

A Naturalistic Approach to the Christian Tradition

FRANK WALKER

What I have to say is a personal, idiosyncratic and therefore an inevitably limited view of this vast subject. I am not a philosopher, theologian or scholar. I am simply doubly O.P.: Old-Age Pensioner and Ordinary Person. I am trying to see Christianity from a naturalistic and humanistic point of view, and also trying to find something spiritual and Christian in what is normally considered a humanistic and secular outlook. I am taking a hint from the intensely honest and gifted (but shabbily treated) Baptist theologian William Hamilton, attempting to see what traditional religious language has covered, and searching for other ways of saying the same thing. I am well aware this is a highly unpopular and difficult, almost impossible, thing to do. Many will deny that it can be done or should be done. Still, this is what I am aiming at in the statement of faith by which I conclude, the form of which has been suggested to me by a recent American Unitarian-Universalist declaration.

Let us begin with a brief look at our human position in the universe. There is nothing to ensure that the universe must make sense to us, or guarantees that we can fully understand it. The universe is not only queerer than we suppose, it is queerer than we *can* suppose, since our perspective on it can never be more than a limited human one. We have only our human senses, brains, experience and language, all of which have evolved in the immense flow of evolution, and we can never get beyond these. We are never spectators with a privileged view of the whole scene, we are forever actors, intimate parts of the passing show, but possessors of only a partial outlook.

We gaze into infinite space, pondering the possibility of many different ‘universes’; in quantum mechanics we enter into the enigma of the infinitely small; we imagine the vast sweep of evolution. We feel awe-struck with wonder and dread, for we know ourselves to be in the presence of a great mystery far beyond ourselves, of which inevitably we are part, but which we do not control or fully understand.

Whenever we play our part (as willy-nilly we all must) in this great unscripted drama of life, we respond to the sense of overwhelming creative power, to the sparkles of glory that thrill us, to the meanings that we can find or form, to the trust and loving-kindness that we may show forth ourselves or find in others, in the help that seems to come from deep within the whole drama: then to all this, and more, we may say, haltingly, ‘God’. We are not giving a precise description of the mystery. We are simply giving a name to it, one which helps us to come to terms with it.

Many of the ancient Biblical writers are agnostic. Like Job they describe the divine as unfathomable, spiritual and transcendent. It is beyond our understanding and escapes our capacity to express it meaningfully. Life is humanity's share in the divine. Our hold on it is transient, and its meaning escapes us. As Thomas L. Thompson says (*The Bible in History*, p. 228): ‘The Bible is baffled by God's hiddenness . . . passionately concerned about the meaning of life in the face of the patent cruelty and injustice of

experience.'

It seems as though we are offered a package-deal: the privilege of life on this beautiful planet, in a magnificent and astounding universe; all this, though, goes with the realities of time, chance, accident, suffering, disease, death. You cannot have the magnificence without the suffering, or life without death. Some, like Ivan Karamazov in the famous story, reject the deal, and give God back the ticket, saying 'No thanks. There's too much suffering.' Most cling to life, accepting the package, however grudgingly.

We know ourselves as human actors in an overwhelming infinite universe. We need inspiration and guidance on how best to face our situation and how to make sense of it all. Traditionally the world's great religions have given this. Christianity is the accepted religion of the Western world. We could follow it simply because of this, but we have better reasons. It teaches and practises great truths of life. It gives us a pattern which we can apply to the infinite mystery in which we find ourselves, one which helps us to live our lives in a constructive and satisfying way, in touch with what is of supreme value. Loyalty to the spirit of Jesus is not so much to a supernatural figure of the past or present, but to the life of loving generosity in the world of today. The commitment that Jesus represents has moved out into the world and exists in secular form (for example, in such concerns as Oxfam and *Médecins Sans Frontières*, to name only two), and does not depend on the repetition of the words 'Jesus' or 'Christian'.

When I try to simplify religion, I boil it down to firstly, appreciation of the wonder and mystery of life, gratitude for the privilege of life in this amazing universe; and secondly, commitment to devoted and loving care for all that suffers, because this is a vulnerable world of suffering. In two words: gratitude and love.

Christianity is one way of helping me to express this, and I understand it in two ways: as a practical teaching that guides us and inspires us in the everyday business of living, and also as a great poetic and mystical drama, the drama of the Christ, the Human Form Divine, that gives a profound shape to the whole of life. The two interact and are intertwined, of course.

We do not delude ourselves that the world and human life are nicer than they are. We are imperfect creatures in an imperfect world. Humans are the most destructive and self-destructive of creatures. In his novel *1984* George Orwell said, 'I have a vision of the future: a boot, stamping on a human face, for ever.' What a grim, sinister vision. Christianity at its best is worthy of our loyalty because it is one of humanity's great Boot Resisters. We need religion and religious communities to help us face suffering, to endure it, and to help one another through it. (I am well aware that tragically the Christian Church has sometimes itself become a monstrous Boot that must be opposed).

I am very drawn to the simplified minimalist Christianity of Albert Schweitzer, who said, "I am a Christian in this sense (and in this sense only): I try to follow Jesus and his Way of loving generosity, and I accept none of the doctrines laid down by the early Church or by any other Church." Schweitzer, one of the twentieth century's greatest

humanitarians, conducted thousands of successful operations, entirely freely, on people who otherwise would never have seen any doctor and who would have died in agony.

