

# A BARE BONES OUTLINE OF SECULAR CHRISTIANITY

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## introduction

This paper arises from nearly ten years I spent in the early 1970's as a Christian revolutionary. First as a local colleague, and then as a full-time member of the Order of the Ecumenical Institute, I rose every day at 4:30 a.m., participated in a daily staff meeting at 5:00, worshiped with the group at 6:30 and then shared breakfast with structured conversations over the day's news and lectionary selection. Fashioned as a religious order of nuclear families, the Order pooled economic resources, shared responsibility for childcare and operated under a rubric that all time was "assigned time" for one task or another.

And while we were most seriously religious, we were far from becoming a cult. Rather than turning inward toward our own well-being, all our efforts were directed outward, toward the "renewal of the church for the sake of the world." Much of our time was devoted to entirely secular development among disadvantaged communities, and the corresponding *mission* of the church in society was a constant focus. Our primary tool for bringing "renewal" to the established Christian church was a residential weekend course called "Religious Studies 1" or simply RS-1. In it, we attempted to bring the "theological revolution" of the early twentieth century from the seminaries to the local church.

For there had been, indeed, a substantial revolution in Christian thought for decades. At the Ecumenical Institute, we recognized the start of this revolution as the publication by Karl Barth of his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* in 1917. I have subsequently learned that Barth's work built upon - although it nominally and emphatically rejected - a broader "liberal" theological project which had been underway for at least a century before as manifest in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher and many others. Following Barth, German Protestant theologians such as Rudolph Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Friedrich Gogarten and Dietrich Bonhoeffer all continued pioneering work to re-interpret the specifically "revealed" gospel of Christianity, as did many other theologians in the United States, such as Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr, Langford Gilkey, and others, all of whom may be categorized under the umbrella of "neo-orthodox" theology. While this work proceeded with considerable variations, it also maintained a single focus: to interpret and understand the Christian gospel in a manner which could speak to modern human beings, recognizing that it was simply no longer credible to understand the truth of the Christian religion in literal terms.

This was a sizeable task which involved many theologians and much disputation. But it was essential, for modern humans could no longer believe in the two-story universe - a distinction between this world and a supernatural one reigning over it -- which had been simply assumed by religious and, indeed, human thought for millennia. Following the Enlightenment and scientific revolution, it was no longer credible to assume that there was a supernatural world in which a personified "God" could and would intervene in history to perform miracles, punish evil, reward the faithful, listen to prayers, and act based on frequently capricious whims. The fundamental Christian myth -- that an omnipotent God sent his only Son to die on the cross as atonement for the many sins of the world, and that if, but only if, you believed as much, you would be rewarded after death with eternal life - appeared almost ridiculous to

modern ears. As a result of such secularism, not only Christianity but every other world religion has suffered major decline.<sup>1</sup>

Did this mean that Christianity (and many if not all other religions) was finished? The theologians said “no.” For if one could only believe the ancient stories, they *worked*, bringing a fuller life to many. The problem arose when one could no longer believe them. By examining the religion with modern eyes, the theologians found, it could be understood how the religion affected one’s fundamental relationship to real *life* as it is experienced by modern human beings. The wisdom of the ages therefore need not be lost, but rather newly understood.

And while, again, there was much disagreement over both substance and method for this endeavor, one approach held constant: that the Christian religious story needed to be understood as true *myth*, rather than either science or history. Like many modern scholars (one may think principally of Joseph Campbell), the theologians recognized that myth can be profoundly “true” whenever it reveals truth about real life, in a manner which often cannot be otherwise expressed. The test of truth was thus reality, in the sense that any story is “true” if it reveals something about life that is undeniably real in your own human experience. The theologians referred to such work as “de-mythologizing” religion. In truth I think it may be better expressed a “re-mythologizing” the Gospel, removing it once and for all from the world of literal events.

We viewed our task at Ecumenical Institute as bringing this understanding of the Gospel out of the seminaries and into the local church, where it was little known. The intensive weekend course, RS-1, was considered the bare minimum time needed to provide an introduction, allowing not only the sharing of new images, but also an opportunity to “ground” such theology by asking such questions as “where have you seen that in your life?” and “does that describe the way life is, or not?” No one, of course, kept any evidence of the effectiveness of the course, but it is fair to say that for many, if not most, the effect was profoundly liberating, and revolutionary.

Which is not to say that either the modern theologians or the Ecumenical Institute were successful. Indeed, the opposite was true. The Institute’s religious work largely ceased in the early 1970’s, after a failed “local church experiment” to develop model “renewed” local congregations throughout the United States. Alas, the very effort showed that the historical church was itself largely disinterested in the task. The Institute accordingly refashioned itself as a secular organization promoting grassroots community development. This was doubtless a worthwhile enterprise, but it wasn’t what many of us signed up for, and I, for one, decided that it was time to leave.

The fate of modern theology itself was little better. In his response to criticisms of his book, *The God Delusion*, the evangelical atheist (my term, not his) Richard Dawkins notes in his preface to the paperbound edition that he had focused on literalist theology rather than the more “subtle, nuanced” theology of such men as Tillich and Bonhoeffer simply because “[t]he melancholy truth is that this kind of understated, decent, revisionist religion is numerically negligible.”<sup>2</sup>

Using my own experience as a measure, I think the truth of this observation by Professor Dawkins is clear. For more than forty years, I’ve looked to find a local church which rests unapologetically on secular, remythologized theology. The closest I’ve found were Unitarian/Universalist

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<sup>1</sup> Enter “decline of religion” into any search engine for a multitude of sources.

