious truth that the virtuous do not always prosper. This is where faith comes to the assistance of virtue, for faith says, "In serving the cause of goodness, I serve the cause of God and place myself in harmonious relation with the living and creative force of the universe. Although I have no control over the decisions of others, I trust that, in the broad scheme of things, it is always best to serve the cause of goodness." Thus, the virtuous walk by faith, not by sight, and God's true martyrs

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are those who make a sacrifice of themselves as a service to the cause of goodness, not for any future reward.

Some critics of Jesus object that he made a bugbear of Hell. It is true that the threat of Hell is more prominent in the teaching of Jesus than in that of any other Old or New Testament figure. However, the real problem with Jesus's teaching about the Day of Judgment and Afterwards lies not in the underlying premise that conduct has consequences, but rather in that his *Heaven and Hell suggest an unreal postponement* of these consequences. A popular interpretive strategy among Christians is to avert this problem by imposing a spiritual or psychological meaning to Jesus's Heaven and Hell, or by giving to his terms a dual significance that includes this meaning. Yet, in doing so, they impose a metaphorical dimension that is notably absent from Jesus's conception.

In the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Mt. 20.1-15), Jesus represents God as a landowner who brings people into his service. The period of service is limited to a twelve-hour work day (6 a.m. to 6 p.m.), representing the dawn-to-dusk of a person's life-span. Those whose services are engaged at 6 a.m. enter into contractual agreement with the landowner for "the usual wages." At three hour intervals, the landowner, with the promise of "a fair wage," brings additional workers into his vineyard. At 5 p.m., an hour before sunset, still others are invited to share in the work. Finally, at the end of the work-day, the landowner dispenses his wages:

Those who had started work an hour before sunset came forward and were paid the full day's wage. When it was the turn of the men who had come first, they expected something extra, but were paid the same amount as the others. As they took it, they grumbled at their

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employer: “These late-comers have done only one hour’s work, yet you have put them on a level with us, who have sweated the whole day long in the blazing sun!” The owner turned to one of them and said, “My friend, I am not being unfair to you. You agreed on the usual wage for the day, did you not? Take your pay and go home. I choose to pay the last man the same as you. Surely I am free to do what I like with my own money. Why be jealous because I am kind?”

Our moral sensibilities cannot but, on the one hand, sympathize with the complaint of the workers “who have sweated the whole day long in the blazing sun” and, on the other hand, take offence with the landowner, who adds insult to injury by suggesting that their complaint has, as its basis, jealousy, instead of their God-given sense of what is and is not just. The whole picture conveyed to us is offensive, and we are only able to overcome our reaction by reminding ourselves that, in the context of the parable, “the usual wages” represents nothing less than the promise of reception in Heaven itself. If, upon the receipt of unmitigated and everlasting happiness, it were possible for one not to wish the same for everyone else, such an ungenerous feeling could only be attributed to genuine meanness of character. The parable, therefore, is meant to teach that all of God’s servants, ultimately, will receive an equally generous reward.

Now that we have got to the kernel in the husk, we might ask ourselves whether it were possible for Jesus to have invented a more obstructive way to convey so simple a message. Rabbi Huna praised Solomon for using “parables and proverbs suited to the comprehension of all, through which means a knowledge of the law became readily obtainable.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus, on the other hand, spoke in parables, “so that (as Scripture says) they may

look and look, but see nothing; they may hear and hear, but understand nothing.” How is it that Jesus could justify this obfuscation? “Otherwise,” he explained, “they might turn to God and be forgiven” (Mk. 4.12; cf. Lk. 8.10). Despite his example, most speakers still labor under the assumption that their first task is to make themselves understood. Yet Jesus, in proudly publishing his self-evaluation as a teacher, said without hesitation, “One greater than Solomon is here” (Mt. 12.42). If greatness consists in making a muddle of the obvious, then Jesus does, indeed, deserve high praise. But, putting this aside, let’s return to his parable’s message regarding the reward of virtue.

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard brings to our attention two essential problems in Jesus’s ethical teaching. The first of these we have already considered: it bases the practice of goodness upon a contractual agreement for reward. The second problem, which I now want to emphasize, is that it postpones the reward until after life (the work day). For a good person, the work in the vineyard is its own reward. What is unfair is that some are called to this work during sunshine, while others are called during rain; that some have the company of songbirds, whereas others are met only by thorns. Such is life, the circumstances of which may make tending to one vineyard more urgent than attendance upon another, but can never alter the essential facts—the landowner calls upon us to work, and the work itself is good. The notion that the laborers receive the same reward, regardless of how long they have served the landlord, is probably more false than true. The joy experienced by the laborer long-accustomed to his work is not the same as that experienced by the laborer who first puts his hand to the task. The life-long saint, in her eleventh hour,

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may know a peace the quality of which the novitiate may only attempt to imagine.

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1. Frances Power Cobbe, *An Essay on Intuitive Morals, Being an Attempt to Popularize Ethical Science. Part I: Theory of Morals*. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1855), 25-6.

2. This distinction is sometimes obscured by the imprecision of common speech. For example, if a young boy decides not to go to school, but instead to clean his room, we may say that he did a “bad deed,” when in fact we do not mean to suggest that, in the future, the boy should refrain from cleaning his room.

3. *The Talmud: Selections from the Contents of That Ancient Book, Its Commentaries, Teachings, Poetry, and Legends; also, Brief Sketches of the Men Who Made It and Commented upon It*. Trans. H. Polano. (1876; San Diego: The Book Tree, 2003), 203.

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## Letter VIII

### *On the Golden Rule and Jesus’s Teaching on Marriage*

I thank you for noting that I referred, in my previous letter, to the Golden Rule, and that I did so in such a way that suggests to you that I recognize its true superiority over other rules of ethical conduct. You then proceed to ask me whether I recognize this Rule as a revelation from God. If I do, then I must also, you assume, recognize Jesus as a teacher sent by God to reveal a superior moral code. In addition, you direct my attention to the fact that, in his teaching on marriage, Jesus revealed a superior

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morality than that which was accepted by his contemporaries. Perhaps there are other observations of this sort that you wish to make. If so, I will gladly address them. But, for now, I confine myself to these two.

The *logia* of Jesus to which you direct my attention have to do with Jesus's public role as a reformer of Judaism. That Jesus had legitimate criticisms to make against the religious establishment cannot be doubted. In brief, these can be summarized as (1) emphasizing the lesser demands to the neglect of "the weightier demands of the Law,—justice, mercy, and good faith" (Mt. 23.23), and (2) mistaking the outward observances of religion for the real thing—which, again, is the result of emphasizing one aspect of Judaism over that of another. Jesus was not the only Jew, even in his own generation, to complain against the problem of improper balance or shifting weights, which may fairly be defined as a problem endemic to all established religions. One solution to the problem is to encapsulate the commandments that are specific within those that are general. Geza Vermes, in his very interesting series of essays on "The Gospel of Jesus the Jew," notes the tendency towards this solution:

The fullest illustration of this trend comes from Rabbi Simlai, a third century AD sage, who explains that all the six hundred and thirteen positive and negative commandments proclaimed by Moses were, according to David, contained in eleven (Ps. 15); according to Isaiah, in six (33.15); according to Micah, in three (to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God—Micah 6.8); according to Isaiah again, in two (to observe justice and do righteousness—Isa. 56.1); and according to Amos, in one alone, "Seek me and live" (Amos 5.4).<sup>1</sup>

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The late third-century B.C. book of Tobit advises, “What you hate, do not do to anyone” (3.15a), and Jesus, son of Sirach, proposes to his early second-century B.C. readers, “Judge your neighbor’s feelings by your own, and in every matter be thoughtful” (Sir. 31.15). Hillel—the rabbinic sage who lived in Jerusalem under king Herod and whose life may have been briefly concurrent with Jesus’s—in commenting upon the Torah’s great commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19.18; cf. Gal. 5.14), devised the simple rule, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow” (*Talmud*, Shabbat 31a). Of course, it is to the inspiration of Jewish rabbis and literature that Jesus is indebted in the formation of his own “Golden Rule” (Mt. 7.12; Lk. 6.31), the grandeur of which is, unfortunately, diminished by his *quid-pro-quo* corollary, “For whatever measure you deal out to others will be dealt to you in return” (Lk. 6.38b).<sup>2</sup> However, the *first* commandment in Judaism—which, when rightly apprehended, may be said to envelope the “Golden Rule”—is, for Jesus no less than for all other Jews, Deut. 6.4-5: “Here, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (cf. Mk. 12.29; Lk. 10.25-8).

The earliest recorded teaching of the Golden Rule is found in the *Analects*. Confucius (late sixth- and early fifth-century B.C.), when asked by one of his disciples for a single ethical principle that could guide a person throughout life, responded with his rule of reciprocity: “Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself” (15.24). You can see for yourself that Confucius’s rule is nearly identical to that given by Hillel and that the injunction of Jesus, son of Sirach, differs from that given by Jesus, son of Joseph, only in that the latter

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*explicitly* converts empathetic sentiment into empathetic deed.

Some critics, laying stress upon the distinction between the negative form of the Rule (as expressed by Confucius and Hillel) and the positive form (as expressed by the two Jesus's), label the former "Silver." But, logically, there is only one Rule with two formulations. This can be easily demonstrated by culling specific injunctions from the general Rule and comparing the negative and positive statements of each injunction:

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- 1a. *Do not do to others as you would not have them do to you.*
  - 1b. *Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

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- 2a. Do not steal from others, as you would not have them steal from you.
  - 2b. Honor the property of others, as you would have them honor your property.

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- 3a. Do not allow those who are hungry to go unfed, as you would not want them to allow you to go unfed.
  - 3b. Feed those who are hungry, as you would want them to feed you were you hungry.

