The Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves

Hans Urs von Balthasar

The change in the spiritual attitude contained in the transition from the patristic to the modern age can be described as a change from a world-*condemning* "dying to the world" to a world-*affirming* "dying to the world."

1. Posing the Question

We are living in a time when the images of gods and idols are crashing all about us. The spiritual and cultural traditions of vast regions of the West are increasingly being called into question; indeed, we can go even further and say they are being liquidated, quickly and relatively painlessly. Just as a tree in autumn drops its leaves without pain or regret in order to gather once more new strength from within, to renew its powers in hibernal peace, so too the tree of culture is now being stripped of its leaves. Of course, in this, the late autumn of our times, the leaves lie thickly under our feet—and the books thickly in the bookstores; but we

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aren't deceived for a moment about that. This colorful yellow and red swarm of leaves is animated no longer by life but, if at all, only by the wind. A small regret might well be permitted us here, just as autumn is the time of the elegiac lyric, but who would want on that account to huddle up under the blankets of an eschatological pathos! We trust the powers of nature, her wise economy and the laws of her renewal.

Now under this drooping bower, many a Christian leaf can also be found. In the course of its two-thousand year history of spiritual and cultural life, Christianity has created for itself a wide variety of expressive forms, particularly in the West; indeed Christianity has been crucial in bringing forth and developing these forms. In a labile and constantly changing relationship, it has turned these priceless works of art born of the human spirit into its dwelling places, its forms of expression, its vesture—indeed, it has almost made them a part of its very body. So it is almost obvious that today, where these dwellings seem to have become dilapidated, indeed where the worldly "body" of the Church seems to be wasting away, Christianity is being placed before the same question of what its living essence and core is that secular culture has also had to face. For to recognize a core as the creative ground of those [later] forms means that we cannot identify it with them.

And it is furthermore quite understandable and obvious that in this self-reflection the gaze naturally turns backwards in time: Swimming against the stream of history, we seek to trace the course of this development epoch by epoch, in order to find once more that living wellspring that lies behind all these cultural forms of expression.

Thus it cannot fail that the history of these forms—especially since they are being examined in these autumnal times when everything is being thrown into question—will inevitably appear as a gradual *departure* from one's own heritage: as an ever more subtle reconstruction, indeed as a progressive branching out of the original core. That is why the history of Christian thought also so often appears to entail at the same time a slow humanization of the divine, a secularization of the holy, a fading away of essentials that already carries, so to speak, the virus of death within itself. The embodiment of the Church in the regions of secular culture almost seems like a progressive decline from her living essence.

For example, if we look at the period of the so-called Renaissance and Baroque Scholasticism, that era might well appear to us as scarcely more than a corrupt product of medieval High

Scholasticism, the decadent work of mere epigones. But if that is our attitude toward those centuries, then in consequence we will have to admit that the same applies to our period too: By taking a bird's-eye view, and not that of the frog, we will certainly have to ascribe all that much *less* creative power to the thought of the 19th and 20th centuries. But why stop there? Was not Scholasticism itself already a false path, with its "rationalization" of dogma, its dialectic hair-splitting and its all-too naïve use of secular logic?

Many people are saying this sort of thing nowadays—from all sides in the church spectrum of opinion—and many more think it quietly or half out loud. We have grown tired of this "pure thinking," we don't have any more time for that sort of thing! If only we could simply steal a quick glance at that much praised "cathedral" of the *philosophia perennis* the way we do its cousins, the cathedrals built of stone, to which we devote at best an amiable half-hour on our auto tour! But a real tour would require years on our part—and who can afford that these days? And this is not even to mention the current state of the knowledge of Latin, a language that is getting more and more painful to us. And so we easily let ourselves be convinced that Scholasticism is not only unmodern and unpractical but is also more or less guilty for bringing us to this current impasse. In not much time at all, we have worked our way back one more step...and have become... "patrologists."

And so the wide world of the Church Fathers now opens itself up to us, leading us back to the very wellspring of early Christianity, of the Apostles and the Gospel itself. Here we finally come upon a world that presents itself to us, by definition, as *the* region of the sources, the unadulterated fountain, the primitive tradition which had not yet been covered up or even distorted by any rationalization. Moreover, this patristic period possesses a structure unique to itself that can make it appear, precisely for us, especially contemporary and fruitful. For it is marked—especially in its Greek branch (which is by far the much more important and fruitful limb, to which as we know even the greatest of the Latins, Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine, owed virtually everything they were)—by a resolute world-transcendence which avoided contact with the sphere of the State so fully that it influenced the State, rather than being co-opted by it.

Except for the unavoidable struggles for dogmatic formulas against the heretics, this was basically a mystical-liturgical community, a "pneumatic" Christianity, in which the original Christian experiences and realities were still being lived "ex-

istentially"—and even the visible hierarchical structure of the Roman Church with its ever increasing centralization, its official apparatus, and its impersonality, was only just beginning.

At least that is how we think we should look on the time of the Fathers now, and an almost Romantic longing draws theologians as well as lay people into this lost Edenic garden. Indeed patristics often resembles a Lost Paradise: Only the very few get to see it with their own eyes—the well-ordered battle array of Abbé Migne's volumes presents an all-too frightening visage. One gets to know the Fathers through hear-say, from compendia or brief translations. Of course we have, so to speak, a substitute for this problem of access in those forms of Christianity which have more or less saved for us over the centuries, unchanged until today, the spirit of the patristic period through a miracle of timelessness: the various forms of Orthodox Christianity. An extraordinary interest is being addressed to them today. For here we have possibilities handed down to us of early Christian thinking, worship and art that—like the monk of Hiesterbach—have, as it were, "lept o'er" the centuries—preserved for us in a kind of ecstatic slumber of timelessness—and which could accordingly enrich us with the original, transcendent purity of Christianity. Greek, Byzantine, Russian liturgy (*contra* the alien liturgies of the West and their noisy surrogates, the popular devotions of all kinds); Greek-patristic *gnosis*, partially revived in Neo-Russian gnosis (*contra* the secularized *ratio* of the scholastic West); Eastern liturgical and existential mysticism (in contrast to the "overemphasis" on the hierarchical official Church on the one side, and to a human and psychological mysticism like that of the Spaniards, on the other): These are just some of the motivations for the fascination with the East that has swept through present-day German Catholicism, where so many of us have taken up the project of looking back from the present to the living sources.

2. *The Method*

Actually, we have spoken too simplistically. For it is clear that no Catholic who knows something of the promise of the Spirit to stand by as Advocate through all times and epochs will look on the history of the Roman Catholic Church as that of a progressive going astray, from which only today we are now finding our way back. No Catholic will want, even for a moment, to understand his appropriation of the past to be undertaken in the same spirit that Luther adopted toward the past. Nor is the mirror-opposite position of Modernism any better, as if the progressive, worldly forms of the Church, beginning with the Roman hierarchy through Scholasticism and on to the First Vatican Council, mean that the original revelation is naturally destined to go through various levels (however valuable in themselves) until it culminates in pure secularization. We would not dream of denying that a supernatural guidance and intervention has been continually operative in the history of the Church—in all ages, past and present.

But cannot our very reflections on the earliest beginnings in the past—and even the destructive tendency that might lurk there—get their meaning and place from this guidance by the Spirit? Is not the specifically Catholic element of Catholicism this constant turning back to consider the tradition? Does not everything authentic and new arise as a re-connection through to something in the forgotten past? And isn't this what we are being called on to do by the signs of the times?

Perhaps. But a counter-question interjects and asks: Is the concrete form of this return really a construal of the past from the highest powers of the *present* (as Nietzsche demanded)? Is it really being proposed and motivated from an insight into what the offer of *this* hour is and what the law of the present is calling us to? Or does it perhaps possess traits that seem so similar to a kind of "flight from the times" that a return to the past might be confused with an abdication of our responsibility to the present? For example, it is rather strange to notice how, at the outset of the Bolshevik revolution, everyone agreed that the deepest reason for its possibility lay in the Eastern Church's alienation from the world and in the gnostic and spiritualizing isolation of a spirituality that had been frantically trying to shut its eyes in these last times to the hard realities of the world. Why do we no longer hear anything more of this insight? We have already mentioned many reasons for our rejection of Scholasticism: It is too rambling, too prolix, too hair-splitting, in short too demanding; it goes beyond our spiritual possibilities. So our return to the past is not everywhere what it should be: an overcoming from strength. All too often it is a partial acknowledgment that we are no longer up to it.

And in any case, must not everything living grow and change? Even the earthly body of the Church? Who would ever think of addressing a young lad who, just by chance, happens to look nearly the same as an old school friend of thirty years ago as if he really were this very friend? And even if this comparison with organic growth might not seem completely apropos because of the supernatural character of the Church, whence comes this

idea anyway that the first epoch of the Church embodies the ideal of Christianity at its purest? It is rather the opposite: There is simply no way of knowing *a priori* whether this ideal radiates out into history at its clearest and purest in the first centuries of the Church or in the medieval period or in these latter times.

In order soberly to discuss the meaning of the three great spiritual periods of the Church (patristic, scholastic, and modern) to the extent possible in an essay, it seems to us that there is only one way to reach this goal: To press on past all external and superficial features of each epoch, to focus on its innermost structural law, and then to measure each respective formal law according to the structural law of what is essentially Christian as we encounter this norm in the Gospel. We are not doubting of course that this essential "idea" of Christianity does not hover like some abstract universal law over history and its changes but rather expresses itself in the level of history in ever-new forms without our being able thereby to call any one of these forms the absolute one.

Now this analogical character of this fulfillment [of the structural law in each period of Church history] is given first of all with the law of space and time, which makes non-identity and otherness the basis of earthly fulfillment. For example, how irreducible are the temperaments, the different ages of man, the sexes, generations, tribes, peoples! These are essential constituents of man, for without even one of these possibilities there would be no chance for fulfillment. Nonetheless, however much this might hold true also for the periods of Church history, however much therefore the whole idea of Christianity can only be read *from* the realizations, there is still to that same extent, even in these realizations, a ranked order of meaning.

This is because all of history is an event and possesses a tendency. Therefore, we must isolate the meaning of the great epochs as well as try to understand them in their respective contexts. In the first aspect we will seek to unveil the unique and thus also the lasting element of their meaning and exemplary status; in the second we shall display an ordered arrangement [among them] in the total context of world history, thereby stressing their perishability and provisional status.

3. The Basic Law of Christianity: Being in Christ

But before we can lift out the Christian content of each individual temporal structure, we must first have at least a general concept [of the essence of Christianity] in which this Christian content

might be sought. We must therefore try to keep in mind the basic structure of the event that became reality in the incarnation and redemption of the world.

Now the deepest longing of man is to ascend to God, to become like God, indeed to become equal to God. Whereas daily life chains and constricts him, confining him to the little world of his everyday life on this earth, a pressure ignites within him to tear away the chains of this slavery and to break through to the mysterious depths that lurk behind this world, to a place where he can be free, whole, wise and immortal—free of the limitations of his narrow ego, holding dominion over the total context of events, superior to fate and to death.

In all peoples an estate, a caste, a special coterie, has formed that is meant to give visible, representative and, as it were, sacramental expression to this general longing. But we know that the serpent got a hold of this very innermost drive of man to press on to God, and poisoned it. Original sin does not sit somewhere on the periphery of human nature; no, the very promise *eritis sicut dei* [you shall be like gods] is the perversion of the original core of man's being itself. Not in the way the Protestants interpret this, as if this innermost center of human nature had been annihilated by original guilt, but it *has* been "tinged," "saturated," "distorted" by sin.

After his expulsion from paradise, man's religious ideal to become "spirit," "sage," "mystic," "perfected" (to name but the purest and worthiest ideals) always means—even though it is *at the same time* a genuinely religious impulse—that it contains a revolt against the Creator, a disowning of the nature in which man was placed and created: the earthly, physical-psychic, communal, spatial-temporal existence.

Man does not want to be man but something else (as he imagines, something "higher"); as a "religious" person, he gives his notice to God that he will no longer do God's service. For this service consists in the simple recognition and exercise of his nature. Instead of accepting the primary fact of his creatureliness as the basis and starting point of all his religious movements and aspirations, he, so to speak, "flies over" this basis and seeks for a magical way—a kind of eating of some reverse-charmed apple—to reach on his own the Creator's way of being.

