# RELIGION AS TRUE MYTH

*Inaugural Lecture*
*of the Professor of Philosophy*
*delivered at the College*
*on 20 January 1953*
*by*

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BEFORE I begin, I should like to take this opportunity to thank you, Mr. Principal, and the members of the Senate, the Faculties, and the Administrative Staff of this College for the very friendly way in which you have received me into your midst.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to my predecessor, Emeritus Professor A. E. Heath, in the first place, for the devotion, over a period of twenty-seven years, with which he founded and built up in this, the youngest constituent College of the University of Wales, a department of philosophy so competently and judiciously staffed that the duty of succeeding to his responsibilities was made a very easy and a very pleasant one for me.

I am further indebted to him personally for the many ways in which he is able to be of assistance to me in this critical first year, and for the assurance I have that there is always someone there, who has stood where I now stand, to whom I can turn for encouragement and good advice.

But perhaps my greatest debt is of a different character. The department which he raised has the deserved reputation of being a 'nursery for professors'. Four persons now occupying chairs of philosophy in different Universities have risen from its ranks. Some kind providence decreed that one of these, and I believe the first, should accede to the chair at Aberystwyth in the year in which I read for Honours in philosophy as a student of that College. I refer to Professor Richard Aaron, whose reputation as a philosopher, and particularly as a student of the English Empiricists, is securely established in this country and was latterly acclaimed from beyond the Atlantic when Yale University invited him temporarily to occupy one of its

chairs. To him, both as teacher and as colleague, I owe everything. He has my deepest respect.

It has become increasingly difficult for intelligent people to assent to the class of propositions known as the dogmas of religion. An accepted secularism is rapidly taking the place of the cultural heritage bequeathed by Christianity. And we not unnaturally connect this development in some way with the rise of science. The modern mind is certainly influenced by science in the way it responds to demands upon its credulity. In estimating the credibility of statements, it tacitly makes the same two assumptions that the scientist is making, namely, (*a*) that the credibility of a statement is a function of the evidence in its favour, and (*b*) that, in the last resort, only what directly registers itself on our bodily senses can be accepted as evidence of the required sort. This is the temper of empiricism: a temper which requires that what the mind is to give its assent to, must have directly engaged it through its experience, and a temper, moreover, which denies that anything is a genuine experience of the mind which has not involved the stimulation of some bodily sense-organ. And, approaching the doctrinal pronouncements of religion in this temper, the man of today simply finds them incredible. Presuming that these assertions convey information of some kind about the world, he looks in vain for any evidence in their favour of the sort that he would be prepared to accept as evidence.

But it often happens that a methodology which exercises a disintegrating influence on received ways of thinking while its logical implications have not been fully worked out, may point to a whole new way of looking at the discredited tradition, when the logic of its own position is better understood. Now during the past two decades in philosophy, the implications of empiricism have



been worked out in a way which enables what I believe to be a profoundly suggestive and clarifying question to be asked concerning the significance of the whole intellectual or doctrinal content of religion. The question is: 'Are we really asking the proper sort of question with regard to religious utterances when we demand to know whether they are *true*?' Or, to put the question differently, 'Are doctrinal utterances propositions?'

The logical implications of empiricism have been worked out by the philosophers who call themselves Logical Positivists. The following is, very briefly, the view which they take. Assertions provoke the question whether what is being said is true. But logically another question comes before this—the question, namely, whether the assertion is a significant statement. Now what the Logical Positivists offer is a test of significance. They claim that a sentence is only used significantly when we know the method of its verification, know, that is, what data of experience would render it true or false. This is known as the Verification Principle. If we accept this principle, it follows that sentences which we are unable to verify or refute, because we know of no data of experience that would render them true or false, are *sentences without meaning*. As the Logical Positivists say, they are *nonsensical utterances*. They may resemble sentences which have meaning. And every word in them will have the kind of meaning that is attributable to individual words. But the sentences as a whole will be meaningless. Now it is arguable that there are no data of experience that would, even in principle, verify or refute sentences about *transcendent* entities like God or the supernatural world. It follows, therefore, that most statements made by religious people, for example, the basic statement that 'God exists', are *not really statements at all*. They are nonsense, not in the popular sense in which saying that a statement is

nonsense is merely an abusive way of saying that it isn't true, but in the technical sense that we know of no data of experience that would render such sentences true and that they are, therefore, *not even false*, but simply devoid of significance. Professor Ayer, who first popularized this brand of positivism in Britain, has this to say of the theist: 'His assertions cannot possibly be valid but they cannot be invalid either. As he says nothing at all about the world, he cannot justly be accused of saying anything false'. It may comfort the theist to know that this at once renders his belief irrefutable. But it is cold comfort, because the very same analysis renders his belief illusory! For if the sentence 'God exists' is without significance, it does not really express anything and so it cannot express belief in the existence of its grammatical subject. Believers are somehow the victims of a delusion when they think they believe.

