

THE JOURNAL of RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

VOLUME XVIII

1961-1962

NUMBER 2

Faith, Existence and Culture

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IT IS CERTAINLY a sociological truism to point out that cultural forms are relative to different societies and to different periods in man's social history. Just as there is no absolute point in our physical universe from which coordinates of motion, mass, and energy can be derived, so there is no absolute position in our cultural history from which the multiple forms of philosophic, artistic, ethical, and religious constructs can be described and evaluated as a unified whole. To achieve such an absolute position one would have to step outside of history itself—an undertaking which we can readily agree is extraordinarily difficult indeed! Hegel in his metaphysics of history advanced the pretentious claim of having attained such an absolute and detached perspective. The Germanic culture, which he understood as the concrete unity of universal, objective freedom and particular, subjective passions, provided him with a context in which he could see the historical fulfillment of Being itself. It fell upon Kierkegaard and Marx, his two chief opponents, to call attention to the comic predicament in which he was involved. Hegel sought to understand history from a point beyond history while at the same time remaining within history. Also for Nietzsche this was the final and most telling expression of the "error of Being" which dominated the whole of western metaphysics. It was clear to Nietzsche that when man no longer apprehended *becoming* as the very stuff of reality, then life and history together were lost. This meant for Nietzsche that man's highest ideals and most noble aspirations

are but a day in the eternal becoming and constant flux of changing and relative values. To be sure, he had his art so not to die of truth, but even his aesthetic morality, with which he sought to transvalue all previously existing human values, could not remain immune to the ravages of change and becoming—and thus relativism played the trump card.

The central task of this essay is to examine certain aspects of the peculiar interrelationship of faith, existence and culture. First, there is the already indicated problem of relativism. If all cultural forms are time-bound and space-bound, does not religious faith itself become a temporally and spatially conditioned response, which has validity only for the epoch and the society in which it receives expression? Does cultural relativism have the final word even on matters of faith? If it does, in what sense can Christianity make a universal claim for an eternal Gospel? If it does not, how is cultural relativism overcome in this special area of human concern? We will attempt to show that the problem of cultural relativism, and the problem of culture as such, can be resolved in a peculiar way—namely through an appeal to an existentially determined knowledge which precedes, both historically and epistemologically, the proliferation of cultural forms, and which raises the ultimate questions that are answered by the concrete faith-decision. Among other things this means that the problem is overcome by going *through* relativism to its existential source, rather than by an appeal to a timeless and worldless human reason which can somehow stand outside of the historical contingencies and view the whole of reality in detachment and objectivity. Human reason is always existentially determined; it is temporal, finite and bound to its historic situation. The indelible historicity of man must be acknowledged, and the consequent relativity of its formalized cultural perspectives must be accepted. Our religion, our ethical norms, our aesthetic values, our metaphysics, and even our scientific formulations are conditioned by our time in history and our place in society. There is no pre-established universal religion or morality which transcends man's historic situation and which can be objectively defined. But to recognize, as Greek philosophy and Christian theology informed by Greek modes of thought failed to do, that there is no objective, universal, unifying cultural perspective derived through the operation of a timeless and worldless reason, does not mean that an answer to the problem of relativism is forever precluded. As long as the question is objectively and non-existentially posed, assuredly no resolution is in sight. We are on the path of a productive pursuit of the problem only when we frame the question in terms of subjective and existential considerations.

As in all philosophical and theological disputes, the decisive factor is the *Fragestellung*. The crucial question at this point, and the question from which all further explication must take its rise, is the question: "Who is this being who is concerned about his historicity and his relativism and asks the question about himself?" Cultural relativism can be overcome only through an appeal to existentially determined knowledge. The problem of culture, in the last analysis, is rooted in the problem of existence. And Christian faith, as it is informed and vitalized by the symbols of creation, fall, judgement, and redemption, constitutes the answer to the problem of existence, and thus also to the problem of culture.