<sup>2</sup> Dawkins, pp. 14-15.

congregations which are at once refreshingly secular but almost enthusiastically non-Christian. (More on Unitarian theology in Chapter 1). There are also many liberal Protestant congregations which utilize secular theology to preach the relevance of the gospel for life today, but which nearly always follow such preaching with a “hedging one’s bets” reference to the two-story, supernatural God, lest some members of the congregation leave offended. Such imprecision is hardly conducive either to theological clarity or for any appeal to those for whom the church is entirely irrelevant.

And theological writings have been of little more help. While I can in no way claim to be a theological scholar, every work of modern theology which I *have* examined almost inevitably comes across as abstract and complex, in addition to being difficult if not impossible to read. Many of my close friends (who almost always have no connection with any religion whatsoever) have often asked for a reference to a book which simply describes what I mean by secular Christian theology. Alas, I’ve never found one for which there is even the slightest chance that they would either read or appreciate it if they did.

Hence, I’ve determined to put insecurities aside and make this attempt. My purpose is not to evangelize or even fully support any system of theology, much less to present an academic review of the various theologians and history of thought which underlie the enterprise.<sup>3</sup> My goal here, rather, is to provide a readable explanation of *what* secular theology simply *is* as may be understood by the theologically unschooled and religiously skeptical secular human. I would hope that it might even be read in a single sitting.

I appreciate that my colleagues of forty-five some-odd years ago believed that at least an intensive residential weekend was required to appreciate modern theology. I now respectfully disagree. As a lawyer, I can faithfully report that anytime my fellow lawyers advise a client that some point is “too complicated” for simple explanation, they are in truth a) merely confessing that they wish to obscure the obvious (most often to justify a hefty fee) or b) even more often acknowledging that *they* don’t understand the concept sufficiently to explain it. The same truth, I believe, should apply to theology.

One final disclaimer, which is that everything here is my attempt to translate the thoughts of others, particularly the theological giants I have mentioned. I make no attempt to attribute any thought to any specific theologian. To do so would not only doubtless result in unforgiveable mistakes of ignorance and misinterpretation on my part but would also make this tome far more complex than I want it to be. Just know that whatever you read here which is good is doubtless not original, and that anything which may be original is probably not very good. That said, everything said here is presented to the best of my ability. The test, again, is whether *you* find it to be true.

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<sup>3</sup> Should anyone want to read a scholarly review of modern theology, I would recommend *The Word as Truth Myth*, by Professor Gary Dorrien of the Union Theological Seminary. For a slightly more dated but nevertheless thorough review of twentieth century German theology, one may also consult *The Question of God*, by Heinz Zahrnt, used copies of which can easily be found online. See the Bibliography for citations.

## Chapter One - God

*We have seen the highest circle of spiraling powers. We have named this circle God. We might have given it any other name we wished: Abyss, Mystery, Absolute Darkness, Absolute Light, Matter, Spirit, Ultimate Hope, Ultimate Despair, Silence. But we have named it God because only that name, for primordial reasons, can stir our hearts profoundly.*

Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Saviors of God*, p. 101

Religion begins with the question of God. Before taking any other step, we must know what it is that we worship, what reality we stand before, and from what source we propose to find meaning in life. In the history of humankind, nearly everything has been tried, from the Sun, to graven images, to the nation (a perennial favorite), to riches, or simply to the happiness of hearth and home. How are we to approach the problem when our modern world view prohibits the very idea of a supernatural Being? The answer is to rediscover the secular truth which has always stood behind the image of the "one true God."

**Simply put, God is the name which we give to the profound Mystery at the center of life itself. One aspect of this Mystery, as many have noted, is the universal life force which causes human beings to care, to create, and to seek meaning in their existence. At the same time, however, this Mystery is clearly indifferent to our caring, destroys our creations, and denies all certainty other than the end of life in death. To love and be obedient to "God" is to acknowledge and embrace this paradoxical Mystery of life.**

So, what does this mean, really? Let's consider first what it is not. Perhaps most importantly, there is nothing supernatural about this understanding of God whatsoever. We are decidedly not presupposing an intelligent power or being, about whom we are describing His attributes. As wise men have stated, God is not God's name; it is the name we give to a reality experienced by every human being, be they a "believer" or not.

At the same time, I would submit, this understanding of God is squarely within the tradition of Christendom, Judaism, Islam, and other monotheistic faiths. We haven't time here to trace the evolution of the Biblical God from a tribal god of the Jews to a universal God of righteousness, but it's pretty clear that this transformation was one of the seminal developments of human history. When Moses encountered the burning bush, he clearly was not confronting some version of Grandfather in the Sky. When Job refused to "curse God and die," he likewise was wrestling with something more than a fickle spirit who clearly, under the circumstances, more than deserved not only to be cursed but cursed out. When Jesus preached about the Kingdom of God, he likewise was resting faith in a Being substantially greater than some form of human-like consciousness who one day decided on a whim to redeem the earth. It is for good reason, also, that Orthodox Jews avoid either writing or saying the name of G-d. However supernatural their understandings may be, these traditions have always understood "God" to point to a Power which is unknowable, mysterious, awesome, ever present, and at once both loving and terrible. Unless we assume that they were stupid, their religion was based on their genuine experience in life.

The task of the modern theologian is to understand the truth behind these traditions, absent the presupposition of a "two-story" split between heaven and earth which no longer

exists. Given the scope of the project, it is not surprising that their best efforts have produced mere guideposts to the reality involved. Tillich speaks alternatively of the “Ground of Being” or, in his more popular sermons, the “Unconditional” or of our “Ultimate Concern.” The Jewish theologian Martin Buber writes of the “Eternal Thou,” by which he means that which is most fundamentally *other* than me. Karl Barth also expressly identified God as the “Wholly Other.” My former colleague Gene Marshall has come to use the phrase “Infinite Silence” when he speaks of the God of the scriptures. My favorite formulation comes from a difficult theologian about whose work I know even less than most, Rudolph Otto, who describes God, or the Holy, as a *mysterium tremens et fascinans*, a tremendous awe- and fear-inspiring mystery which at once terrifies as it captivates. What a tremendous phrase, *mysterium tremens et fascinans*. One need be a student neither of Latin nor Rudolph Otto to get the point.