Now it seems to me that, in propounding this very radical test of propositional significance, the Logical Positivists have made possible the exposure of a mistake in our whole conception of the significance of the doctrinal content of religion—the mistake, namely, of demanding that a statement of doctrine should be the sort of statement that can meaningfully be said to be true or false. I suspect that it is this demand, among other things, which has brought about the decay of religion in the modern world. For as statements of literal fact, doctrinal utterances had to submit to the test of significance proposed for factual propositions in general. Scientific rules of evidence had to be applied to them. And, inevitably, when they were weighed in these balances, a searching and sceptical generation found them wanting. From being utterances which people accepted within the setting of a great heritage, they have become allegations which the majority of people disbelieve. And to disbelieve a proposition is to believe its contradictory—to hold, in fact, that the proposition is *false*. May not the proper answer to the decay of belief in the twentieth century be that we need to redefine the status of the basic utterances of religion *so that they can no longer be found to be false*? I do not mean in the sense that they are once and for all proved to be true, for I deny the possibility of such a proof, but in the sense that the question of truth and falsity is *no longer thought to be the proper question to ask concerning them.*



A suggestion to this effect was put forward in the early days of Logical Positivism by another former member of the philosophy department of this College who acceded to a chair. I refer to Professor Karl Britton who expressed the following view in a paper on *The Truth of Religious Propositions*:[1] 'Religious propositions do not convey information. This view involves that there are no religious facts, in the sense in which there are facts about physical objects, that religious propositions are not true or false in the ordinary sense of these words.' Then he says this: 'Many people think that religion ends for a man who decides that religious propositions are not well-founded scientific hypotheses. In this I am sure they are mistaken. Religious sentences can be proved meaningless only in the sense of "meaning" proper to scientific sentences: but they may have meaning in some other sense.'

It is a view as to how religious utterances can have meaning not subject to the test of verification that I want to put forward in this lecture (without wishing, of course, to suggest that my views would necessarily be acceptable to Professor Britton).

One widely canvassed view of the purpose of religious utterances is that they serve to *express emotion*. 'Express' here is not used in the sense of 'state' or 'describe'. Religious utterances 'express' feeling in the way an exclamation

[1] *Analysis*, Oct. 1935, pp. 21 ff.

would. They relieve rather than describe it—provide an outlet for it. This is known as the Emotive Theory of Meaning and it has seemed to many Logical Positivists to offer the best solution of the problem of the significance of both moral and religious utterances. Now the suggestion that in this field meaning is somehow related to *emotion* is, in my view, an exceedingly important one. But I find a disappointing shallowness in the way the theory is worked out in current philosophical literature. And this, I suspect, is due to the traditional preoccupation of empiricist philosophy with our knowledge of physical phenomena and with the logic of the language in which we describe these phenomena. This has left empiricism with the heritage of a very defective and superficial knowledge of the emotions. Indeed, it is true of our culture generally that knowledge has become a kind of supersophistication divorced from the inner life of feeling. But the despair of anyone who wishes to counteract this tendency is that we have no precise language in which to state the opposite point of view. At the expense of leaning heavily on metaphor, I am going to try to describe a 'dimension' of personal reality to which I believe science cannot penetrate. I shall call it the 'dimension of depth in man'.

One reason why, as philosophers, we fail to think down into this dimension, and have put such a shallow construction on the view that religious utterances are expressions of emotion, is that we assume that psychology can, at least in principle, say everything there is to say about persons. This is a tempting but dangerous assumption to make. A young philosopher[1] has recently ventured to question 'the value of psychology as a means of investigating personality'. His reason for striking this rather new note is that he wants to adhere strictly to the common-

[1] Bernard Mayo, *The Logic of Personality*: Jonathan Cape.



sense meaning of 'personal' and avoid the natural confusion of 'person' with 'individual'. He realizes that psychology is the science of 'people'. His quarrel with it is that, as a science, it is bound to be abstract. It treats the individual, he writes, 'simply as a case falling under some general classification or other. It treats him or her as a bearer of known properties.' And as such, he is convinced, 'it must fail to take any account of the essential element in personality'. For personality, in what he takes to be the common-sense view, is just what constitutes the *difference* between one individual and another. It is, however, notoriously difficult to define this quality. For strictly speaking, the unique is incommunicable. We are unable to *think* it; it *shows itself*. When it is a unique object, it shows itself to perception. But when the unique is a person, it shows itself directly to feeling. It is *felt* as an essential loneliness, a sense of being this solitary self and none other, a sense of the selfhood, the apartness, the *fate* which, even in the closest union of bodies and souls, one cannot alienate from oneself and share with another.

