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common denominator that describes what takes place wherever God is revealed in this world. A part, an aspect, or a sign of God's reality in the world becomes recognized by means of an historical occurrence, a human encounter, a parable, or an inward experience. This reality, which is not of itself accessible to us and which we do not perceive as we do the things of this world, is opened to our understanding. Thus, that which is earthbound becomes the bearer of the divine self-revelation. God's self-disclosure takes place through means which basically make possible human access to God. However, these means are only recognized for their character as channels of revelation when they are viewed as signs and manifestations of the reality of God. God's transcendental reality—that is, a reality that exceeds the borders of our transitory world—now becomes available to us as that which is capable of being heard, seen, hoped for, and perceived.¹⁴ God steps out of his hiddenness and meets humanity under the conditions of their power of perception. For the New Testament message, this has occurred in a basic way in the stature and destiny of Jesus of Nazareth.

Thus, God is recognizable only to the extent that God has offered himself to be apprehended. This means that our theology does not concern itself with "God in himself" but with God in his revelation. The question that preoccupies theological inquiry is not "Is there a God?" but rather, "Who is the God who reveals Godself to us?" The living God can never be the object of our investigation, definition, and decision; rather, the true and living God will always be the subject of the encounter that God provides for human beings through his self-revelation.

According to the biblical understanding, revelation is therefore never simply a disclosure of a divine reality that would not otherwise be accessible to us. Rather, it is an event that anticipates a response, an act of communication, that establishes a new relationship between God and humanity. It is the relationship of faith. Revelation awaits a response.¹⁵

Revelation and faith are terms that we are employing here in a twofold sense. On the one hand, they indicate an event or an accomplishment; on the other hand, they indicate the content of that which is communicated, or accepted, in this event. Revelation and faith are thus related to one another in a twofold manner.

They correspond to one another as events, since revelation intends to awaken faith, and faith emerges as true faith only through revelation. They also correspond to one another in their content. Those who believe understand themselves and the world in their state of relationship to God,

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as this has been disclosed in revelation. The content of faith can therefore only be that which is the content of revelation.

Faith, as the activity of God's revelation, also includes the "yes" to God, the Creator, and thus to our own creatureliness, as well as trust in our Preserver and Father. A new relationship to God is laid open to us through him, into which we willingly enter.¹⁶ This is a reciprocal, personal event between God, the Revealer, and humans, the recipients of that revelation. In faith, we recognize the reality of God as the source and foundation of our lives, and we order our entire existence from the standpoint of this reality. The obedience that recognizes and does God's will is not added to faith as a supplemental task. It is part and parcel of faith, and is that aspect which concerns human actions.¹⁷

With this initial overview, we have set forth only a part of the basic structure of the biblical understanding of revelation. Important questions remain open with regard to its content. It is clear that the biblical text does not impose a closed system of revelation. Instead, it seeks to provide witness to the dynamic history of revelation. For Christian faith, this revelation points toward God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. However, how should the revelation of Christ stand in relation to the history of revelation as a whole? What is the relationship between the acts and discourse of divine revelation to their written deposit in the books of the Bible? And what is to be said about the possibility of God's revelation in creation or in the inward nature of humans independent of the witness to revelation that is found within the Bible?

These questions are to be pursued in the remaining sections of this chapter.

1.1.1 *God's Revelation in Jesus Christ*

Hebrews 1:1-2 summarizes unsurprisingly clearly the meaning of the person and the history of Jesus for the Christian understanding of revelation. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son."

God speaks in the Son, and, according to the understanding of this episode, it is not only the words of Jesus that qualify as the discourse of God. God reveals himself in Jesus' Person, his life and actions, and his death and resurrection. Through his work in its totality, Jesus Christ is "The reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (verse 3).

In this sense, Jesus Christ is both the center and the totality of the

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revealing activity of God for the Christian community, and thereby also the measure and the criterion for everything that lays claim to being divine revelation.

The New Testament texts illustrate this principle in a variety of ways.

The Gospels, especially the first three, firmly hold to the distinctiveness of the Man from Nazareth, in that they delineate his earthly life and work, noting both his human limitedness and the transparency of his being and actions in manifesting the reality of the reign of God and of his righteousness.

Thus, the detailed portrayal of his painful and patient suffering on the cross is no less a testimony to God's revelation in him (Mark 15:39) than are the reports of the appearances of the Resurrected Lord, which bestow renewed faith upon his disciples, who had succumbed to fear and resignation.