Where does one experience this Mystery? In everyday life. Certainly the presence of God, as so understood, is known when a mother contemplates the wonder of her newborn daughter, or when an astronomer ponders the discovery of a black hole at the center of our galaxy, a mere 27,000 light years from earth. A man hears the voice of God when, like the prophets of old, he sees injustice and the sufferings of others and feels the need to do more with his life than pursue a career, for reasons he can’t quite explain. The presence of God also comes when a student standing on the platform of the ‘A’ train wonders how an archeologist may interpret the ruins of this scene in the year 4036.

But let’s not get sentimental. The terror of God is also felt when a man asks why his four-year old son was murdered by leukemia. Or when a woman has her hands hacked off in Sierra Leone because she happened to be in the way of a violent militia. Or when you go to your deathbed guilty, knowing that you have done little, indeed, with your life. Why? *Mysterium tremens et fascinans* is a clue. I agree, however, with Kazantzakis. It’s because “God,” and nothing that we can name, is in control.

This is an outline, and not a dissertation. Without wandering too far, permit me to offer a few supporting clues to this secular/religious understanding of God.

#### The contrast with idolatry.

Perhaps the plainest view comes from understanding that *God appears most clearly as the opposite of idolatry*. Certainly, anyone who has ever sat through a Sunday School Bible class, or even the full version of Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments*, knows that the One True God *hates* graven images and false gods. In the times of Samuel and Hezekiah, such gods were most dramatically present as the tribal spirits, represented by icons carried into battle by warring tribes. One suspects that there really *was* a Golden Calf, as such a symbolic form for protective spirits was common at the age. They fell short, however, and history has swept them away.

While golden calves may have passed out of history, certainly the dynamic of idolatry has not. Without exception, rather, all of us worship false gods every day. Worship of the nation, the family, fame, wealth, personal ambition, or even religion itself are but a few of the favorites. These man-made “things” become idols whenever we ask them to carry the meaning of life. They are revealed as false gods whenever it becomes clear that they can’t. And it is when they collapse that the true “God” -the unknowable Mystery - becomes known.

This point may be self-evident. indeed, I may have already beaten it to death, but bear with me for a few more illustrations. Whenever I make my family the idol of the day, for example, I have hitched my wagon to a very fickle deity, indeed. Like most family worshipers, I focus on the kids, in my case, one. I deny it, of course, but like many, I have counted on my one unlucky offspring to carry the Bergdall ark into the future, succeeding where his forbears have not. When he grew older, and turned out pretty well – intelligent, responsible, witty, charming, and the like – my manifest pride and very *un*-manifest plans and hopes for his (which is to say, my) future grew stronger still.

Now, had you asked me, I would have told you, of course, that I was only trying to be a good Dad and to let the young man live his own life. As you may also suspect, however, the day once came when both my “golden calf” and its demise were exposed, if only to me. The occasion itself was no big deal. When Robert was about fourteen or fifteen, he went off for a long trip to Africa with his uncle, who had lived there for many years. Before they went, my brother asked whether it would be ok if Robert wanted to take a jump on a bungee cord off the bridge crossing Victoria Falls. This is apparently *the* bungee jump of bungee jumps – over a hundred meters (about thirty stories) high, famous among bungee jumpers the world over -- and I said, “yeah, sure, if he wants to,” being absolutely sure that my cautious, conservative offspring *wouldn't* choose to do any such thing.

And, of course, he did. Again, it was no big deal, but when I watched the video tape of the thirty-story jump, I found that I was watching a total stranger. Everybody else may have seen a kid in an exciting dive off a bridge; what I saw was a young man leaping into *his* future without me. I don't know why, but I also saw my grandfather leaping into the American frontier in Oklahoma, and my father enlisting into the infantry World War II. I saw my two paternal uncles -- both of whom had been acknowledged prodigies as young men – leap into lives which led to emptiness and early death from alcoholism. None of us, it appeared, were going to make so much as the smallest blip in history. I don't know whether Robert will or not, but I also somehow then knew that it didn't matter; whatever Robert was going to do with his life was *his*, not mine. Maybe it was the drama of the event, but it was clear to me that my son was “gone.”

I don't want to overstate the experience – since, after all, nothing really happened – but I think that was not unrelated to that which would have occurred had the bleeping bungee cord snapped. Or if the experience had so terrorized him that he came home to find solace in heroin. “My boy” had passed into history. Every hope and fear that I had for the future suddenly passed beyond my control and I quite clearly saw the “awe-full” wonder of his life, as well as of mine.

Clearly the death of idols and chaotic burst of new life is not always so idyllic. The founder and Dean of the Ecumenical Institute, Joseph Mathews, used to say that “the Lord sent World War II, just for me,” meaning that it was only on the beaches of Saipan that he came to see how fragile, how terrible, how absurd, and how defiantly hopeful was life itself. In our own recent history, how many casual idols – be they faith in the future, in a secure America, or the progress of humankind – were called into question on September 11, 2001? How many millions on the same day made new decisions and commitments to that which was truly important in their lives?

One of the persistent conundrums of theology over the centuries has been how to be grateful when God sends us evil and loss. How might we say, “Thank you, Mohammed Atta, for revealing the face of God?”

## Finding God at the Center of Science, Not at Its Edge.

Let me move on to a second clue as to what “God” is all about in a secular/religious age. Consider that, in our time, *the experience of God is found at the center of our knowledge, rather than at its edge.* I’ve never actually experienced it, but I understand and believe that there was a time in human history when the Mystery was experienced at the limit of our understanding of the world and its “scientific” explanations, whatever they may be. When one doesn’t understand electricity, to take a simple example, lightning is “divine.” (And it’s still a pretty good symbol of the justice that *should* apply if only God had half a heart!) The story of Adam and Eve similarly provided an excellent explanation of the origins of life until such time as Darwin appeared. Miracles also authenticated the presence of the Divine, even if we often had to take them on religious faith rather than personal experience.