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- 4a. Do not forget the vows you made to your spouse, as you would not want him or her to forget the vows made to you.
  - 4b. Remember the vows you made to your spouse, as you would want him or her to remember the vows made to you.

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- 5a. Do not strike another person, as you would not want another person to strike you.
  - 5b. Be non-violent toward others, as you would want others to be non-violent toward you.
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I will never forget an experience I had as an undergraduate student at a Christian college. A professor of mine referred to the Golden Rule of the Gospels as a clear indication of Jesus's superiority as a moral teacher. Although I was a Christian, I was aware of the logical equivalence of the Rule expressed by Confucius and Jesus, and so, when the professor had finished, I raised my hand and, when called upon, brought up this equivalence to his attention—and, at the same time, to the attention of the entire class. The calm and pleasant demeanor of my professor instantly vanished. The blood rose to his face as he berated the blind and foolish opponents of Christianity who attempt to reduce morality to logic. The difference between the two formulations, he insisted, was the difference between the call to either a *passive* or an *active* righteousness. Was there no difference between the man who was “good” because he never did an evil deed and the man who was “good” because he always did good deeds? Who was more likely to do a good deed—the man who has the negative form of the Rule or the man who has its positive form inscribed, as it were, upon his forehead? The truth of the matter, he concluded, was self-evident to every spiritual person. What could I say? I felt just as Jesus's inquisitors must have felt. I had been brow-beaten into submission. I had been astonished and stunned into silence.

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My professor was right in *this* matter: logical equivalence is not the same thing as practical equality. But whether the positive or the negative formulation of the Rule is practically superior has everything to do with the person and the situation. A man who, while quarreling with another man, has lost his temper, may find the negative “Do *not* strike this fellow, as you would *not* want him to strike you” to be far more valuable, at that moment, than any positive formulation of the same Rule. To him, then, the negative form of the Rule might be said to be 24-karat, whereas its positive variation only 18-karat. Even so, both are “Golden.”

Do I believe this Rule to be a revelation from God? Absolutely, but not because it was spoken first by this or that person, but because it strikes the human conscience as being completely and everlastingly good. It carries the full weight of conviction with it. As such, the Rule does not belong to any person; rather, it belongs to all of humanity as a gift from God. I have no doubt that the Rule had become manifest to consciences long before it was added to Confucius's *Analects*, but I do not believe that there were many ears to hear it before the first millennium B.C. The Golden Rule could have little meaning to those living in a low stage of civilization, under laws with a severely limited reach, and wherein one's survival depended largely on one's ability to take advantage of position and circumstance. In a primitive order of civilization, the Golden Rule might be accepted as no more than a code pertinent to familial interactions. With the progress of civilization, people would gradually apply the code to their guests, their neighbors, and eventually, to their fellow citizens. In regard to human dealings with the conquered and enslaved, the Rule has been of little consequence until quite recently. Two hundred years ago a Christian slave-owner might

be so conscientious as to remind himself, “I must do unto my slave as I would have him do unto me were I his slave.” More than this would not have been expected of him. Even now, the Rule has little affect in international relations.

Immanuel Kant’s rule of precedence (the Categorical Imperative), although sometimes presented as a variant or alternative form of the Golden Rule, is a complementary principle: “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law without contradiction.”<sup>3</sup> Paraphrased, it says, “That behavior which would not be good if done by everyone should not be done by you.” Whereas the rule of reciprocity engages one’s empathetic imagination, the rule of precedence requires one to envision pervasive social consequences. The Categorical Imperative assumes a higher stage of civilization, and therefore—even though it *would not* have occurred to Kant had the Golden Rule not met with nearly universal acceptance—it *could not* have occurred to Jesus. Yet, I believe it to be as much a revelation from God as is the Golden Rule.

Now I have some questions for you. Do you live by the Categorical Imperative? Do you believe that the idea of it comes from God? Do you believe that God would require of you anything that he would not require from everyone in the same situation and circumstances?

You ask me about Jesus’s teaching regarding marriage. I assume that you mean to include his doctrine on divorce and remarriage. Moses, according to Deut. 24.1-4, allowed a man to divorce his wife for any “uncleanness” he found in her. The man could, afterwards, change his mind and take her back, *unless* she had become another man’s wife. In this case, even if the second husband had died, the first husband could

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not remarry his former wife because “she has been defiled.” Clearly, what is regarded as defilement is sexual intercourse. Therefore, the “uncleanness” did not signify adultery. In fact, under Mosaic Law, both parties involved in an adulterous relationship would be stoned (Deut. 22.22). Although we can be certain that “uncleanness” did not signify adultery, we cannot escape the ambiguity in the term. Perhaps it signified any sort of unchaste behavior, but by what authority can anyone draw the line between what is and is not chaste? A wife’s innocent smile may be interpreted by a jealous husband as unchaste flirtation. Who is to be the judge? Clearly, if the law did not come up with a more specific definition of “unclean” or “unchaste,” then the law would have to surrender the problem of definition to the husband. The Pharisees were, thus, divided on this issue by two schools of thought. The disciples of Shammai limited divorce to causes of sexual immorality, whereas the disciples of Hillel contested that the husband need not state a reason, but could divorce his wife for any cause whatsoever.<sup>4</sup> In the birth narratives of Jesus, when Joseph (before his dream) resolves to quietly dissolve his engagement with Mary, without making any direct accusation against her, it would appear that he recognizes the wisdom of Hillel. What would be the kinder, more compassionate course of action toward women—to coerce the husband intent upon divorcing his wife to bring an accusation of sexual immorality against her, or to allow the husband to divorce his wife without stating any specific cause? Arguments can be made on both sides, and it would be pointless for me to enter the debate.

When Jesus was asked to give his position (Mt. 19.3-9), he cast his lot with neither Shammai nor Hillel. Dispensing altogether with the troublesome passage in Deuteronomy, he

took his stand on Gen. 2.24, where the conjoined man and woman are called “one flesh.” Obviously, the biblical writer was not making an empirical observation. The man and woman are still two separate bodies. Their union into “one flesh,” if real, must refer to something accomplished by God and perceivable by him alone. This being the case, only human arrogance would pretend to dissolve the union. God alone can separate what he has joined together.

I believe the Catholics are justified in doubting the authenticity of the Matthean exception clause (19.9), which would legitimize divorce on the grounds of *porneia*. I cannot quite bring myself to decide whether, given Jesus’s logic and social conditions, he might have recognized *adultery* as a religious and legal cause for divorce, but the exception clause is suspicious on both exegetical and text-critical grounds. In any case, if we translate *porneia* as sexual immorality or unchastity, instead of as adultery, we are then left with Jesus defending Shammai’s interpretation of the Deuteronomic divorce law. But, were this Jesus’s position, he would have made his case *from* Deut. 24.1-4 and not *against* it.

Assuming, for the sake of argument, that Jesus did recognize adultery, and adultery *only*, as a legitimate cause for divorce, I still cannot see how Jesus advanced the cause of justice or morals. If Jesus had succeeded in reforming Jewish law, he may have prevented some divorces, but he would also have ensured the stoning of more women. The notion that Jesus was intending to legislate for Gentiles is without foundation, and those who would interpret Jesus as an international legislator must remove him altogether from the context in which the Gospels place him. Therefore, I will not blame him for the incalculable but immense suffering that has resulted from transplanting

his *logia* on marriage and divorce into the courts of western civilization.

Jesus concerned himself with marriage from the insensitive viewpoint of an ideologue to whom the institution was without practical consequence. Because, in the poetic language of Gen. 2.24, a man and woman are said to be made “one flesh” by God, Jesus insists upon an indissoluble union. It never occurs to him to consider what problems might result from his interpretation. He has no experience of the difficulties faced by married couples and divorced persons. Indeed, their troubles are irrelevant to him. The brilliant simplicity and logical coherence of his doctrine blind him to its harsh consequences, particularly toward divorced women. “He who marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Mt. 5.32; Lk. 16.18). A woman who has been given a certificate of divorcement and cast out of her husband’s house, perhaps through no fault of her own, is consigned to spend the remainder of her life alone, to provide and fend for herself, and to abandon her dreams of raising a family. Why? Because a Galilean carpenter interpreted Gen. 2.24 in such a way as to make it necessary.

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1. Geza Vermes, *Jesus in His Jewish Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 41. An earlier edition of this book was published under the title *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

2. A brief but useful discussion of the forms of the Golden Rule during the inter-testamental period is provided in Geza Vermes’s *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 38-41.

3. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 30.

4. Tractate Gittin ix.10, Babylonian Talmud.

## Letter IX

### *On Discipleship under Jesus*

My questions do have a purpose, and I thank you for your answers. I wanted to know what you thought of the Categorical Imperative because I think it has an application to at least one of Jesus's demands that he placed on his disciples. But, since we have not yet discussed these demands, I should provide a brief introduction leading up to the application I wish to make.

The guiding principle of discipleship was, for Jesus—and, I suppose, for John the Baptist as well—an uncompromisingly strenuous moral and spiritual effort toward perfection. It is expressed in this *logion*: “Enter by the narrow gate” (Mt. 7.13a; cf. Lk. 13.24a). Taken by itself, it is a good and safe rule. To live by it, one must exercise vigilance in keeping the gate within sight and one's feet on track. If, in any endeavor, one is aiming at perfection (to change the metaphor), it is better to set one's sights too high than too low—and this is never so true as in morals. Our human condition acts upon our behavior like a force of gravity. If to sin is to miss the bulls-eye, then we will find all our missing arrows lying *beneath* the target. So, Jesus's principle is sound. But it is based, like so much else in Jesus's teaching, upon his dogma of future rewards and punishments: “The gate is wide that leads to perdition, there is plenty of room on the road, and many go that way; but the gate that leads to life is small and the road is narrow, and those who find it are few” (Mt. 7.13b-14; cf. Lk. 13.24b). In correction, we might observe that moral and spiritual perfection is not to be reached—neither in this nor in any future life—; but to have attained to a vision of

perfection and to the certain knowledge that, however distant the goal, one is progressing toward it—*this* is life. To want these desiderata is to be *already* damned.