The New Testament epistles, especially those of Paul, describe the death and resurrection of Jesus as the focal points for the revealing activity of God, who discloses his righteousness and love to a humanity in bondage to the power of sin and death (compare Romans 1:16f., 3:21f., 8:31-39). With a yet stronger emphasis upon the Person of Jesus, it is declared in Colossians 2:9, "In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily."

The special concern of the Gospel of John is to expound the ramifications of this declaration. Its prologue, which delineates the way the divine Word comes to humankind, and thereby serves to present something like a concise outline of the history of revelation, is directed toward the statement, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only son, full of grace and truth."

The divine reality and the reality of "grace and truth" is experienced in the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:14, 17). An Old Testament attribute for God is referenced with these concepts, which characterize God in his kindness, goodness, and grace, and in his abiding faithfulness and truth (compare Exodus 34:6-7). The basic Hebraic expression for this divine quality can only be inadequately rendered in our vernacular. In particular, the Hebraic and Greek equivalents for our word *grace* describe this personal aspect much more strongly than does the English term, which is oriented to the concept of "pardon" or "the grace that surpasses righteousness."¹⁸ If Moses gave the law that testifies to God's grace and truth, then this divine reality has now become human in form through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).¹⁹ He is the grace and truth of God, God's inex-

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haustible goodness and faithfulness, that lived among and for us humans! As the One who has loved his own to the end through the laying down of his life, Jesus reveals that God is love (John 13:1; 1 John 4:10, 16). Thus, Jesus can declare concerning himself, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

To say that the only begotten Son is the only One who knows God and can proclaim him (John 1:18) does not mean that he offers reports on this or that about the Father. Instead, it means that he effects the encounter with God. He does not only attest to the truth (John 18:37) or speak about the way to God. According to John 14:6, Jesus says concerning himself, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." He summons humankind on his mission, opens to them the truth of God and gives them eternal, that is, true, life. In the encounter with Jesus, God reveals himself to us as the living God.

It is this above all that characterizes revelation: "According to its biblical witness, the manifestation of God is a history which God enters into with humanity, whereby He comes into proximity with them.... Revelation is the opening of fellowship: God comes to humanity. It is not left to its own resources, nor is it permitted to remain alone with itself and the world."²⁰

The christological concentration of the content of revelation makes it inescapably clear: revelation is not a product of the human endeavor to perceive. God himself, as the God who turns toward humanity, and thereby the God who is love, is the source and content of his revelation.

The revelation of God "in the Son" is not limited by the witness of the New Testament to the brief tenure of his earthly reality. Through him God has created the world (Hebrews 1:2; 1 Corinthians 8:6); he is the firstborn of all creation (Colossians 1:15-16), and therefore he is himself the Word who has become flesh, the same Word through whom God created all things at the beginning (John 1:1f., Genesis 1:1). Jesus Christ is "the eternal Word made flesh,"²¹ and his being with the Father "in the beginning," means that from the very beginning self-revelation was part of the essence of God. We will probe these relationships more extensively in the discussion that follows.

The revelation of God in Jesus Christ has not yet attained its goal: the Christian congregation is also still waiting full of hope for the glorious appearance of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13). However, this One who is coming is none other than he "who gave himself for us" (verse 14). To know him gives certainty to those who hope.

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Similarly, in the Revelation to John, what is decisive in view of the future of this world is the realization that "the Lamb that was slaughtered" was found worthy to lead God's cause to its victory (Revelation 5). For the Apocalypse, it is also the case that "revelation," in the last analysis, is not information about the endtime events. Instead, it is a summons to encounter him who says: "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me" (Revelation 3:20).

It once again becomes clear that the christological focus of the biblical understanding of revelation maintains that at its core and essence, God's revelation is not the communication of random facts but the opening of the way of salvation, which God walks with humanity and with the world. In this salvation, "everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ."²²

1.1.2 God's Revelation in the Word

God wants to find an opportunity to speak—that is the basic conviction which sustains our attempts to speak of God and which is delineated by the biblical witness to the utterances of God. As we have seen, it is repeatedly asserted that God is *speaking* or that his *Word* is going forth, where ever historical events have the character of revelation or where the prophets receive a message through visions. It is completely foreign to Hebraic thought to make a conceptual distinction between the Word that is declared and the thing that it signifies.²³ Without doubt, the position of the Word is so connected to the event of revelation that it is particularly appropriate for us to describe revelation as an encounter. It is not enough for there to be a straightforward historical event or the demonstration of a powerful epiphany. In his revealing actions God addresses humans and he awaits their response.²⁴

The revealing Word of God is referred to in the Bible in manifold fashion.