Taken literally, of course, this kind of stuff no longer “works” for other than the most committed religio-philes. (Is that a word? Another discussion.) But consider for a moment where us modern, educated types *do*, in fact, encounter the *mysterium tremens et facinans* in our life. It clearly isn’t about what we don’t know, but with what we do.

Our best physicists tell us that the universe began with a “big bang” of energy/matter, billions of years ago, from a mass about the size of your fist. Now we understand that the universe is either expanding or is already contracting, depending upon your view, until entropy prevails. The electrons, photons and quarks which make up this universe are not only largely unseen, they are also complemented by “dark matter” which we absolutely don’t see, but which forms as much, if not more, than that part of the universe which we do. Black holes are everywhere, sucking light itself out of being but, thank God, the limits of this universe are finite, even though we haven’t a clue what may be on the other side.

This is “science,” not mythology. How did it happen, much less why? God only knows. And, if you think that all such science is nonsense or unimportant, please remember that such theories brought us the very stark realities of television and the hydrogen bomb.

I’m probably screwing up all of the astrophysics here, but that hardly matters for my point. The same truth follows even if Einstein himself were to present the evidence: that science reveals, rather than explains, the Mystery of existence.

## Embracing both the wonderful and the terrible

Searching for an authentic religion outside the realm of the supernatural, I was for many years a Unitarian/Universalist, and for most of those years I figuratively sat at the feet (actually in the second pew) of a profound theologian, R. Forrester Church. Trust me when I say that I owe a deeper debt to Unitarians, and to Forrest in particular, than I can repay.

Yet I do have a bone to pick with liberal Unitarian theology. For years, I listened to pastoral prayers offered to the “Spirit of Life and Love,” while the crux of preaching was to the same effect, all of which, as Forrest himself would often say, in other contexts, is “100% half right.”

For it is true that the “Spirit of Life” makes sense of much human endeavor. Human beings are defined by their need to find meaning in life and often the quest to give love, and to receive it, provides the fullest meaning that we can find. Certainly it is true that the only thing

that truly survives us after death is “the love that we give away.” Such truths were also the crux of the liberal Christian theology pioneered by Friedrich Schleiermacher, who argued that the “religious feeling” in men is the source of truth and that God is the power of all being and ultimate unity in the world. Like modern Unitarians, Schleiermacher thus developed such formulations as “Because we experience Christ as love, we know that God is love.”<sup>4</sup> Such idealist thought was at the center of liberal theology throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

And it was precisely this theology that was almost violently rejected by Karl Barth and his neo-orthodox colleagues for one principal reason: that it could not accommodate, much less explain, the four years of organized murder, hatred, and butchery which were World War I. Similar failures of human-centered faith affected the American theologian Langford Gilkey when he was confronted with the selfish, cutthroat and generally despicable behavior of what otherwise were the best of people [mostly Christian missionaries] trapped in China and subjected to the rigors of Japanese imprisonment during World War II. Reinhold Niebuhr likewise observed that a world of peace and justice demands solid structures of defense and perpetual vigilance, precisely because of the inherent presence of evil among humankind.

For the truth is that the “spirit of life and love” is always countered by the reality of death and despair. Humans search for “meaning” which, in the end, is never found. Love is, indeed, a potent force in our lives until such time as it isn’t. Schleiermacher’s “religious instinct” in humankind is thus limited by the truth of history. And an authentic life of faith must accommodate both.

Finding the meaning of “God” in such a conundrum was identified by theologians in the twentieth century as “dialectical theology.” Outside of a seminary, this is simply a description of life as it truly is. This is, indeed, a profound Mystery.

The question is, can you love it? Are you prepared to make decisions in view of your own death, the “meaning” that you don’t have, and the hopes that you nevertheless can’t avoid? Stated another way, can you love *life as it really is*, as it is given to us by “God?”

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Dorrien, *The Word as True Myth*, p. 21. See Bibliography for citation.



## Chapter 2 - Christ

*When asked by a University of Chicago student in 1962 whether he could summarize his life's work in a single sentence, the acclaimed theologian Karl Barth responded, in effect: "yes, I can. 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'"*<sup>5</sup>

The most common statement of the Christian gospel is that "Jesus loves you. Your sins are forgiven." This is true. It takes considerably less rather than more re-mythologization to understand this in secular terms.

**The Word of Jesus the Christ declares that you, just as you are, without preconditions or outside approval, can live your life fully. No one, no thing, no human failing or limitation can prevent your full participation in life as it is.**

This truth is apparent both in the teachings of Jesus and in the Christian story *about* Jesus which has been told for millennia. As for the teaching of Jesus, I'll ask the reader simply to recall the various parables and preaching of Jesus which are not only recorded in the New Testament but have become a part of the very fabric of Western culture and everywhere else that culture has been carried. Think of the tales of the prodigal son, the intervention by Jesus in the case of the woman about to be stoned (from her perspective, not just that of the sinners shamed into not casting the first stone), and the numerous accounts of our hero JC hanging out with tax collectors and other reprobates. The point is that any transgression can be forgiven to permit a new start.

