

# Christianity and the Supernatural<sup>1</sup>

## I. The Meaning of the Supernatural

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### I

AT THE BEGINNING of his provocative book, *Man's Need and God's Action*, Reuel Howe records a casual conversation with a typical secularized modern. His interlocutor lists a variety of this-worldly goods which he already possesses, and ends with the light-hearted prediction: "If we'll only use our heads and play it right, we'll soon have a way of life that will make religion and church unnecessary."<sup>2</sup> We can hardly help realizing that this is an accurate enough expression of a view held, at least tacitly, by a very large part of the population of the Western world. Millions of those to whom the Gospel must be addressed quite frankly doubt that the Church has any real meaning for their lives as human persons. That means that, if we are to communicate at all with the secularized masses, we must give serious consideration to the relation between their scale of values and the promise and demand of the Christian faith.

The trouble is that within the Christian community itself there are ominous signs of a widespread inability to deal with this problem in adequately Christian terms. It is painfully obvious that many Christians tend to assume the standards of secular society, so that for them the Church fulfils its vocation by searching out the "felt needs" of modern man and then outbidding other agencies in meeting such needs. Starting from the reasonable assumption that men and women want peace of mind, domestic happiness, social success, economic prosperity, and international order, they present the Christian ethic as the surest way of securing these goals, or perhaps, where the memory of traditional theology is greener, they offer the grace of Christ as the strongest force making for human welfare. In sharp contrast to all this, in circles where man's transcendent destiny is more clearly recognized, we often hear an exposition of the Gospel which detaches man's ultimate concern with a right relation to God from the pressing realities of everyday existence. While this kind of thinking may preserve the Christian witness to the supernatural and eternal, it does so at the expense of any effective reference to the natural and temporal circumstances under which man's eternal salvation must be worked out.

1. This study is based on a lecture given at the General Theological Seminary, New York, in January, 1956, under the Bishop Paddock trust.

2. Reuel L. Howe, *Man's Need and God's Action* (Greenwich, Conn.: Seabury Press, 1953), p. 3.

Perhaps it would be misleading to suggest that either of these tendencies had been systematized by responsible Christian thinkers as a pure theological position. Nonetheless, in contemporary theological discussion, attitudes are often expressed which, if they were logically developed, would necessarily issue in a purely this-worldly or in a radically other-worldly philosophy. To use the jargon popular among theological educators, some theologians seem to aim at "relevance" to life, superficially interpreted, at the expense of Christianity, while others manage to defend the Christian faith only at the risk of real "irrelevance" to man's temporal existence.

This dilemma is not simply a matter of human perversity—of a brash materialism, perhaps, countered by an escapist spiritualism. The essential structure of the Christian faith has a real two-sidedness about it, which may at first lead the unwary into dualism and then encourage the attempt to resolve the dualism by an exclusive emphasis on one or other of the severed elements of complete Christianity. Indeed, I think that such a dissolution is inevitable once we lose our awareness of that ordered relation of the human and the divine, the immanent and the transcendent, which the Gospel assumes. For the integrity of the Gospel, then, no theological task is more important than the clarification of the true relation of man to the supernatural. As Hendrik Kraemer put it more than twenty years ago, in an influential assessment of the task of the Church in the modern world: "The Christian Church in the West and in the East, despite the difference in background and history, is virtually confronted with the same fundamental problem: the relation to the world and all its spheres of life, and the same danger lest it solve it in the wrong way."<sup>3</sup> And as the same writer has observed more recently, this amounts to raising the ultimate question of the relation of created nature to God and his grace. "Instead of the term: Church-World, one can use the term more hallowed in the history of theology, that is to say: the realm of Grace – the realm of Nature."<sup>4</sup> In other words, the practical problem of the mission of the Church drives us to face the theological problem of the transcendent being and the manward action of God.

The terms of the question can be diversely stated from different viewpoints, so that we may speak of the creaturely and the divine, the secular and the sacred, the historical and the eschatological, or the natural and the supernatural, but all these dualities point to the same primary truths. On the one hand, man's life is the product of creaturely processes and it has to be lived out in this world of space and time. On the other hand, the ultimate foundation and the final destiny of that same life lie in a supratemporal relation to the reality which transcends all creaturely existence. If we accept the easy solution, as we readily do, and minimize either aspect of this two-sidedness of human life as seen by Christian faith,

3. Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1938), p. 30.

4. Hendrik Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1956), p. 32.

that faith is in imminent danger of losing a good deal more than half its meaning.