As we have seen above, the saying regarding Jesus Christ as the Word of become flesh is central. Not only is the biblical concept of the Word of God that is done, taken up and personalized by this event; through the use of the Greek concept of "logos," the philosophical question concerning the final ground of being and the recognizableness of God is furthermore being addressed.²⁵

An additional circle of discourse concerning the "Word" is made known where Paul places the gift of the "message of reconciliation"

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(2 Corinthians 5:18ff.), or the empowerment of the word of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:18ff.), alongside the event of God's act of reconciliation in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It is inseparably bound to and yet clearly distinct from it. The gospel, the message of reconciliation, is the instrument whereby God's saving activity continues to operate. God's righteousness, which is made efficacious for our salvation, has become manifest once for all in the death of Christ (Romans 3:21-24), and it reveals itself to be new each day in the message of the gospel, leading persons to saving faith (Romans 1:16f.).²⁶

God himself addresses humanity in the message of the apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 5:20) and in the Word of those who carry forth this message. From the start, God's revealing activity is thereby open to all future hearers of the Word!

Conversely—that is, looking back on God's words in the Old Testament—it is valid to say, according to 2 Corinthians 1:20, that the "Yes" is spoken to all of God's promises in Jesus Christ. The fact that God has spoken in the last days through his Son certainly does not annul what he "spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets" (Hebrews 1:1). On the contrary, God's revelation through the Son confirms and fulfills the validity of those words. No matter how this was implemented in particular exegesis, what the Psalmist declared in principle remains valid for the Christian community, also in view of the words of the Old Testament: "The Word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness" (Psalm 33:4).

It should certainly be noted that, with the formulation of this declaration for the Old Testament worshiper the "Word of the Lord," was as yet no formally defined entity, standardized by chapter and verse, so to speak. In that time, neither the Hebrew nor the Christian Bible existed in its present form. Its confession of the trustworthiness of the Word of God was founded on its content and referred to the variegated tradition of God's discourse to his people in the community of the old covenant, the affirmation of his faithfulness, and his demand for obedience.

But we also need to be clear that we have the "Word of the Lord" at our disposal—whether in its Old or New Testament form—only in the form of the Bible and through the witness of its texts. We are dependent on this Word whenever we make inquiry into God's word.

Karl Barth has provided a quite helpful formulation regarding this complex phenomenon of the "Word of God" by delineating its "threefold" nature.²⁷ He distinguished between

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—the *proclaimed* Word of God, in which God speaks to persons through the preaching and sacrament of the church, —the *written* Word of God, the Holy Scripture, as the remembrance of the revelation that has occurred, and —the *revealed* Word of God, the event of revelation itself, that is expressed most fundamentally in the statement “The Word became flesh.”

God speaks to us in this threefold structure of his Word, and it is important to comprehend the inner unity and the interdependence of the three forms of the Word of God. We know the revealed Word only through the Scripture, and the written word is opened to us in the actual event of proclamation. Conversely, the proclaimed Word is derived from the Bible, and the written word has its authority from God's revelation, to which it attests.²⁸

The declaration that is given in the “Fundamentals of the Doctrine and Theological Task of the United Methodist Church” on the subject of “The Word of God and the Bible,” comes quite close to what is contained in Barth's formulation.

Through the Scripture, the living Christ meets us in the experience of redeeming grace. We are convinced that Jesus Christ is the living Word of God in our midst, whom we trust in life and in death. The biblical authors, illumined by the Holy Spirit, bear witness that in Christ the world is reconciled to God. The Bible bears authentic testimony to God's self-disclosure in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as in God's work of creation, in the pilgrimage of Israel, and in the Holy Spirit's ongoing activity in human history. As we open our minds and hearts to the Word of God, through the words of human beings, inspired by the Holy Spirit, faith is born and nourished, our understanding is deepened, and the possibilities for the transformation of the world become apparent to us.²⁹

Some illustrative comments need to be added to these basic observations.

(a.) In the final and actual sense, God's Word in his eternal, incarnate Word, which has addressed us in Jesus Christ and in which God has opened himself to us from the depth of his Being, is his unsurpassable love. This Word is the basis and cause for every human witness to God's discourse, from which it proceeds and by which it is empowered.