Now from this centre, from within this sense of being oneself, burdened with an existence and a fate that is inescapably one's own, one regards one's own being in a way which profoundly concerns my problem in this lecture. At the more ordinary levels of self-awareness I regard my existence in its social setting. I think of myself as placed within a complex of relations with other people and caught in a web of responsibilities, duties, and daily tasks. But I can also think about this thing which is myself at, so to speak, a deeper and a lonelier level—a level where the total dimension of my being comes into view, or, to vary the metaphor, where my existence is placed in its total setting. I said 'think' about myself at this level. But 'thinking' here has neither the conceptual clarity and precision of scientific thinking nor the practical clarity

and adaptability of the thinking by which I steer my life through its maze of social contacts, responsibilities, and daily tasks. For it confronts, not a show of phenomena which can be analysed, pulled apart, and related together again in terms of their observable sequences; it confronts meanings in a dimension of depth to which thought can only partly penetrate. It confronts *mystery*, though not just blank mystery, but mystery that is pregnant with inarticulate meaning—the mystery of 'my being in its total setting', the mystery of *personality*, of its origin, purpose, guilt, and suffering; the mystery of its relation to time—of its decline and death, and the mystery of its destiny. The meanings which glimmer in these depths are only very inadequately conceptualized. That is why, again at the risk of appearing unphilosophical, I would say that it is not by thinking, by intellection, but by *feeling* that we become aware of them. And it is feeling in this sense in which it involves a power of 'knowing by feeling'—feeling as a kind of grasp of objective meaning in a dimension very different from the one in which science does its analysing, charting, and recording—that I would substitute for the psychological 'states of feeling' that the Emotive Theory wants to say are relieved or 'expressed' by religious utterances.

It is essential, of course, that meanings dimly felt in the first place should emerge into consciousness and be conceptualized, translated into thoughts. Because feeling, unproven and unprotected by thought, is in mortal danger of self-delusion, of mistaking a merely subjective compulsion for the compulsiveness of authentic truth. Only *thinking* can fit the deliverances of feeling into an objectively valid system of knowledge. *But it must be the right sort of thinking*. It is extraordinarily important that thinking should not falsify the meanings which feeling dimly perceives in trying to articulate them. The scientific



assumption that absolute clarity alone can give assurance of certainty must not misguide us into trying to take out of these meanings the dimension of depth and plotting them out, as it were, two-dimensionally as a flat picture with perfectly discrete terms related together by perfectly discrete relations. Feeling is in contact here with the deep mysteries of being. The thinking by which we try to articulate the deliverances of feeling must not be the kind of thinking which dissipates the mystery but nevertheless fails to illumine it.

Now one of the most mysterious qualities of personality lying in this dimension of depth is its *freedom*. To say that man is free is to say that there is a radical indeterminacy and unpredictability in what he does—both in the thoughts he is going to think and in the overt actions he is going to perform. This is what is meant by freedom of choice. 'Always', wrote the poet Yeats, 'the unique intervenes, that which is called by everyman his freedom.' The indeterminacy lies, so to speak, in two planes, a horizontal and a vertical. Horizontally, man chooses between alternatives placed before him by the vicissitudes of nature and history and is conscious, in making his choice, of the possibility of making a *different* one. Vertically, he is conscious of the possibility of making a *better* choice, of acting more nobly than he did, or of putting greater care or better craftsmanship into a job done. The latter aspect of freedom has been acutely analysed by Reinhold Niebuhr. He sees it as a capacity in man for 'indeterminate self-transcendence'. Freedom in this sense involves that man is always reaching out, as it were, beyond himself. The ability to imagine some possible nobler action he could have done or a possible better way in which he could have handled a job turns his freedom into a fundamental restlessness, a sense at every level of attainment that he is somehow falling short of his true

capacity. Niebuhr writes: 'Man does not know the limits of his possibilities. He can do nothing and regard it as perfectly done, because higher possibilities are revealed in each achievement. All human actions stand under seemingly limitless possibilities. There are, of course, limits, but it is difficult to gauge them from any immediate perspective.'[1] Two elemental human qualities stem from man's capacity thus to over-reach himself in indeterminate degrees. One is man's *creativity*—his capacity to put into the world things it would not otherwise have contained. The other is man's *anxiety*. Because he can set no limit to what he ought to be, a fundamental disquietude afflicts his conscience. Thus the higher possibilities under which he is conscious of standing both draw him into the creation of novelty and torment him with the feeling that he is never quite doing all he could do.