Now how does an appeal to existentially determined knowledge make possible a movement through cultural relativism? How is the situation changed by abandoning objective and detached perspectives and focusing upon the personally engaged, existing subject? Existentially understood, man as that being who asks the question about himself, is a being who is oriented in a concrete life-world. In this concrete life-world his various existential projects radiate from a center of concern. This concern drives toward biological, psychological, and social horizons, and returns always to a concern about man himself as he is projected into these various world-horizons. Kierkegaard in his notion of passion, Jaspers in his notion of *Handlung*, Sartre in his notion of *engagement*, and Heidegger in his notion of *Sorge*, have all expressed in an incomparable way this central factor of concern which is the very fibre of human existence. Now the peculiar task of an existentialist phenomenology, most explicitly carried through by Heidegger, is that of a precise delineation of the structures of this concern as it manifests itself in the concrete life-world. An investigation and further elaboration of such a delineation, desirable as it may be, is of course outside the scope of this essay. However, we must show how such a delineation undercuts cultural relativism and becomes decisive for the movement of faith.

Four structures of this concern which are crucial for a solution of the culture problem and a conceptual clarification of the meaning of faith are: *finitude*, or concern about one's creatureliness, *estrangement*, or concern about one's alienation from others and from oneself, *conscience*, or concern about one's guilt, and *resolution*, or concern for an integrated self which affirms itself in the presence of threatening negativities. These structures of concern—finitude, estrangement, conscience, and resolution—delineate certain aspects of the concrete movements of the existing subject in his immediately experienced life-world. These concrete movements are

never objectively known nor directly communicated. They are subjectively apprehended, but apprehended in terms of structures which point to and describe (although not exhaustively) and communicate (although not directly) the universally human. The Christian faith, formulated through the symbols of creation, fall, judgment, and salvation, provides the concrete illumination of and answer to these four movements of human concern. In the concrete faith-encounter man's finitude or creatureliness is illumined in the context of createdness, which points to the divine ground of being (symbol of creation); estrangement is illumined in the context of his experience of alienation from this divine ground (symbol of the fall); conscience is illumined in the context of God's disclosure of his law (symbol of judgment); and the movement of resolution is illumined in the context of divine grace and forgiveness (symbol of salvation).

Thus it becomes apparent that if the culture problem is rooted in the existence problem (both as regards methodological and ontological priority), and the Christian faith with its symbols of creation, fall, judgment, and salvation is understood as an answer to the existence problem, then the issue of cultural relativism becomes secondary and subordinate. The structures of human concern, and the faith responses within the movements of this concern, precede the emergence of the problem of the relativity of cultural forms in which this concern and faith has its formalized and socially objectivized expression. Relativism is overcome not by avoiding it, nor by appealing to a universal and timeless reason in abstraction from the concrete-historical but by proceeding *through* it to the engaged existential subject who apprehends himself in the concrete immediacy of his life-world.

The task which confronts us now is that of defining the precise relation between the Christian faith and various cultural forms—such as art, science, politics, and religion itself. How do the symbols of creation, fall, judgment, and salvation, which answer the existence problem, illuminate and vitalize the cultural expressions of an epoch? What does faith have to say about the relation of man to culture? What conditions must be specified in the formulation of a theology of culture? Quite clearly a comprehensive formulation of a theology of culture cannot be undertaken here. Nonetheless, an effort will be made to set forth some of the primary considerations which such a formulation would have to entertain.

First, what do finitude and creation tell us about man's relation to culture? Finitude as an irremovable fact of life drives us to an acknow-

edgement of the irremovable finitude which underlies every cultural form and activity. There is no absolute culture and no absolute vantage point of interpretation within a culture. All cultural forms, like Tennyson's "little systems" have their day and cease to be. And in no wise is religion, as one among other cultural forms, exempt from this finitude. But finitude understood within the context of creation takes on a new meaning. The new meaning is that God is the divine ground of every finite cultural form and activity, and constitutes the power by virtue of which it has its being. Culture as the manifestation of human activity has thus both a quality of creatureliness and createdness (as has man himself). From this there follows a most important middle axiom—the positive value of culture. Every cultural form is finite, but insofar as it is, it is a *finite good*. This is the essential truth in the symbol of creation. This truth is central to the Biblical tradition ("God looked upon what he had made and beheld that it was good"), and has received expression throughout the whole history of Western theology. Augustine formulated it most precisely in his *Enchiridion* when he wrote: *Esse qua esse bonum est*. Aquinas, Luther, and Schleiermacher all acknowledged its paramount importance. This middle axiom has a regulative and critical function in that it combats recurring tendencies to deny the relevance of culture for faith. The rejection of culture—whether in its political, scientific, or artistic expression—generally characteristic of sectarian religion, belies an acknowledgement of the full implications of the symbol of creation. The symbol of creation points to the divine power and the divine goodness which is present in all forms of culture—both material and ideational.