(b.) We know of God's revealed Word only through the Word that is

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attested to by the Bible: the word of the Old Testament, whether hidden or manifest, points with bold anticipation, yet also with historical distance, to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The words of the New Testament apostles and teachers report to us God's actions in the deeds and destiny of Jesus and proclaim him to be the Christ of God.

Because of the central importance of the Bible as the foundation for Methodist theology, a separate section will be devoted to the questions of its origin and exposition (1.2).

At this point, we will already formulate several basic statements concerning the relationship of revelation and the Bible.

Alongside other Christian communions, we affirm that “the holy Bible, Old and New Testaments, reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation. It is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice.”³⁰

The following criteria will guide us in identifying what is the proper relationship between God's revelation and the Bible:

(1.) God's revelation is primary to the holy Scripture. The Bible is the witness to enacted revelation.³¹ This enacted revelation is reported, attested to, preserved, and transmitted in the Bible—it intends to become revelation anew.

(2.) The character of revelation is to be the revelation of salvation—thus it is not a communication concerning unknown things that could be experienced by means of other channels (geography, history, culture, etc.) but are easier to discover from here. To be sure, the Bible can be used in that way, and this approach has repeatedly been followed. It is also at times apparent that it “is right” on such matters. However, when its character is read as a witness conforming to God's revelation, then the Bible can be regarded as leading us to the knowledge of God and of ourselves, as well as seeking to bring the entire world into obedient relationship with God.

(3.) Revelation and the Bible are not identical, yet neither are they separable from one another. Whoever seeks to express true assertions about God without measuring them against the witness of the holy Scripture runs the risk of succumbing to a deception. Whoever wants to understand the Bible must be open to the expectation of perceiving God's discourse within it.

Being a document of enacted revelation, the Bible bears witness to God's acts, and above all to God's final revelation that is available in Jesus Christ. Thus, both the Bible and revelation must always remain interrelated.

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In this mutual relationship they are the source and the basic norm for the theology, doctrine, and preaching of the church. Scripture without the prior provision of revelation is a dead letter (2 Corinthians 3:6). Revelation without the Bible is perhaps a devious self-deception. However, in their juxtaposition they become "canon," or the norm for our theological and pastoral work.

Also, God's self-revelation through the words of the Bible means that these words are intended to be received in faith. First, the words of past ages become the actual and sufficient words for readers and hearers living in the present day. "The Christian witness, even when grounded in Scripture and mediated by tradition, is ineffectual unless understood and appropriated by the individual."³²

(c.) The Word that is proclaimed by Christian witnesses of our day is also God's Word, through which God himself addresses humanity and produces faith within them. Our witness confronts persons in their most inward being, and by means of weak human speech they are enabled to encounter the saving and life-giving God. The misuse of the Word of God promoted with the homiletical authority of the pulpit in the past has today led to the situation where many proclaimers think too little of its power, and not infrequently they deal with their responsibility for it in a casual manner. The fact that God wants to come to verbal expression through human beings is a high calling, which authorizes and at the same time challenges us to a greater carefulness and faithfulness in the delivery of the message.

The "proclaimed Word of God" thereby occurs not only in the sermon but also in the sacrament and in liturgy, in Christian instruction and in personal witnessing.

The word that we proclaim gains its authority as the Word of God through its grounding in the written word, the witness of the Bible, and through the working of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit makes the message of the biblical witness—fixed in writing and related to the past—the present, awakening, justifying, and life-endowing Word of God for us today.

This relationship of the Word and the Spirit describes an important problem that has been resolved in a variety of ways.

The Reformers, especially Luther in his struggle against the so-called "enthusiasts" ("Schwärmer"), laid great value upon the close connection between the "outer" Word of the sermon and the witness of the Spirit.³³

In the Methodist movement, stronger attention was given to the work of the Spirit in the heart of human beings, through which the message was

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actually brought near to its hearers and could be existentially grasped by them. The strong connecting of the operation of the Spirit to the message of the cross was particularly constitutive. That which the Spirit "reveals" is nothing other than the existential certainty that God's love in Christ is personally valid for me, and the operation of his blood suffices to save my life and to constitute it as wholly new.³⁴

Methodist theology thereby distinguishes itself very clearly from the viewpoints that are founded on the promise of the Spirit from John 14:16 and that have repeatedly emerged in Christendom since the second century. These maintain that the Holy Spirit has opened for the Christian congregation a new horizon of revelation, which in its content can lead beyond the revelation of Christ.

