

March 13, 1972

THE STOIC, THE Gnostic,  
and  
THE STYLE OF FAITH

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS This World - Other World			ANALYSIS OF Gnostic AND STOIC			UNDERLYING QUESTIONS OF FAITH		
Three Levels of History	Xianity bring healing to both realms	The Human Journey between the realms	RS-I Dynamic	The Stoic Response	The Gnostic Response	What is the way life really is?	How can I not miss the dance?	What is the true demand?
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1. One of the most crucial events that happened to me recently was reading Richard Niebuhr's article, "Toward a New Other-Worldliness." That article was such an important event because in it he relates this world and the other world to history. It gave me a three-level grasp after history. In his imagery this world is on the bottom level, the other world on the next level, and above that is Christianity, or the issue of faith and unfaith. He makes it very clear that Christianity, or the issue of faith or unfaith does not have anything to do, in the first instance, with the condition this world is in or the condition we grasp the other world is in. Both of these worlds are temporal or historical in the sense of our participation in their experience. Man lives in temporality and man lives also in his participation in eternality. The way that a particular historical era participates in both of those or fails to participate in one of them is the situation of faith or unfaith.

2. Niebuhr's picture of history goes something like this. When Christianity came on the scene both worlds were intact in both the Hebraic and the Greek forms. Then there was a period of Christian history in which the temporal world fell out of "favor", so to speak. The problem of this era was the attempt to live only in the other world and not live in this world. The balance was restored again for the next period of Christian history. Today, however, we have a period of Christian history in which man is attempting to live in this world without the other world. Thus there have been only two periods in all of Christian history, he says, when man did not live in a time when humanness had grasped its true duality. The first was in the middle ages sometime after the fall of Rome when they had lost the grasp of this world, at least as anything that was authentic. The other is in our time when we have lost a grasp of the other world.

3. Then Niebuhr goes on to say that Christ brings healing to both worlds. The job of the Christian faith is to heal this world or renew this world and also to heal the other world. This world and the other world have to do with the creation, or the nature of man. Man, in his nature, participates in what we mean by both of these, and both of them must be intentionally recreated, or reappropriated, or re-related to by man in every era of his history.

4. Another thing the article reinforced was that this other world has to do with the whole problem of religion, or the way in which in this world you attempt to be present to the other. Christianity is not a religion. Rediscovering the other world has nothing whatsoever to do with Christianity. Christianity has nothing to do with the other world. Man, if he is a man of faith, has to live his life. His life is other-worldly so he must live his other-worldly life. And his life is this-worldly so he must live his this-worldly life. Christianity has to do with living the conditions of this world and the other world as they are given to you, and reconstructing those conditions as you are called on to reconstruct them.

5. Saint Benedict in 500 A.D. woke up in a time when this world was in sad disrepair, was threatened with actual cultural doom, and people, were going off for ecstatic experiences. In that context it really strikes a hard note that Benedict's thesis or rule had to do with adding study and work to contemplation and prayer. In one respect Benedict was a self-respecting ascetic who went temporal. He put his contemplatives to hoeing potatoes and copying scripture. He began a reconstruction of the temporal realm. Now we are, interestingly enough, in exactly the opposite situation. We have to begin as radically secular men whose job it is is to rebuild the other world, or rebuild man's participation or grasp in the other world.

6. The opening paragraph of this Richard Niebuhr article is a poem worthy of reading again.

"Man lives in two worlds, and when he tries to make his home in one alone, something goes wrong with him. Our race, like that of the migratory birds, cannot live and perform all of its functions in one climate. But must undertake a periodic flight to another homeland. Not only Christianity but every wise understanding of man in his world and even primitive custom produced by trial and error recognize the duality of the human environment, and the need for seasonal journeys from this world to another. Oriental wisdom offers its own account of the here and the there and of the soul's transmigration. In the West, Greek theory on the one hand and Hebraic vision on the other have given man the understanding of the two regions in which they must dwell as well as of the route that leads them from one to the other. In East and West religious institutions, more or less primitive, more or less guided by revelation and reason, remind men of another land to which they must journey in life as in death, and seek to direct their going out and the coming in of the soul."