But the message is also apparent in the Christian story *about* Jesus, the Christ, he who was crucified for our sins (which, for me at least, is a bit more difficult to explain). But the bottom is clear – that your "sins are forgiven" without the need for further sacrifice – but how does that come across in real life? Just for a minute, consider the circumstances of Jesus's life and death. The Hebrews of the time were desperately awaiting the *Messiah*, he who would save the nation and lead to a new triumph over the imperial authority of Rome. And what did they get? A promising leader who was then crucified, dead and buried, by the authorities. It is as if Jesus had taken out a big sign: "THERE IS NO MESSIAH," together with the corresponding message "And I'm it." There is no barrier to one finding the "Kingdom of God" *today*, without precondition and certainly without the need for yet another "savior" to add something to life which otherwise isn't there. Thus Jesus of Nazareth came to be known as Jesus...the Christ.

Let's consider a few corollaries to better understand.

### You are Accepted.

In one of the most famous sermons of the Twentieth Century, the theologian Paul Tillich undertook to interpret the gospel through a discussion of the concepts of "sin" and "grace." Sin, Tillich said, is not a list of naughty things that people do, but rather reflects the human condition of separation from others, from our own hopes and aspirations, and from the quest for meaning which defines human life. This is, again, the way life is. No matter who we are, we *fail* to live the life we want and hope for. And it is during despair over this fact that sometimes grace intervenes

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<sup>5</sup> Roger E. Olson, *My Arminian Evangelical Theological Musings*, [Did Karl Barth Really Say "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know....?" | Roger E. Olson \(patheos.com\)](https://www.patheos.com/blog/2012/05/did-karl-barth-really-say-jesus-loves-me-this-i-know-/), accessed May 2, 2022

with a strange but undeniable message that “you are accepted” by the mystery of life (the “Ground of Being” in Tillich’s terms) without precondition, period.

For someone truly in the depths of despair, this pronouncement is somewhat more than offensive. I have a cousin, for example, who once had a few more drinks than he should have and nevertheless decided to drive home. An accident ensued which killed both of his children. Or a soldier may recall how in Vietnam he participated in destroying whole villages of innocent children. “You are accepted?” “Bullshit!” one must protest. But whenever you can come to see it, the answer is “Yes.” At some point, you really have no choice. For the alternative is to turn your own guilt into a demon, consuming your life.

This is precisely the message given whenever any Catholic priest hears an authentic confession and offers absolution. The message is clear: “You can live your life, as it is” from this moment forward. Does that mean your guilt goes away? No. Does it mean that you abandon the felt need to make restitution? No. Does it mean that you *should* make penance and change your ways? No. All such things, Tillich says, may come later. The first demand is merely “to accept the fact that you are accepted.” Such is the core meaning of grace in the Christian “gospel.” There is nothing to prevent you from living your life as it is, now.

#### The past is approved; all is good

Hearing the gospel does not mean that everything is suddenly peachy. Hearing the True Word, however, does give one an understanding which permits a new relationship with events in your past which are decidedly *not* “OK.” Thus one can say that the past is approved.

I think of the exceptional foster children I encountered in my years as an official of the New York City Department of Social Services. By the time nearly any foster child reached adulthood, he or she has experienced a life of almost unimaginable horror: being either ripped from or abandoned by a natural parent, placed most often in an endless cycle of short-term foster homes, often accompanied by not only emotional neglect but also physical and sexual abuse. Yet a number of these “children” take stock of their experience upon adulthood, find a path to education and a vocation, and find it within themselves to lead full and useful lives. Do they do it by forgetting where they came from? No, that’s simply impossible. Do they suddenly decide that they *like* their experience as perhaps the best that the State has to offer? No, the wounds are too deep to forget. The only way to move forward is to appropriate that experience as what brought them to where they are today. The “past is approved,” and the future is open.

As a society, we find it easy to admire people with physical or mental handicaps who nevertheless rise above them and lead a full life with the body and brain that they have. We also at the very least accept the ex-convicts who have insisted on putting their past behind them and living a new life today (even if that’s while still in prison). And we can’t avoid the inspiration of courageous African Americans who insisted on justice and a fair shake, while accepting -- not liking -- a history of oppression and humiliation which lasted for centuries.

Yet at least most of us, ourselves, continue to be blocked by perceived obstacles of far less importance. We don’t have enough money, or we didn’t get the education or the job we deserved, or our parents scarred us forever with irrational treatment and withheld love, or we simply have more neuroses than we can count. We could, in fact, learn a lot by taking stock in the message of those who have chosen to say “yes” to their past and nevertheless proceed to triumph over far greater obstacles.

A key story from the New Testament which makes this point is in the book of John.<sup>6</sup> It tells the story about a cripple who had waited for 38 years near a holy pool which would cure anyone of any ailment if only they could be “first in” after the pool was stirred by an unpredictable visiting angel. When Jesus passed by, the wretch complained that he *would* be cured, but was always blocked, due to his crippled legs, from getting there first. Jesus, it is written, would have none of it. “Do you want to get well?” he asked. Then “get up, pick up your bed and walk!” he commanded. And despite the doubtless foul smelling and decrepit state of the bed in question, the man did as he was told. Understood as a myth, the message is clear: despite everything in your past that may shout that it blocks you, pick it up, say “yes” to the past, and move into the future. You don’t first need an intervening angel. Such is the gospel for all.

#### One more story.

Not drawn from the New Testament, but rather from the comic pages, there is one more powerful story which captures the essence of what is meant by “your sins are forgiven.” This comes from the pen of Charles Schulz, author of the comic strip “Peanuts,” which was ubiquitous some fifty years ago and which I think has survived in the American culture to this day. For those of you younger readers who may not be fully conversant with “Peanuts,” however, suffice it to say that it focused on Charlie Brown, an earnest young fellow who always tried his best, at everything, but was seemingly destined to fail. Among his antagonists was a little girl, Lucy Van Pelt, who repeatedly coaxed Charlie into taking a running start to kick a football which she temptingly held in kicking position but then pulled away at the last minute. She also offered “psychiatric advice” at a street-front booth for the bargain price of five cents.