In John 14:26; 16:13-15, the "christological linking" of the operation of the Spirit is expressed with great clarity, which certainly would represent Jesus' words and work in a new manner, but would not bring forth a new, Christ-transcending message.³⁵

This christological connection of the work of the Spirit endures in the praxis of the Christian community, through the connecting of the proclaimed Word to its substantial grounding in the written word of the Bible. Although from 2 Corinthians 3:3-6 the thesis could be deduced that in the "New Covenant" there should be no more "Scripture" but only the "ministry of the Spirit," the early church learned soon that it should hold firmly to the written witness concerning him, in order to maintain its commitment to Christ. It is precisely that "on the written nature of the word hangs His autonomy and independence, and consequently His free power over against the Church."

However, in order that the Bible as critical measure of the Church remains transparent for the actual point of reference of the church—that is, Jesus Christ, as the incarnate Word of God—"sola Scriptura" (the Bible alone) may not be understood in a purely formal way, in which the message of the Bible is diluted into simply providing information about a closed system of revelation and becomes a dead letter. It is more correct to say that "sola scriptura" is to lead to an ever new grounding of contemporary proclamation in the message of Christ, from which it gains its empowerment to address contemporary people in the Name of God. In doing so the preached Word of God attains the highest meaning for the event of revelation: a personal encounter takes place between God and human beings in the present day, and with this activity God's revelation attains its first goal.

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1.1.3 God's Revelation in God's Creation

The assumption that there was and is a preliminary knowledge of God outside the fullness of the Kingdom and apart from the source of the biblical message has almost always been accepted in the Methodist tradition.³⁶ In the next three sections we intend to probe the questions concerning the content that this kind of knowledge has and can have, and how it takes place. In the fourth section of this chapter, we want to consider what can or must be acknowledged by this "general" knowledge of God, from the viewpoint of a Christian theology.

(a) In his *Compendium of Natural Philosophy*, Wesley declares with plainness and simplicity of style that "the world around us is the mighty volume wherein God hath declared himself. . . . The book of nature is written in an universal character, which every man may read in his own language." The perfection and greatness, the power and wisdom of the Creator, his goodness, but also his wrath can be deduced *from nature*. That means "every part of nature directs us to nature's God."³⁷ The most recent publication in Europe on the doctrine of The United Methodist Church, the book on faith entitled *Underway with Christ*, describes natural philosophy in a way that is quite similar to Wesley's outlook: "As the creation of God, the world bears witness to the Creator."³⁸ It may be an indication of God's unending and inexhaustible vivacity, his constancy and faithfulness, his glory, goodness and wisdom, but also of his inscrutability. For, in addition to the evidence of God in creation, there "is likewise to be found within nature that which is veiled; beside the similitude of His essence, there is also that which is incomparable, and beside that which is consoling, there is that which is contradictory."

The Bible in many respects bears witness to the fact that humans can discern something of the reality of God from nature, and, indeed, to the fact that they can repeatedly will to displace this knowledge that extends from creation to humanity. The declaration in the twelfth chapter of the book of Job is especially significant and startling: "But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being" (Job 12:7-10). Many of the psalms invite us to express astonishment for the wonderful order in nature, in praise of its Creator (Psalms 8:4; 29:2-4; 104).

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The New Testament gives different, nuanced details in this matter. In Acts 17:22-31, Luke reports a speech of Paul on the Areopagus in Athens, in which it is pointed out how God, through his ordering of creation, has granted to humanity the possibility of discerning him, and by citing a Greek author, it is demonstrated how humans have been brought quite near to this place of discernment. This glimpse of God has certainly been darkened by the idolizing of vividly depicted gods. Yet, its presence is still sufficiently potent that it can be correlated with Paul's proclamation of Christ to the Greeks and thus it can help lead them to the goal.

In Romans 1:19-23 and 1 Corinthians 1:21 Paul expresses himself quite critically on this subject. To be sure, human beings are able and need to recognize the Creator in his creative actions in nature. However, they have despoiled this knowledge of God because they set the creation in the place of the Creator in their veneration of gods that are fashioned in human and animal form. The fact that this knowledge had been possible is the ground for the complaint against humanity, which turned away from God, but for Paul, there was obviously no positive point of contact here for his proclamation of the gospel. Humans certainly inquire about God in view of the wonder of the creation; however, they miss the true God, because they fashion for themselves their own gods.