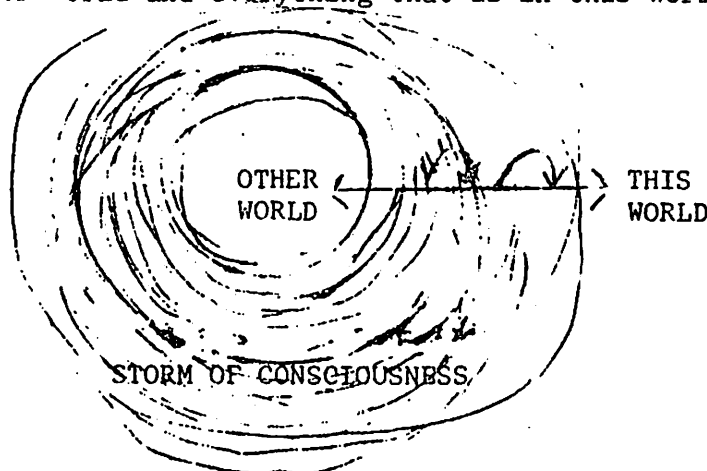
7. How do we get some picture of two realms that allows us to relate all our fantastic experience to them. I would suggest that all our data reveals that this world know that you cannot sustain radical engagement in this world without the other world which comes into being in relationship to that engagement. Radical engagement in this world is in fact the presence of the other world. There is no passion that transcends the present state of things unless the eternal has broken into your life. I would suggest that when we are intrigued with socially engaged people, when we feel threatened by people who are able to be absurdly socially engaged, we are threatened and intrigued because we see in them a sense of the eternal. We see manifested in their absurd behavior, the other world.

8. There is no earthly reason for being a great policeman or teacher. There is no earthly reason for being a great earthly anything. The paradox Niebuhr spells out is that where there is no radical commitment to the other world, there is no radical engagement in this world either. Therefore the institutions and patterns of life here disintegrate. The temporal order is not enough, and the temporal order cannot be sustained save man is making his migrations into the eternal and back again. You cannot seek the eternal for the sake of the temporal; you have to seek it for its own sake as part of the nature of man, as the other half of humanness itself. Then the temporal can be renewed as part of the working dynamic of history.

9. This is going to give us a whole new way of interpreting history. We were talking the other day about how China has impacted people's imagination these days. If you had to live primarily in the temporal as your boundary, then China, having decided for corporateness over against the individualism of the United States and Europe, probably has made the wiser choice. But the weakness of both China and the U.S.A. is that neither has an adequate recovery of the other world. Both of them are going to be threatened with disintegration, because the boundary of their imagination is too limited to the temporality of men.

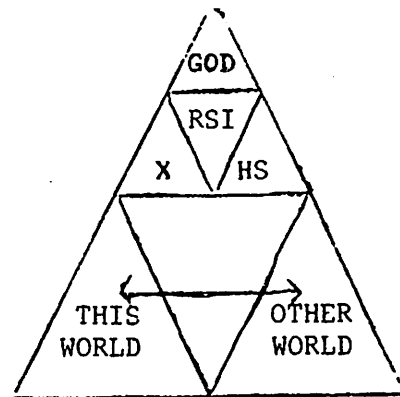
10. And that is an insight into the possible role of India in human history. India, for good or for ill, has throughout history been primarily dedicated to the other world. That is the gift of its culture. Now India is in a state of awful decay, but the hope of India coming out of that decay is in a rediscovery of the other world, and therefore a new appropriation of its heritage and grandeur in that dimension. And if India was recovered in that dimension, it could possibly be the salvation of China. China has been infused with spirituality from India throughout its history. Buddhism went from India to China and brought depth to the Chinese culture in the past. So again, if India were to come off it could have the possibility of not only bringing depth to the whole world but bringing depth to that crucial dynamic of China almost unavoidably. That may or may not be right in the particular, but that kind of spinning about this world and the other world relative to what is going on in history is why reading this paper has broken open for me something brand new in the way of organizing my observation.

11. The question remains-how do you get a picture of these two realms to relate to? An interesting image for these two worlds is that of the center or the eye of the hurricane and the storm around about. If the other world is that center with the storm round about, then beyond the storm in another kind of quiet is this world. But consciousness is the storm of spirit. Spirituality is the relationship between the other world and everything that is in this world.



12. This has helped me to get a new slant on Soren Kierkegaard's categories. He says that man is a relationship between the eternal and the temporal. Man is a relationship between the infinite and finite. Man is the relationship between sheer freedom and necessity. But all this is not yet man. Man is a relationship which is conscious of itself and which relates to itself. Or man is that which in his relationship is conscious of being that relationship, and therefore can consciously, if you like, migrate back and forth between this world and the other. Now what it means to be a man of faith by the Kierkegaardian formula is to be willing to be this being who migrates back and forth between this world and the other. And what it means to be in despair is unwilling to be this being who migrates back and forth between this world and the other, and to be unwilling therefore to live in the storm of consciousness that goes on in between. Another great image of Kierkegaard that has always had power for me beyond any way of describing it is his statement that when you are willing to be this relationship which relates itself to itself, then you are grounded transparently in the power that constitutes the whole relationship.