However, a faith which sees culture only in the context of its created goodness invites a religious myopia which conceals the existential fractures and moral ambiguities present in all cultural forms—fractures and ambiguities which arise as a tragic consequence of man's alienation from the divine ground of his being. The first movement of the interdependent self in its cultural consciousness is elucidated through the symbol of creation. The second movement is elucidated through the symbol of the fall. Every ethical system, every political program, every social organization, and every religious institution bears the mark of this tragic alienation, which is as much of an indelible component of cultural actualization as it is of personal actualization. The state, the church, the school, and the family are pervaded with attitudes and judgments that remain forever morally ambiguous. They are all in some sense alienated from their essential goodness. Political strife, class conflict, family disorganization, and religious

rivalry are all phenomena which indubitably betray a fall from the original goodness of creation. As sin has produced a fissure in the human personality, so it has fractured every form and expression of cultural advance. The particularization of this existential and moral fracturing can be witnessed in the declaration of claims for cultural supremacy and moral purity in each of the special regions of culture. A political regime is elevated as an object of ultimate allegiance, makes a fantastic claim for absoluteness, and brings about the demonic distortion of a deified state. An educational program preaches that knowledge is man's supreme good, sets itself up as the cultural vehicle of this knowledge which alone can save mankind, and thus provides another example of a creature that has denied its creatureliness. A science claims possession of the key for final explanations through quantitative reductions and statistical averages, and thus becomes guilty of a transgression of its limits. A religion absolutizes its doctrinal formulations, fails to recognize the disguised vices which permeate all of its virtues, and thus denies that it too is a sinner. In these ways do each of the cultural forms rebel against their Creator, and refuse to acknowledge their finitude and their guilt. As the symbol of creation cautions us against viewing culture solely in terms of its existential negativities, so the symbol of the fall cautions us against the temptations of viewing culture in terms of a pristine and untrammelled goodness.

The symbol of judgment powerfully elucidates the experience of guilt and condemnation in our inner personal and social history. Through the voice of conscience man is called to a concern about his indelible and irremovable guilt, which is part of his finite existence by reason of the fall. Heidegger has expressed this universal structure of human concern in his formulation, "*Dasein* as such is guilty," and has developed a penetrating phenomenological description of the ontological basis of conscience and guilt.¹ In the concrete faith-encounter this experience of condemnation for guilt is apprehended as a judgment by God for the sinful misuse of man's finite freedom. Every personal and practical project of human concern is pervaded by the nothingness that makes its appearance through the actualization of finite freedom. Man can never fully affirm his essential being. He can never become wholly sovereign over himself. Because of his alienation from God he lacks the resources to bridge the gap between his existential actuality and his essential ideality, between what he is and

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (7th ed.) (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer Verlag, 1953), pp. 267-301.

what he ought to be. In the concrete faith-encounter this correlated phenomenon of conscience and guilt is illuminated in its religious depth. It discloses a God who is the judge over every finite, guilt-ridden existence, which unauthentically conceals its guilt and denies both its finitude and estrangement. As a consequence of man's personal and cultural *hubris* judgment follows. Thus, in one of its expressions, the symbol of judgment indicates the relativity of all human claims. This is a relativity understood not in terms of an objective and detached survey and comparison of various cultures, but a relativity arising from an awareness of a sovereign God who judges every finite and sinful individual and institution for its wooden pretenses. The Christian faith, therefore, acknowledges the relativity of all cultural values as readily and emphatically as the sociological and anthropological relativist. However, he sees this relativity as an implication of man's creatureliness and estrangement, and not simply as the result of a comparative sociological analysis of value. Thus, in the final analysis, the relativity of cultural forms is seen in its theological depth.