In Jesus's vision of perfection, Judaism is insufficient to *guarantee* the eternal reward. Does this not indicate a fearful lack of trust in the merciful goodness of God on the Day of Judgment? And yet, paradoxically, in Jesus's teaching to his disciples, what is seen to be of paramount importance is an unhesitating faith in the merciful goodness of God in the here-and-now. Nothing, in Jesus's perspective, is so indicative of the absence of this faith and so obstructive to its development as the possession of money.

The dividing line between Judaism and discipleship may be clearly seen in the story of the rich young man (Mk. 10.17-22, Mt. 19.16-22), referred to as a "ruler" in Lk. 18.18, who, in earnest supplication, asks Jesus, "Good Master, what must I do to win eternal life?" Jesus peevishly responds, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments." (Possibly, the poor fellow had heard Jesus's speech on "the *good* man" [Lk. 6.45; Mt.12.35].) The humble inquirer, courteously dropping the offending epithet, continues, "But, Master, I have kept all these [commandments] since I was a boy." Jesus then, recognizing in the man a prospective disciple, says to him, "One thing you lack: go, sell everything you have, and give to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; and come, follow me." The young man had come to Jesus seeking spiritual counsel. There is no reason to question the sincerity of his request or of his desire to pursue the path of perfection. But as Jesus's notion of the *first* requisite, beyond Judaism, for striving to enter through the narrow gate was poverty, "he went away with a heavy heart." Wealthy Christians, in an attempt to

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vindicate both Jesus and themselves, generally interject the gratuitous assumption that Jesus, peering into the secret recesses of the man's heart, had perceived therein a greater love for money than for God. But this interpretation (which may, in part, be based on conflating the Lucan narratives of 10.25-9 and 18.18-23) simply evades Jesus's clearest statement: "None of you can be a disciple of mine without parting with all his possessions" (Lk. 14.33).

The Synoptics are agreed that Jesus made use of this encounter as a teaching opportunity. Turning to his disciples, he observes, "How hard it will be for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!" Clarifying what he means by "hard," he continues, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Mk. 10.23-5; cf. Mt. 19.23-4; Lk. 18.24-5). In other words, "hard" is a gross understatement. One might suppose that all of Jesus's disciples had understood this, yet they express astonishment. Like most poor young men coming from agrarian communities, all that they possessed could be rolled up in their coat—if they had a coat. Of the twelve, only one, Matthew (Levi), the former tax-collector, probably had property to sell. To their inquiry, "Then who can be saved?", Jesus answers, "For men it is impossible, but not for God; everything is possible for God" (Mk. 10.27; cf. Mt. 19.26, Lk. 18.27). In testing the metal of this *logion*, we hear the ring of profundity, but feel the weight of hollowness. At best, it suggests an unwillingness on Jesus's part to give his *obiter dictum* in the place of divine judgment.

Would-be disciples of Jesus, who, preferring ambiguity to lucidity, imagine that they find in this last saying a loophole to the demand for poverty, simply fail to understand the master's first requirement in following him. But, perhaps, they have this

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to say: “For us, the demand is impractical. Were *we* to sell all our possessions and give the money to the poor, we should prove ourselves to be imprudent and irresponsible. We cannot believe that God requires this of us!” If so, then they (in company with the rich young man) are reasonable and conscientious, and not less Christian in being so. Though Jesus’s disciples were the first to be called Christians (Acts 11.26), the Church of Christ has never been a continuation of the school of Jesus, and what enthusiastic Christians like to call “discipleship” is rarely, if ever, the discipleship envisaged by Jesus. In fact, Christians are often better and wiser than was Jesus. Even so, if we understand *why* Jesus demanded poverty, *what* he expected his disciples to learn from it, or *how* he expected the experience to be a benefit to them, then we might better evaluate what must appear to us as astonishing folly.

The principles of cultivating and living by absolute trust in God, along with the guiding principle of striving to enter through the narrow gate, form part of Jesus’s public discourse. They were delivered *as principles* to all Jews. Jesus insisted upon the radical *application* of these principles, the demand for poverty, among his disciples only. Let’s consider the underlying principles.

In bidding his audience put away all anxiety in regard to food and clothing, Jesus advances several analogical arguments. In the first of these, he tells us, “Look at the birds of the air; they do not reap and store in barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. You are worth more than the birds!” (Mt. 6.25-6; cf. Lk. 12.24). It would appear that Jesus never heard of a bird that starved to death because, unlike the squirrel, it had failed to “reap and store.” In the Lucan version, Jesus refers to a specific bird, the raven. The specificity here

is meaningful, for ravens are particularly adept at survival. They are scavenger birds and, as such, have no scruples about eating from people's garbage or feeding off of dead animals. Jesus's point is obvious: Since God feeds ravens, we may trust that he would feed us were we to live as ravens—that is, as beggars or bums. It's a comforting thought. When the cupboard is bare, we must not fret, for as long as there are people whose wealth allows them to toss their scraps and to contribute to soup-kitchens, we can be certain that God will provide. Indeed, there is Stoic wisdom in this observation, and by it we might guard ourselves against utter despair. However, it is not Jesus's purpose here to provide a maxim for courage in the face of disaster. Rather, his point is that poverty is *not* a disaster; on the contrary, if we had sufficient faith in God, we would realize that the true disaster is to live with anxiety in regard to our provisions. If we are not now hungry, we are to give our attention to the things of God; if we are hungry, we are to ask him, in the confidence of faith, for our daily bread, knowing that he will not, in answer, give us a stone (cf. Mt. 7.9-11, 6.11; Lk. 11.3).

The practical antitheses to Jesus's religious philosophy (if "philosophy" it can be called) are savings accounts, retirement plans, and insurance policies. Such things betoken a lack of trust in the goodness of God, and—perhaps, what is more important in Jesus's estimation—a failure to use one's time in developing a child-like relationship with the Father and in concentrating one's moral energies upon progress toward the narrow gate. In his Parable of the Rich Fool, Jesus presents us with the picture of a successful farmer "whose land yielded heavy crops." His current barns were insufficient to store the harvest, so he decided to replace them with larger barns, so

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that, after reaping the rewards of his labor and luck, he might retire and enjoy years of leisure. “But,” says Jesus, “God said to him, ‘You fool, this very night you must surrender your life; you have made your money—who will get it now?’ That is how it is with the man who amasses wealth and remains a pauper in the sight of God” (Lk. 12.16-21). Whether the farmer had a family who stood to benefit from his hard work is irrelevant to Jesus, as is the possibility that the farmer might have used his years of retirement in Torah study. Any comfortable reliance upon money, in Jesus’s viewpoint, necessarily precludes a dependance upon God, and in doing so, prevents the development of faith in his goodness. Just as a slave cannot, at the same time, serve two masters faithfully, depending upon both to recognize and reward his fidelity, one “cannot serve God and Money” (Mt. 6.24, Lk. 16.13).

This dichotomy between God and Money is set forth again by Jesus in the story of poor Lazarus and rich Dives (Lk. 16.19-31). When they awake in the afterlife, Lazarus is in Paradise and Dives in Tartarus, between which is a great and impassible gulf. One might suppose that Lazarus is being rewarded for his virtues and Dives punished for his vices, but we quickly discover that this is not the case—*unless* one defines poverty itself as a virtue and wealth itself as a vice. Abraham explains to Dives, “Remember, my child, that all the good things fell to you while you were alive, and all the bad to Lazarus; now he has his consolation here and it is you who are in agony.” This story illustrates Jesus’s paired beatitudes and anathemas (Lk. 6.20b-21a, 24-25a):

How blest are you who are in need;  
the kingdom of God is yours.

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Alas for you who are rich;  
you have had your time of happiness.

How blest are you who now go hungry;  
your hunger shall be satisfied.

Alas for you who are well-fed now;  
you shall go hungry.

Because the poor are, of necessity, made to depend absolutely upon God, and in the hard school of poverty learn to trust in his mercy and goodness, the poor in this life are envisaged as rich in the next. And, because it is impossible for the rich to develop that child/Father relationship with God enjoyed by the poor, Jesus envisages them as impoverished and wretched in the afterlife.

But—putting the issue of rewards and punishments aside—perhaps the best practical illustration of the double-standard in Jesus's priorities is shown in the account of his visit to the home of two sisters in the village of Bethany (Lk. 10.38-42). Martha, the older of the two, having received Jesus as her guest (which probably entailed receiving his closest disciples as well), was obligated by custom as old as civilization itself to fulfill certain duties of hospitality. These duties included the preparation of a meal. While Martha was busy, Jesus sat at the table and was engaging in discourse. Mary, the younger sister, escaping from the kitchen, plopped herself down at Jesus's feet. What happens next we can infer from the narrative. Martha attempts to get Mary's attention. She succeeds, but not without distracting Jesus. Mary, not wishing to respond to Martha, pretends to be deeply engrossed in Jesus's speech, and

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Jesus, perceiving Martha's consternation and the cause of it, also chooses to ignore her. At his point, Martha—at first, merely annoyed, but now, genuinely hurt by Jesus's apparent refusal to intervene on her behalf—interrupts her guest's discourse: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to get on with the work by myself? Tell her to come and lend a hand." No guest wishes to be placed in this predicament. We might blame Mary for not coming to terms of agreement with her older sister. We might blame Martha for not waiting for a more opportune moment to reprimand her younger sister. Yet, as neither chose the best course of action, Jesus was placed in the position of judge. In a similar situation, when the case involved two brothers, Jesus responded, "Who set me over you to judge or arbitrate?" (Lk. 12.14). In this case, however, Jesus has something to say, and from him, ostensibly, we are to expect greater sagacity than from Solomon. "Martha, Martha," Jesus answers, "you are fretting and fussing about so many things; but one thing is necessary. The part that Mary has chosen is best; and it shall not be taken away from her."