What is this Way of loving generosity that Jesus lived and taught? Can we give a clear account of it? Jesus is a teacher of wisdom and humanity. He wants to help people to live with verve in troubled times. Give generously: don't count the cost. Go the second mile. Forgive seventy times seven. Ask, seek, knock and find. Rescue the stricken Samaritan, bind up his wounds and help him on his way. Search for the lost, give power to the poor, feed the hungry, restore sight to the blind. Heal and comfort the sick. Defend the vulnerable children and women. Visit the prisoners, make peace, contemplate the lilies of the field. Return penitently, like the Prodigal to make a new beginning. Welcome back joyously like the Prodigal's father, Do not do to others what you would find hateful when done to you. Take up your cross, where necessary, and follow this Way of generosity. Be life-affirming Boot Resisters. All who follow in this spirit are members of the Body of Christ - this is an inclusive poetic metaphor, not a bureaucratic organization that shuts people out. You do not become a member by undergoing some ritual act - you become a member by sharing something of the spirit that is in Jesus. I treasure Joseph Blanco White's saying, 'All who are drawn in trust and love to Jesus and his practical teaching may call themselves Christians.'

I wish to stand with Jesus and the saints of every religion and of none for all that is most deeply human and humane, against the cruelty, the horror, the evil, the indifference, the triviality, the injustice and suffering of the world.

There is not only the Jesus of history, there is also the mystical Christ. The New Testament speaks of 'Christ in you, the hope of glory.' 'Christ' represents what William Blake called the 'Human Form Divine'. If you find the word 'Christ' difficult, then replacing it with 'the Human Form Divine' may be helpful. This represents the inmost reality in every person. I can understand it as the Christian way of saying what the ancient religions of India also say, 'Thou art That': the Atman (the inmost reality within a human being) is one with Brahman (the inmost reality of the totality of Being). Christ the Human Form Divine is not simply a historical person or the name of one particular religion's founder and leader. This reality is universal. It is not in competition with the saints and heroes of any religion, for it is within them, the deepest part of them. It is beyond gender, race or nationality.

The great Christian festivals witness to the Human Form Divine and give a satisfying shape to the year. Advent brings expectant hope of new life, Christmas is the festival of the Incarnation, the Human Form Divine embodied in every child born, to which all the pomp and power of government must bow down in adoration, for the purpose of political power is simply to serve the well-being of the vulnerable Holy Child, the Human Form Divine. Lent is the time of reflection and generous giving. The Last Supper enacts the sharing of life and love. The Passion of the Christ is the Passion of Everyman and Everywoman; what is most good and innocent is betrayed into the hands of cruel self-seeking power, scorned, derided, tortured and done to death. A time of bitter tragedy, but ultimately of triumph, for the Human Form Divine, even though it must

suffer humiliation and crucifixion, cannot be destroyed. It will for ever rise again from the grave. It will get up and go forward again into life. Pentecost brings the outpouring of spirit - imagination and energy and renewed determination. Even in the festival of the Trinity we can see the celebration of loving relationships as the heart of what is of supreme value. This great drama of the Human Form Divine is not to be understood literally, or simply historically, but poetically, mythically, mystically.

This is my own understanding of Christian faith. In my concluding section I am trying to express some traditional ideas of God, worship, Incarnation, Divine Unity, Holy Spirit, penitence, confession, the Communion of the Saints, the Holy Catholic Church, Eternal Life, in more secular language that is not so obviously 'religious.' We shall always be trying such new beginnings, for until the hour of our death we are all beginners.

Statement of Faith

We believe the universe is a natural process, immensely old and destined to continue into an unimaginable future.

We human beings are products of that natural process and sustained by it, and so are all other living beings. We feel reverence for life and wish to engage in a great affirmation of life, We hold life to be sacred. It is more than we can fully understand or control.

On this earth all forms of life are interdependent, so we believe we must serve with devoted care the well-being of all lives and of the whole planetary system.

We believe that in us the universe becomes conscious and aware of itself. This may happen in other beings and in ways that we as yet do not understand, but we believe that it happens in us.

The universe exists both outside us and, in a sense, within us. We believe that the outer and the inner are a unity: it is the same universe outside us and within us, so that our dreams and hopes and aspirations are part of the universe.

There exists in us an inextinguishable desire to know, to understand, to find or to create meaning. We may call it the search for truth, and we hold it to be sacred.

While we wish to affirm life and celebrate it by expressing our gratitude and appreciation, experience teaches us that this world and we ourselves are imperfect and full of suffering. Therefore justice and compassion are demanded of us.

We are prompted, encouraged and inspired towards justice and compassion by many human traditions with their teachings, stories and distinctive ways of living.

The life and teaching of Jesus, and the mythical drama of the Christ, awaken a great humanitarian impulse of generosity and of human helpfulness. This humanitarian impulse is a central part of our tradition, though we do not understand or uphold it in any exclusive way. We happily acknowledge that it is found, for example, in the Buddha and in other teachers and saints.

We believe we have a responsibility, as far as we are able, for the well-being of the whole, and recognize that we are all bound up together in the great bundle of life in the community of living beings

In life and death we trust ourselves to this process.