That which makes the creature formally a creature in its innermost being—the consciousness of standing with its whole ontic ground, its essence and existence, under the will of the Creator, his good will and pleasure; the consciousness that an absolute Being stands over against it whose essence inconceivably

consists in his being through himself and therefore in being what the creature essentially can never become—this consciousness that expresses the first, unsurpassable and most basic *truth* of its being is pushed off by the creature into the background. In its place man posits the calculation that if he indeed comes from God he must thereby contain something divine, a "divine spark," a "little spark of the soul." And so, even if he is an accident and is conditioned according to his external existence, yet he must still be an eternal thought of God according to his inner "essence." He convinces himself that he is, as it were, a piece and component of the eternal world of Ideas—which is fundamentally no different than claiming to be a part God himself.

Thus one finds in one's human nature a place—perhaps only a point, but this point suffices—where one can, as it were, traffic with God "religiously" *on the same footing*, where a mystical *identity* obtains between Creator and creature. Now to reach this mysterious identity-point requires all kinds of strenuous effort: The earthly and temporal now seems in this regard to be only an external husk that envelopes and hides the inner kernel which must be shattered ascetically, "denied," and made transparent. The perfected and knowing exercitant looks through all this as mere appearance, for all non-identity with the divine is basically a non-being; and this applies as well therefore to the constricted ego and to one's unique individuality.

The element of original sin in this human religiosity consists in this: That the similarity between Creator and creature that is given with the fact of our derivation from God is not etched into the more fundamental relationship that defines what a creature is: that which is *not* God. Everything depends on this fact. This not-being-God of the creature must be maintained as the most fundamental fact of all, ranking first and above all others. That God is God: *This* is the most immense and absolutely *unsurpassable* thought. It says to me (if it has really struck home to me in the deepest part of my being) with an absolute evidence which can never be gainsaid that I myself to the very marrow of my existence *am not God.*

And should I ascend into eons and perfect myself there, should I lean out of my very self and leap out of myself in an infinite, loving ecstasy, and should God himself overshadow me with the gifts of his divinity—I still am not God. If ever this thought has struck me, I grasp at the same time that my fundamental not-being-God is that truth which can never lapse into forgetfulness if I want to strive for "my truth" and "my perfection." On the contrary my whole striving to reach the divine home

must be expressly built on this fundament. In other words, in the relation between God and creature, similarity and difference do not hold the balance, but this dissimilarity is more radical.

And that is why, to the extent the creature comes nearer to God and becomes more "similar" to him, the dissimilarity must always appear as the more basic, as the "first truth." The more we know of God (and that always will be: the more we are "in God," since we can only know God through God), all the more do we also know that *we* are not God and that God is the One ever beyond all similarity, the ever more improbable, the ever ungraspable One. Or, as all the authentic mystics express it: The more we know God, the less we know him. If the light grows in "arithmetic" progression, the darkness simultaneously grows in "geometric" progression. And thus in approaching God the initial "intermediate space" between him and the creature will never be gradually diminished and done away with in, so to speak, an infinite asymptotic approach. For this would presuppose, in the developed sense, a possible, or at least an ideal, point of identity between both poles. No, on the contrary: All true approaches to God, however they might happen to be brought about—whether naturally, that is, more from the creature, or by grace, that is, purely from God—stand by definition in this strange paradoxical relationship, that they can be constructed only on the foundation of an ever more towering distance.

But this "cleft" between two different natures that love each other is something frightening, and it tempts us to despair when considered abstractly. But as soon as we ourselves are the lovers and stand in the perfection of love, what is frightening is transformed immediately into what gives sweetness and delight. For the eternity of the cleft is at the same time the eternity of the juxtaposition that allows love to happen at all. Only where there is non-identity is love possible. And it is absolutely not true that love requires the abolition of personality, that it craves to be the Thou of the other. Even in the human sphere it wills rather the ever-greater exaltation and ecstasy of the beloved *simultaneously* with the greatest proximity and communion. How sad it would be if it were ever to turn out that the beloved *only* possessed our measure and form! For only this interplay between presence and distance lets us possess an ever more inexhaustible object of admiration and "divinization."

And if the beloved assures us that he loves us as we are and that he loves precisely this: Our peculiar and unexchangeable self, so we will try, for his sake and out of love for him, to have this self-that-we-are try to become ever more perfect. This hu-

man relation of love is only a weak imprint of the religious relation between God and us. That in God the relation of mutual otherness does not mean simply being "foreign" and "apart" in the manner of a servant to his master but more deeply hides within itself the mystery of love as well: This we begin to suspect from the revelation of the triune God himself, in whom the highest unity and communion of Being requires and grounds the variation of persons. So little is our ineluctable not-being-God a pure lack and provisional status to be superseded later, that we have a reflection of our similarity to God precisely in this negative, namely in the reflection of the uniqueness and incomparability of God.

This relation of radical difference as the root of all similarity and community with God is grounded in the essence, in the *nature*, of all creatures. So it is not as if to the factor of the "greater difference" of created "nature" the factor of the overcoming of this difference is ordered, for example in the spontaneous grace of God. Rather, similarity is rooted in the difference and thus is as such the formal outline, the *nature* of every possible creature. And every act of grace from God's side does not destroy this relation, nor does it abolish it but fulfills it through "elevating" it, which grace effects: *gratia non destruit, sed perficit et extollit naturam*. Even in the gracious relation to God the formal outline remains the same; it is, so to speak, the "golden mean": Even if the dimensions become different, the proportions remain the same. It is precisely the God who gives grace who has drawn us inconceivably near to himself and in himself; and he shows himself thereby as being even more inconceivable than he was ever able to appear to us, so long as we are still lacking in grace.

Original sin therefore undermines this formal outline. It wants to be "like God" in an immediate way. Instead of consummating his nature, his way of being human, in the essential otherness of human and earthly nature and thereby perfecting himself by praising and serving the Creator, sinful man leaps out of the law of nature and drapes himself in another, higher nature that is purely spiritual, like that of the angels, indeed one that tries to be somehow like God. No external punishment from God needs to follow hard upon this attempt: The machine that has been violated, the destroyed organism, was itself punishment enough. The contempt for the law of being leads on its own to torment and death.

What the incarnation of God could alone mean for the redemption of man from this sin is now suddenly clear: It is the

restoration of this right fundamental relation—lived out by a paradigmatic man—and in such a way that it leads to the most inconceivable exaltation of man to communion with God. The hypostatic union, the intersecting point of two poles, which man in his presumption had tried to reach on his own and which can now be touched, as it were, in the life of Christ and by sharing in it, is expressly consummated in the absolute "unmixedness" of the two natures, indeed precisely in their greatest separation.

That is, over against man's striving to leap over the region of the flesh, of space and time, and of the collectivity, to become a spiritual being, a perfect "personality," superior to the world from within in a lonely flight to the heights, the order of redemption puts its finger on nature, on the world, on existence in space and time, on community. Yes: Precisely because the supernatural appears here in its unveiled form, as the Logos of God himself, the accent is placed on what is distinctively natural: Christ appears not as the friend but as the servant of the Father. And only by consummating this natural relation of servant-and-lord can the elevation to the relation of being friend-and-child take place. Yes: Because man wanted to overcome what was distinctive about his nature and wanted to shed what specifically belonged to his essence, his corporeality with all its needs, impoverishments, weaknesses in order to cultivate the spiritual side of his being (to get nearer, so he intended, to God), for that reason the weakness of the flesh (*sarx* and not just *soma*) is chosen as the crucial place of redemption, with all of the consequences that this entails: suffering, powerlessness, loss of courage, abandonment, pain, and death. God chooses the weak to shame the strong; he chooses the natural and the fleshly to shame the spiritual. For man becomes these latter dimensions, spirit and *pneuma*, only to the extent that he remains rooted in his fundamental truth, in the truth of his nature.

The order of redemption is therefore the radical reversal of the order of original sin: over against the ascent to God by man on his own powers (which results in the elevation of man, his *assumptio*, in God). In the *Verbum caro factum est* and in the way it was accomplished, namely by accentuating and emphasizing the difference between God and man, all of mankind has been shown the exact place at which and from which alone its old longing for *apotheosis* can be fulfilled. Christ is no "pointer," no "perfected," or "illumined," or "spiritual" man, no "high spirit," or "great personality." Rather, Christ is God in the nature of a "normal man" (σχῆμα ἀνθρώπου: Phil 2:7). From the paltriness of the human *conceptus* on: from the poverty of the

crib, the invisibility and marginality of the thirty years as a manual laborer to the simplicity and fatigue of his life as an itinerant preacher, which was the only way he could obey his Father and fulfill his task, to the disgrace and torment of the Passion and the ultimate separation from the Father on the Cross and in death: Everywhere the stress is put on "nature." Of course not on a "naturalistically" understood nature, or on a "passionate love" for the "earth," or on ecstatic and romantic association with the "human, all-too human." Rather, this stress is always on that illusionless, simple and unpathetic nature, as in the "simple people" who know how to accept the harshness of existence along with the occasional joys that come their way, not making much fuss about either, experiencing and taking in a great deal, sacrificing themselves and wearing themselves out with work without taking overdue notice of it or thinking it is "anything special," keeping back in the lower ranks as simply a matter of course, and finally departing from this world without leaving any visible traces in world history, never really understanding why they, of all people, should be "the first."

This humanity is the atmosphere of the Gospel and it is the place where the unheard-of takes place, where the divine appears and becomes visible, palpable, as John says (1 Jn 1:1-3). It is from *this* point that the pendulum of redemption gets its oscillating range; *this* is what has brought about the death of the world, the implosion of the Old Eon in the resurrection and establishment of the New.

For in the dying of the old world the fundamental law of creatureliness is fulfilled in its sharpest and most extreme form, the deepest foundation walls of the creature are made visible, in a radicalism that the sin of wanting to be like God has provoked. It becomes clear that the first and most basic factor is the uniqueness and divinity of God, and that therefore, where God will want to appear, everything else has to disappear and sink to dust. Because sin did not want to see this and thought it could leap over this distance by sacrilegious presumption, for that reason the truth can only be communicated to the creature by pointing out the gruesome cost of our restoration, underlined and italicized with the blood of the God-man himself. The whole world, to the extent it still wants to share in this redemption, must plunge along into this death, recognizing its impotence and weakness, its not-being-God. But precisely because this is redemption by Christ, "God from God," for that very reason the demonstration of the emptiness and hollowness of the creature directly, immediately, and without any intermediate steps becomes the demonstration

of the presence of the fullness and glory of God; the dying in which the foundation walls of creatureliness are made visible becomes the path taking us over to the resurrection; flesh becomes the very structure of the Temple of God, of the new heaven and new earth.

But this irruption of the glory of God is now, and for that very reason, not that of the *replenishment* of the abyss between God and creature that has become visible in the death of Christ. This distance, as we have indeed already seen, is the foundational truth; and the presence of the glory of God cannot entail blinding and dazzling the eyes so much that the truth of creatureliness is lost sight of; on the contrary, it means its definitive confirmation, fulfillment and transfiguration. The resurrection is, of course, the fulfillment of the gutted-out and burned-out being of the creature through the glory of the incomparable God, but it is so precisely as a final emphasis on *nature*. To the extent that nature is the resurrection of the flesh, to that extent a new heaven and a new earth come to be, which implies the fulfillment of nature, even and precisely to the extent that it stands over against God. The New Eon is the demonstration of the ultimacy of the ever-greater difference between God and creature, precisely in the intimacy of a community that cannot be conceived as being closer or more intimate.

So even the eternal beatitude cannot be imagined in the direction of a kind of extinguishing of the individual consciousness, as if the highest happiness consisted in "ascending" to God by sinking into oneself in self-absorption. This tendency points to at most only half the truth. The other half says that even in the highest union of becoming one, God must still be understood as the wholly Other. There is neither psychologically nor metaphysically considered a Christian "experience of being divinized." Even in the highest union, the individual ego does not experience annihilation but only the absorption [*Versinken*] of one's being *before* the overpowering greatness of the divine Being fulfilling me.