Unfortunately, the narrative of Jesus's visit to the home of Martha and Mary ends here. Luke leaves us to imagine Martha's reaction and the ensuing scenario. I envision it along these lines:

**Martha:** "My lord, tell me, what is this *unum necessarium*?"

**Jesus:** "What does Moses say?"

**Martha:** "To love the Lord, thy God, with all thy heart, mind, and strength."

**Jesus:** "Do this, and thou shalt live."

**Martha:** "But, lord, please explain. How has Mary shown greater love for God than I?"

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**Jesus:** “Know you not, Martha, that while you were spending your time and energy on the passing concerns of the flesh, Mary was taking pleasure in the eternal things of the spirit. The flesh profits nothing; the spirit gives life.”

**Martha:** “Thank you, lord. Now I understand.”

*[Martha returns to the kitchen. Some minutes later:]*

**Jesus:** “Martha! . . . What’s that odor? Is something burning?”

**Martha:** “Aye, lord, hypocrites and the unmarried.”

**Jesus:** “It smells like flesh.”

**Martha:** “Truly, thou art a prophet! Lamb, to be precise. But do, please, continue Lord. I believe you were saying something about ravens?”

**Jesus:** “Nay, Martha, but first let us eat. All this talk has left me famished.”

*[Martha emerges from the kitchen with the food. She distributes chops to the disciples and, then, takes her seat next to Mary.]*

**Jesus:** “Martha, have you nothing for me?”

**Martha:** “Aye, lord, for you has been reserved the part that is best.”

**Jesus:** “What part is that?”

**Martha:** “The part that Mary chose—a whole burnt offering.”

Discipleship was not for everyone, nor did Jesus intend it to be for all. Had everyone tried to hop onto the bandwagon, it would have quickly collapsed. The story of Jesus’s visit to Martha and Mary demonstrates this fact to us, as it were, in miniature. If every person sympathetic to Jesus’s ministry were

to have chosen the part that was “best,” and to have sat at his feet, no one would have remained on the sidelines to prepare meals, mend clothes, and contribute to the communal purse (v. Lk., 8.2-3). If all had tried to sell their possessions and to give the money to the poor, soon there would have been neither buyers nor takers—in which case, Jesus would have been pressed to either limit discipleship to those who *could* get rid of their possessions, or to revise the terms of discipleship so that, perhaps, it required learning to live with possessions *as if* one were without. However, neither of these possibilities had any appeal to Jesus. Nor was he interested in establishing a small, self-sufficient commune, such as the Essenes at Qumran. His school was to have no landed property, no gardens or fields, and no business address (v. Mt. 8.20, Lk. 9.58). The master himself was a missionary, unencumbered by spouse, family, or possessions, and every disciple was to become, ultimately, like his master in word and deed and in ability to train others.

Now, if the practical demand for poverty that Jesus placed upon his disciples was based solely upon expediency, then we might find no fault with it. Certainly, as the master of his own school, he had the prerogative to dictate rules for matriculation. And, given the climate, environment, and society in which Jesus lived, perhaps the rules he chose served his purposes as well as he expected. Yet, when Jesus based his demand for poverty upon a religious and ethical foundation—the imperative to enter eternal life through the narrow gate (the attaining, insofar as it is humanly possible, of moral and spiritual perfection), and the imperative of expressing and developing faith in the goodness of God—then, we have not only a right but a necessity to examine his rules for disciples as though they applied to all. For, as Peter is represented as saying, “God has no favorites, but in every

nation the man who is god-fearing and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10.34-5). If God has no favorites, then he has no *special* reward for those who choose for themselves a path or part that is necessarily available only to the few and can only be sustained by the contributions of the many. Since the discipleship envisaged by Jesus could not possibly be available to all and, of necessity, had to be sustained by those who were not disciples, then we cannot agree with Jesus that God had a special reward reserved for those who heeded his call to follow him (*v.* Mt. 19.28, Lk. 22.30).

Do you see the application of the Categorical Imperative? As Kant defined it, “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law without contradiction.” Since it is manifestly impossible for every one to get rid of his or possessions and depend on the providence of God (which includes, in no small measure, the generosity of others), then it cannot be a maxim of conduct. But Jesus not only makes it a maxim for all who become his disciples, but a *necessity* for the attainment of spiritual perfection. In his elitist morality, Jesus is at odds with Kant. More to the point, if the Categorical Imperative is good and true, Jesus is at odds with God.

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## Letter X

### *On Jesus as a Jewish Sectarian*

I don’t say that Christian “discipleship” is false; I only assert that it is not at all the same thing as the discipleship envisaged by Jesus. I consider it perfectly reasonable for any group united

by ideology or practice to create its own program for the training of novices, and I certainly have no wish to quarrel over the name given to any such program. All that I am saying is that Christians are guilty of historical error when they represent their “disciplining” process as modeled upon or a continuation of the discipleship of the Gospels. Before answering your question, “What would a disciple of Jesus look like?”, I think we need to take another look at who Jesus was and what he himself was doing.

When teaching in the synagogues, Jesus astounded the people because, “unlike the doctors of the Law, he taught with a note of authority” (Mk. 1.21-2; also Mt. 7.28-9, Lk. 4.32). Traditional rabbinic teaching is very much like discourse among academics; in regard to any given subject or the interpretation of any particular text, it recognizes the pertinent contributions of scholars and brings them into discussion. Doctors of the Law, like university professors, may be confident in their reasoned conclusions, and yet still bring into consideration the opposing arguments of colleagues and predecessors. Moreover, if they are wise, they are humbled by the realization that neither self-assurance nor loud applause can guarantee any lasting significance to their most carefully deliberated conclusions. Jesus, although familiar with rabbinic teaching, was an outsider to the collegial community. He was a demagogue rather than an academic. His natural intelligence, wit, artistry, modest learning, and Galilean courage were sufficient to foster his pretensions to authority. However, he was also very much aware that, because he lacked not just the credentials but the actual substance of formal rabbinic training, he was vulnerable to having his ignorance publicly exposed. This consciousness of vulnerability, combined with anxiety over sustaining and

increasing his hold over the hearts and imaginations of the populace, manifested itself in two ways.

First, as the Synoptic Gospels would have us believe, Jesus (until his purposes necessitated otherwise) stayed away from Jerusalem and addressed his own countrymen. In Galilee, among the gullible and desperate, the agricultural laborers, shepherds, fishermen, and “bad characters—tax-gatherers and others” (Mt. 9.10)—Jesus found his most receptive audience. Knowing his limitations, Jesus made the best of them, and attributed their results to the will of God: “I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and wise, and revealing them to the simple. Yes, Father, such was your choice” (Mt. 11.25-6; cf. Lk. 10.21).

There are noteworthy exceptions to Jesus’s popularity, even within Galilee. Not surprisingly, when he attempted to make use of his “note of authority” in the synagogue of Nazareth, he was regarded very much as a sophomore who, returning home during vacation, attempts to assume the role of instructor. Naturally, his neighbors found his attitude nauseous (Mt. 13.53-7). In a more elaborate version of this story, we see the townsfolk of Nazareth favorably impressed by Jesus’s exposition of scripture, “surprised that words of such grace should fall from his lips.” When, however, they recognize the speaker as the carpenter’s son and take offence at his assumption of high-brow eloquence, Jesus, finding his balloon punctured, becomes incensed and insulting, leaving his neighbors little choice but to escort him out of town and threaten him with stoning (Lk. 4.16-30).

Jesus’s behavior in Nazareth leads us to the second result stemming from insecurity over his limited religious education. This is his aversion to those whose learning and credentials placed them in positions of public trust. Nothing in the Gospels

is so well attested as Jesus's defensive animosity against those who were legitimately entitled, by reason of their training in the Torah and broad familiarity with rabbinic commentary, to make educated judgments about his teaching. The Pharisees and doctors of the Law were thorns in his side. They were the cultured critics from whom Jesus, try what he might, could not escape. They journeyed "over sea and land to win one convert" from among his adherents (Mt. 23.13-15). Jesus feared them and referred to them as "causes of stumbling" in the path of his followers (Lk. 17.1-2). And, because he feared them, he hated them. Yet—contrary to his assertion that their rejection of him constituted a fulfillment of scripture ("They hated me without reason," Jn. 15.25; cf. Pss. 35.19, 69.4)—it is evident from the narratives that, if any Pharisees harbored feelings of hatred for Jesus, they did so on account of his blanket and vitriolic condemnations and unrelenting efforts to bring them into contempt. Jesus not only instigated nearly every quarrel that he had with the religious authorities, but he also set the tone of their debates. Ironically, Jesus (like John the Baptist before him) referred to the Pharisees and Sadducees as a "brood of vipers" (Mt. 23.33; cf. Mt. 3.7; Lk. 3.7), although no tongue was so full of venom as his own.

When Jesus's public teaching is considered, no legitimate reason appears why he should not have entered into a sweetly reasonable dialogue with other teachers of Judaism, unless—as has been already suggested—he wished to set himself up as a demagogue and master over his own sect, in which case the mainstream authorities would have been perceived as adversarial threats. And the evidence of the Synoptic Gospels is that this is exactly what occurred. Failing to obtain from the Pharisees, Sadducees, and doctors of the Law the same childlike

assent that he received from rustic Galileans, the most that Jesus could hope to do was to silence his opponents through paradox or riddle. When he succeeded in this, his disciples awarded him with laurels for victory and applauded his dialectics as incontrovertible wisdom. When, however, the opportunity for such victories failed to present themselves, Jesus had no defense other than to fall back upon his arsenal of rhetoric and attack with weapons of vitriol—broad and indiscriminating denunciations, caustic insults, and dire threats. The evidence of this in the Gospels is pervasive.