I should like, if I may, to enlarge a little on the reason why the realities I have thus tried to describe elude the grasp of science. The reason lies in the conditions which science must lay down in advance as to what can constitute a possible object of investigation by its methods. Any field in which scientific procedures are to be applied must exhibit *two* characteristics in particular—*generality* or *repeatability* and *predictability*. The scientist's master-concept is that of a dependable regularity in the way things behave—the concept of 'law'—and everywhere he must look for repetitions which confirm the same laws. Consequently, for 'things' in their concreteness and individuality, he has to substitute events which are capable of endless uniform repetition. To put the matter crudely in terms of the contrast of 'form' and 'content', the scientist only manages to describe the *forms* of things—the form which the object or event shares with other

[1] *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. i, p. 195.



objects and events. *Content*, the inwardness of things, that which is unshareable and unrepeatable in them, eludes him. There is therefore a sense in which he is only describing the surface show of things. This may not really matter when what is being described is external reality. For the physical world may only *be* a surface show. Material things may just *be* bundles of properties none of which is unique because all are shared by more than one object. But getting behind the surface show does matter when what you are trying to describe is not an object but a person. Neglect of content here is fatal. The reason why an object could be no more than a surface show is that we cannot uncover its inwardness and the object itself is not conscious of its own inwardness. But men and women are. I am in direct contact with the unique and unshareable content which makes me the thing that I am. To have this *awareness* of inwardness is, in a sense, all that it means to be a person. Or consider again the intractability of the phenomenon of freedom. No event for science can be uncaused, unaccounted for in terms of the total state of the universe before the event took place. No event, for science, therefore, is, in principle, unpredictable or indeterminate. It may be that nobody can tell what an individual atom will do, although we can predict the behaviour of masses of atoms. But it seems certain to me that nobody can tell what a person will do. You may feel that you know enough about someone to be able to predict his or her actions. Well, we often do predict in a general sort of way, and we are quite often right. But we also know perfectly well that men and women have an annoying way of just not doing what they have themselves led us to expect them to do!

It is interesting to note that as science approaches this dimension of depth in personality it becomes less exact. The most exact of all the natural sciences is physics. For

in the realm of matter in motion there is always the possibility of numberless repetitions. Physics has a concept of time in which time appears as an abstract and repeatable measure, but time as an unrepeatable, historical, process does not exist for it. And the more a science has to take account of this the less exact it becomes. Thus, biology—the science of evolving forms—is less exact than physics. Sociology stands at a farther remove, while in psychology, which directly concerns itself with people, it is significant that different explanations exist side by side with no very good reasons why one should be preferred to another. But perhaps the most interesting case of all is history. It is debatable whether there can be such a thing as a *science* of history. And this has something to do with the fact that when you study the concrete historical actions of individuals, not the repeatable actions which illustrate your psychological laws, but their irrevocable, fateful, actions, you cannot abstract from the dimension of depth in personality. Freedom, which has its source in this dimension, runs right through the whole fabric of history, making generalization difficult and prediction dangerous.

There exists, then, a dimension of reality from which the modern mind is 'disinherited' because it has no concepts through which to gain possession of it, all its energies having gone into the task of learning to wield its scientific concepts. Nevertheless, we are conscious of a deep urge to possess this heritage—to possess it *conceptually* I mean, to illumine it in some way by thought. I am going to put it to you that there is only one kind of concept, or quasi-concept, in which it is possible to do this. I shall call it 'myth'.

It has been found convenient in the philosophy of religion to distinguish *two* senses of the word 'myth'. There is, in the first place, the sense in which the word is used



by the anthropologists and students of primitive culture. Myth in this sense is pre-scientific, the product of a primitive form of speculation which the scientific investigation and description of phenomena has altogether superseded. The myths of primitive man retain interest only as relics of an earlier stage in the growth of the human mind. But mythical thinking in the *second* sense, so far from being outmoded by science, exists alongside of science as the only means by which we can illumine the world in its total dimension and exhibit it in its totality as a realm of meaning. Science exhibits *Nature* as a realm of meaning but gives an incomplete picture because it leaves out the dimension of depth in man. When we regard the world *from within this dimension*, in its relation of total setting to the drama of human life, it takes on a character such that *myth in this second sense alone* enables us to exhibit it as a realm of meaning. Myth thus becomes a necessity of thought. It is the only form of thinking by which we can hope to make coherent what we but very imperfectly understand—the world in its total dimension, the world as grounded in mystery, the world in the terrifying but fascinating aspect which it presents to feeling when regarded from within the depth of our human predicament.

Myth, as thus understood, however, would not be called 'myth' if it did not have something in common with the primitive myth. What is the connexion? They have their source in a common motive—the motive of introducing coherence into a world that is imperfectly understood and of enabling man to get his bearings in the total universe. But the most important feature common to the two uses of the term is that in *both* senses what is implied in calling any picture of reality a myth is that it is *not to be taken for literal truth.*

Now religious utterances, it seems to me, are myths,

*not to be taken for true or false*, but meaningful by reason of their relevance to certain human needs which come into view when we include in our concept of man his dimension of depth and try to regard him, as it were, in his total predicament. One such need, for example, is the need to be reassured of the ultimate meaningfulness of existence. The possibility that there is no *ultimate* meaning at once turns existence for us, as persons, into a nightmare, into something that is quite senseless and chaotic. Yet man is always living on the verge of this kind of meaninglessness. He is particularly threatened by it when he contemplates the abysmal immensity of the physical cosmos. Now the religious dogma of the creation of the world by God I regard as a myth which draws its meaning not from its literal truth but from its relevance to man's need for reassurance that he is living in a world which is ultimately meaningful. Try to rationalize the dogma into a quasi-scientific hypothesis about the origin of the world and it *does* become meaningless. For it then purports to be true or false and there are absolutely no known facts that could verify or refute it.