All the thrilling tremors and shiverings that accompany the experience of union take place only in a deeper tremor of worship. The more grace calls us to a friendship on equal footing with God, the deeper will the awareness become of being only servants and stewards. Only the lover knows what holy fear really is in truth. Only the creature of grace can grasp in the moment of highest gifts of grace the whole truth of *ecce ancilla Domini*. What might seem to the untutored eye to be an experience of "divinization" is in reality—where it is authentic—the

experience of no longer coming into consideration before the all-fulfilling ocean of the divinity.

So the Christian dispensation really does appear most clearly expressed in the formula: *gratia non destruit, sed perficit naturam*. Man really is the one who *destruit* by trying to climb up out of his nature into a "spiritual" existence. This is the meaning of all religions except for Christianity, from Buddhism to Platonism and Gnosticism; and it is the meaning as well of all the great Christian heresies, from Docetism and Origenism in antiquity, the Joachimism of the Middle Ages, to the Protestant spiritualism of modern times. Here in every case the law of the incarnation in its definitive sense, obligatory for all times, is basically suspended in a refusal to see it as God's decisive foregrounding of nature: Whether by denying outright the true incarnation in the flesh because it is unworthy of God as a pure *Spirit* (as the Docetists held) or by downplaying it because it is impossible for the *holy* God to be incarnate (as in consistent Protestantism, for example, Karl Barth's), or whether by holding that this nature has finally been "overcome" or "exalted" once and for all in Christ's act of redemption and that therefore the Christian has not been inserted into the law of Christ himself but into the law of a spiritual-pneumatic existence: not in the tension of the Old and New Eons but, into a "kingdom of the spirit" (as in consistent Origenism, in Joachimism, and once again in the manifold forms of authentic as well as Idealist and secularized Protestantism and Jansenism).

These forms import once more the structure of original sin into the Christian dispensation, and they do this by not building the fulfillment of the world on the foundation of the formal outline of the law of being (restored and underlined by Christ). They all think they can fly higher [than our nature allows] when they point to the intoxicating fact of our "being adopted as God's children" and of our "participating in the divine nature." And they see this as an immediate form of having God abide in the heart, in which the old law of nature, the law of distance and of "being a servant," is supposed to be overcome and abolished. But none of them sees that every act of approaching God directly always runs right up against the law of the incarnation, which has established the emphatic difference between God and creature as the place and stage of union and has determined nature to be the basis and measure of grace—and the Cross and the tomb to be the place of the resurrection.

This is expressed in that indirectness of the Christian dispensation that Kierkegaard has so deeply described as the law

of conversion:

> With every step forward that man makes, God becomes even more infinitely exalted, and thereby man becomes smaller, even if this happens by virtue of the progress he makes.... If I might put it this way, it is a kind of "reticence" on God's part because of His majesty. Precisely because he surrenders Himself more and enters more into commerce with man, precisely there will man be demoted [*degradiert*], however elevated he be at the same time. Yes, he is still being elevated but he is being elevated by virtue of the fact that he receives an infinitely higher vision of what God is, and so he is demoted. How exalting! No human sovereign can guard himself in this way against the press of his subjects. "He must increase, while I decrease": That is the law for everyone who approaches God. If God had been separated from us by a million steps on a staircase, He would never be able to guard against the urgent press of man, for steps, however many, can eventually be climbed. But the law of conversion assures us that the approach is ever-distant: Infinite majesty! "But that means," you say, "that, in a way I lose God!" How? He is still increasing! No, I am losing something all right: I am losing myself, my self-possession, until finally I find my whole blessedness in this worship: He must increase while I decrease. But this is of course already the law for all true love.[1]

4. *The Basic Law of Christianity: In the Church*

In our search for the structure of what is truly Christian we have arrived at the point of understanding the incarnation of Christ as the highest unification of man with God by emphasizing the greater mutual difference of man and God. In the simple language of the Christian: humility is truth, and humility is the foundation of all the virtues. Humility wants to decrease and not "ascend," not even according to the so-called "spiritual" and "inner" man. It is an all-too abbreviated and misleading formula that says: God descends that man might ascend. Just as it is an all-too short saying (that does not express what is decisively Christian) that says: God became man that man might become God. For first of all, what applies here is Paul's saying: *qui descendit, ipse est et qui ascendit* (The very one who descended also ascends). Man does not so much effect the countermovement to Christ—even with grace. Rather, he is a Christian only in the exact imitation of Christ's movement. The law of Christ is the law of the *one* Christ: Head and Body.

This should still be developed a bit more in detail, however briefly, before we can move on to the specific laws govern-

[1]Kierkegaard, *Tagebücher*, ed. Haecker, II, 301, 312.

ing the great periods of Church history, for the law of the incarnation continues to take effect in the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church. The foundational law that dominates this continuation results from the relation of Head and Body: The Head is hypostatically one with the Logos, the Body is not; the Head is without sin and redeems us, the Body is sinful and what has been redeemed. But if this is the "truth" of the Body, then the distance of the creature from God is potentialized, as it were, through the distance of the Body to the Head. It is the hubris of the great heresies to overlook this renewed distance and to treat the Head and Body as being, so to speak, on the same footing. It is also the hubris of the religious intoxication [*Dämonie*] to look on its being incorporated into the Body of Christ as an immediate participation in Christ's redemptive office (as many "sacrificial souls" deem themselves). But also here the "law of conversion" intervenes. The Church worships her Head, even though she is the Body *of* this Head. She does not take her own measure in order to speak from her own authority, but only in Christ's place, whose revelation she hands on and interprets, without changing it. She proclaims what she has heard, and only in this way is she the still resounding voice of *the one who is speaking*. The "potentializing of the distance" is thus always to be kept in mind when we are discussing the effects of the law of Christ in his Church.

In this sense the Church is in her foundation the obedient co-consummation of Christ's descending movement into the world, to the very point of those most "natural" realities of all: Cross and death. And in this descending movement she is the place of the manifestation of the divine, the place of the highest union of God and creature. Moreover, this manifestation of God in the failure and disappearance of the creature does not happen as an abolition of the distinctively natural but as its highest guarantee and sanctioning.

"As the Father has sent me so I send you." In this line is expressed the continuation of Christ's descending movement. As Christ fulfills the will of the Father precisely by going away from the Father and so remains one with the Father, so too the Church fulfills the will of Christ in her going into the world and so remains one with him. Indeed, this "going away" has its ultimate source and justification in the intra-divine "going away" of the Son from the Father himself, in the eternal *missio* in which all missions in salvation history are rooted. Precisely when we are placed by God in our uniquely human place in the world, we come to participate in the divine nature and are permitted to

partake of his inner-trinitarian life. And precisely when the human and non-divine dimension of our action reaches its highest point, when the barque of the Church is bobbing and heaving on the high seas, apparently lost between the waves and storms of the world, scarcely distinguishable in her form as servant and sinner from what surrounds her, that is the very moment when she consummates the decisive union with the Redeemer's form of being a servant and thus with God himself.

So the Church, in her being sent out to the world, is herself fundamentally a part of the world, just as Christ as man was a part of the world. To take scandal against that first truth would be to call the second into question. However much the Church is also a supernatural community established from above—just as Christ came from God above and not "through the will of an earthly father" or "of the flesh"—so too is she still an authentically natural, authentically human and authentically visible society—just as Christ was a natural, visible male human being.

And this visibility is not merely an external, exoteric one but an essential visibility that can never be abolished. Thus the authentic naturalness, indeed the decisive naturalness, of the Church is continued in all her functions: in the visibility of her sacraments, offices and states of life, her hierarchy and liturgy (she is no invisible "spirit-church"), in the authentic naturalness, reasonability and rationality of her theology (and not as "gnosis"), in the authentically human and natural pattern of her ethics (which is not confined just for the "spirituals"), in the authentic possibility of her apologetics (since the Church is a visible form among other visible forms).

None of this means that the Church is the world, that faith is reason, that the theological virtues are the moral virtues, any more than Christ ceases to be God because he became man. But it does mean that as redemption was effected only by underlining the human, the worldly, the natural, the non-divine (for only in this way could the *place* of the encounter between God and world be made ready), so too the Church walks in the path of redemption by plunging with determination into the world and becoming herself the tool of this redemption, the *instrumentum redemptionis*.

But at this juncture it is significant that the Church herself is not identical with Christ the Redeemer but stands over against him in the distance of worship and obedience. The Redeemer of the world is God and, as God, possesses a sovereign, direct and immediate relation to each human soul; and thus, as the only one who can "search the heart," he can redeem and give

grace to whom he will—whereas the Church is a visible organism consisting of men that, as such an organism, takes her place among other visible communities. She must hold fast to the law of her sending which enjoins her to measure the extent to which someone belongs to Christ by the extent of his participation in the visible, sacramental and hierarchical organism.

So there arises a tension between the visible Church and the invisible kingdom of the redeemed. Their boundaries do not coincide. "Many are within," says Augustine, "who seem to be without, and many are without who seem to be within." This tension proves all the more clearly that more than anything else the Church has a mission, a mandate, to preach the salvation of the world, to mediate it sacramentally and visibly, to represent his invisible presence through her presence, but without ever mistaking herself for a moment with the source of this salvation.

This serving, and not dominating, position in the world makes her in the fullest sense of the word a continuation of the "Suffering Servant." The actual kingdom of God for whose sake she exists and for the building up and construction of which she has been sent is not herself but mankind as a whole: the "world." Through her efforts, her persecutions, her obloquy, her defeats, she must help to earn salvation for this human race and must live out the way of salvation externally, as a visible, sacramental sign. She is the training of the world in redemption.

This redemption, however, is effected, we know, in a twofold rhythm of dying and being buried with Christ and rising with him. In dying the formal outline of creatureliness is restored, while in the resurrection the creature's being-in-itself is fulfilled as a form of being-in-God. This double articulation is the ultimate form of the world's being, transcending all other forms, since the supernature appearing in Christ fulfills (*perficit*) all natural being. How far and to what extent the world in fact helps to bring about this death and resurrection in Christ is a mystery known to God alone. We only know that there is, on the one hand, the general law of the world (since the world as a whole stands supernaturally exalted and under the kingdom of Christ and since God's will to save is universal), and we know, on the other, that we are called to be members of the visible Church and thus are called as such to proclaim and re-present this consummation with all our powers.

Now we finally understand the actual meaning of why the Church is called to turn from the world, indeed flee from the world, and yet be turned to the world as well. As the "contemplative Church" turned away from the world, who is not "of this

world," the Church lives out before the cosmos *its* own death; but at the same time she steps visibly and symbolically, sacramentally and efficaciously, out of the Old Eon and into the New. As the "active" Church turned toward the world, however, she looks on the whole world as the field of redemption and sees it, as it were, as the New Eon *in potentia* and radiates it as a whole with the warmth and power of her inner life. She is thus the already risen heart of an immense body that is still hovering halfway in *rigor mortis*, with the Church trying to force new blood to flow into ever more receding members.

What we want to say by this is: The relation between the visible Church and the world entails that the double movement of the Church's life should not be understood as, for example, a tension between a "sending" (into "nature") and a "return" (from "nature"). Rather, the idea of "sending" is *the overarching one* over against the two basic articulations of the Church's life. For both are the expression and function of the world-redeeming office of the Church. Both are therefore placed in that point of decisive distance of the Body from the Head and—as the continuation of the sending of Christ—are positioned at the point of the decisive distance of Christ's humanity to God.

The inner proof for this is the way and manner in which grace, vision, "Spirit," is given to the Church: As "light of the world," as "a city built on a hill"—this is how that Body that has been lifted up out of the world in rapture is meant to work its effects in the world. The presence of the Advocate Spirit is promised to the Church as a help in the struggle of the Church to come to terms with pagans and heretics; that is, it is promised to the Magisterium and not to benefit a self-satisfied individual or to justify a social smugness [*Beschaulichkeit*]. Only by fulfilling her task, only by standing by her post in the world, does the Church have the guarantee of a supernatural Advocate.

This is how the great religious orders have arisen: under the overarching sign of sending—however differently they might put the emphasis now on renunciation of the world or on activity. The Benedictine monastery is in an eminent sense the "city on a hill," renouncing the world but thereby ordering, forming and educating the world round about it. The Franciscan order takes the death of Christ and his resurrection as a visible sign into the people and into nature. The Dominican order takes possession of all the zones of the Word, of mind and thought, in order to stamp them with the seal of the supernatural law of the world. Teresa of Avila expressly builds her contemplative cloisters as bulwarks against Protestantism, Ignatius dedicates his

Society entirely to the needs of the apostolic Church of his time. They are all functions of the one total service of the Church to the world.