Nearly sixty years ago, on September 26, 1963, a Sunday “Peanuts” appeared in which Charlie sought Lucy’s psychiatric advice.<sup>7</sup> Charlie complained: “What can you do when you don’t fit in? What can you do when life seems to be passing you by?” Lucy responds by inviting Charlie to the top of a nearby hill. She then asks five questions surveying the scene, and concluding with “There are no other worlds for you to live in...right?” and “You were born to live in this world...right?” “Right,” Charlie replies. “**WELL, LIVE IN IT, THEN!**” Lucy commands, knocking Charlie off his feet, before extending her hand for the 5¢ fee.

Such is the “Gospel” in our times.

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<sup>6</sup> The Gospel of John, Chapter 5, verses 1-9.

<sup>7</sup> Schulzmuseum.org/digital collection, <https://schulzmuseum.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/02E17C80-C74A-489B-848D-673177542410>, accessed February 2, 2021.

### Chapter 3 – The Holy Spirit

*In the small hours Jesus went out [to his disciples in a boat on the Sea of Galilee], walking on the water of the lake. When the disciples caught sight of him walking on the water they were terrified. “It’s a ghost!” they said, and screamed with fear. But at once Jesus spoke to them. “It’s all right! It’s I myself, don’t be afraid!*

*“Lord, if it’s really you,” said Peter, “tell me to come to you on the water.”*

*“Come on, then,” replied Jesus.*

*Peter stepped down from the boat and did walk on the water making for Jesus. But when he saw the fury of the wind he panicked and began to sink, calling out, “Lord, save me!” At once Jesus reached out his hand and caught him, saying “You little-faith! What made you lose your nerve like that?”<sup>8</sup>*

*“It is to freedom that you have been called, my brothers.”<sup>9</sup>*

The third “member” of the Christian Trinity is perhaps the most difficult to explain but the easiest to understand when you encounter it in life. It is what makes the entire enterprise worthwhile. Simply stated,

**The “Holy Spirit” is nothing less than the profound freedom which flows from living in the Word of Christ in obedience to the reality of life. Despite limitations, one is always free to choose where and how to live, and to give, one’s life.**

The “Holy Spirit” is difficult to understand perhaps because it lacks the mythological concretion of an image such as the Divine Father or his immanent Son, Jesus. The Spirit first makes a solo appearance in the New Testament in the story of Pentecost, the gathering of members of the young Jesus Movement in Jerusalem shortly after the crucifixion.<sup>10</sup> As the story is told, “Suddenly there was a sound from heaven like the rushing of a violent wind, and it filled the whole house where they were seated. Before their eyes appeared tongues like flames, which separated off and settled above the head of each one of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different languages as the Spirit gave them power to proclaim his message.” This leads to one of my favorite quotations from the New Testament. After skeptics viewing the scene “laughed mockingly” and observed that “these fellows have drunk too much new wine,” Peter replied, “Fellow Jews, listen carefully to what I say while I explain... These men are not drunk as you suppose – [for] it is only nine o’clock in the morning!”<sup>11</sup>

Peter’s under-appreciation of the vast potential for drunkenness notwithstanding, one can gather a clue about the Spirit from the circumstances of the event. Remember that these were men who had followed and expected a “Messiah.” None had come, and they had

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<sup>8</sup>Matthew 14, verses 22 through 32. J.B. Phillips translation.

<sup>9</sup> Letter to the Christians at Galatia, Chapter 5, verse 13.

<sup>10</sup> The Book of Acts, Chapter 2.

<sup>11</sup> Acts, Chapter 2, verse 14.

witnessed as their leader was crucified at the hands of the empire, and at the instigation of those very religious reactionaries they opposed. Nevertheless, they came to a new understanding and freely *chose* to continue with their work, just as Jesus had chosen to continue his. It is thus not surprising that they would be flush with spirit. If anything, they *were* quite drunk, with their own freedom to so decide.

Let us strip aside the trappings of mythology and consider some further clues to understanding what such “Spirit” is about.

### Freedom begins with Obedience

The first principle of true freedom is that it paradoxically begins with obedience to God, i.e., the way life truly is. One simply cannot be free while being chained to an illusion or man-made idol. At the outset, this requires that one must accept the reality of one’s own death before one can freely decide how to live one’s life. But it also means that one must acknowledge (i.e., be obedient to) the particular situation one confronts rather than the illusion which one might hope to be the case.

In RS-1, we used to teach an understanding of this freedom through a short paper by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.<sup>12</sup> As that paper can be a bit abstract, however (we always used to teach it by beginning in the middle), I will try to describe the phenomenon itself through the biography of its author, who has become venerated, for the right or wrong reasons, as a modern saint by both fundamentalist and secular Christians.

Bonhoeffer was a pastor and a professor who came from a decidedly bourgeois family. When the Nazis came to power, he clearly perceived their evil and became a leader in the German “Confessing Church,” which expressly rejected the blasphemy of state-sponsored Lutheranism. When that movement was itself crushed by the state, he left to study and teach at the Union Theological Seminary in New York, a safe location from which he might continue his theological work, just as had his colleague in spirit, Paul Tillich – also then in exile at Union -- or his principal mentor, Karl Barth, who worked in Switzerland. Yet Bonhoeffer decided that *his* calling was as a pastor to the German people, a role that he could not fulfill unless he shared the experience of the people for whom he wished to care. He thus returned to Germany on the eve of World War II.

Once there, he was forced to assume a war-time role in German military intelligence, even as he continued his theological work. As the Third Reich progressed, he became involved in a conspiracy to eliminate Hitler, activity which became discovered and led to his imprisonment and execution only days before the end of the war. I should emphasize, however, that Bonhoeffer’s involvement was not the romantic cloak and dagger stuff such as characterized the French resistance. That was simply not possible. Bonhoeffer’s role, rather, was to make contact with an Anglican bishop whom he had known before the war to determine, through the bishop, whether the British authorities would accept a negotiated peace should his brother-in-law and others succeed in convincing an important German general to stage an anti-Hitler coup. Neither predicate to the enterprise came about, as neither the British government nor the Wehrmacht general expressed any interest. The effort itself was discovered by the Gestapo, however, and led to Bonhoeffer’s demise. Before his execution, Bonhoeffer spent

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<sup>12</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 248.

considerable time in prison, during which he continued to write, such as he could, and generally minister to the needs of his fellow inmates.