13. When I am talking about God I am talking about that which created this world and the other world, and the possibility of migration between the two and the possibility of relating to the two, and therefore of relating to that which created this world and the other world. Suddenly that recovered the first verse of scripture in the Bible: "In the beginning God created the other world and this world. And he took man up out of the dust of this world and blew into his being the breath of the other world". Anyway that got said to me as never before how utterly contentless Christian faith is. Whatever content you give the other world is not the content of Christian faith. Christian faith has no content. It is that decision to be grounded transparently in that power that constitutes whatever content is constituted, either the content of the other world, or the content of this world, or the content of your spirituality in trying to relate to the two of them. All that content is just sheer humanness, and faith is the willingness to be related to that.



14. Now that has deeply to do with analyzing where we are right now. I want to use another illustration of these three levels of history. The RS-I course has to do with God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. And all three of those categories are contentless. They have to do with faith or unfaith. This world and the other world both have to do with content. They have to do with creation. And if you place these categories on a triangle, then the arrow between this world and the other is the dynamic of consciousness. How do you embody being a man of faith in the dynamics of consciousness, in the dynamics of living in this world, in the dynamics of living in the other world? We are deeply concerned with what the style of faith looks like, what the style of faith looks like when it takes on form.

in this world, and what the style of faith looks like when it takes on form in the reappropriation of the other world. Since all that we mean by the style of faith is willingly being man as man really is, we are also talking about the style of humanness itself.

15. As we have been struggling with how it is that man is refusing to be a person of faith in this particular moment, an analysis of gnosticism and stoicism has been very helpful. It has occurred to me now why it has been so helpful. The stoic is a reduction of living to this world, and the gnostic is a reduction of living to the other world. Benedict has his primary problem with gnosticism with a little stoicism thrown in. We are going to have our primary problem with stoicism, if you like, with a little gnosticism thrown in. The gnostic dimension is the fringe dimension of our society today. The really upstanding man of our time comes off on the stoic pole. So that is where our main battle is going to be.

16. The stoic is clear that life has harsh limits. This is his reductionism of God: God is reduced to harsh limits, and life has harsh limits. He is clear that all demands are relative. If you approach him with any sense that there is something that has to be done, he thinks you are crazy. He is concerned with the fate and tragedy and the grandeur too of this world.

17. The stoic's reduction of the Christ word is to say that there is no truth. Another way the stoic gets this said is that my life is okay. It is not that my life is a shambles of sin but despite that I am received. No. Not that at all. His word is that my life is okay. Or maybe it comes off as, "I can make it." "Life is tough and harsh and storm," the stoic says, "but I can be an iron man." Anxieties rumble down underneath this statement. There is a great anxiety about being shown up a fool. There is a great anxiety about inauthentic responses. There is a great anxiety of personal collapse. You find thoroughgoing stoics coming into the Academy with the philosophy of life that they can make it, have collapsed 73 times (giving their philosophy of life a slight trial), and so they are looking for a word of possibility.

18. Under the category of the Holy Spirit the stoic's stance is that of genteel endurance. One aspect of the genteel endurance of the stoic is that he does not like anger. He does not like absolute commitment of any sort. This is very profound. The person who is not willing to get violent about anything is the one I am talking about here. There is a very sophisticated sellout to peace, reconciliation, and love. And that love comes to the stoic on very human terms. "There must be some way to live that presupposes some kind of moral order here that presupposes peace and reconciliation and love.", the stoic says. The very ideas that life is essentially violent is almost beyond belief; that the way life is is a violent dialogue between this world and the other world to start with, and therefore violent dialogue between every single human being. That is the way life is. That is harsh for the third rank stoic to grasp.

19. The gnostic, approach to God comes like missionless experience of the AWE. It is a quest to get beyond the mundane, or experience an ethereal jag. Somehow the experience of God, has to be some ultimate super-feeling of awe or to be transported into something absolutely wonderful. In other words, the gnostic hates the whole idea that God is to be experienced in pencil sharpeners, mimeograph machines, and chalk dust, and boys and girls and ordinary things like that.

20. Lucid insights is what the gnostic says the Word is all about. The Christ word, (or some reduction of the Christ word) always comes to the gnostic as an occult experience or as something in that direction.

21. For the gnostic the reduction of the Holy Spirit is to see his style as superman untouchability "Nobody can get to me.," says the gnostic. The gnostic believes that after he has been saved he will never again feel despair. There is no more agony of decisions. Decisions are sort of made automatically now. Guilt is gone. Tension is gone. No more tension, no more guilt, no more agony and no more despair, just automatic living.