The crucial token of the presence of the Holy Spirit is release, the "sending," into service that follows the moment of election, indeed that inheres in it potentially. Pentecost is the high feast of sending. Paul, endowed with both the "Spirit" and "gnosis," twice sharply and severely turned against a "spirit-gnostic" Christianity that thought it could dispense with all this business of being committed to the world and to nature in favor of a "purely supernatural" "pneumatic" existence. The first time was against the eschatological Christians of Thessalonica who purported to belong "to the other side" and who claimed that the Old Eon no longer existed for them. And the second time was against the so-called "pneumatic" Christians of Corinth who were playing a sacrilegious game of their own purposes with the Spirit and his gifts instead of using these gifts to fulfill their mission, for which purpose alone they were given. These two instances, the eschatological and the pneumatic, were the starting points for a return to the old, original-sin-determined Gnosticism with its ideal of a pure spirit being, of an immediate apotheosis in place of the Christian "law of conversion."

But it is the fundamental law not only of Christ but also of his Church that we possess the Spirit of God—and therefore the gift of apotheosis—only to the extent that we exercise humility (which means that we recognize ourselves as "nature" and thus as what is infinitely different from God), to the extent that we are obedient (thereby fulfilling the concrete ministry to which we are called, becoming like the form of Christ), and finally to the extent that we also understand ourselves in the distance that obtains between the members to the Head (so that we realize that we are being punished with suffering and failure first of all for our own sins and guilt; but we also realize that this suffering is part of the unmerited grace of Christ; that our suffering has been allowed to be taken into the suffering of Christ...helping in this way to redeem the world).

5. Rules of Discernment

In the preceding remarks we have taken a long way around to build an access road to our main problem. Now has come the time to confront this problem directly and to pose the question how the structure that we found as the crucially Christian one finds its presentation in the three great periods of Church history.

The Church has been sent to all peoples and to all times; and since she is expressly meant to speak in the form of the visible and natural, she is also directed to take on the kaleidoscopic variety of the different situations of those times and peoples. Every epoch has its own language, world view, perspective; and the Church must make use of all these in order "to become all things to all men and so to win all for Christ."

But the spiritual language and conceptual world of a time and culture which the Church first encounters are by that very fact not Christian. On the contrary, they will have to bear, necessarily and infallibly, the signs of that thinking and language—even in religious matters—that we have initially characterized as "tainted with original sin." If the Church thus makes use of these concepts and views to express the Christian content in them, a kind of tension, indeed a struggle, will necessarily break out between the worldly vesture that is more suited, as it were, to older world views because of long use (the folds of the garment will certainly fit them better) and the new wearer of this garment.

This dilemma emerged very clearly even at the beginning of Church history when the young Church, as yet unburdened with any cultural and intellectual legacies and possessing only her mission of the *kerygma*, stepped forth into the late Greek, Hellenistic culture, whose religiosity perhaps possessed much more strongly than any other the traits of the spirituality tainted by original sin.

If we are rightly to judge these first and all subsequent encounters of the Church, as well as future ones that might come along, with the cultural and philosophical forms of each respective period, then we must keep four things in mind.

1) The pagan world view already stands before a world framework that is supernatural. Since the whole of mankind is ordered to a single supernatural goal and since, consequently, it has a knowledge of this goal in one form or another—this means that there is on earth no purely natural religion whatever. Every religion stands in a more or less direct, more or less oblique, light of Christ's revelation, even if it does not expressly know of Christ and his coming. This applies also to the Eros that animates it: It can be tainted with original sin, but it cannot be totally perverted (the opposite view would imply the annihilation of the natural capacities of man because of sin, which was a Protestant doctrine, not a Catholic one). Nor can it be a purely natural Eros. This must be emphatically maintained when, for example, investigating and even proving the influence of pagan forms of religion on Christianity. For example, the influence of Plotinus

on the theology of the Cappadocians, or of Proclus on the Areopagite. The belief that by proving such an influence one has called into question the authentically Christian status of a theologian has severely and uselessly confused the discussion of the beginnings of Christianity.

Who can say to us, then, how much Plato or Plotinus have been partaking in an authentic supernatural grace? What allows us to assert with certainty that the neo-Platonic view of God or the Buddhist turn inward were not—in many cases, at least—true paths to supernatural salvation? Often enough the element of original sin might simply be a false starting point or a false emphasis which can be corrected with little difficulty. The Fathers and the Scholastics worked at this kind of correction, in the belief that the pagan philosophers were not only a natural but also an expressly supernatural "pedagogy to Christ."

2) On the other hand, we must not underestimate the element of original sin in these world views. And just as baptism cleanses of original sin but leaves "the tinderbox of concupiscence" in the soul, so too a "baptized" world view can retain much of its earlier pagan heritage. Indeed, it will necessarily preserve this legacy, because a world view is a growing and organic whole that has taken shape in the course of a long tradition. Its general tenor, its cognitive rhythm, the distribution of its accents, its lights and shadows, its closed architectonic that leaves no room at all for certain facts and outlooks: All this leads us to suspect that this world view will, if not falsify, at least reproduce the Christian message incompletely, distorting it through its own stylized prisms.

But here we must be once more on our guard. Just because Christianity has over a long course of time made use of some intellectual and spiritual language and world view, it still does not in any way have to identify with this world view. Rather what has happened often enough is that a kind of symbolic relationship will arise between the two according to which certain philosophical or religious views would serve as the sign, expression, and transparency for Christian views that have other emphases and are shaped differently. One need only think of the "concept of Logos" as John adapted it! *Apatheia* means in Clement of Alexandria and in monasticism something completely different than what it does in Stoicism, even though not only the external word but also its semantic resonance and content were taken over as the expressive sign of a new content.

To have failed to see this general relation of symbol and thus to have accused the Church Fathers, for example, of having completely fallen prey to Hellenism and the Scholastics of having done the same to Aristotle is the fundamental error of so many Protestant researchers, with Harnack at their summit. Had not Christ himself made use of Jewish concepts and moral norms without "meaning" them to be taken Jewishly? This second law will thus call upon us to be careful when judging the secularization of Christian doctrine.

3) But once more we must not deny the possibility of such a secularization. Beyond the unavoidable one-sidedness and limitations of each particular era and its conceptual language, we must also consider that the Church has been promised infallibility only in dogmatic decisions as well as in a certain general orthodoxy of proclaimed doctrine, but that in this context many particular errors are not only possible but likely. For the Church herself is no community of sinless beings but a community that must be purified each day anew from her guilt and spiritual idolatry. And so how could her thinking remain free of this ever-new relapse into the old patterns of original sin? How could she not daily find herself called to return to the law of Christian thinking?

Here too the "potentialized distance" of the Body from the Head must express itself: This Body, on its own, is always a rebellious Body and as such it must continually be submitted anew to the Head. So just as sin and the world are always gaining for themselves new room within the Church, so too heresy is always gaining for itself new room in theological and ecclesial thought. Heresy is an analogical concept. Even if a sharp boundary line is drawn between those heresies that have earned an express judgment of condemnation and those that never met with such a condemnation and thus continue to claim a part of the Church's heart, still we should consider how much objective distortion was held in the course of time by the most important Doctors of the Church, how much was lost out of sheer accident or as a necessary adjunct to an express condemnation, how many erroneous and inexact views float around in the heads of nearly all believers!

The light of the absolute Truth breaks forth only through a vast number of mosaic shards of broken and smoky glass: in the thousands of many forms in which it is announced, systematized, humanized. According to an important theological maxim, the *whole* Church cannot go astray *for long* in *important* matters. But even if the promised Advocate let the Church as a whole find or regain once more the right course, with what groping and stumbling does she find her way along this right path!

4) But this hard path is no turning around in a circle. In

the course of the centuries the Church has learned a lot. There is a true development and unfolding of dogma. The Church has never subsequently fallen once more into the confusion of Arianism, Donatism, Pelagianism. And what remains to her from these dearly bought experiences are not just a few dry dogmatic formulae but a living knowledge of the disadvantages and dangers of entire world views. So she will never return again to the same situation. If similar dangers befall her later (for example, Messalian and Protestant subjectivism, or Eunomian and Enlightened rationalism), she still encounters them at another point along the coil of their spiral grip.

That is why there can be no pure repetition and repristinization of a past era in history. For the relationship of symbolic reflection that we spoke of between the total intellectual expression of a time or culture and the Christian *kerygma* is absolutely unique and valid only in that unique time. The wheel of history cannot be put into reverse. "When I was a child, I thought like a child..."

It is important to see here that the Church, as with every earthly entity, is being led through a changing series of qualitatively different situations and moments, the "truth" of each one of which is unique and coincides with the others only analogically. Into this analogy, even the *philosophia* and *theologia perennis* has also been placed. To remain alive it changes, in the same way that the entelechy of every living thing must change and develop in order to remain true to itself, its idea and essence.

These four points of view will have to be kept in mind by anyone who undertakes to explain the relation of a spiritual epoch to the total meaning of the complete phenomenon of Christianity. It is consistently a labile and polyvalent relation. To try to force so rich a reality into a worldly formula can never happen except at the heavy price of corruption, but even in the worldly formula a Christian nucleus can be found lurking. But one thing is certain: No time is completely like another, and the Church is always standing before a new situation, and, therefore before a new decision in which she can let herself receive advice and admonition from her past experiences but in which, however, the decision itself must be faced directly: The past can never lighten, let alone dispense from, the decision itself.

6. The Law of Patristics

The first great episode of the history of ideas in the Church is the era of the Fathers. With a maximum of immediate, radiant Christian life and an instinctive certainty for the true and decisively Christian, the young Church emerged into the pagan world, including its intellectual traditions, in order to assert herself over against that world and to win it over for Christ. The first attempts at this are to some extent rather timid and in many cases clumsy and amateurish. But that is inevitable, for the worldly scaffolding of the spirit must first be assimilated. The first Fathers often formulated things in a way that have been objectively overtaken and which today must be considered heterodox. Many of them, like Tatian, Tertullian, Hippolytus and Novatian—and even Cyprian and Origen—found themselves in tension with the Church's magisterial office, the visible bulwark of the tradition.

But the great heresies of Gnosticism, Montanism, Arianism, Nestorianism, Monophysitism, Manicheeism and Donatism serve continually to narrow the field of free speculation. The living-instinctive orthodoxy must continually be transposing itself into an orthodoxy that is also explicitly and rationally explained, taking stock of itself. In the shadow of the great Councils there arise those powerful and sober buildings of the spirit that provide the foundation for Christian theology with a confident faith in the truth and from a wellspring of living water whose fullness was never again to be attained. An immediate vitality from the Holy Scriptures that undergird the whole period of the Fathers and nourished it as a fertile field gave to it the character of an almost immediate unfolding and continuation of revelation itself.

That is why this period is so marked by the immediacy to experience, why the impressions of the world enter so directly: For that is always the mark of every young era and is the reason why it can react much more openly and instinctively to new challenges than is the case of an aging mind that is hampered by all sorts of hardened concepts and practices. Greatness, depth, boldness, flexibility, certainty and a flaming love—these virtues of youth are marks of patristic theology. Perhaps the Church will never again see the likes of such an array of larger-than-life figures such as mark the period from Irenaeus to Athanasius, Basil, Cyril, Chrysostom, Ambrose and Augustine—not to mention the army of the lesser Fathers. Life and doctrine are immediately one. Of them all it is true what Kierkegaard said of Chrysostom: "He gesticulated with his whole existence."

The first great and most difficult struggle with the pagan world of the spirit is won, and the Church as a whole victoriously withstands her first great challenge. All subsequent generations of thinkers, preachers, and mystics will now have to

continually refresh, strengthen and establish themselves at the sources of the Fathers.