That Jesus firmly believed in the permanence of Judaism is generally evident from his teaching, but may also be demonstrated from two of his sayings in particular: “Do not suppose that I have come to abolish the Law and the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to complete” (Mt. 5.17), and “It is easier for heaven and earth to come to an end than for one dot or stroke of the Law to lose its force” (Lk. 16.17). Jesus perceived his own public teaching on the kingdom (or, reign) of God (or, heaven) in the heart to be a prefacing, rather than an abridging, of the Torah. What he appears to have had in mind was much more than a simplification and balancing of the Law’s demands. Jesus’s realization was the necessity of a foundational relationship with God as “Abba,” Father, upon which the superstructure of the Law could be built. This realization, which was in no way unique to Jesus, was proven to him through both personal experience and his ministry with others. When critics expressed doubt in regard to the propriety of his methods, Jesus responded with the pragmatic principle, “God’s wisdom is proved right by its results” (Mt. 11.18-19)—or, as we might say, “The proof of the pudding is in the eating.” If it works, it must be right.

In an autobiographical moment, Jesus tells his disciples, “When, therefore, a teacher of the Law has become a learner in the kingdom of Heaven, he is like a householder who can produce from his store both the new and the old” (Mt. 13.52). What Jesus, the householder, describes as “new” to Judaism is his own teaching on the kingdom of God. Only when the Law is “completed” (Mt. 5.17) by his supposedly novel doctrine can it be taught as God intended. In the fourth gospel, Jesus is made to suggest that, prior to his preaching of the kingdom—and, thus, before the proper foundation for the Law could be laid—God excused sin, but now that Jesus has revealed what previously had been hidden, the people are without excuse (15.22). No doubt, Jesus declared with authority and charisma his good news of the kingdom. People traveled for miles to hear him. The time was ripe for this gospel: “Until John, it was the Law and the prophets: since then, there is the good news of the kingdom of God, and everyone forces his way in” (Lk. 16.16).

As already noted, Jesus found it easier to establish his authority as a teacher by addressing the less educated. Yet, he attempted to account for his audience selection on pedagogical grounds. He concluded his parable of the wine-skins, “Fresh skins for new wine!”, adding, “No one after drinking old wine wants new; for he says, ‘The old wine is good’” (Lk. 5.36-9). In other words, observant Jews (old wine-skins), satisfied in their religion, were not likely to feel a need for the prefatorial and foundational teaching (new wine) that Jesus had to offer. More plausibly, they would have recognized in Jesus’s public teaching very little, if anything, that was genuinely new, and (worse yet, for Jesus) would have had their own store of wisdom from which to draw forth lessons both new and old.

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The saying of Jesus that is often pointed to as a proof that he anticipated an abolition of the Law is found in Mt. 5.18: “I tell you this: so long as heaven and earth endure, not a letter, not a stroke, will disappear from the Law *until all that must happen has happened.*” A comparison of this verse with Lk. 16.17 (quoted above) will show that what is appended to the Matthean version is a second dependent clause, one that appears to compete with the first (“so long as heaven and earth endure”). If, as some Christian commentators insist, “all that must happen” is an oblique reference to Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection (along with the subsequent inauguration of the Christian dispensation), then not only is the first dependent clause rendered unnecessary and misleading, but so also is the emphatic declaration of the Law’s immutability (not “one dot or stroke” will disappear or lose its force). More plausibly, the ambiguous clause in the Matthean version should be understood as saying “until God’s purposes for the Law are achieved” and as added by the humble compiler to offset the omniscience implied by the ostentatious phrase “so long as heaven and earth endure.”

So, the first thing that you need to note is that Jesus was fervently Jewish. His frequent opposition to religious authorities in no way diminishes from this fact. Rather, it was because Jesus was so enthusiastic about *Judaism rightly apprehended*, and because he was convinced that the religious authorities neither understood nor taught it correctly, that he opposed them. It is inconceivable that Jesus’s disciples did not love *Judaism as taught by their master*. And yet—as I think I demonstrated in my previous letter—Jesus believed that Judaism as traditionally understood and practiced was insufficient, in itself, to lead the believer to the narrow gate. So, Jesus’s disciples were not only committed to the proclamation of the rule of God

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in the believer's heart, as well as the cultivation of a childlike dependency and trust in the Father, but also to learning the full message of Jesus—a message involving both word and deed, itinerant preaching and the *imitatio dei*.

What would a disciple of Jesus look like? He would be Jewish to the core of his being, would emphasize the essence of Judaism as understood by Jesus, and would proclaim through word and example that the way toward salvation is through developing one's personal relationship with God as Father within the context of Judaism. He would be a son of God. Moreover, he would be a man of extremely humble means. I suppose that he would look much like the apostle James.

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## Letter XI

*On the Masterful Manipulation of Jesus*

What you tell me about your recent experience during a worship service is interesting to me, but unfortunate for you, and I am sorry that you had to endure it. It was, indeed, as you say, a violation of your privacy. [—] did not have the moral right to publicly bring up, while leading the congregation in prayer, your intellectual doubts. I would add that, by treating those doubts as a spiritual illness, he clearly demonstrated his lack of respect for the process of reason to which you have committed yourself. I empathize with you and understand your feelings of anger and humiliation, but I urge you to forgive him and, in *private* prayer, ask God to open [—]'s ears that he may hear, to open his eyes that he may see, that he might know that *all* truth is from above and is to be embraced, without any fear or

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distrust, but in perfect confidence in the goodness of the One who is the author of truth. Offer this prayer when you can do so in perfect sincerity, and in the meantime meditate on what I have suggested. I think that you will come to understand and to feel that your proper response to [—] is pity, not anger. Do not delay or leave this matter unattended. I fear that, if you do, a seed of bitterness may soon sprout roots and make itself doubly difficult to extricate.

Do not imagine that freeing yourself from the stranglehold of Jesus is as simple as breaking off your physical connection with the Church. Christians do not lie when they speak of the guilty conscience of apostates, but the basis for this *feeling* of guiltiness is not always actual guilt. Of course, only you can know how deeply Jesus has affected your psyche, and you probably will not know for some time. Even so, it is in the interest of your spiritual and psychological well-being that you understand and rightly appreciate the tactics of manipulation that Jesus used (and, through the Church, continues to use) in order to secure his hold upon disciples.

As you know, Jesus would not tolerate a dissenting viewpoint from his disciples. From them, even submission was inadequate. He expected nothing less than an implicit, unquestioning faith. They were to trust him as though he, and he alone, had access to God's counsel. "I tell you this," he said to his disciples, "unless you turn round and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven. Let a man humble himself till he is like this child, and he will be the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven" (Mt. 18.3-4; cf. Mk. 10.15). In Luke's account, "the little ones" to which Jesus points are not merely children, they are babies (18.15-17). What Jesus expects his disciples to cultivate is an attitude of absolute

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dependence and trustful reliance, not simply toward God, but toward himself as God's interpreter. When Jesus spoke to his disciples, he spoke authoritatively, often sternly. He expected them to hear and believe, not to ask further questions. Thus, when they did not understand his words, they "were afraid to ask" (Mk. 9.32). Once only does Peter express outright dissent. Jesus, obviously enraged, responds, "Away with you, Satan; you are a stumbling-block to me. You think as men think, not as God thinks" (Mt. 16.23). In the Gospels, there is a telling absence of dialogue between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus had no confidence in his ability to satisfactorily establish his notions on the firm foundation of reason. He declares; he does not debate. He would not allow his disciples, rustics though they were, to enter with him into rational discussion.

How such a teacher could maintain a hold upon the minds of disciples is a psychological phenomenon, with a number of contributing causes. But partly, the answer lies in what Jesus called "faith." After exhorting his disciples, "Have faith in God!", he explained his meaning: "I tell you this: if anyone says to this mountain, 'Be lifted from your place and hurled into the sea,' and has no inward doubts, but believes that what he says is happening, it will be done for him. I tell you, then, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours" (Mk. 11.22-4). According to Jesus, "belief" not only has the power to create its own reality, but it also has the power to do so without limitation. This is, truly, an infantile belief. More accurately, it is a concoction of imagination and credulity, the efficacy of which depends upon the practitioner's trust in the concoction itself. To doubt its power is to ensure its failure. This is exemplified in the story of Peter's attempt to imitate Jesus by walking on water:

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Peter called to him: “Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you over the water.” “Come,” said Jesus. Peter stepped down from the boat, and walked over the water towards Jesus. But when he saw the strength of the gale he was seized with fear; and beginning to sink, he cried, “Save me, Lord.” Jesus at once reached out and caught hold of him, and said, “Why did you hesitate? How little faith you have!” (Mt. 14.28-31).

If Jesus is the model of the *imitatio dei*, and if what is required for our *imitation of Jesus* is the power of an unhesitating belief that we have already received from God everything needed, then it will always appear to us that the root of failure is within ourselves, not within Jesus’s teaching. In this case, “faith” not only becomes a virtue, it becomes *the* virtue, the foundation of all moral goodness. The more earnestly we attempt to enter through the narrow gate, the more devastating our failures, the more certain it is that we will strengthen our dependence upon Jesus and our trust in the validity or superiority of his teaching. Not until we are able to liberate ourselves from this psychological trap can we fully appreciate Jesus as the master manipulator. Then we will see that he is like a wolf in shepherd’s clothing who keeps the sheep distracted and himself fat by blaming their losses on a wolf that looks like one of themselves.