Since the advent of modern natural science, the question concerning the possibility of knowing God from nature and creation had appeared to be settled. If the Christian natural scientist, such as John Kepler or Isaac Newton, had admired the wisdom and magnitude of the Creator in the harmony of the natural laws, since the beginning of the nineteenth century it also seemed fitting to consider the concept of God as being superfluous as a necessary "working hypothesis" for explaining the origin of the world. Darwin's theory of evolution appeared to be better able to explain the origin of the species than did the belief in a Creator-God.

Strange to say, the question concerning the recognition of God in nature and the need for the concept of God to explain the origin of creation has in recent years been raised with vigor against the background of the theory of evolution and of modern theories of the rise of the universe, as in reference to the so-called big bang theory. Emphasis is once more being given to the question of the recognizable-ness of God in nature, and the necessity of the concept of God for the explanation of creation. This tendency is also to be found among scientists who have maintained a critical distance from the Christian faith.³⁹ These investigators have certainly demonstrated clearly that the image of God that results

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from such considerations is not identical with the God whom the Bible proclaims.⁴⁰

The question of God readily emerges not only with regard to the beauty and magnitude of the creation. The Bible also knows that it is precisely negative experiences in and with nature which cause people to raise questions about God: the transitoriness of human life, as is the case with the life of all creatures, the pains and privations as well as the threats concerning the meaninglessness and uselessness of all toil, cause people to inquire concerning the meaning of these experiences, and of their existence.⁴¹ They proceed from these kinds of questions to the position that there is Someone who is able to provide an answer to that which is beyond human limitations—and not only that, but who can also possibly effect a transformation of the human situation. For these are certainly not scientific questions that arose from curiosity or purely theoretical cognitive efforts. Much more, people are here asking questions in deep existential perplexity, which makes it impossible simply to push aside such considerations and notions.

(b.) There is also this intermingling of astonishment and horror, of wonder and fear, of exaltation and prostration that is implicit in the questions that people ask concerning God and which lead them to seek him. However, there are further areas of experience within the created world which can direct us toward God. Many persons have accepted as true such evidence of a transcendent reality in the voice of their conscience, which they are unable to silence. "We feel observed, recognized, and to the core of our being, seen through and judged. But by whom if not an omnipresent and omniscient God, in whose dominion we exist?"⁴² Even if the psycho-analytic research of our century has brought us new understanding of the origin and function of our conscience, the ancient perception of the divine in conscience lingers, which implicitly provides us with a scrutinizing court of justice that we finally are unable to avoid. Indeed, the words of our conscience can only be ignored at the price of endangering our existence as human beings.⁴³

We certainly are not able to assert that the voice of conscience within us is to be equated with the voice of God. We obviously realize that the conscience is not infallible but is very much prone to error. The question of a binding norm for our behavior is thereby not yet answered. However, what the phenomenon of the conscience makes unavoidably clear is this: our existence as humans as such stands under an unconditional requirement that certainly can take different forms, but which is unchanging in

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its character. Given the nature of the requirements of conscience, humans have throughout recorded history always joined the question of conscience to an ulterior court of justice to which we must render an account in accordance with our conduct. For Wesley, conscience was a sign that God's preventive grace was operating within human beings.⁴⁴ Paul significantly describes this activity of God in the hearts of human beings in his epistle to the Romans, where he writes, "All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness" (Romans 2:12-15a). Even if the heathen—like Jews and Christians—do not involve the will of God in their actions, but rather resist it and put themselves in its place, this changes nothing concerning the truth that they have at least been able to partially recognize the will of God. It is thereby also significant that the reality of God himself makes God noticeable in our world of experience.

(c.) Some brief reference may yet be made to two further fields of experience, without our discussing them in detail. Even within the field of human history there has been the repeated attempt to recognize some traces of the activity of God. Here we are not speaking of the history of salvation ("Heilsgeschichte"), which cannot be conceived without God being recognized as its author. Rather, we are speaking in this connection of the general history of humanity and of peoples. Events are perchance accepted in the experience of history as a judgment or as traces of the activity of God. "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked" (Galatians 6:7). This connection, whereby offenses are repaid, whereby injustice does not remain uncompensated, and whereby that which humans perpetrate upon one another comes back to them, has often been understood as an act of God. It is apropos to say that "God's wheels grind slow, but exceeding fine," wherever an evil deed experiences a delayed recompense.