Nonetheless the danger of this struggle was immense, and it is not only the "luck" of this inspired time of youth in the Church, groping in the darkness, but also ultimately the almost visible guidance of the Holy Spirit, that lets this life-and-death struggle lead over and again to the rescue and redemption of the Church. For ironically enough, it was precisely the very certainty of victory with which the Fathers contemplated all the truths that they encountered, it was their very confidence that these truths were already Christian and which they therefore claimed for their own, using them to pour the truth of the Gospel into the language of their time, the thought forms of late Hellenism (above all, of neo-Platonism), that hid the danger of an unconscious alienation of the original deposit of revelation. This danger was all the greater when late Hellenism itself possessed a strongly developed religiosity, thereby threatening, in this hand-to-hand battle of the two forms of religion, to swamp the mutual differences with an apparently supernatural and world-transcendent character.

The greatest and for later times the most decisive and consequential encounter took place in the Alexandrines, especially under the greatest genius, next to Augustine, of the patristic era: Origen. We can no longer deny that in his case and despite his unbending will to be and to remain an authentic Christian, not only were outer words but also basic forms of Hellenism allowed to penetrate into the inner realm of Christianity, and to a great extent they established themselves there henceforward because of the unique influence of this giant of the spirit (a fact which has not yet been sufficiently researched and evaluated). It is not so much a question of certain individual doctrines that worked their way inside (such as, for example, the doctrine of the pre-existence of souls—which could easily be declared heretical upon their enunciation) as it was much more a question of the inner space of the spirit, a whole tissue of assumptions from time immemorial that are not easy to get a hold of, an atmosphere, a formal methodology.

In the following, we shall be trying, first of all, simply to characterize this danger zone. In fact it lies not on the surface but in the very depths of the patristic world, and an investigation of this danger zone will help us to circumscribe the "formal outlook" of the patristic period. The corrective that we will then have to bring forward is, however, just as important and must not be lost sight of. The danger, indeed the crisis, into which the-

ology fell because of Hellenism frequently became the occasion of the greatest benefit (quite apart from the great heresies, whose refutation became, as Augustine said, the basis on which Church dogmatics was built, a tool of absolutely crucial significance for illuminating theology). But more to the point, the Christian character of doctrine was not adversely affected in its deepest core by Hellenism, however deeply influential it might have been. Hellenism might have been the means of expression, the clothing, the body of the Gospel, but its soul was not touched. This will become frighteningly apparent to us again and again when we ourselves try, for our part, to realize the same dangerous experiments as Origen did! An ultimate cleft, often scarcely specifiable in words, will divide content and expression. Behind the neo-Platonic term we sense the Christian pathos.

But first to the depiction of this neo-Platonic danger as it was expressed inside the Church. In neo-Platonism the relationship of God and world is most fundamentally conceived according to the schema of "participation." The world is essentially *what* participates, while God is what is partaken *of*. Seen from God, God is the One who gives a portion, the One who, as it were, holds his own being from himself but who also externalizes himself; and this *egressio* of God from himself *is* itself the world. A series of steps in the potencies of Being characterizes this progressive egression of God from himself. In Plotinus they are called, in descending order: spirit-soul-matter. With the Gnostics and later neo-Platonists what takes the place of this simple emanations-scheme is a complicated series of egressions from the Godhead that fills up the distance between the fullest Being and nothingness. To God's "egression" there corresponds, as the second phase, a "re-uniting" in God, in which the movement of descent reverses itself, the potencies are reabsorbed into one another, each one into the next higher, until they finally all return to God.

It is clear that this schema in its purest and most logical elaboration has a pantheistic character. Created being is understood as a de-potentializing of the divine being; it is in itself "participation" (and only on the basis of this determination also something *that* "takes part"). It is, in its innermost interior essence, the Godhead's stepping-forth-from-himself. Now of course it can happen that from the fluid and flexible nature of the concept of participation one can more or less veil or shadow the pantheistic logic of the schema. This is already the case among many Gnostics, and even with Plotinus (whose religiosity in no way can be unambiguously called pantheistic, for already with him

one has the impression of a cleft between inner experience and symbolic expression). And of course, this holds true much more among the Fathers who make use of this schema.

And if one initially tries to transpose the content of revelation into a Platonic mode in an all-too simplistic way, above all by conceiving of the three divine persons as a kind of descending scale of potencies from the Godhead (the Father as primal God and absolute unity, the Son as "second God," the realm of the ideas and the origin of the Many, the Spirit as "third God," as it were the border between God and world), then one will soon be brought to see how the explicit heresy of Arius finally forced the Church to see how untenable was this schema. Nor should we forget that to look on the creature as something, in its ultimate nature, as purely negative and de-potentialized would contradict the word and meaning of the Bible too strongly.

But the inner logic of the Platonic scheme was so compelling that one could draw the defensive walls, as it were, only with great effort; and then the defensive measures would often enough be forgotten the next moment—because of the hypnotic power of its inner architectonic, especially when one wasn't thinking explicitly on the schema.

A first sign for this is the fact that in spite of constantly repeated assurances to the contrary, the schema of descent was not all that far from the dogmatics of the Trinity, even in post-Nicene theology. Although the abstract and formal statements on the Trinity are now correct, the schema of descent still stands before the vision of Greek theology like some kind of accompanying phantasm. This is probably the real reason why the *filioque* could never find a home in the Greek Church: A view of the Holy Spirit that posits the Spirit as the substantial love "between" Father and Son contradicts too openly the first conceptual schema of Platonism.

A second indication for this is the fact that, despite the formally orthodox post-Nicene view of the Trinity, no corresponding trinitarian piety and mysticism seemed inclined to develop. For example, in the mystical writings of Gregory of Nyssa one can almost touch the fact, so palpable is it, that the loveliest trinitarian and dogmatic passages in his work remain almost without influence on the actual mystical parties who were striving to ascend to God—not to the trinitarian God but to the absolutely simple "essence" of God that stands on the summit of the Platonic pyramid.

This tendency to a strict monotheism thus also completely wins out in the grandiose and resounding clarion call of the Greek

Fathers: In Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor, where the formally available confession of the Trinity plays almost no role whatever in the living-out of the Christian life. In fact what Maximus does is to get past the Cappadocians and Nicea and consciously link up with the Origenistic schema of Logos theology.

Closely bound up with this is their version of the incarnation, which, despite the Antiochenes and Nestorius, constantly was inclined to a docetic and Eutychian view. The incarnation is consequently thought of as the most extreme point of the "egression" of God from himself; the self-emptying (*kenosis*) appears as God's self-alienation in the service of fetching the world back home to the Godhead. Indeed the incarnation is almost looked on by the Alexandrines as a "distortion" of the purely spiritual into its opposite pole, matter, a distortion that was necessary for pedagogical and salvation-historical reasons in order to apprehend the distance of the material world from God and gradually lead it back to the realm of the spiritual and divine by a reverse movement.

Origen's myth of the pre-existence of souls and his idea that the material world is a consequence of the fall of sin shows this conceptual schema (that in many places is muffled and only latently present) in its most bare-faced and thus as such its most heterodox form. But even where the myth is lacking (as in Clement, Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus) the direction their thought takes toward this schema is still present. In this schema the incarnation must appear as something provisional and transitional. The resurrection of the flesh, formally confessed and maintained, appears like a disturbance of the systematic lines and usually was subtilized in one or another form.

But what is most decisive in the outcome of this strategy is the total effect it has on the tendency of the Christian life, the direction of its ideal, its asceticism and mysticism. In consequence of the movement of the ascending, step-by-step return of the world potencies into God, this movement proceeds unambiguously away from the material to the spiritual. Spiritualization, presented in a thousand different colorations, is the basic tendency of the patristic epoch. Early monasticism—with its extremely ascetical experiments, its training in denial of the body, its Encratite traits, its individualism—shows this most clearly: Along with its extraordinarily splendid sides, this brand of monasticism clearly shows the peril of this movement.

Let us cite once more the example of Maximus the Confessor, for symptomatic reasons. With him the fate of Greek

patristics has taken a most exemplary form: Although he became the great spokesman and martyr of Chalcedon and the leader of the anti-Monophysite movement, although he defended better than anyone else in his dogmatic and polemical writings the *asynchytos*, that is, the self-subsistence, definitiveness and positivity of the human nature of Christ, although he raised this term even to the very midpoint of his philosophical interpretation of the world, nonetheless in his ascesis and mysticism he relapses in many respects into a Monophysite-tinged spiritualism, thereby sealing the fate of the Byzantine Middle Ages to a large extent.

A final characteristic trait is the lurking tendency of Greek-Christian thought to look on the visible and hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church (as the continuation of Christ's visibility) as a *transitorium*, as something exoteric to which an inner spiritual hierarchy corresponds as its lasting truth and to which the earthly hierarchy must continually correspond.

Now of course the aesthetic drive of the early Greek culture to create new forms, its genius for the symbolic and dramatic, had its effects on all these spiritualistic tendencies. And among these categories [inherited from the Golden Age of classical Greek culture] the whole material cosmos as well received its positive estimation in the Greek Fathers. And finally under this rubric, as a piece of cosmic symbolism, we should also note the grandiose world of the Byzantine liturgy. But even this cosmic liturgy possesses a Platonic background, and therefore rests on other principles than what animates the Western and Roman liturgy, which is primarily a function of a positively asserted hierarchical order that is definitive precisely in this positivity.

The roots of the great schism, and this is something that one must repeat over and again, lie much deeper than one thinks, to judge by all these renewed attempts at establishing union. In order to find the real differences lurking behind the surface and to arrange them in a loving and patient conversation in such a way that both views can be reconciled without truncating the essentially Christian content, the first thing that must be done is to bring to light those habits of thought of both parties that are most hidden from view (and that therefore work unconsciously: These are always the much more important presuppositions). Then they would have to be measured against one another so that they might eventually become mutually complementary, each filling out the gaps of the other.

Of course, in the preceding we have first painted a strongly negative picture. We have described the effects and results of the encounter of the Christian content with the Greek

Platonic form of thought in such a way that it would seem as if this encounter had led to a conquest of the former by the latter. But the proper way to judge this process also entails that we observe the second principle of interpretation as formulated above. Between form and content there exists not an overlapping relationship but a symbolic one that is labile and very hard to specify. Everywhere we find that words become transparent in a deeper way than their merely denotative meaning. The whole dimension "from matter to spirit" is a *sensible image* for the dimension "from creature to God." But authentic Christianity in each period depends on how far the symbol is recognized as symbol and treated as such—how far, that is, God is not confused with the "innermost essence of the human spirit," and the "divine Pneuma" is not mistaken for that *created* "pneuma" that Greek anthropology counted as one of the components of man, along with his body and soul.

But in fact the signs of this Christian character (and thus of the symbolic distance of content and form) can be seen to be present as we gradually work our way through the texts. "Pantheism," in the sense used by the ancient Greek philosophers, is for the Fathers the worst of all gruel. Against nothing do they struggle more energetically and unambiguously. Over and again they emphasize and maintain the first basic cleft between God and creature. All "divinization" is only a participation from grace and never a fusion of nature. Even so extreme a spiritualist and fanatic of unity like Evagrius Ponticus maintains this distinction, at least formally. The corrective of a feeling of worshipping distance and the sharp sense for what grace means is precisely what the great Church Fathers like Athanasius, the Cappadocians, Cyril and Dionysius gave to us for all time in so exemplary a way.

What works against the immediate tendency to divinize creation and man is an authentic Christian shyness before the ineffable God who dwells beyond all seeing and grasping, the knowledge of God's eternal otherness and thus of his overpowering and ever-greater darkness even in the midst of his light. No one has more clearly developed the foundational doctrines of negative theology than the three Greek Fathers: the two Gregorys and Dionysius. In the wondrous mystical theology of Diadochus of Photiké the Christian essence is so immediately effective that no trace of Hellenistic thought forms can be seen. And where could one find examples of a more heroic fidelity to the Church than in Athanasius, Basil, Cyril and Maximus?

Finally, we must provide a warrant, an *authorization*, for this symbolism, for this dynamic from matter to spirit. First of

all, taken in itself, every religious *askesis* will have to engage the order of man's sensate instinctual drives. Augustine's basic schema: The body subordinate to the soul, the soul under God, is obligatory for all eras of Christianity. Then understood as a symbol: The dying to the world with Christ, this dynamic of life ordered toward the new eon, can be symbolized in the categories drawn from the world of matter and spirit, for it is part of the presupposition of the Christian life that it be a life not of the gross senses but a life spiritually transfigured ("Your transformation is in heaven," "Your life is hidden with Christ in God"). This is a basic aspect of revelation, which can never be done away with in all our focus on the world. Paul and John have set the precedent for this when they call God "spirit" and set up "flesh" and "spirit" as the symbolic values for the old and new eons. And so with the Fathers, this biblical meaning always resonates through the use of Hellenistic terms.