This then is how I would interpret the discovery that a radical analysis of meaning puts religious dogmas in the class of utterances to which truth-status predicates are inapplicable. I have nevertheless described religion in the title of my lecture as 'true myth'. In what sense am I using the word 'true'? The clarified, philosophical, conception of truth defines it as a relation of proposition to fact. Propositions are the sort of thing that can be true or false. They are true when they correspond, and false when they fail to correspond, with fact. But when, as it were, in the thick of life's battle we say of something 'This is true' or refer to some idea as 'the truth', the word carries overtones of meaning over and above its strict connotation. In particular it carries, I think, the overtone



of 'importance'. Not only does the plain man mean by truth the content of an idea rather than its relation to the fact which verifies it, he generally means some idea or body of ideas to which he attaches *importance*. Now it is in this sense of 'true' that I speak of true myth. The essential requirement of myth in my sense is not that any facts should directly verify it but that its content should be felt to be intrinsically important. And its importance is the importance of *relevance* to a need arising in the total predicament in which man is placed. I have been very much struck in this connexion by what Susan Langer says in her book *Philosophy in a New Key* about a certain characteristic of the *primitive* myth-making mentality. She writes: 'We must not confuse the myth-making stage of thought with the literal stage. Belief and doubt belong essentially to the latter; the myth-making consciousness knows only the appeal of ideas. Only the development of literal-mindedness throws doubt upon them and raises the question of religious belief.' Thus, for example, primitive man did not think of his Hero-myths as being *true* stories, or, of course, as being *untrue*. He simply liked to repeat them, as he would a ritual, because their content held a deep meaning for him. They had relevance to his defenceless predicament in an imperfectly understood and alien world. They spoke to him of a reassuring possibility. For the mythical Hero, Miss Langer points out, is simply Man himself 'overcoming superior forces that threaten him'. He is 'a representative of the race in its strength and pride definitely orientated in a world of grand forces and conflicts, challenges, and destinies'.

The distinction I am drawing, then, is this. Content known to be *true* in the sense of corresponding with fact is expressed in propositions. Content felt to be intrinsically important is expressed in myths. These are

utterances to which truth-status predicates are, *strictly*, inapplicable. But the fact that they are important utterances may be expressed by the notion of truth because 'true' carries 'important', in the sense explained, as an overtone of meaning.

I propose now to examine some of the more distinctively Christian dogmas in the light of this analysis. The dimension of depth comes nearest to the explorable surface of phenomena in the realm of history. That is why the fabric of history, unlike the fabric of the natural order, shows so much stress and strain. It is the stress and strain of freedom. Necessity in history, which, of course, one cannot deny, is *compounded with freedom*. Man has a sense of being carried along with the march of events, and yet of moulding the future through his ability to redirect energy into new and different channels. Somehow we *make* history. But man makes history by taking decisions. And this means that, while he is conscious of both the natural and the historical future as realms of *possibility*, the possibilities of the historical future make him anxious because they lie, as it were, on his conscience as an anticipated responsibility. They are, in a measure, the *possibilities of his own freedom*. And this has the extremely important consequence that what man will do with them, when the time comes, depends on his prior estimate of them as possibilities—depends, I mean, on whether he faces them hopefully or despairingly. The threat of despair is never far from one who thus realizes that the future is, in some measure, contingent upon his own choice. The possession of freedom means that he *can* be creative in history. But it also means that he is not bound to be creative. He may perversely obstruct and even shatter his own constructive work. He can round in fury upon the fair and fragile structure of a civilization that has taken him generations to build and simply devastate it.



A phan ddaeth drosto ei hen gynefin glwy,
Troes olud oesau fil o dan ei sodlau'n sarn.[1]

So here, too, as under the shattering impact of the immensity of Space, man stands on the verge of inner chaos and meaninglessness. He faces a future that is imperilled by the ambivalent possibilities of his own freedom. And his need in this predicament is the need to protect himself against the threat of despair begotten of meaninglessness. But a free spirit, conscious of the ambivalence of his freedom—conscious, I mean, that his very power to create is at the same time a power to destroy—can only ward off despair *through faith in his own possibilities*. A recent book on Christianity by a Cambridge historian ended with the pronouncement: 'It is essential not to have faith in Man.' I should have thought the exact opposite was the case. To be creative in history man must *believe* in his capacity for creation. He must be hopefully and not despairingly orientated towards his own possibility. And he must have an *articulated*, *conceptualized* faith, a faith embodied in some structure of meaning. The need for a similar faith turned the primitive mind to myth-making. Primitive man sought to overcome despair through a symbol of his own potential mastery over the perils and powers that threatened him. And, except that the perils are no longer natural but historical, there are modern myths which serve exactly the same purpose. One could mention the nineteenth-century myth of Progress—the myth by which an age nourished on the theory of Evolution sought to introduce meaning into human history. Then there is the new and fateful mythology of history which has taken its place—the myth of Marxism. Concealing from itself the dimension of depth in the phenomena which it describes, Marxism has no inkling of its own mythical character and