So, what lessons did Bonhoeffer draw from this experience and, through his writing, share with the world? Just this: that *freedom* in this world begins with *obedience* to life as it is. Hitler was in power, the German church was in thrall to heresy, and the means to oppose either were decidedly limited. Yet Bonhoeffer found the means to act. After he was imprisoned, Bonhoeffer continued to act as a free man, by choosing his own relationship of faith – as he later wrote, “with open eyes and a joyous heart” -- to the circumstances at hand.

Second, it was clear that the “right” action was clearly a matter of *choice* in obedience to one’s conscience and understanding of what is responsible under the circumstances at hand. There was no certain answer. Of course, it helped to make decisions while standing in appreciation of the Mystery of life and with the assurance of the Word that his actions were approved. It helped to do what he felt *called* to do. Nevertheless, as he wrote, “right strives with right.” Surely it would have been just as responsible to stay in New York and contribute to the raging theological revolution of the time. Or, with the hope of taking a more useful role in the future, simply to take a pass on such a highly dangerous but cockamamie scheme as that to which he agreed.

And, finally, one can never know with any certainty whether one’s decision was right or wrong. There is no “authority” to issue certificates of approval. Bonhoeffer decided on a course of action which led to his execution. But was it the “right” one? Who knows? One can freely make a decision for all of the right reasons, but nevertheless be condemned to never knowing if it was “right.”

In this regard, one may also remember the “original sin” of Adam and Eve. That wasn’t an apple tree in the center of the Garden of Eden. It was the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”<sup>13</sup> Mere mortals could never know. “Certainty,” in contrast, lies wholly within the realm of false idols, such as the German state, who can dole it out with ease.

Such is the experience of freedom in the “Holy Spirit.” It is at once liberating, but shockingly demanding. And, if one has the eyes to see, it cannot be avoided. But if you can embrace it, this freedom may also lead to a rich, indeed, “resurrected” life.

### Freedom is available to all

The problem with such dramatic illustrations as the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer or other spiritual heroes is that they often suggest that such freedom simply isn’t available to those of us who must live day to day. “Look,” we say, “I just can’t *be* Nelson Mandela, or Mother Teresa, or Mahatma Gandhi, or any one of thousands of other people who may personify a life of freedom or faith. “I gotta go to work!”

To put the response gently, “nonsense.” Every single human being has the power to choose how he or she will spend her life. *You* can take stock of the circumstances of your life and decide how to live. Suppose, for example, that your spouse develops dementia and is projected to survive for at least another twenty years as a burdensome near vegetable. In broad strokes, you have three choices: a) you can hit the bricks and leave your spouse to the mercies

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<sup>13</sup> Genesis, Chapter 2, verse 16.

of Medicaid; b) you can stay in the marriage, regretting every day that such a disaster is your fate; or c) you can accept the fact that your spouse is effectively gone and freely *choose* to take responsibility for the care that is needed. The choice is yours, and there is nothing which can take that away. You may notice that on the surface a) and b) appear somewhat similar to c). The key difference is choosing your *relationship* to the reality you have.

Thus, a person is wholly free even though he or she may be condemned to prison for a crime they didn't commit. A person born to poverty can nevertheless choose to exercise the power that they have either for better or worse. A person with a physical handicap can choose to accept it (again, not that they like it) and move forward. And any person burdened with the mundane can nevertheless choose to let their greatness shine through to the others they encounter every day.

It's your choice.

### Life comes from death

The choice to which the Holy Spirit refers is the freedom to choose how you will use your life. Indeed, this is the essential message of Easter. For years, I've heard both liberal preachers and secular skeptics alike wrestle with the message of "the Cross." Most modern human beings simply can't accept that Jesus literally rose from the dead, literally descended into hell, and then literally ascended into heaven. We similarly can't literally believe that we ourselves can live forever if we only somehow believe that Jesus was able to pull off the trick. (And, for that matter, who would really want to strum a harp, play golf, or do anything else for 10,000 years, plus?) Such skepticism, while valid, misses the point.

The message of the resurrection, rather, is that whenever one decides to *give* his or her life, to abandon all connections to the security of some idol or another, they may then find that they are "rewarded" with true freedom and, at least sometimes, with "the peace that passeth understanding." In this view, Jesus was resurrected the moment he decided to continue, not abandon, his ministry despite the threats to his life. A civil rights worker in the 1960's was likewise living a resurrected life whenever she left all security behind and nevertheless decided to cross the Edmund Pettis bridge. A captain in the Korean war found true meaning when he declared that should he be killed, no hometown news report should say that his life was "taken." It was, instead, "given" for the purpose he found more than sufficient.

Saying as much again risks the perception that such action is only for those extraordinarily placed and equipped. Again, this is an error. Any mother can testify that she finds new life whenever she gives of herself, completely, to her children who will then only go their own way. Any teaching nun – or, for that matter, any public school teacher -- can similarly attest of the freedom that comes from wholly giving oneself to instruct students who, in the end, may not even care.

In a passage doubtless added to the scriptures long after the death of Jesus, he admonishes his followers to "take up your cross and follow me."<sup>14</sup> The "cross" to which he refers is not some overwhelming but unavoidable difficulty in life, as is often supposed. It is rather a decision to give your life for a purpose that you choose.

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew chapter 16, verses 24-26; Mark chapter 8, verse 34; Luke chapter 9, verse 23 and chapter 14, verse 27.