Another tactic that Jesus used to tighten his psychological grip around his disciples was to make them believe that the more they learned from him, the more accountable they would be to God: “The servant who knew his master’s wishes, yet made no attempt to carry them out, will be flogged severely. But one who did not know them and earned a beating will be flogged less severely. Where a man has been given much, much will be expected of him; and the more a man has

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entrusted to him the more he will be required to repay” (Lk. 12.47-8). It is one thing to say that all are accountable to God for living up to the moral code that God reveals to them. It is quite another thing to represent oneself as God’s teacher and then threaten one’s students with eternal punishment proportioned to their failure to apply their lessons. Disciples who have once sat at Jesus’s feet dare not to question the wisdom of that which they have heard. Rather, they will return again and again to make certain that they thoroughly comprehend and *believe* it, so that they can make the right application. Very soon, they feel that they have reached the point of no return, and doubt becomes a thing to be feared and avoided at all costs. Only “the man who holds out to the end will be saved” (Mt. 24.13).

If you are now separating yourself from the Christian Church, it is particularly important that you maintain and, if at all possible, strengthen your devotional life—not just for a day or two, but for a sustained period, at least long enough to prove to your own satisfaction that your relationship with God and spiritual progress are not at all dependant upon your connection with the Church. Too often, honest doubters, upon severing Christian fellowship, break off their spiritual routine and suffer loss in their love for goodness and truth. They soon stand convicted in their own eyes (and, perhaps, in the eyes of loved ones) of moral decline. Considering the cause, they cannot but associate it with their departure from the Church. Then, wanting nothing so much as to revive their spiritual life and feel themselves again at peace with God, they attempt to make an offering of their doubts, as though this were a noble sacrifice. But God is not mocked. Because one has sinned against conscience, is God now supposed to be satisfied because one is

ready to sin against reason too? Remember Nadab and Abihu. I tell you this: God will *not* be satisfied.

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## Letter XII

### *On the Author's Journey*

You ask two separate, though related, questions: “Why did I hold on to the name ‘Christian’ for so long, and what finally made me give it up?” If you are wanting an answer in two sentences, you must know that I will disappoint you. However, I promise an attempt at brevity.

All of my formative religious training and spiritual experience was obtained from within the context of Protestant fundamentalism. Daily Bible reading, scripture memorization, the tracing of God’s purposes through biblical and ecclesiastical history—these formed the foundation of my education. The Bible, as I was led to believe, was the key to all truth. It was the standard by which every human utterance could be judged, and therefore an intimate knowledge of it was obligatory in one aspiring to any position of responsibility in the Church. As a young man, Bible preachers were my celebrities—those who possessed so powerful a command of the scriptures that they could preach at length on any topic simply by recollecting and elaborating upon whatever passages in the Bible seemed at all pertinent. The quoting of a line from scripture was looked upon as the declaration of God’s word, and the citation of book, chapter, and verse was enough to certify its authority. But, as you are aware, the distance between what is called “knowing” the Bible and the actual understanding of its contents is beyond

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measurement. Historical, anthropological, philological, and literary knowledge are all necessary for any real understanding of the Bible, and a single lifetime hardly suffices for even the brightest and most talented minds.

Those who begin their education with the presupposition that their holy book is, as a whole, a supernatural revelation from God will, sooner or later, be disillusioned. Many then, feeling that they have been hoodwinked into believing a thing that is not so, give up the whole idea of finding the divine in a body of literature. The few who continue their study ultimately discover that the natural and the supernatural are not so easily distinguishable. Some arrive at the realization that God's hand can be seen in the history and literature of all peoples at all times. This process is a consequence of persistent education and of maintaining an open mind to the divine. It is not an experience in any way unique to myself, but it belongs to humanity in its current stage of development. It is a process of enlightenment described in different ways by people throughout the past three hundred years, but it was particularly common among the educated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Never again will Christianity be so pervasive in western civilization; never again will the erroneous premise be so pervasively held among Christians.

My belief in the supernatural character of the Bible died the death of a hundred pinpricks: the first puncture was agonizing; the tenth was painful; the twentieth was troubling; the fortieth was uncomfortable; the sixtieth hardly disturbed me; the eightieth was not even felt; the hundredth was fatal. I had believed too much too strongly not to be sadly altered by my disillusionment. I did not *leave* the ministry; I *fled* from it. Overnight and inexplicably, the thought of taking my

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accustomed stand behind the pulpit, Bible in hand, became unendurable to me.<sup>1</sup> I resigned without explanation. How could I possibly account for what had so suddenly and without warning come over me? I gave no farewells. I simply ran away and disappeared. Don't suppose that I now approve of my conduct, for I do not. Fortunately, I could not run away from years of spiritual experience. There was, for me, never any possibility of denying the reality of God. Nor could I deny the role that the Bible had served in my development, as a medium through which to gain religious and personal insight.

In the years that followed, I gradually learned to read biblical history as biblical story, biblical story as supportive of biblical doctrine, and biblical doctrine as meaningful, generally, only insofar as it could be understood as metaphor. Did I believe that Jesus was the son of God? Yes and No. Did I believe in his resurrection and ascension? Yes and No. Did I believe that, through Jesus, believers had forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life? Yes and No. Given enough latitude and imagination, one can convince oneself of the truth of almost anything *in a metaphorical sense*. Had I no need to make myself understood to others, I might have continued indefinitely down this path. Yet, at some point I began to feel that, whenever I answered the question "Are you a Christian?" with an affirmative, the inquirer had not learned anything from my answer. On the contrary, unless I followed by offering some explanations, my answer was almost certain to mislead. Not wanting to intentionally misrepresent myself, I decided to reform my answer. Instead of the affirmative, I would say, "Not in the historical sense." Only once, when speaking with a conservative Evangelical, did I respond, "Not from your point of view." But, in either case, my answer was interpreted as a simple "No."

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I then made a wonderfully liberating discovery. I could say, “No, I am not a Christian,” without offending anyone who did not need to be offended. And, what is much more important, I had the gratifying sense that I was being honest. Sometimes the realization that one has been doing the wrong thing does not come until one begins to do the right thing. In giving a negative answer to the question “Are you a Christian?” I did not feel that I had become any worse as a human being. I did not feel that I had offended God. Quite the contrary. Moreover, I then began to feel myself free to criticize Jesus, for as long as I thought of myself as a Christian, I felt obligated, as a person under orders, not to speak against my superior. So, in retrospect, I now believe that I should have ceased to identify myself as Christian long before I actually did. But when?

I will reserve the answer to this question for another letter.

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1. The nearest approximation to my experience that I have found in literature is related by Martin Gardner in *The Flight of Peter Fromm* (New York: William Kaufmann, 1973).

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## Letter XIII

*On Jesus as the Subject of Messianic Prophecy*

There are, I think, two beliefs, either of which are essential for maintaining the name “Christian.” These are (1) a belief in Jesus as the Messiah (that is, the Christ) (—either (a) the one who would “deliver us from our enemies, out of the hands of

all who hate us” (Lk. 1.71), as anticipated by the Jewish people or (b) the revisionist Messiah of Christianity, that delivers humanity from the slavery and eternal consequences of sin by propitiating God as the perfect sacrifice) and (2) a belief in Jesus as the Son of God—not *a* Son of God, not even *the* Son of God in a comparative sense that makes him superior to other sons of God, but as morally perfect (—either (a) morally perfect and, therefore, the Son of God, or (b) the Son of God and, therefore, morally perfect). In Christian theology, the two beliefs are interrelated, but either can be maintained independently of the other.

The earliest and central belief among disciples was the first of these, that Jesus was the Messiah, God’s “anointed one,” which may refer to a prophet, priest, or king. It is, of course, for this reason that they were called “Christians.” The earliest Christians ransacked the scriptures in search of Messianic or pseudo-Messianic passages that either could be applied to what they already knew about Jesus or could be used to fill in the gaps in regard to what they did not yet know about Jesus. In order for a passage to be regarded as Messianic, it either had (1) to optimistically look forward to a future prophet, priest, or king who would right the wrongs then being suffered, (2) to refer to a person, action, or event with sufficient ambiguity so that the reference could be made to have its application in connection with a person already presumed to be the Messiah, or (3) to have analogical value that would allow the person, action, or event to be understood as having a more perfect reference to some one or thing not in the mind of the writer, but rather intimated by the Spirit guiding the writer.

No exegetical or hermeneutic skill was needed for the Christian enterprise of identifying Messianic passages. There

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was no need for them to ask, “What does the passage mean in its textual, literary, sociological, and historic context? What was the writer’s probable intent? How would the intended audience have understood it?” Rather, the foremost requirements were imagination and ingenuity. Exegesis or analytical reading would have arrested their progress; circular reasoning now upholds it.

A few examples should suffice.

(1) In the first category are passages such as 2 Sam. 7.11b-16. When King David volunteers to build a house (temple) for the ark of the covenant, the prophet Nathan tells him,

The LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house [dynasty]. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

In its context, the especially favored son of David is clearly Solomon. No Christian denies this, but they argue that, since the dynasty of David was not, in fact, “forever,” the message of Nathan has a more perfect fulfillment in Jesus. For the biblical writer, however, “forever” simply indicates a period of indefinite length. An American prophet might say, for instance, that God was displeased with the colonial rule of Britain and transferred his love from King George to George Washington, and in making

this other George the “Father of the Presidency,” has established his house forever. Of course, we don’t know what tomorrow may bring. Perhaps, the presidency of the United States shall come to an abrupt end. But, from the prophetic viewpoint, it is a thing established for a very long while, without any end in sight, and therefore “forever.” The author of the Letter to the Hebrews advances the Christian appropriation of the passage, claiming that the sentence “I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me” refers *only* to Jesus (1.5). God, it is supposed, would never say such a thing even to an angel. Much less, then, could he have said it to Solomon. Here the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews goes too far, and Christian explicators are forced to explain that what he really meant to say was that “son,” *in its plenary sense*, could only refer to Jesus, but that, in a lesser sense, it could refer to Solomon. They point out that it was Solomon, not Jesus, who had to be chastised by his Father for the commission of iniquity.