[1] But when his old recurring frenzy comes upon him
He grinds the heritage of ages to dust beneath his heel.

falsely supposes itself to be a *science*—the science of social dynamics. But there can be no such science. Marxism is a mythological interpretation of history by which man seeks to orientate himself creatively towards the possibility, which he knows to be there, of changing the economic organization of society. Had Marxism realized this and not kept up the pretence of exhibiting an historical determinism that was supposed to make the transition to Socialism inevitable, it might have been less completely at the mercy of the confusions and corruptions with which freedom disorganizes the fabric of history. So far from being a demonstration of historical necessity, Marxism is the expression of a hope by which it is sought to control historical possibilities. No one should be in doubt about this in an age which saw the rise of Fascism, the reintrenchment of Capitalism, and, above all, the suspected corruption of the Marxian dream itself in the only country where it took root.

Now it may seem paradoxical to place religion in the same category with Marxism. Nevertheless I am going to maintain that Christianity is the same sort of myth, but a myth possessing deeper sources of insight into the total human predicament than any of the secular myths I have mentioned. It seems to me that the significance of the Christian religion in relation to the culture of the West is that it has provided Western man with a particularly powerful symbol through which to gain what I have (rather barbarously) called a hopeful orientation towards his own possibility. This is the symbol embodied in the dogma of the Incarnation—the symbol of the Divine Man.

To avoid misunderstanding, I should, perhaps, make clear what parts of the New Testament teaching about the Founder of Christianity I regard as mythical in my sense. The Gospels, in so far as they narrate of the human



birth, life, and death, and record the teaching, of one Jesus of Nazareth, I regard as historical documents. They consist of informative statements about the past (a class of statements which are regarded as satisfying the verifiability test although views may differ as to the method of their verification). Moreover, the propositions contained in the Gospel narrative I regard as, in the main, true, although perhaps my only justification for this view is that I know of no good reason for suspecting the story to be false. In short, I do not regard the human story of Jesus of Nazareth as fiction, or as a fable. The story, however, is set in a wonder-world of supernatural births, miraculous cures, angels, demons, and demonic possession, a Heaven that is physically above the earth, and a Hell that is physically below it. All these adornments of the story I regard as myths, not in *my* sense, but in the sense in which mythical thinking is simply pre-scientific thinking. And I am in full sympathy with the project launched by Bultmann of *demythologizing* the New Testament in respect of this substratum of primitive material which it contains.

But I also think it necessary, at another point in the interpretation of the New Testament, to reintroduce the concept of myth. It seems to me necessary to regard as myths, in *my* sense of 'myth', the beliefs which Jesus himself, and the Church founded by him, came to hold with regard to his origin and the purpose and significance of his life—the beliefs, for instance, that he was God, or the Son of God, and did not, therefore, die in the way human beings do but, as the Creed puts it, 'rose again from the dead, ascended into Heaven and now sitteth on the right hand of Glory'. These beliefs, though subtly intertwined with the Gospel narrative, are *not* historical propositions. I do not mean that they have the significance or intent of historical propositions but are incredible

because somehow known to be untrue or unproven. No such refutation of them is possible. They are not the sort of proposition that could have literal truth or falsity. They convey no information. But what I want to insist on is that they are *not*, therefore, without meaning. They have the significance of 'true myths'—the significance, that is to say, of relevance to certain aspects of the total predicament in which man is placed.

What then is the relevance of the symbol of the Divine Man to a free spirit involved in the perils of nature and history who can both touch the depths of inner meaninglessness and despair and is yet conscious of standing under seemingly limitless possibilities of self-transcendence? The farther you penetrate into the dimension of depth the more you realize that it is particularly in the *moral* sense that man needs to be hopefully orientated towards his own possibility. It is in his effort not to be clever but to be good that he is especially conscious of standing under ever higher possibilities of achievement. Now it seems to me that the significance of the Jesus of dogma is that he symbolizes the perfection of moral achievement as a realized possibility in human life. This is his relevance to man's need to be hopefully orientated towards his possibilities as a moral being. For a *human* symbol of moral perfection is, at the same time, a symbol of human moral perfectibility.