A few quick examples may suffice to illustrate the point. In *Bearing the Cross*, the historian David J. Garrow tells of the time that Martin Luther King decided to pursue life as a civil rights activist. This was in the early days of the Montgomery bus boycott. Martin was only twenty-five years old. His life was directly threatened by the Klan (and indeed, his home would be bombed within days), his success far from certain, and the destruction of his family life and comfort all but assured should he pursue this path. He looked long and hard for a way out. Yet, after a fateful prayer, he “heard an inner voice” saying “stand up for truth...for righteousness.” Martin then chose to proceed and “almost at once, my fears began to go.” And, despite many subsequent doubts and trials, he never turned back. As Martin himself said later, “I have been to the mountaintop.” Life was given up, but new life was found.

And, lest you think that you are not up to the standards of Martin Luther King, consider the ordinary, secular experience of any of a number of people (and you must know some) who have abandoned successful careers in order to pursue a “calling” which they might resist but choose to follow instead. That calling may, but need not, be a calling to follow some religious vocation or serve the poor. I have one acquaintance, for example, who only in middle age came to see that small business created most of the jobs and, indeed, human progress in society. Accordingly, he gave up a successful career in philanthropy and decided to follow another in venture capital. The key, I believe was that he determined that was what history demanded, of *him*. Now, I have never discussed theology with this particular fellow, but I would argue that he is *giving* his life to “God,” and reaping the benefits of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, let me tell you a bit about my great Aunt Elizabeth, who was a simple rural housewife and devoted Mennonite. Elizabeth was never a formally recognized leader and worked every day on the farm. But she was always a functional leader and lived her faith every day, supporting family, friends, and her church in every crisis without judgment or preaching. As a poet would say, she “kindled the life quality where it was not.” She was the “rock,” the one always “there” for us, and for the world, even when that meant only canning vegetables to be shipped to the needy. Stated another way, she gave of herself without condition, and lived a sacred life. When last I saw her, she was days away from death in a hospital, chained to more tubes than could be counted. Yet she announced, with calm happiness, “I’m going to see Jesus.”

I of course don’t know, but very much doubt, whether Elizabeth saw Jesus as she expected. What I do know is that she not only saw but walked with Jesus every day of her life. Stated another way, she lived a resurrected life. That choice is available to us all.



## Chapter 4 – A few words about the Church and the “Trinity”

At this point, I can only hope that I would have at least fundamentally communicated a secular interpretation of what the Christian gospel is about. This will doubtless leave many if not most with an underlying question. “This is all very nice,” you may say, “but tell me again exactly what the bleep does this have to do with ‘Christianity’ and why would I ever need ‘the Church?’”

I’ll start with the second question first. And the answer is that you *don’t* need the church. Soren Kierkegaard recognized more than a century ago -- as has every theologian worth his or her salt -- that religion itself may be an idol which prevents, rather than facilitates, a true relationship with “God.” In his final days in prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer similarly speculated that the time may have come for a “religion-less Christianity” to avoid the obstacles of the organized church. And we must, of course, recognize that Jesus himself was put to death not at the hands of the Romans, or of the “Jews,” but rather by the religious establishment of his time. This is bad stuff, indeed.

But whatever its form, I would argue that one needs a community of faith. For however clearly one may understand “the Gospel,” the truth is that we, all of us, too often forget. I, for one, have needed more than an occasional reminder that my piss-ant “career” ain’t what life is about. And the historical church – for all its heresies, travesties, blasphemy, and wars – has at the same time kept some flame of true faith alive for quite a while. And it’s a flame which I for one, like a moth, find it difficult to avoid.

Again this can be understood in entirely secular terms. Theologically speaking, the “church” is the body of people who live in the Word -- knowing that they need nothing to justify their lives -- and who nevertheless, by choice, take responsibility for the world. This clearly does not require that they “accept Jesus” or have any understanding of the scriptures whatsoever. It does mean that they choose to go beyond socially approved activity and are willing to both give and risk everything to create a new and better world.

Most of the examples of the “church” as so understood are wholly secular, rather than religious. I think of the civil rights movement (our favorite example when teaching RS-1 in the 1960’s) and the international movement for women’s liberation, and many others. I experienced the “church” as part of a group of people who worked together in the Department of Social Services some 80 hours a week back in the 1980’s to develop structures to improve the lives of New Yorkers.

But as I’ve said, it helps to have somebody that can both channel one’s efforts and simply *remind* a person of one’s understanding and decisions about how to live your life.

We may very well need an entirely new form for the meaningful religion. And the “faith” it reflects may grow to encompass more than one religious tradition, which we might better understand if we could also skip the superficial and plumb the depths of dogma to understand the human truth which lies beneath. But the simple fact is that we need something and, at least for now, I’ll leave it at that.

Which allows us to conclude with a few reflections on the “Holy Trinity” of the Christian church. You may have noticed that the analysis of “God,” “Christ,” and “Holy Spirit” above are more than somewhat interdependent. The Mystery of Life only becomes “God,” when a person takes that relationship to life. The word of the “Christ” only becomes the “Gospel” when one

comes to accept that that is simply the way life is. And the freedom of the “Holy Spirit” only comes about after one accepts the Word that, in fact, nothing “more” is required, and then self-consciously chooses where to give one’s life. These are thus all “faces” of the same reality, rather than three competing “gods” who somehow cooperate as a team.

One could thus say that Secular Christianity is simply a philosophy which rests on this understanding. My observation, however, is that the same understanding has been present in historical Christianity, when truly followed, for millennia. I find it helpful to think that I stand in this tradition of faith.

All of which can be argued and discussed. But only if one finds that the central message of the faith is “true.” I hope that this introduction may at least make comprehensible the basis upon which many of us believe that it is.

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