And finally we should not forget how strongly Platonism and even neo-Platonism had been permeated at the time of the Fathers with Aristotelian and Stoic elements. Not only the Antiochenes, as born rivals of the Alexandrians, but even Origenist theology, is permeated with such elements. Certain tractates of Gregory of Nyssa cannot be imagined without Poseidonius, and even less can the construction of Chalcedonian theology and the *Summa* of the Damascene be understood without Aristotle. Thus in many ways the danger of Platonism was hemmed in, and what we will in a moment bring out as the unique feature of Scholasticism had already been anticipated by the Fathers.

Nevertheless, we must point out here (where what is at issue is only the most implicitly held and often painted-over and corrected conceptual law of the patristic period) that the Platonic schema is what predominated. This law has always hidden within itself (in its basic concept of "participation") the danger zone of a too-easy transition from the realm of the natural spirit into the gracious realm of the divine Pneuma. "Pneuma" as the place of actual participation proves to be too dazzling for the Greek mind: It scintillates and opalesces (just as the later Russian Sophia speculation will do, developing along the same point) in an unclarified two-fold unity between the divine and the created sphere. In this way the fundamental deficiency of the whole Platonic schematic is revealed. To put it in Christian terms, it is able to be an excellent expression of the *supernatural* relation between the God of grace and the engraced creature (grace is of course essentially "participation" in the divine nature), but it is not able

sufficiently to clarify the relationship of the two *natures* that lies at the basis of every act of grace.

For it can only indicate a connection and not *what* is connected in this connection. Rather, the replacement of what is connected (as a self-subsistent, positive *suppositum*) by virtue of the connection must denigrate the former into a pure *negativum*. For this is how even in Platonic thought the sphere of created being is described: as a μὴ ὄν—as non-being. Certainly not as a pure nothing, but as a relative nothing—vis-à-vis the Imparter [*Teilgebender*; literally: Part-Giver, in contrast to "*partaker*"]. That creation as such is fundamentally something different than a depotentialization of God cannot be shown in the Platonic schema.

And so it happens that in all forms of Platonic-Christian thinking creation (nature) and the Fall of sin have a secret, if often mostly unspoken, affinity. On the other hand, the *positive* in created nature is seen as something inherently supernatural: The "pneuma" of man interpreted as grace belongs, thus, to the natural constitution of man. The Platonic schema shows the formal outline of the God-creature relationship *too simplistically* (they relate to each other according to this schema like N and -N). And from this simplification what results is ultimately, in exact logic, all the dangers of Patristic theology and spirituality.

Now of course, the attempt to deal with Platonism was the first great intellectual adventure of the Church. To that extent, we must not lose sight of all that was merely implicit and undeveloped in their views. This was the Church's first time out, so to speak, and there is something about the efforts of these early thinkers that reminds one of the attempt of any adolescent, which is precisely what gives it its charm.

That is why we must see in the Fathers great prototypes and models of intellectual power and Christian daring and interpret them with tact and tenderness and always take into account the hidden tension and symbolism between content of meaning and expressive form. But nothing would be more perilous than to demand from our completely different situation a pure return to patristic Platonism, heedless of the consequences. For we have learned over the course of a thousand-year maturation to understand the limits of this Platonism more and more clearly, and we cannot with impunity want to rescind this development.

Of course it will always carry the veneer of depth, piety and superiority over the lowlands of a "purely formal philosophizing" if one generalizes the Platonic schema and makes it into the *fundamental* God-creature relationship, as if this schema can

express in the Christian realm the supernatural relationship between God and creature. As for example in the form in which the exoteric and flat "causal relation" is replaced by the allegedly deeper "exemplar relation." Even if the unique and ungraspable relation between Creator and creature cannot, as we know, be pigeonholed into the category of *causa efficiens* in the innerworldly sense, and even if the relation of similarity of cause to effect is foundational, so too the pure superordination of the exemplar-relation (and thus the return to an emphatic Platonism) is just as one-sided as it is corrupting in its consequences, for it usually brings back in its train, as later experiences show, those totalizing tendencies at the time of the Fathers toward spiritualism and supra-naturalism.

It is important to realize here, in a "holy sobriety," that what seems to be more interesting and stimulating is not necessarily what is really deeper. One approaches the deepest truths of grace by undergirding them with a correct doctrine of nature.

Everything that we have said here about the structure of patristic theology is in no way new. Every theologian knows rather that the relationship of nature and grace in the Fathers had never been suitably clarified. But what has not been seen to the same extent is the cause of this unclarity in the course of the Church's intellectual history and the consequences of the Platonic presuppositions that permeated everything once these penetrate the theological sphere.

Also we must once more expressly emphasize that what is at issue for us here, and in the following section, is in no way an immanent estimation and evaluation of Platonism and Aristotelianism as philosophical theories. We contemplate them only on the basis of their suitability to illuminate certain partial aspects of regions of the Christian and theological picture of the world. Only from this standpoint will we be looking at the way of Scholasticism in the following section as a necessary clarification of the fundamental structures that were not able to attain to complete transparency in the patristic period because of a certain lack of conceptual material.

7. The Law of Scholasticism

As exemplified in its great masters, who were consciously rooted in the legacy of the Fathers and reverently entered into their tradition, Scholasticism attempts to clarify the still unresolved tension between God and the world by turning from Plato to Aristotle. This turn means in its depth the replacement of the

schema of participation (as a formal outline) with the schema of effect-to-cause. And for the effect (that is, the creature), this means replacing the μετοχή with the ἐνέργεια or ἐντελέχεια.

On the one hand this avoids even the appearance of a pantheistic emanationism: God's emergence out of himself no longer appears under the image of self-alienation (and thus the need disappears to speak of a "declension" or a "depotentializing" of the divine substance) but under the image of a creation, a generating [*Erzeugnung*] of an Other, a partner. As a consequence, on the other hand, the positive ontic weight—the inner self-possession, the positivity—of the partner is expressed. Thomas is basically the philosopher of "secondary causality." He is thus also the theologian of "nature," that is: Nature as that self-subsistence of created being that is *presupposed* before any gracious and unmerited participation in God can take place and in fact is the basis by which this participation can take place.

This provides theology with a way for expressing a most fundamental fact of the Christian dispensation, that every relationship of the creature to God is to be constructed only on the basis of a mutual otherness that is always more predominant. Furthermore, it says that *only* this basis of ever-greater difference suffices to support and make possible the highest unity. Thomas saw the paradox in all its starkness when he asserted the principle that: The nearer a creature stands to God, the more it is capable of moving by virtue of its own powers.

It is clear that with this fundamental change, in principle at least, all those dangers fall away that came with the Platonic schema. For no longer do the levels of being (spirit-soul-body; or man-animal-plant-matter) have the exclusive character of a step-by-step depotentializing of being and of a progressive alienation from the central fire of life. In place of the Great Chain of Being there emerges the rounded, ordered cosmos closed in on itself in which every individual thing possesses its worth and dignity and no single thing—including inert and dead matter—is permitted to be dispensable to the whole.

In other words, the direction of God is no longer unambiguously to be understood as moving solely in the direction toward the spirit and away from matter. God stands, as it were, in the *same* distance and nearness as Creator to *all* his creatures. And only on the formal basis of this equidistance, this "indifference" toward his creatures, does the special relationship of the creature endowed with conscious spirit to God emerge in its specific nature. And so the final temptation has been set aside: The

temptation of defining, however vaguely, the intra-divine and trinitarian relationship in terms of salvation history or cosmology. With the Scholastic concept of nature, the possibility is finally taken seriously that the incarnation can be seriously misinterpreted in a Docetic and Monophysite direction as a *transitorium* to a purely spiritual condition. The Scholastic concept of nature also obviates every mistrust and hostility toward the material and its natural laws, for with the concept of created nature this danger is avoided in principle. The lines that in the Platonic schema could only be correctly delineated with a certain amount of effort (because they contradicted the logic of the system) can in the case of Scholasticism be inserted into the foundational schema on their own credentials, as it were.

On this foundation the (Platonic) order of grace is constructed without any longer undermining the foundation itself. For since grace is no longer a pneumatic *substance* (as it is in the murky anthropological "Pneuma" of the patristic period) but a modification (even if an unheard of one) of the natural substance (an *accidens*), all participation in a unification with God can be viewed from now on as a simultaneous perfection and crowning of the "naturality" of nature.

But does not this Aristotelian worldview hide the reverse danger in itself? Namely, in place of supernaturalism, naturalism; instead of spiritualistic mysticism, a collapse into rationalism? Isn't Scholasticism soon liable to the danger of overvaluing the natural *ratio* and its capacities? We do not wish to deny this lurking danger, still less the partial distortion of late Scholasticism into a rationalistic subtilization of the content of revelation.

But what we must first realize is that the great scholastics strove to fashion neither pure philosophy nor pure theology but rather a total view of the world that emerged from nature and supernature. They are quite clear about this, even if they do not expressly say so at every moment. They well know that they are making use of and exploiting theological resources for the most part at the very place where they are apparently only philosophizing. Their whole intent was to clarify and order the meaning of the *fides quaerens intellectum*.

That they trust the *ratio*, for example, more than do the Platonists is in their view an aspect of the activity of the self-subsistence of the created spirit that possesses its greatest similarity to God precisely in this self-powered activity (and not so much in the passive Platonic "vision"). The real danger of this position begins only where it forgets that this total world vision is a *theological* one, precisely in its most reliable conclusions. That

is, this is a vision that *God* has given. And this forgetfulness will always result in the unified philosophical theological thought of the High Scholasticism becoming narrowed—as modern Scholasticism tried to do so often—into an immanent and purely philosophical "system" of logical stringency.

But in this emphasis on the natural foundation, does there not at least also lurk the obvious opposite danger of rending the being of the world into two "storeys" that never communicate: A natural and a supernatural zone? But even this danger does not exist as long as the absolute uniqueness of the ultimate (that is, the supernatural) final goal of this world is consciously maintained, as High Scholasticism always did. Everything in the natural order is, of course, already directed by this finality and ordained toward it. Every human being, taught Aquinas, who attains the age of reason decides, however implicitly, for or against his supernatural salvation, that is: for or against the salvific order of Christ.

Furthermore, however, it is precisely this encompassing, overarching *theological* view of the world—that is, the vision of the world from God—that gives a much deeper look into the God-given and God-related essence of created nature, than was ever possible to a Greek philosopher. In this view, what is revealed is precisely that the highest nobility of the creature consists in being essentially and ontically a constantly available tool of the divine praise and service. But this also means that this absolute availability (*potentia oboedientialis*), and consequently the attitude of entrusting oneself and handing oneself over that is the subjective correlate of this availability, defines the ultimate essence and the most perfect attitude of the creature. If, therefore, by elevating man to participate in the divine nature, God claims this availability, this must imply that the dimension of the supernatural really *is* inscribed in the fundamental outline of nature. The unity simply could not be closer, no matter how much we separate and divide for purposes of analysis.

However strange this might sound, the actual dangers of Scholasticism do not come from Aristotelianism (we are referring here only to the basic concepts and not to the individual disputable sentences), but from the residue of Platonism that had still not yet been overcome. That is why, to name the most important and controversial point, the material separation of nature and supernature (despite their *de facto* interpenetration) was never fully realized, even in Thomas. For Thomas still knew nothing of a natural final goal of man that pertains to the nature of the creature as such (however much that natural goal was over-

lain and "superseded" by the *de facto* supernatural world-order). So he had to come to the conception of a "natural longing" of the creature for the supernatural vision of God. But this then entails, of course, the danger of interpreting the *potentia oboedientialis* as a *potentia naturalis*, which corresponds to the patristic danger of looking on the *pneuma* as an essential component of man.