The weakness of philosophical ethics, as it seems to me, is that it thinks of moral problems far too much in terms of generalities. A genuine moral problem is a problem-*situation* arising in the relation between persons. It can have no dictated solution, arrived at through its subsumption under a general rule. It is solved by a unique personal decision. For the question that is really at issue in situations of this sort is a question which I put directly to myself and to which the answer will have to be a



decision—the question, namely, of the limit to which I am prepared to go in sacrificing my own interests to the interests of the other person or persons involved. The answer will have to be a decision and not a dictated answer because it rests with me whether and to what extent I am prepared to be accommodating. For there are *indeterminate* possibilities of accommodation. I cannot ease my conscience at any point with the assurance that action beyond that point would involve sacrifice of my interests. For there is nothing to prevent my making this sacrifice except my regard for my own interests. Now man is laid under a *natural* obligation to relate his life harmoniously to the lives of others. His natural gregariousness demands this much of him. But whatever accommodation he may make, he is conscious, as a free spirit, of standing under ever higher possibilities of achievement. There is, accordingly, no standard of other-regardingness which he can regard as ultimately normative for his life short of the perfection of self-sacrificing love. The higher possibilities revealed in every achievement of harmony point towards the perfection of love as their ultimate fulfilment. It is thus as the perfection of *love* that Jesus symbolizes the highest possibility of human nature.

The symbol has behind it a genuine historical situation. For the man Jesus of Nazareth is known to have taught by precept and parable an ethic of love which is not just a plea for compromise in human relationships but an ethic of unstinting, self-sacrificing love. And he is known to have exemplified this love in a final act of self-abnegation which, by reason of the suffering inflicted and the endurance with which it was borne, has about it the quality of overwhelming heroic greatness. This is why popular imagination has fastened upon the Cross as the supreme symbol of the perfection of love.

But the symbol of the Divine Man gains its real power from dogma. At this point the human story is taken up, as it were, into a kind of wonder-world. The dogmas that seem to me to be particularly suggestive are the ones which tell of the Resurrection of Jesus, of his Ascension into Heaven, and of his Intercession for Man in Heaven. Here, I would hold, is the *mythologized* version of the attainment of perfection by a human being, the mythical enactment of the taking up of the 'human' into the 'divine'—of the entry of flesh and blood into perfection. This Jesus intercedes for our broken humanity, not by pleading on our behalf—that is a legalistic corruption of the meaning of the myth—but by the fact that he has taken our human substance into Heaven. For 'Heaven' is Perfection, and the storming of Heaven by One made in our human image has the force of an earnest or warrant of Man's ultimate moral perfectibility. This is the significance of the stress on his physical ascent into Heaven. Had he died as other men do, he would have become a shadowy soul, withdrawn into the problematic heaven postulated by the believer in immortality. To be transmuted into the eternal symbol of the perfectibility of man, he had to be taken up into Heaven in the whole substance of his humanity—as man of flesh and bone. This is incredible as literal history, but its mythical significance is profound. It holds in a concentrated symbol the assurance of the apotheosis of Man—not of man in the abstract, but of men, of the man of flesh and bone. Through such a symbol, hope comes to man from the place where it has most need to come to a being that is conscious of standing under ever higher possibilities of achievement, namely, from *beyond* himself, from the Perfection beyond him which is both his inspiration and his despair. 'Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul entering the place beyond, whither the forerunner has



for us entered, even Jesus.' ('. . . i'r man yr aeth y rhagflaenor drosom ni, sef Iesu.')

It is thus clear that I am claiming for the religious myth a significance that has nothing whatever to do with the sense in which the propositions of science are meaningful. But the difficulty, as Professor Britton points out in the paper mentioned earlier, is 'to find an exact test for "meaningful" in any of its non-scientific senses'. Is there any kind of objective test of the relevance I am imputing to the Christian myths? Clearly there can be no *exact* test. It is impossible to devise methods of establishing the importance of religious symbols that would compare in precision with the received methods of verifying empirical propositions or scientific hypotheses. Nevertheless, if there is to be a test of relevance at all, it must be an objective one. The symbols have relevance to needs lying in the dimension of depth. But the proof that they have this relevance must lie outside that dimension in a field that is open to objective investigation by methods which at least approximate to those of the more exact sciences. Such a field is the field of history. And the test, it seems to me, of the meaningfulness of the symbols I have been trying to interpret must be an historical one. An historical test cannot claim strict scientific validity. For we have seen that of all the disciplines which concern themselves with Man, history approaches nearest to the dimension of depth in him. But an historical test can claim objectivity because in history the dimension of depth is *exteriorized* as human action. And it seems to me that our available historical test for the importance of concepts of a symbolic or mythical character is the same as the test we apply in estimating the importance of an artistic product, the test, namely, of *survival in history* as an effective focus of meaning and a resource for the periodic fructification and regeneration of culture.