Note the process of appropriation. First, the Christian apologist begins with one or more metaphors that he applies to Jesus. Jesus is a “son of God” and a “king.” Second, the apologist searches the scriptures for kings who stood in positions of favor with God and are referred to as his sons. (Obviously, the best place to begin in the scriptures would be with those passages that have to do with King David. Moreover, since the Messiah is supposed to be a descendant or “son” of David, any passages having to do with Solomon might also serve the purpose.) Third, having come up with some good candidates for prophecies of Jesus, the apologist examines their content for features that support or weaken their candidacy. In the case of the passage under consideration, we have a dynasty that is said to last “forever.” The idea of a dynasty can’t be applied to

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Jesus's kingship, but since his kingdom is spiritual, it might fairly be described as lasting forever. Moreover, we have the idea of building "a house for my name," and since it takes little imagination to think of the Church as a house, the apologist will add this to the list of supporting features. Unfortunately, the "son" in this passage is referred to as guilty of sins. Since this controverts another idea that Christians have about Jesus, it has to be added to the list of mitigating features. Even so, he who has an appetite whetted for prophecies will not pass up this combination platter. He will set off to the side anything indigestible. Finally, having accepted this passage as a prophecy of Jesus, the apologist can now argue *from* it in order to advance other notions. For example, since the "house" has been identified as the Church, this same passage can now be used as a *proof* that God, through the prophet Nathan, foretold the establishment of the Church, that what Solomon was in relation to Jesus, the Temple was in relation to the Church—that is to say, pale shadows of the substance that was to come.

As I noted above, what is needed in this process of appropriation is imagination and ingenuity, not any skill at exegesis. I should add that what is needed in those who accept the clever results of this process is credulous trust.

(2) In the second category might be included Ps. 22 and Isa. 52.13–53.12, among the most cherished of alleged prophecies of Jesus. When read in context, neither of these literary extracts have anything to do with Jesus or with any Messiah. The psalm is a first-person celebration of deliverance from a wasting physical illness and from personal enemies who hoped to profit by the song-writer's death. The "servant song" of the latter Isaiah provides us with a unique reflection upon Israel as he returns to the ruins of Jerusalem after his long period of

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captivity in Babylon. Let's look at a few lines from each of these so-called prophecies.

First, Psa. 22.16-18:

For dogs are all around me;  
    a company of evil-doers encircles me.  
My hands and feet have been mauled.  
I can count all my bones.  
They stare and gloat over me;  
they divide my clothes among themselves,  
    and for my clothing they cast lots.

The imagery is striking, but there is nothing so out of place in this passage as to suggest that it finds its fulfilment in the crucifixion of Jesus. Of course, anyone taken captive might refer to himself as being encircled by his enemies, but so too might anyone who feels overwhelmed by those hostile to himself. No doubt, you yourself have heard someone say, "I am surrounded by idiots." The Hebrew psalmist, feeling himself oppressed by those more wicked than himself, said, "I am surrounded by dogs." But, in the context of this song, this is more than mere metaphor. Note the picture that the psalmist paints for us. He is confined to bed and, in the severity of his illness, has lost much weight. His physician has given no hope for his recovery. He is visited regularly (either on official or private business) and imagines, perhaps rightly, that his visitors are secretly delighted in his illness and, in eager anticipation, have divided his remains prematurely among themselves. In his estimation, they are as a pack of wild dogs that encircle the dying, awaiting the moment to attack and devour their prey. When they visit him, they take

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hold of his extremities, his feet and hands, to feel how weak and cold he is. In keeping with his metaphor, he describes this as a piercing or mauling by their sharp teeth. As poetry, it is a poignant and striking portrait. As Christian “prophecy,” its canvas it ripped to shreds in order that some few pieces of it might serve an apologetic purpose.

But this is not all. So intent were the earliest Christians, on the one hand, upon making scripture match their interpretation of Jesus, and on the other hand, upon making Jesus match their interpretation of scripture, that they gradually came to “remember” the crucifixion in such a way as to imitate this psalm. There is simply no other way to explain the utterly absurd scene in the Gospels where the Roman soldiers cast lots for Jesus’s clothing (Mt. 27.35, Mk. 15.24, Lk. 23.34, Jn. 19.23-4). Are we really supposed to believe that they had taken a fancy for the filthy garments of poor Jews?

Then there is the plaintive cry of Jesus from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psa. 22.1a; cf. Mt. 27.46, Mk. 15.34). Is it possible that Jesus, while enduring agonies, could have recalled this particular line from a favorite psalm and appropriated it for himself? Yes. But, it is far more probable that disciples, while envisioning the crucifixion from the vantage-point of Psalm 22, soon imagined this as among their master’s final words. Moreover, it serves the purpose of drawing the reader’s attention to the particular psalm which they saw as “fulfilled” in the crucifixion.

Next, Isa. 53.5-9:

He [Israel] was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,

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and by his bruises we are healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray;  
    we have all turned to our own way,  
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.  
He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
    yet he did not open his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
    and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
    so he did not open his mouth.  
By a perversion of justice he was taken away.  
    Who could have imagined his future?  
For he was cut off from the land of the living,  
    stricken for the transgression of my people.  
They made his grave with the wicked  
    and his tomb with the rich,  
although he had done no violence,  
    and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Most Christian commentators would have us believe that neither the writer, his immediate audience, nor any other reader had any notion of whom he was speaking of for half a millennium. He was, they say, inspired by the Holy Spirit and was led to speak of things that no one could understand until after the death of Jesus. In fact, the passage made perfect sense to the writer's contemporaries, and—with a little understanding of its historical context and poetic figures of speech—is easy to understand today.

Surely, you understand this verse: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for *her*” (Eph. 5.25). Who is this “her” to whom the writer refers? Do you say, “Obviously, it is a woman!” If I tell you that, in this

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case, the first-person singular pronoun refers to a collective group, the Church, will you retort, “That’s impossible! It would be unnatural for the writer to refer to the Church in a way that would appear to exclude both himself and his audience”? No, you have no difficulty understanding that the writer’s choice of metaphors makes it necessary for him to speak of the Church as though it were a single female person, apart from both himself and his audience. Why, then, do Christians have so much difficulty understanding this “servant song” of Isaiah? Mainly, I suppose, for two reasons: first, they read without reliable reference to the historical context; second, they read through Christian glasses and can only see what years of training have coached them to see.

Hosea 11.1-2 says, “When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.” In this short passage collective Israel is referred to in the first-person singular, is called “my son,” and is then referred to in the third-person plural. Granted, no English teacher would allow her students to write in this fashion. The biblical writers appear to have had more license in their use of pronouns. They adopted their pronouns to serve their metaphors and were promiscuous with their metaphors—that is, they refused to be faithful to just one.

In the passage quoted above, Israel is represented as the subject of divine chastisement or tough love—so tough, in fact, that many regarded his captivity as his death as a nation. From a human standpoint, the captivity was unjust. After all, the Babylonians were the wicked rich. If a nation needed to be chastised, why not them rather than Israel? All in due time. In the meanwhile, the wicked were used to punish the guilty. But it was punishment with

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a healing purpose. The Israel that was returning to Jerusalem was not the same Israel that was taken away. They had been purified, as through fire: “by his bruises we are healed.”

“Yes, but . . . ,” say Christians, “it fits so well with what we know about Jesus.” In fact, it fits with a theology and a story about Jesus, both of which were shaped, in part, by this passage from scripture. Was Jesus really buried in the tomb of the wealthy Joseph of Arimathea? Perhaps, but as already observed, the early Christians gradually shaped their memories and traditions in accordance with the details they found in what they supposed to be prophecies of Jesus. Unless the Romans treated the body of Jesus with special care, which is a remote possibility, then it was either left upon the cross to rot or was buried in a shallow grave.<sup>1</sup>

Consider Zech. 9.9:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter Jeruslaem!  
Lo, your king comes to you;  
triumphant and victorious is he,  
humble and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Matthew is so intent on making this passage apply to Jesus that he ignores the Hebrew parallelism and transforms Jesus into a circus performer, riding into Jerusalem on both “a donkey and her foal” (21.2-7). No one aware of how the early Christians used scripture to shape their traditions can say with certainty whether Jesus rode into Jerusalem upon a donkey. If he did, it was with the conscious intent to mimic scripture—an agenda that the Gospels are unanimous in foisting upon Jesus. Observe how, as Jesus enters Jerusalem, his disciples sing

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out, “Blessings on him who comes as king in the name of the Lord!” (Mt. 21.9; cf. Mk. 11.9, Lk. 19.38, Jn. 12.13). In this case, an enactment of Zech. 9.9 is obviously intended. The only question is whether it ever actually happened. To say that it did is tantamount to saying that the disciples were complicitous with Jesus in his efforts to mimic scripture. And, if this is the case with these disciples, then why not also with Joseph of Arimathea?