The idea of a direct, rectilinear divinization appears in the background, and it is not accidental that the mysticism of the soul's "spark of fire" in Meister Eckhart is obligated not only to the Greek Fathers but also to Thomas. Nor is it accidental that the doctrine of the Real Distinction in modern Thomism (according to which a true infinity of fullness accrues to the *actus* in the creature, a fullness that is only limited through an "essence" distinct from it) always had to justify itself against the objection of latent pantheism. This doctrine of a *desiderium naturale visionis* is moreover linked with the scholastic tendency to try to ascend step by step through the various stages and regions of world-being, reaching finally (and sometimes almost counting on) the inner structure of supernatural being.

This hidden rationalism that occasionally becomes visible in many of the scholastic arguments of *convenientia* thus has its origin not in the Aristotelian but in the Platonic schema of thought. In fact the "step-proof," the famous *quarta via* in Thomas's Five Proofs, is the crucial Platonic and Plotinian proof for the existence of God! Once more, what is connected with this ascending logic is the same lurking difficulty: That even in Scholasticism the direction of thought we noticed in the early Fathers away from the material and particular to the spiritual and universal still prevails as the real and most distinguished way of reaching God. For example, in true Hellenistic fashion, the particular still remains, as such, a vain nothing (bound as it is to the quantitative and material), and the direction toward the universal and spiritual at the same time points the way to the divine. Finally as the last outworkings of this Platonic direction, the medieval ideal of the *Sacrum Imperium* must be mentioned, the ideal of the organic unity and permeation of State and Church, which arose from a still insufficient distinction of the two-sided material content.

Now of course the correctness and the occasional success of this final unity can itself point to the fact that the Middle Ages meant a unique situation in the total development of Christianity. It was an essential moment, therefore, that had to be tried out for its time and thus had its justification in this uniqueness. But it should be equally clear from these considerations that even

here the wheel of history cannot be put into reverse and turned back. No, its own immanent logic had to lead High Scholasticism—exactly as once happened to the era of the Fathers—beyond itself. There is no stopping dead in one's tracks at the Middle Ages in the course of this logic—just as, *a fortiori*, there is also no way of getting behind the Middle Ages and terminating our journey somewhere before their dawning. Rather, we will have to make our way, loaded up with the whole positive legacy of the past, toward the future.

But for the Middle Ages themselves, however, that same "symbolism" between content and expression is to be invoked that we have already observed in the patristic era. Because Scholasticism was an extremely living and vital interpretation of the world, those tacit refutations and supplements are not lacking to it that the living instinct of a great thinker takes up to fill out the rigid logic of his thought. But if this symbolism is transparent to a later situation as inadequate, then this balance can no longer come into play, for then it is a question of clearly drawing the consequences.

Therefore, no one would misunderstand us more thoroughly than the one who would interpret our sketch of the two periods as a "turn toward Scholasticism" and a "turning away from patristics." Both periods have their strengths and their dangers. The temptation of Scholasticism, to pigeonhole and rationalize the supernatural order into an Aristotelian schema of thought that is somehow bound up with "original sin," is no more or less strongly felt than the reverse temptation of the patristic era to flee the natural order into a mystical Platonism. But it is not a matter for us here of the concrete, empirical configuration of Scholasticism, but only of its abstract and, as it were, its intelligible "idea." This idea, however, is characterized by its being able to assume into itself the whole truth of patristics—whether it has in fact done that is an entirely different and purely historical question!—and by its being able, beyond that, to clear away the remaining unclarity that still hovers about it by placing it in a fundamental context that is decisive for a Christian interpretation of the world. The increase of the conceptual materials and of the "thought forms" now available to us permits a more exact description of the core content of revelation.

As we said earlier, we can still maintain this progress took place, even if empirically and historically we can prove that all kinds of distortions and even dilutions happened to the original creative forces. Indeed, it might well be that the pessimistic portrait we painted at the outset of this essay is true: The course of

the history of theology from the Fathers to the Scholastics to the Moderns very well might represent a progressive waning of mental and synthetic powers. But that would in no way affect our point, that the sequence of the formal laws of these periods has brought what is distinctively Christian to more and more clarity.

8. The Law of the Modern

The further path taken by Christian thought in modern times is, in its positive characteristics, marked by the progressive exclusion of the Platonic and Hellenistic residues of Scholasticism. Of course, often enough the great systematicians of genius are missing, and the leading lights of the day repair to non-ecclesial, indeed to non-Christian philosophy and theology. Nonetheless, the great outlines of this development can be seen.

The first line leads from the intellectualistic universalism of Scholasticism into the progressive discovery and appreciation of the concrete, the unique and the historical. With the spreading influence of nominalism, the concept of the general loses its ontological value and becomes merely a means for helping out epistemology. The individual is what is uniquely existent and real. Instead of the *individuatio ratione materiae*, gradually what takes its place is the *individuatio ratione formae*. Correspondingly, the depiction of this unique individual, which we call history, gains the upper hand and jostles aside, and even tramples on, the cosmic and history-less systematics of yore.

The Age of Discovery brings the closure of the earthly world into human consciousness, and this is the sensory image that speaks to the men of this age, confirming them in the material self-subsistence of the created nature that they have discovered. The Renaissance was thrilled by the world of the physical and bodily and inspired by its expressive language, which the Age of the Baroque made use of to portray even the most transcendent of realities. This drive to accentuate the individual in the context of a nature closed in on itself later degenerated into empiricism, rationalism, Deism, materialism and historicism.

Closely connected with this, a second line leads away from the Scholastic concept of nature, deepening the up-to-then scarcely developed concept of the *suppositum*: the "person." Over against the natural and objective mode of thought of Thomas Aquinas, the personal and actualist approach of Scotus came to be emphasized. In its ultimate (later) culmination, this trend of thought sums up the whole realm of the objective, logical, and

ontological connections as those that express and objectify the ultimate, act-determined moment of the person's freedom.

This inevitably also put the relationship of world and Creator into a new light: The world now seems dependent from moment to moment on the unfathomable will, good pleasure, and love of a majestic and sovereign Person. The creatureliness of the world became all the more sharply evident. Developing out of Scotism, this pathos impinged on Thomism (as Bañez shaped it); it becomes predominant in the attitude of an Ignatius of Loyola; and was obscured in the actualist theology of Protestantism and Jansenism. With Kant and also in the 19th century, this actualism became secularized in the manifold forms of irrationalism.

Both lines of development: 1) the progressive development of the individual and the concrete and thus the increasing appreciation for the actual worldliness of the world, and 2) the progressive emphasis of the personal, were capped off in Christian thought by a shift of meaning that unified both. The formal outline of the God-creature relation was made clear in the fact that, simultaneously with the elevated self-subsistence of the realm of nature, an increased dependence on the Creator was emphasized. At the same time as the natural sphere was rounded off into a realm of its own, there appeared, as it were naked and unveiled, the formal relation of creatureliness.

But in doing so, the last residues of Hellenism had been in fact overcome. For the two characteristic theses of Platonism—the priority of the universal over the individual to the point that the world of Ideas was absorbed into the divine sphere, and the efforts that go along with this view of trying to get away from the material and particular in favor of the spiritual and general—finally experienced its reversal. The personal God, who in his actual personal intimacy cannot be reached from below or from the outside or taken to be an objective thing or expropriated by man's spiritual sense, must now first reveal himself if he is to be known at all.

Revelation as the personal self-disclosure of the divine majesty is now seen to be absolutely undeserved and free, bound by no requirement; it is the absolutely unexpected, and is so little what nature on her own terms might have been "longing for" and "suspecting," so little the fulfillment of a "deep urge," that it will still possess the lasting character of a definite "positive law" even after it has fulfilled these expectations. Which means that it is also a law that can be accepted only in the decisive attitude of submission, surrender, faith and service.

From this perspective comes the justification and explanation for the emphasis on the purely "positive" in the whole of salvation history: the emphasis on considering the person of Jesus in his earthly and human facticity (over against the cosmic and universal image of Christ in the patristic era), the underlining of the "positivity" of the Church's hierarchy all the way to the declaration of the Pope's infallibility, in whose words the pure positivity of revelation's mode of entering history is continued and which itself must be also accepted in obedience. The *potentia oboedientialis* as the ultimate ground of the creature has thus come into full view in its literal meaning and is definitively preserved from being confused with a *potentia naturalis*.

If in this way the pure *super*-natural dimension of revelation, the pure from-above aspect, is placed in the foreground so sharply that it is almost unbearable, it is nonetheless supplemented, and necessarily so, by insisting (precisely in the modern formulation) that the supernatural has now truly and definitively penetrated *into* the natural. The world into which the incarnation has taken place is a truly worldly world: Not, for example, a shadowy and symbolic copy of a higher, spiritual, ideal and universal world but rather a world in which there are unique individual persons and situations, in which time and space are the bases of qualitative differences, differences which cannot be reduced to a general concept without robbing the particular of something essential to itself. This is a world, then, in which there is a true history. Moments, that is, have their own immediate relation to the eternal and cannot be replaced with something else. This is a world in which the bodily and physical is not something provisional but rather a definitive component. It is a world whose salvation—should God freely choose to "eternalize" and "transfigure" it—could only occur along with this physicality.

God steps into this so very worldly world, so dissimilar to God, and claims it for himself, precisely in this worldliness and dissimilarity. The very feature that makes the world the world, its naturalness with all that this means—reasoning, logical thinking, free will, sympathetic feeling, the vitality and animality of man's physicality, his emotions, pains and desires, in short the whole great bazaar of everyday life on earth—has been sought out by God as *the* place for his incarnation. And this is no spiritualized, etherealized nature but the σχῆμα ἀνθρώπου, the same frame that all men possess. And in this unabridged and untransformed schema, he has poured out the "fullness of the Godhead."

In this view, man's old temptation inherited from original sin to make himself divine by "ascending" to something no longer human is made radically impossible. For first of all, the very possibility of man to ascend to God on his own is taken away from him. (Of course, not in the sense that he would possess no natural faculty for recognizing God, since that is precisely what remains reserved to modern times: to define this faculty against all denials. But rather in the sense that man cannot expect revelation on his own but can only obediently receive it as something coming from above.) So God is then set before him in the most pressing clarity. And in this encounter he is told that he cannot "divinize" himself by setting aside his nature. That can only happen, should it occur, on the basis of the permanent level of this nature.

And this can happen—we must once more emphasize both as our conclusion and as a way of returning to what was said at the outset—because of the way Christ descended into the natural and into what seems the most undivine of this nature: The ordinariness and flatness of poverty, the blindness of obedience amidst the thousand natural shocks of being a poor man of the flesh, and above all his abandonment, poor and pitiable, to cross, death and grave. And now the Christian who joins in this descent will also be radically immune to the tempting thought that he need only "descend" according to the "external" and "sensate" man but "ascend" according to the "inner," "spiritual," "pneumatic" man. For henceforth he can no longer confuse his own, human "pneuma" with the "Pneuma" of the Holy Spirit. And if he also realizes in his innermost being how much the mystery of his union with God and with God's nature takes place by joining in this descent of Christ into the world, cross and death, then he will also give the honor to this innermost mystery of his heart (*Deus interior intimo meo*!). Or rather, he will allow this mystery to find a home in him by his efforts to "decrease" while the Lord "increases."

9. The Total Structure

In characterizing the modern Christian idea, it goes without saying that we have abbreviated and schematized its basic structure much more than we did with the earlier periods. But our only concern was to find the one living point [of the distinctively Christian] and to bring it into the foreground, from which the manifold spiritual influences since the Middle Ages could receive their ultimate meaning and their decisive justification.

But how odd this—undeniable—progress in working out

the central Christian idea seems in the concrete! Perhaps nowhere else does the legacy of original sin thrive more strongly, nowhere in fact does impotence, dissipation and dissolution, seem so present as here. Leaving completely out of consideration the heretical and pagan forms that fill out this era, Christian thinking seems scarcely to have brought forth a fully rounded and entirely perfect form that could have appropriated the whole tradition in its authenticity and assimilated the modern in its lasting validity. Some hold on to a past situation, but it is one that indeed would remain true only if it is vitally transformed and developed further; while others fall into a conscious or unconscious dependence on rationalism, empiricism, idealism, traditionalism, etc. And others finally seek the principle of the modern in some form of absolutizing and only end up stretching revelation on the rack of some foreign system: Whether in the direction of a pure actualism that equates being and action; or in a personalism that pursues a kind of spiritual libertinage under the cover of the "religious personality;" or by invoking a schema of a "noble humanity" *(humanisme chrétien)*—which, however, hardly gets ten steps down the road before it betrays its resentment; or by loudly proclaiming a "theology of crisis," which is all too willing to give up the knife for the sake of making the blade even sharper...