However, when good deeds or an upright and honorable life lead to the experience of a positive response within a person's biography, and thus a reward, this is interpreted as a blessing of God. As in the previous examples there is an underlying conviction here that history does not simply elapse, with the assistance of the principle of cause and effect and by human deeds. Instead, there is One who "sits in authority," who will

finally bring righteousness to pass.⁴⁵ Wherever this answer is not recognizable, where evil deeds remain unrecompensed, or wherever diligent, upright persons are having to suffer a difficult fate, many would question the righteousness of God, which appears to be totally absent from their observations.

These contradictory experiences with history, from which it seems one is unable to deduce a unified description of God, brings the matter of the general knowledge of God into the twilight of more important hypotheses. Hence, Theophil Spörri speaks with good reason of the "impenetrable darkness of history."⁴⁶

(d.) Finally, there are also the *far-reaching disruptions* in individual lives or in the lives of other persons that have repeatedly led them to ask about the possibility of an ultimate sustaining Power. Here we are referring to experiences of a nameless, purposeless longing or an existential "angst" that cannot be overcome, which is searching for ultimate fulfillment and security. (There are believers, who see their lives in this perspective when experiences of deep suffering or threatening absurdity happen to them.) In addition, other persons, who had not formerly considered the existence of God, but who have long since refused God or have not come to know him at all, come to such a place in their lives where they are asking beyond this visible reality. Such far-reaching disruptions are probably consistent with the experiences of which we have already spoken. Nevertheless, they describe a new dimension of observation and recognition that can scarcely be ignored. At this point there is not yet a clear recognition of who God is to the extent that God takes form as one to whom a person could turn, with complaints, scorn, and bitterness. Only the question of God remains, but not as a question addressed to other persons or to earthly courts of appeal, which are unable to offer anyone help to ascend from the abyss and the personal misery that threatens individual life, but rather as a question seeking God.

1.1.3.2 THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IN DIFFERENT RELIGIONS

Scientific research in religion has long sought in vain for a convincing theory for the origin of religions. What has been determined—with tolerable certainty—is this: from the first traces of human life on this earth, there has also been evidence of the presence of religion. It can no longer be ascertained exactly what experiences and observations in particular have led to the veneration of superhuman powers and deities. Perhaps we may be permitted to accept the fact that these questions and experiences

were not so very different from those which people in all times have lifted up over the boundaries of their experience of this world. These include their sense of self-elevation in relation to extraordinary experiences of fortune and the attending questions of the origin of those experiences, complaints about suffering and the deficiencies of life, and the emerging question of how to overcome them. An awe in the face of that which appears to be superterrestrial, which appears at the same time fascinating and threatening, has found expression in the various developmental steps in the religious veneration of deities.⁴⁷ We may distinguish between dynamic and animistic religions, natural religions and religions of revelation, "primitive" religions and high religions—they all stand here beside one another as a sign indicating that religion is to be viewed as an "original expression of human life."⁴⁸

Even the biblical authors proceed from this basis and uphold the viewpoint that they live with their faith in the one true God in an environment in which other deities are being honored. It is now understood that not only negative influences—including a vigorous rejection of the biblical authors, the prophets and the apostles—have proceeded from those alien religions. A series of biblical texts also indicates significant influences which have been positively received. Basic research has established that the biblical reports of creation in the first two chapters of Genesis bear the influence of motifs that derive from older accounts of creation. The wisdom literature of the Bible assimilates insights from the ancient Egyptians, and in the New Testament there are certainly the so-called "household tablets" (Colossians 3:18–4:1; Ephesians 5:22–6:9). Rules for living from Stoic philosophy were received, and, to be sure, they were in a form that had already been newly imprinted by its use in Judaism. Of course, foreign structures of thought are never simply taken over without being examined. The story of creation itself shows that stories are never connected to the motifs from other religions without modification or contradiction.

For this reason, the prophets of Israel and the proclaimers of the gospel have been able to ridicule in a powerful way the expressions of belief in the gods. Perhaps the sharpest rebuke of this type is heard in the irony from the words that we find in the fortieth and forty-first chapters of the prophet Isaiah. "To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? An idol?—A workman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold, and casts for it silver chains. As a gift one chooses mulberry wood—wood that will not rot—then seeks out a skilled artisan to set up

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