In regard to Jesus’s intent to “fulfill” scripture, consider this episode in the Gospels. Knowing that he is soon to be removed from his disciples, Jesus tells them that, if a disciple “has no sword, let him sell his cloak to buy one. For Scripture says, ‘And he was counted among the outlaws,’ and these words, I tell you, must find fulfilment in me; indeed, all that is written of me is being fulfilled.” Of course, outlaws carry swords; therefore, if Jesus is to be “counted among the outlaws,” his disciples must carry swords. Jesus is, thus, delighted when a disciple responds, “Look, Lord, we have two swords here.” His reply, “Enough, enough!”, evidently is meant to signify that two swords are, in his estimation, enough to fulfill the scripture (Lk. 22.36b-8). The disciples, however, are confused. Naturally, they suppose that the swords are to be used for self-defence, and so, when the temple police approach to arrest Jesus, they ask, “Lord, shall we use our swords?” One of them (Peter, according to Jn. 18.10) strikes the servant of the High Priest, cutting off an ear, and Jesus has to intervene in order to stop the violence (Lk. 22.49-52). The humor of this episode, unfortunately, is obscured and generally overlooked on account of the high drama of the larger narrative context.

(3) In the third category, that of analogical prophecies, must be placed the idea of Jesus as the “lamb that is led to the

slaughter” (Isa. 53.7). The early Christians could not make up their minds what sort of sacrificial lamb Jesus was to be. Ultimately, they decided that he was *both* the Passover Lamb (*Korban Pesach*, Ex. 12.3-12, Num. 9.12) and a sin-offering (1 Cor. 5.7, 1 Pet. 1.19, Rev. 13.8, Jn. 1.29). Whereas the Synoptic Gospels represent Jesus as eating the Passover with his disciples, the Gospel of John actually pushes back the execution of Jesus in order to make Jesus himself the Sacrifice of Passover. Thus, once again, we see the narrative tradition of Jesus being changed in order to serve the greater cause of Christian doctrine. In Judaism, the *Korban Pesach* was not a sin-offering; it was a memorial sacrifice, a celebration of the redemption of the Hebrews from Egyptian servitude. No Gentile could, in any way, be involved in the sacrifice if it were to be acceptable to God. In regard to so-called sin-offerings, they were offered only for *unintentional* “sins” (mistakes or accidents) that resulted in ceremonial uncleanness. Real sins involved both the will and the conscience, and they could not be absolved by any outward observance, such as a temple offering or sacrifice. Rather, they involved the individual’s relation to God and demanded repentance and, in cases where others were injured, punishment or restitution. Moreover, a sin-offering was never a male lamb. So, in neither case does Jesus satisfy the Law as a lamb of sacrifice.

There are a number of other moral problems involved in the Christian fiction of Jesus’s death as a propitiatory and atoning sacrifice, not the least of which is that it would represent God as a wrathful, unforgiving devil, intent upon the torment and destruction of every person who is unwilling to allow an innocent person to suffer and die in his or her stead. Is God really so incompetent that he has created a species without the

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capacity to live according to the purpose for which he created it? And is he also so unreasonable and passionate as to blame and punish his creation rather than himself? And is he also so silly and unjust as to imagine his problems resolved by casting his punishment upon a single victim who has never offended him? Explain to me, if you can, how such a god as this is a moral improvement upon the Zeus of Homer?

A person might, I believe, reject the Messianic status of Jesus and yet still retain the name “Christian” if he or she still believes Jesus to be the everlastingly impeccable moral ideal of humanity, a model held up for our idolization and emulation. As to this notion, if all that I have written in this and previous letters has not been sufficient to dispense with it, then I cannot but believe that we have different conceptions of morality.

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1. John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 154.

## Letter XIV

*On the Comprehensiveness of Theism*

I was pleased to learn from your most recent letter that you retained one friend from among those who were formerly your companions in the Christian faith. But when I read that [—] is willing to remain your friend so long as you hold out to him the hope that he might regain your allegiance to Jesus, I wonder whether you have, in fact, retained a friend. Of course, you should always be open to persuasion, but that is hardly

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the issue here. Is it not clear to you that [—] cannot accept you as you are? How, then, can he ever love you as a real friend? I would never counsel you to break off your friendship, but I do think that you should urge the necessity of basing your friendship upon a *mutual* condition—that you both remain, first and foremost, friends to God. If that is not, also, a *sufficient* condition for friendship, then perhaps [—] cannot believe that you, with your current convictions, are truly in rapport with God. Would *you* consider that person a friend who has so little respect for you as a man of God and who insists upon evaluating your most intimate communion with the divine by a standard that you no longer accept as legitimate?

From the perspective of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, you—as a pure Theist—stand on the portal of a religion but are yet without it. From their perspective, your religion appears as a thing immature and undeveloped. Beware of allowing their perspective to influence your own appreciation of where you are and what you possess. Do not undervalue what you have gained. They have the *confidence* of having acquired everything, whereas you, without this confidence, are, in fact, in possession of much more than they. What is the basis of their confidence? Is it not because they imagine that they have found everything they need within one book or under one teacher (or from a clearly defined set of books or teachers)? Is it not because they are no longer seekers and are no longer compelled to exercise their reason and conscience in evaluating the truth value of what they find?

You are not banned from their books and their teachers. But you know that the real standard of truth and goodness is not in them but, rather, in what you possess from God. Everything you hear, everything you read must stand before the court of

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your reason and conscience. And this is where your confidence in God is much greater than theirs—for you have faith that God will guide you to use the tools that he has blessed you with in order to discern truth and goodness. The longer that you grow in God’s grace, and the more that you exercise your mind and spiritual faculties of discernment, the easier it will be for you to discern the relative value of truth claims. Never succumb to the temptation to end your quest and say to yourself, “I now know all that I need to know of truth and goodness.” If you do, be assured that, at that moment, your powers of discernment will begin to shrivel—like muscles that cease to be used.

No doubt, you know or have heard of a person who, after many years of believing the Bible to be an authoritative guide to truth and morals, suddenly abandons it and falls into gross immorality. Christians like to moralize over the spectacle of such cases and use them as warnings against religious doubt. But, in fact, they should be recognized as warnings against the dangers of implicit faith. The man who has learned to walk by a strong faith in a book revelation has but learned to walk by the aid of strong crutches. When the crutches are removed, he will have to relearn to use the spiritual muscles with which he has been endowed by God.

Therefore, I say to you again, Never allow your Bible-believing friend to define the value of your relationship to God.

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## Letter XV

### *On Prayer and Miracle*

Belief in miracles is a thing of yesterday. The most that the modern mind can evoke is what Coleridge referred to as the

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“willing suspension of disbelief.”<sup>1</sup> When we first began our correspondence, I took it as a matter of course that whatever belief you had in the alleged healings and exorcisms of Jesus was entirely contingent upon your prior belief in his existence as a supernatural being. Had you come to me with a belief in the divinity of Apollonius of Tyana, it would have been foolish and wasted effort on my part to attempt to persuade you that his miracles and prophecies are mere stories. In the ancient world, innocent ignorance, childish credulity, and misguided notions of how best to honor the reputation and memory of great persons, led to the proliferation of such tales. True greatness does not, of course, depend upon the truthfulness of these stories, and no sooner is the nature of greatness recognized as circumscribed within human limits than the supernatural accretions fall off as dead and useless weight.

But now you come to me from the opposite side, as one unaccustomed to think of prayer apart from biblical supernaturalism. Since, as you say, God already knows our hearts and, in any case, does not intervene in human affairs, what is the usefulness of prayer? Experientially, you already know the answer, but as we all have need, on occasion, to be reminded of what we know, I am glad to be of assistance.

Do you not feel that, as a reasoning and intuitive being, you are connected, at the deepest level, with the power that shapes and directs the universe? Our comprehension of that power is necessarily limited by the boundaries of our consciousness. We are conscious of our own mindfulness, that it is by process of mind that we are able not only to imagine, will, and act, but also to apprehend intangible qualities, such as good and evil. By analogy we define the power of the universe as mind, and since we know that goodness is not a mere construct

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of our imagination but is, instead, a reality that we are made so as to gradually apprehend, we necessarily identify the mind of the universe as good. But our analogical reasoning does not end there, for we cannot conceive of independent mind without, at the same time, conceiving of personality. We probably say, "A person has the ability to think," but we might say with more truth, "That which thinks is a person."

No doubt, if we were divine and not human, this analogical and anthropomorphic reasoning would appear to us as feeble and primitive. But, thank God, we are not God. He has given us enough intelligence to be aware of the limitations of our intelligence and, as a corollary, of the moral necessity of conducting ourselves in a spirit of humility. So we approach God as we would approach a person better and wiser than ourselves. And, knowing that God has not made us for destruction but for life and happiness, we approach him as we would a friend or parent.

Approach God as one from whom who have nothing to hide. There is nothing that you can reveal to God about which he does not already possess perfect knowledge. Therefore, unburden your soul. Tell him everything in absolute candor, but say nothing merely in order to hear yourself. Rather, speak and await his response. If you are not ready to hear, or if you have already heard without acknowledgment, then God may be silent. More often than not, God speaks, but we lack the patience to await his response and rightly interpret what we hear.

As Frances Cobbe noted, "If we restrict ourselves solely to the conception of Prayer for God's inner action on the hearts he has made, for his help to overcome our weakness, his forgiveness to restore us after our sins, his love to fire our cold natures with Love divine and human, how inexpressibly beautiful and simple does it become!"<sup>2</sup> There is nothing supernatural in such

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prayer as this. And yet, what could be more miraculous than to find oneself made whole by the mere touch, as it were, of the outer garment of God. It is not Jesus who casts out devils and heals the diseases that afflict our souls, but rather God himself. If you do not come to God in prayer, his care for you will not be diminished. Only a seared conscience and a closed mind would keep him from communicating with you. But it is for our own benefit that we keep the lines of communication open and free.

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1. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* and *Two Lay Sermons* (1817; London: George Bell and Sons, 1905), ch. 14, p. 145.

2. Frances Power Cobbe, Preface to *Alone to the Alone: Prayers for Theists by Several Contributors*, 2nd ed. (1872; The Francis William Newman Society, 2009), p. x.