To whom shall we go?

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by Reinhold Niebuhr
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"Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will you also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord to whom shall we go? Thou hast words of eternal life."—John 6:67.

This question and answer is probably a variant of the more frequently quoted confession of Peter as recorded in the synoptics, given in answer to the question, "Whom do you say that I am?" At any rate, it belongs to the same period of Jesus' ministry, usually designated as the crisis. Jesus had been popular. The multitude had followed him to hear his words, to catch the charm of his personality and to be cured of physical ills. But gradually, as Jesus unfolded the full meaning of his way of life, the multitude found his ideals as difficult as they were engaging and began to desert him, muttering, "These are hard sayings, who can hear them?" Only the smaller circle of disciples remained and Jesus was not quite sure of them. At least, he determined to test them. Did they also desire to leave him? No, Peter answered, as usual the spokesman for the rest, Where shall we go? The implications of that counter question are unusually significant. What Peter is saying in effect is, "What you demand of us is so difficult that we are almost tempted to follow the multitude in their desertion. But you have helped us to look profoundly into the meaning of life and we are not able to find a decent alternative to your way and to your truth." If that is the meaning of Peter's words, he is as truly the spokesman of generations of Christians in them as he was in his confession, "Thou art the Christ."

Comfort and challenge. There is an assurance of comfort in the great affirmations of Christ's faith which the multitude is always anxious to accept; but inextricably

intertwined with that assurance is a moral challenge which most men find too difficult to entertain. The Christian church, at its best, is a fellowship of the few who have seen, however dimly, that the assurance and the challenge belong together. Christ's gospel presents both a way of looking at life and reality, and a way of living. What Jesus offered his disciples was fellowship with a God of love and a way of living in and by love. He believed that the universe itself must be interpreted in terms of a personality which expresses itself in love, and he believed in the practical and redemptive efficacy of love in all human relationships. His ethic and his religion were one; and he was clear-eyed enough to know that any consistent obedience to a God of love would inevitably result in suffering. He saw that the world was not altogether under the dominion of God. The world has its own standards, which at best are standards of decency with love left out; and being jealous of those standards it will crucify anyone who will condemn them by surpassing them. And even were the world not so jealous, Jesus saw that there is an inner necessity in love which inevitably results in sacrifice and suffering. Love cannot be redemptive until it identifies itself with its object, in which case it suffers for the sins and becomes the victim of the weaknesses of the beloved. The strategy of love therefore makes almost impossible demands upon the soul, but the difficult adventure is made easy by the fact that whoever embarks upon it progressively discovers the love which is at the very heart of things.

Alternatives. What are the alternatives of such a challenge combined with such an assurance? Peter, the simple fisherman, could not survey the centuries which preceded nor anticipate the experiments of the generations which followed him, yet the philosophies of the ages have not added much to his simple intuition. It is difficult to find a decent alternative to the position of Christ either as a philosophy or as a strategy of life. One alternative which some men of every age have accepted, but which only a few have raised to the dignity of a well-reasoned position, is a life bereft of any moral pretensions which justifies itself by the conviction that there is no goodness at the heart of things. Since the world is a chaos, these men have said, or have thought without saying, there is no reason for moral order in MY life. Arthur Hugh Clough gives classic expression to this position in his "Easter Day":

> Eat, drink, and play, and think that this is bliss,
> There is no heaven but this;
> There is no hell,
> Save earth, which serves that purpose doubly well,

Seeing it visits still
With equalest apportionment of ill
Both good and bad alike, and brings to one same dust
The just and the unjust
With Christ who is not risen.

There is always enough moral chaos in the world to give the shadow of justification to such a strategy of life. Naturally inclined to moral sloth, the average man finds it most gratifying to let the universe itself justify his spiritual inertia. A more popular variant of this position is an ordered life in a chaotic world, but ordered upon the basis of selfish impulse rather than moral principle. Since the world is both ruthless and confused—so runs the argument, though it is not generally openly avowed—I will be ruthless but not confused. I will steer a straight course through the eddies and currents of life, straight to my own ends. There are no obligations of love or conscience to persuade me to qualify my self-interest. This is a philosophy by which many men live but which few openly avow. When they do, as in the case of Nietzsche, their very vehemence betrays the weakness of their position.

Is love effective? Moral nihilism is too strong for the stomach of most men. A more popular position is therefore to affirm the love and goodness at the heart of things but to doubt the efficacy of love and the practicality of goodness in immediate situations. That is the position of the psuedo-Christian. Even Peter, who in one moment admitted that he could find no other way but that to which Jesus pointed, tried in the next moment to dissuade Jesus from accepting the consequences of thorough consistency. And Peter was as typical of the average Christian in the second moment as he was in the first when he accepted Jesus as his savior. The Christian church is in fact made up of people who, in a moment of insight, catch a glimpse of the meaning of love in the life of God and man but spend most of their days trying to escape the consequences of absolute loyalty to their vision. There is nothing quite so satisfying as to eat your cake and have it too, as to live by the assurance that the universe is rooted in love and goodness and at the same time to garner the immediate satisfactions which come from ruthless living. Such a position is not logical, but men are not prone to pay a high price for consistency. The pseudo-Christian position has a certain charm for many men who abhor the idea of a morally chaotic world even while they add to its moral chaos.