But the point is not to fret how the authenticity of the Christian dispensation might be once more distorted and disfigured through original sin in quite unexpected ways. Rather, the real issue is the more exciting possibility: That this authenticity can be even more apparent in our time than perhaps ever before. The two factors that pressed in on us at the outset of this essay as the tokens of original sin have emerged after centuries of lengthy unfolding from various disguises to a relatively noticeable purity: the total transcendence and the total immanence of the Christian dispensation over against nature. Or more specifically, the "law of conversion": The more God appears as God (that is, as the Wholly Other), the more interior does our union with him become.

So far we have only considered the three great periods that have occupied us in their sequence (and thus in their transitionality and relativity). And this forbids us from trying to revive one of the past epochs in all its limitations. It would be useless in the brief space remaining to examine in detail that other way of looking at the matter that we announced above and that brings to the fore the permanence and uniqueness of each epoch and thus tries to read the one total structure from the various

different structures of each period.

What is characteristic of this way of looking at things is that the third epoch that we have described does not actually bring a new starting point with it but rather tends to bring to a logical conclusion the [valid elements of the] starting points laid down earlier. Thus, the fruitful contrast, from which the image of the whole can be realized, really is stretched out along the tension between patristics and scholasticism (or, if one prefers, between Platonism and Aristotelianism) as the ultimate formal intellectual directions of the human mind. But what concerns us here is not this eternally labile balancing act of philosophical thinking between "Idealism" and "Realism" but the end result of this tension for theology and Christianity.

In this sense *patristics*, seen in a highly formal perspective, represents the eternal factor of the truth of the Christian "clean sweep" of the world [*Weltauskehr*] to the point of the complete death and disappearance of the creature before the God who is "all in all" and must always become so more and more. The ceaseless reduction of the levels of being to the highest Being (an insight that lies at the heart of Platonic logic); its transcendence from all merely participating being; a deep ontological piety according to which existence itself is a prayer (as the corresponding echo of this presence of being in the realm of consciousness); the feeling for the fact that the creature is nothing other than the presentation and re-presentation of God outside of himself; and thus a deep understanding of the cultic, of the objectivity of the symbolic and sacramental world order: All of these are the eternal values of the patristic era.

But what detracts from them is that an all-too simple schema of the God-creature relationship lies at their roots; or put better, that the authentic Christian schema had to be maintained, as it were, against the stream of Platonic and pantheizing logic. This defect disappears when the patristic principle lets itself be supplemented by the scholastic principle. And thus purified, it then refines itself using the insights of modernity. For here in the modern era, the principle of "God being all in all" is realizable without abbreviation and even more consistently, because now *the sovereignty and totality of God no longer comes into view at the cost of the world's being but precisely as its fulfillment.* "I no longer need to be dead," says Claudel, "that You might live." God is God so much that he himself can be in the All that he is not.

The modification in the spiritual attitude that is contained in this transition from patristic to modern piety can be described as the change from a world-*condemning* "dying to the world" to

a world-*affirming* "dying to the world." In other words, in modernity what comes unmistakably to the fore is that even the factor of the Christian mortification to the world stands under the more comprehensive sign of mission. Christian death should not lead us to abandon our natural post in the world where revelation and the order of salvation have placed us; rather, our dying must itself be suffered through *while* we maintain our post. The patristic sense for objectivity and representation need not give way, then, to a more predominant subjectivism and anthropocentrism (as the line is always being incorrectly drawn). Rather, in the principle of the modern, this feeling for objectivity and representation comes precisely to its fulfillment, at least when every "subjectivity" of ecstatic ascent to God remains encompassed by the meaning and consciousness of Christian mission.

What is most important in the Christian perspective is that each person is so much more than he imagines. And so the ontological and liturgical element of patristic piety only gets a different coloring in the modern principle, for now the great liturgical action is no longer being acted out, as it were, away from the world and in another divine realm beyond this one (one might think here of the complete transcendence of the art of icons) but is being enacted by God in the world.

This shift of perspective, whereby we come to see that the play is being acted out by God, is the justification for our being mortified *for* this world; it is our way of participating in God's "indifference" toward all things so that we might be missioned to an action that represents that drama in the world. But the fact that we are being sent "into the world" only emphasizes all the more that this difference must move and make its home in the midst of the greatest "difference" of life: in true, living nature, indeed with ourselves as a part of nature. Only a superficial way of looking at things will juxtapose the laws of patristics and modernity as a contrast of theocentricity and anthropocentricity, as a liturgical and ontological focus versus a subjective, psychological piety or mysticism. The difference lies only in this: That the Fathers did not yet understand "subjectivity" as a function of the total representation, for they were still under the continued influence of the Platonic inhibitions.

Over against patristics, *scholasticism* is the decisive conquest of the natural realm for the world of Christianity. By placing the emphasis on the *energeia* of creaturely being, on its "for-itself" and its natural capacities, it certainly signifies the awakening of the "subjectivity" over against the almost impersonal objectivity of the Greek world. Augustine (and not Bernard of Clairvaux) was the first to sound this note, one that does not cease to be heard from then on until Francis and Tauler.

But what remains crucial about this is the fact that this form of pondering and self-reflective subjectivity nonetheless came to full flower under the overarching form of the scholastic worldview, which was a view of the whole order of the cosmos from God. In this respect the strictest linkage between the two orders remained the model, even for so soaring a subjectivity as Dante's, just as the adventures of the courtly knights were governed by the strictest ceremonials. The impetuous drive to embody even the spiritual that took over in all areas of life from church-state politics and architecture to theology did not lead to a distorting apotheosis of the world, because it had its determining form in the Christian descent of the incarnation.

To that extent the Middle Ages really do stand in a happy middle between two eras. The immense naïveté with which it surveyed things (world and God, nature and grace, State and Church) and which gave it the happy ability, like the fool Parsifal, to produce the most unforeseen works, was only possible in this hovering intermediate position between the fading resonance of Platonism and the dawning light of modern realism. It was a hovering that could not yet see the reality of things in their whole sharpness, for the "species" and the "genus" were still for the Scholastics the ultimately relevant and spiritually graspable reality, not the *individuum*; but even so, it was already moving in that direction.

And so the ethos of objectivity and representation in the Fathers was translated in the Middle Ages into an ethos of "discretion," in the full sense of that word, with all its connotations. The place that is given to the *ratio* comes to it only from the grace of *fides*, and yet it can grow and mature to a self-subsistent function under this protecting form. This self-subsistence will first of all continue to grow, even to the point of running into the danger of forgetting the presence of the overarching reality or of consciously shaking it off as a confining yoke. The crises of nominalism and subjectivism, or rationalism and irrationalism, will cause an immense amount of devastation. But by bringing victory to the inner principle of the Middle Ages, these crises serve—without their knowing it—to force the decisive formula of the Christian dispensation out into the open.

According to everything that has been said, this formula means three things: 1) the fulfillment of the "turn to nature" begun in the Middle Ages as the "place" of the incarnation and thus as the place where the "apotheosis" of man takes place as

adumbrated in the Fathers; 2) the fulfillment of the ultimate form of the world so strongly emphasized by the Fathers: the view that "God is all in all";[2] and thus 3) the fulfillment of the mutual interplay between patristics and scholasticism beyond both.

Finally, this places us before *our* task. Removing the obstructions of all one-sided views (that come mostly from simply returning to the past), we must realize the total meaning of the Christian dispensation as the inner meaning of our times demands. Over against a presumptuous and totalizing naturalism, this total meaning must certainly help to make visible, with all the powers at its disposal, the basic law of "dying to the world," of "dying that we might live" for the new, redeemed world. And to that extent the Fathers will be for us the most vital model, with their ethos of mortification and dying for the sake of the world beyond. But this mortification must be effected only in the overarching sense of a mission into the world. Indeed it must unhesitatingly affirm without abridgement the crucial importance of humanity and worldliness as the place of the epiphany of the ever-greater and ever-more-inconceivable God.

In this sense, the change in meaning of the *concept of Christian love* as the basic fact of revelation and of the ultimate demand of Christian existence is significant, and it may summarize for us in conclusion the meaning of our daily activities.

To define it first in negative terms, the contrast in no way consists in saying that the Fathers defined "love" as an "ontological," supernatural condition that arises out of the sacramental life of the Church, whereas for modern people it possesses a primarily "psychological" and thus (as people seem to assume) a "natural" connotation. All eras of Christian history are agreed that Christian love can be derived only from the original rebirth from God (in baptism or the baptism of desire); and therefore love is only possible from an original dying to the world that is given by grace and entailing as a part of that gift a participation in God's nature. (Such simplifying constructions completely overlook the danger, constantly latent in the Fathers, of a subjectivizing and individualizing mysticism; they flirt with the danger of a reinterpretation of *agapē* as the result of a self-active asceticism of ascent: Origenism and Messalianism can be recalled here only as the strongest crisis points.)

[2]That is, insofar as the most concrete view of the world as singular, historical, personal also makes possible the most concrete view of its creatureliness, all the way to the fundament of the *potentia oboedientialis*, the point of intersection of nature and supernature.

The true difference lies rather in this: The Fathers insisted on the original differentiation from the world without emphasizing the decisive place of this event. Love, therefore, means that the creature has been taken into the bottomless life of the Godhead. For the Fathers, love is a total transcending and being drawn out of all being that is merely relative and participative into the movement where God returns from the world to himself. For man to join with God to help to complete the descending movement of the incarnation wherein God turns to the world would have made no sense to the Fathers. For since creation and, even more so, the Fall have already brought us into this "below," this "distance from God," and since Christ in his incarnation has searched for us in this region "below," all that now matters is to link up with him and take the same way back to God as Christ took.

The perfect Christian does this by gaining control over and ruling his passionate nature, by purifying himself (to the point of aiming for the ideal of a Christian indifference to the world: *apatheia*) and by contemplating the celestial mysteries of the New Eon (until finally he attains to the fullness of *gnosis*). In this way he nurtures in his life the principle of the divine life, until as it were his whole being becomes transparent for that supra-worldly peace and the complete seclusion with the "pure Godhead" in himself. The display of this peace before the world and one's fellow man is the example on which the longing of others for God must develop. The "deficit" to some extent in the "personal" sphere in the perfected Christian is his crucial gift of love to men: God appears when man disappears.

But for modern man the rebirth that grounds love is primarily a being placed in the movement of Christ: descending from God into nature. God's "trinitarian life" expresses itself in the sending (*missio*) of the Son from the Father, in which sending the Spirit of love has his origin and *raison d'être*. For the modern person, therefore, the statement that "God is all in all" bears the marks of an openness to the world in the manner of Ignatius's *"Hallar Dios en todas las cosas"* ("Finding God in all Things"). But, not in the sense of a luxurious wallowing in "personal relationships," but by strictly following out Christ's mission. Thus love will certainly emphasize the "contrast" with God (*contra* the Fathers). But this "contrast" with God will be seen as the consummation of that creaturely law that decrees that we are not God and are therefore called to obey. Love and "friendship" become, as it were (to use a rather oversubtle formula), the "soul" and the super-elevation of the relationship of service and obedience

that is the ground of nature: *amor non tollit sed perficit et elevat oboedientiam*—just as the meaning of Christ's love is also perfected in his perfect obedience; that is, in the total renunciation of his selfhood as the "servant of the Lord" in Cross and death. For it is here, in his self-disappearing and "descending" that God's love for the world manifests and perfects itself. So where the creature is most a creature, God is most God.

The Christian helps to bring about this self-emptying of Christ, and does so in a "galling" service for the redemption of the world. But in this annihilation (which is only to be discharged by the "law of conversion"), the annihilation of self and the depersonalization of the patristic ideal of love has been overtaken. For even here, where nature has attained her end and her truth, the divine life appears as the meaning and fulfillment of everything. But it is precisely the truth that "God is everything" that provides the foundation for the resurrection of the New Eon and establishes the possibility for the fulfillment of the creature, even—and especially—in its ever-greater contrast before the ever-greater God.—*Translated by Edward T. Oakes, S.J.* □