Paul Tillich has elucidated this theological dimension of judgment in his concept of the "Protestant principle," which is one of the governing concepts in his theological system.² The Protestant principle is the foundational principle on the basis of which one protests against any demonic claim for absolute and final knowledge. It is thus that the Protestant principle provided the condition for Luther's protest against the Medieval church. But the principle is not confined to the historical protest of Luther, nor to the continuing protest of Protestantism against Catholicism. It is applicable to all finite formulations and institutions, which means that Protestantism must use the principle against itself. Tillich argues persuasively that Protestantism, in its various stages of post-Reformation orthodoxy, lost the Protestant principle. Protestantism as a historical movement and a relative cultural form must not be confused with the Protestant principle. The latter is an expression of God's judgment of Protestantism itself. What one finds in many varieties of post-Reformation developments is simply a substitution of a new absolute for an old. A confession, a creed, a scriptures, or a founder of a sect becomes absolutized, makes an unconditional claim for final truth, and thus considers itself immune to judgment—both human and divine. Whenever this happens the judging principle of protest is lost. Not only, however, must the Protestant principle

² See particularly, *The Protestant Era* (The University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 161-181.

be used against Protestantism. It must be used against Christianity itself, which as a religion is but another relative cultural form. The Christian religion is not exempt from God's judgment. Religion must not be identified with faith. It was particularly the unparalleled insights of Kierkegaard, the solitary thinker who found it impossible to be a Christian in Christendom, that made the contemporary world aware of the dangerous confusion of religion and faith, Christianity and Christ. Christ is the answer to the question of ultimate meaning which arises in man's lived subjectivity. Christianity is but a finite, fractured, and feeble formulation which repeatedly sells its Christ for thirty pieces of silver.

The fourth universal structure of human concern which we have delineated is resolution. One of the most provocative discussions of the significance of this structure for an understanding of human existence is found in Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*.⁸ Resolution is the concern of the existing self for an integrated being-in-the-world. We are interested here not in a further elucidation of this structure, but rather in a correlation of this structure with the content of faith in its cultural expression. Through the symbol of salvation faith concretely apprehends the movement of resolution as a self-affirmation made possible through the transforming power of divine grace. Resolution understood in its theological depth dimension is not a movement based on human self-sufficiency, but is rather a movement transfigured and vitalized through the justification by faith through grace. Like the symbols of creation, fall, and judgment, so also the symbol of salvation has direct bearing upon the cultural problem. Faith affirms the presence of God's healing, redeeming, and transforming power in culture with the same fervor that it attests to God's creation and judgment. Man's finite and broken world is the subject of God's healing power. This is one of the central themes in the Gospel of John, and to a lesser degree is expressed intermittently in the literature of Paul.

One of the special tasks of a theology of culture is that of elaborating the full implications of the symbols of the faith, and particularly the symbol of salvation, for the ideal of cultural inter-communication and harmony. If God is God he heals not only the fractures of our personal existence, but the fractures of our cultural existence as well. In the final analysis the two modes of existence are inseparable, for man's being is always a being-in-the-world which is historically and culturally extensional. Any striving for personal integrity is thus inseparable from a striving for cultural

⁸ Heidegger, *op. cit.*, pp. 305-310.

harmony. This striving for cultural harmony may express itself concretely in movements for racial equality, ecumenical councils, committees on religion and higher education, conferences on science and ethics, and programs for the integration of religion and the arts. Each of these spheres can express an embodiment of God's saving and healing activity. They can express a divine love which provides the directives for cultural integration. They can express a divine justice which informs the contingencies of historical becoming through an embodiment of the divine *logos* within the conditions of time and space. Love and justice, in their theological depth, are the most powerful expressions of God's action in Christ. Christ is thus apprehended in the concrete faith-encounter as the healer of culture, or as H. Richard Niebuhr has so aptly formulated it: "Christ the transformer of culture".⁴

The implication, both logical and existential, of the symbol of salvation is that any dualistic approach to the relation of faith and culture is seriously questionable. God's creating and saving activity in the world entails a positive valuation of culture. At the same time, however, the symbols of the fall and judgment express an irremovable tension between faith and culture, and thus check any tendencies toward the identification of the content of faith with a cultural form. Faith views every cultural form in the context of its created goodness, but it also views every cultural form in the context of its estrangement and moral ambiguity. It sees culture as embodying the healing power of God, but also as pervaded with guilt and standing under God's judgment. Culture neither contradicts the divine activity, nor is it identical with it. The face of culture is multi-dimensional. It retains the essential goodness of creation. It bears the marks of the fall. It is subject to divine judgment. It is constantly transformed through God's saving activity.

⁴ H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (Harper & Brothers, 1951). See pages 190-229 for an illuminating discussion of the Fourth Gospel, St. Augustine, and F. D. Maurice on the theme of Christ as the transformer of culture.



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