Questioning yet persisting A much higher and finer alternative is one which questions the moral character of the universe but nevertheless insists on the highest

moral obligations for man, which accepts the challenge of Jesus without claiming the comfort of his faith. Men of extraordinary moral sensitiveness from Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius to Thomas Huxley and Bertrand Russell have lived by this faith or in this lack of faith. They have not always insisted on interpreting the universe in terms of moral chaos. Some of them indeed have come upon aspects of the world which persuaded them to regard it as in some sense divine. But they expected no help from any resource outside themselves in their moral struggle. In the western world stoicism and in the east Confucianism have developed this type of ethical philosophy. In our own day the number of those who have accepted this alternative of the Christian faith has been tremendously increased as men found themselves convinced by the discoveries of science of the ruthless and nonmoral nature of the physical world.

As a reaction against an overestimate of the moral character of the world this kind of philosophy is inevitable. All through the ages Jobs have complained of the ills from which good men suffer and Asaphs have cried against the prosperity of the wicked. The natural life seems to offer little aid to the morally aspiring soul. What it accomplishes must be done in the teeth of a hostile nature. The weakness of the position philosophically is that it accepts the physical world as an adequate revelation of the nature of the universe and leaves out personality itself as a revealer of reality. And it must be added that a moral idealism which makes no claims upon the universe, though it sometimes bears the choicest spiritual fruits, is in the end usually corrupted by pride and despair. It is difficult to maintain any sense of humility when we imagine ourselves the best thing in the universe; and the spirit of heroism easily sinks into sullen rebellion when man imagines himself orphaned in the universe. Stoicism and cynicism are historically and classically not identical, but stoics are easily spoiled by the spirit of the cynic. It is difficult to maintain our confidence in mankind if we can not trust life itself. Communism, which is increasingly becoming the religion of the disillusioned multitudes, is significant for its paradoxical attempt to build a brotherhood of love through a strategy of hate. It wants to help man even while it distrusts him. In that characteristic it is simply the most ruthless exponent of all moral idealism which is rooted in moral despair. Henley’s “Invictus” is typical of this whole school both for the pride and the sullen spirit which shine through its lines:

> Mid the fell clutch of circumstance
> I have not winced nor cried aloud;

Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody but unbowed.

It matters not how strait the gate
How charged with punishment the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.

Yet it must be admitted that there have been stoics who have maintained a sweet and wholesome spirit; and nothing ought to be said to detract from the glory of that kind of idealism at its best. Thomas Hardy is right in insisting that the honest stoic deserves pity rather than blame. His complaint against his critics touches the heart:

Yet I would bear my shortcomings
With meet tranquility
But for the charge that blessed things
I'd liefer not have be.
O, doth the bird deprived of wings
Go earth-bound willfully?

There is an alternative to the position of Christ's so closely related to it at some points that it is often mistaken for it. It is the position of the pantheist who sees the whole universe in terms of God and regards all partial evil as universal good. He views the immoral caprices of nature which outrage the heart of a stoic through a mist of mysticism until he persuades himself that evil is some kind of illusion. The pantheist is tempted to become either a consistent pessimist or a consistent optimist, and in either case he enervates the springs of moral action. Even if his pessimism rises to the sublime spiritual heights of a Buddha, he denies life and beats a splendid retreat. As for the optimist who regards evil as an illusion, he is infinitely inferior to the heroic moralist who makes a brave though, as he thinks, futile stand against the atrocities of nature. The pantheist either takes the cross out of Christianity or sees nothing but the cross—without the resurrection.

The promise of Jesus. The promise of Jesus against all these various counsels is that the love at the heart of the universe, the love of a Father, will be progressively revealed to anyone who will venture his life upon the assumption that the universe is really grounded in love and who will maintain an attitude of humble and reverent

expectancy for what God may reveal in his experience. He does not promise any easy or magical revelation of God to every chance searcher. The assurance that the universe itself is moral and will respond with helpful resources to the spiritual aspiring soul must come progressively to the moral adventurer. It is the pure in heart who shall see God. Out of their moral experiences they shall fashion the means of perception by which God becomes real. Yet even when they reach that assurance they will not be saved from suffering from the world's confusion. To cooperate with God means, in fact, to accept the cross. The cross is a symbol of the fact that order has no easy victory in the world over chaos, that love has no easy triumph over force. Christ is always assuring one half of the world that the victory of the spirit over the confusion of the world is not impossible, and the other half that victory is not easy. He himself touched areas of life from which God seemed absent and had experiences in which for a moment the love of God appeared to be an illusion. The cry "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" came out of a tortured soul—tortured not so much by physical pain as by the terrible reality of a life mission in apparent ruins. Yet a moment afterward came the cry of victory, "My God, into they hands I commend my spirit!"

The experience of Jesus upon the cross is not one of a dreamy pantheist who imagines God in easy and magical control of every process in the universe. It was the experience of a spiritual adventurer who saw life as a struggle between love and chaos but who also discovered the love at the center of things which guarantees the victory in every apparent defeat. Is there any philosophy which accounts for all the facts of life so well? And is there any faith which so completely satisfies all human needs? Where shall we go to receive so much strength for the struggle and so much comfort in its momentary defeats and so much assurance of the ultimate triumph?