I submit that the proof of the importance of the symbols I have been trying to interpret is that they have formed an integral part of our Western Culture for nearly two thousand years, conserving its heritage of values and sustaining its faith. In particular they have orientated our whole culture hopefully and optimistically towards the perilous possibilities of human freedom. And this faith has enabled Western man to be active and creative in history to a degree unparalleled in other cultures. Science itself and the vast technological progress it has made possible, have their roots in this faith. For although the faith sustained by the Christian symbols was ostensibly a faith in God, the intermingling of the human and the divine in the underlying content of the symbols has meant that it had effect in history as a humanistic faith—a faith in Man, in the essential divinity and ultimate perfectibility of man. I came across these very striking words in Saint Exupery's *Flight to Arras*:

> There is but one victory that I know is sure, and that is the victory that is lodged in the energy of the seed. . . . My civilization too springs from energy contained within a seed. . . . For generations my civilization *contemplated God in the person of man*. . . . Man present in every individual. . . . Man higher than the individual. Man the seed whence springs our victory.

There is one problem—of the many that the reader will doubtless feel I have overlooked—which I should like briefly to discuss before I close. This is the problem of the relation between the effectiveness of a religious symbol and the part played in religion by belief or assent. It could be urged against my whole interpretation of Christianity that what I have been calling its 'mythical' or 'symbolic' content would never have secured a foothold in the formative processes which finally shaped the culture of the West, if it had not been contained in a body of utterances which were naturally taken to be informative



propositions and, by most people, believed to be true. If, as I claim, the West is indebted to the New Testament for its faith in human possibilities, this is not because generations of Christians have gone to that document for materials with which to construct an archetype or symbol of 'divine humanity', but because they have given simple assent to its proclamation that in 'the reign of Tiberius Cæsar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judæa' *God became man* in the person of a Jewish carpenter. What then do I take to be the relation between the literal interpretation of this dogma and the 'mythical' interpretation which I have endeavoured to give it in these pages?

They have been paradoxically related in the history of Christian thought itself. Stress on the literal divinity and pre-existence of Christ has always threatened to undermine his significance as the supreme symbol of human moral perfectibility. For the thought of one who achieved perfection and was taken up 'into Heaven' has little relevance to our human predicament if he was not really a man at all but God, or a Son of God, masquerading as man. On the other hand, the liberal and unitarian denial of the divinity of Jesus threatened to rob his Image of the peculiar quality of transcendence without which his significance for man would not come from beyond man himself or be an earnest of moral *perfection* as the goal ultimately attainable by man. The potency of Jesus as a symbol of transfigured manhood is inevitably lost in the ordinariness of his status as 'mere man'.

How then may symbol and belief be related? It seems to me certain that religion in the past has overstressed belief through an undue anxiety to present its content in the form of propositions which would have meaning in the ordinary sense and straightforward, literal, truth. It suffers, someone has said, from an 'excess of affirmation which has brought its teachings into unnecessary conflict

with science'. The peril of the religious myth, Niebuhr points out, 'is to express itself in pre-scientific concepts and *insist on their literal truth*'. Nevertheless, it seems to me that two 'levels' of religious thinking have to be distinguished—a level where the 'mythical' significance of the content of dogma is understood and a level where 'myths' expressed in doctrinal form are mistaken for propositions and believed to be *true*. My contention has been that the 'mythical' significance of the dogma of the divinity of Jesus is its significance both as the *traditional* symbol, and as combining the elements of an extraordinarily *powerful* symbol, of human moral perfectibility. I would particularly wish to stress, however, that at *both* levels of religious thought the symbol derives its potency through a transcendent or numinous quality which attaches to the figure of the Divine Man. At the level where dogma is taken for literal truth, the Christ-Image derives this quality through the capacity which not a few retain for *belief* in the literal divinity of Jesus of Nazareth. But the field over which the symbol continues to be effective in this way *through union with belief* is rapidly contracting. A generation is being cut off from the sources of meaning which lie in the dimension of depth because, for an increasing number of people, the *images* in which for centuries a Christian civilization has articulated those meanings are in process of dissolution. Mannheim finds the root cause of the 'despiritualization' of modern life in the 'evaporation of primordial images or archetypes which have directed the life-experience of mankind through the ages'. What we are now witnessing is a waning of the power of these images.[1]

And the consequence, another writer has pointed out, is that, at a time when civilization is becoming more dependent than ever on the inner character of its indi-

[1] *Diagnosis of Our Time*, K. Mannheim, Chap. VII.



vidual members, we have been brought to the pass of hardly knowing 'how to reach the sources of character in ourselves'. What I have solicited in this lecture is recognition for a different kind of religious thinking where the question of literal truth is subordinated to the question of rediscovering the 'mythical' structures of meaning which dogmas conceal under their pseudo-propositional form. At *this* level, the Christ-Image retains its transcendent or numinous quality through an activity of reflection which combines contemplation of the Image in its traditional form, shot through with suggestions of an origin beyond the merely human, with an attitude of suspended judgement which keeps the whole question of the credibility of the statement that God became man in abeyance while allowing the Image to exercise fascination through its *significance* as symbol and promise of the ultimate perfectibility of Man. Only by the help of an Image such as this can we again hope to reach the true sources of character in ourselves.

(cp. Phaedo: "we shd use such accounts [as the myth of the fate of the soul] to inspire ourselves with confidence...")

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