22. This really became clear to me during a conversation on the Garden of Gethsemane I noticed there were several gnostics in the room. They were absolutely certain that Jesus in the Garden was not feeling real agony, or that the agony that he was feeling in the garden was his unfaith. They thought that his being desperately depressed before the decision he had to make was some kind of unchastity, that something was wrong with that man because he was desperately depressed. How do you get it said to those people that that was life, that that was the authentic life, to come upon yourself as desperately depressed under horrifying agony and that what it meant to be a man of faith was just to stay awake through the Garden of Gethsemane and agonize your agony. To agonize your agony on through to the decision is what it means to be a man of faith. That is a little bit too ordinary, too mundane, a little too un-occult for the gnostic. It forces him too far into the grime of history.

23. Underneath, both the gnostic and the stoic seem to be asking the same questions. What is the way life really is? That is the question underneath the question. Usually they ask the question in a way that rings false, like, "Show me the way, I want to know the way." But they really do not want to know the way. Yet underneath that unwillingness to know is a fear that they already know the way life is.

24. Another underlying question is, "How can I not miss the dance that life really is?" Life as it is really is a dance. The stoic really wants to dance but he does not think there is going to be any dance therefore the way you dance to life is not let yourself be deceived by any false dance. The gnostic is always trying to whomp up a dance. Underneath, the stoic is saying life will never dance, that it is not supposed to dance and if anyone is dancing there must be something wrong with him. You remember the story of Lucy when the dog comes dancing across the stage and she says, "STOP DANCING." That is a stoic response. You are not supposed to be dancing. This is a sober time. But even so, the gnostic is always finding some way to dance. He is jumping up into the second story somewhere to make a dance out of life where there is no dance or just a phony dance.

25. How can I not miss the dance that life really is? The "not miss" question is a powerful image. One of the passages in Saint John has the disciples saying, "What is the way? What is the Way?" Jesus says "Someone is going to prepare it for you", and Peter leans over to John and says, "Ask him who it is." So John leans over and says, "Who is it?" This kind of anxiety goes all through the gospels. "What am I going to miss?"

26. The third underlying question is, "What is the true demand on my life?" Of all three questions, that is the last thing you want to know. What is the authentic demand upon my life? Faith is dealing with these questions head on. It is getting clear on this world, on the other world, on what humanness really looks like, getting clear on the real dance that life is and participating in it, and how to put on that kind of a style.

27. In our experience the obedience chart conversations is the place where the dread in participating in life is most threatening, but the place where the fascination knows no bounds is in meditation. I have been trying to understand why that is true. I know this, that the struggle with Jesus over against Satan is an intriguing struggle and there is deep fascination with what it means to have a meditative council with Jesus as the king of that council. But for most, obedience is just sheer terror.

28. A recent article on the Old Testament Prophets speaks in terms of radical obligation to God, ontological obligation, which transcends all moral obligations. That is where you and I are terrified. If we could make obedience something moral like doing what the spirit movement rule book says we would be delighted. But it is that radical ontological obedience that is the horrifying one.

29. The first paragraph of the article reads: "In their own personal life (that is in the prophets' own personal life) they experienced this power, terrifyingly as the radical overthrow of everything that had held good for them hitherto. An experience of which the accounts of their callings bear excellent testimony. There is not one of them that did not receive this new certainty of God in such a way that the whole previous pattern of his life, the thought and plans by which he had up to now regulated his relations to the world, was not smashed and replaced by a mighty divine imperative, obliging him to undertake something which hitherto he had not even considered a possibility." And the same revolutionary forces which they saw in their own lives they also realized were in the lives of their nation. This terrible divine fact, driving with irresistible impetus against the totally differently constituted reality of the empirical world and hurling the empirical world out of its past, the threatening predictions of the end of a nation of people, marked as they were by declarations of doom for which in the first stances there was no reason given, all stem in the same dominating conviction that the present order is menaced at its very roots by the breaking in of a power hostile to it. That means however that the prophets could only conceive of the side of the divine reality that they beheld as one that was driving onward in mighty events, aiming at the upheaval of all the existent reality, in shaking both man and his world in their titanic self assertion. For these men all descriptive phrases which tried to imprison God in the here and the now and to portray his sovereignty over the world as static and inherently stable were bound to appear inadequate. For them it was a matter not of the place of the eternal divine ordinance in the life of men and of nations but of a head on collision between the divine reality and the empirical world, the very world itself was being imperiled by a power completely independent of it and therefore unrestricted in its authority over it.

30. Phrases like these enable us to feel where the man of faith is experiencing his dread, is experiencing the threat, is experiencing being in history over against the God of history. Like the prophets, we are experiencing having every way of operating we have ever known being smashed. We are forced to do something which we have not even considered a possibility. Perhaps for our time, that necessity is to build a new grasp of the other world.

.....Gene Marshall