It is the uniqueness of this particular duality that makes it so hard to understand and express. We bring to the apprehension of the ultimate duality a mind formed by our experience of the manifold dualities of our temporal life, in which again and again an "either-or" decision is forced upon us, because to choose between temporal goods is necessarily to exclude as well as to affirm. For that reason, it is fatally easy for us to reduce the divine-human relation to an ordinary duality, and to fail to see that it is a relation "in depth"—an ordering of means and immediate ends with reference to their ultimate end—rather than a simple juxtaposition of two similar realities. Consequently, we produce at best a simple "two-storey" picture of nature and the supernatural, and then, having assumed that we can occupy only one storey at a time, we find ourselves driven to choose between a secularist rejection of the supernatural storey and a pietistic suppression of the natural storey of our misconstrued Christianity. We urgently need, then, to move beyond such initial misconstructions to a more fully Christian vision of the two levels of reality.

The problem of nature and the supernatural forces itself on our notice in the very form of Christian faith as expressed in the Creed. For the Creed witnesses to our faith in the eternal, living, and true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in God who creates man in the world to fulfil his purpose—in God who takes our manhood in the Incarnation—in God who through the Church sanctifies human life for eternity. But to say all this is to say that the supernatural creates nature for its own supernatural purpose, or, more fully, that God, who infinitely transcends every actual or possible creature, creates finite beings to participate in his life, and acts through them and in them to bring them to that destiny. To profess our faith in the triune God, in his creative love, in his redemptive acts, and in his grace in his Church, is in effect to acknowledge that the intrinsic structure of Christian theology must be described and defined in terms of the relation of nature to the supernatural.

Admittedly, the actual term "supernatural" has a rather complex history and its proper theological definition is a complex problem. In particular, it is essential to keep from being misled by the apparent analogy with such expressions as "superman" into thinking that the "supernatural" means the "natural, only more so." Whatever the verbal difficulties, however, the idea itself is an inescapable requirement of Christian faith. It is true that the wide-spread use of the word in Western theology dates only from the work of St. Thomas Aquinas.<sup>5</sup> But Aquinas seems to have derived the term from such influential transmitters of Eastern Christian thought as John Scotus Erigena and Burgundio of Pisa, who in their respective translations of the Pseudo-Dionysius and St. John of Damascus had used the adverbial

5. Cf. A. Deneffe, "Geschichte des Wortes 'supernaturalis,'" *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*, 46 (1922), 349.

form, *supernaturaliter*, to render the Greek *hyperphuōs*. Moreover, while it is the "Areopagite" and the Damascene who gave theological currency to this particular Greek term,<sup>6</sup> from an early period the concept of that which is "above nature" had been seized upon by Christian theologians as an appropriate means of stating the core of the Gospel. So, for example, Origen tells how God "raises man above human nature (*hyper tēn anthropinēn physin*) and makes him change into a better and divine nature." In a similar vein, St. John Chrysostom speaks of men as having received, by grace, "health, beauty, honour, glory and dignities far exceeding our nature." In the West, perhaps the most concise expression of the idea is to be found in the Leonine prayer: "Grant us to be partakers of his divinity, who deigned to become partaker of our humanity."<sup>7</sup> In these and a multitude of patristic texts, the essential point is just this, that God, who is essentially "supernatural," perfect with a perfection beyond creaturely comprehension, nevertheless elevates human creatures to a true participation in the divine life—an indwelling of God in man and man in God.

The same idea finds an eloquent modern expression in some sentences of the great German theologian, Matthias Joseph Scheeben:

If the lower nature is raised in all these respects to the level of a higher nature, and especially if this elevation modifies the lower nature so deeply and affects its inmost being and essence so powerfully that the limits of possibility are reached; if God, purest light and mightiest fire, wishes thoroughly to permeate His creature with His energy, to flood it with brightness and warmth, to transform it into His own splendor, to make the creature like to the Father of spirits and impart to it the fullness of His own divine life; if, I say, the entire being of the soul is altered in its deepest recesses and in all its ramifications to the very last, not by annihilation but by exaltation and transfiguration, then we can affirm that a new, higher nature has come to the lower nature, because it has been granted a participation in the essence of Him to Whom the higher nature properly belongs.<sup>8</sup>

That something like this is the ultimate meaning of the Christian Gospel seems to me to be beyond question. It is not just that the credal confession of God's purpose, from creation through the Incarnation and the work of grace to eternal life, makes real and full sense only in the light of this eternally intended coinherence of the divine and the human. The New Testament itself seems to support such an interpretation of the Gospel, when we reflect on its familiar phrases: "partakers of the divine nature"; "God shall be all in all"; "I am glorified in them"; "God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son"; "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me"; "changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another."<sup>9</sup> The problem, then, is not so much to defend the reality of man's

6. Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Ep. 4 ad Caium* (PG, 3, 1072); John Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa*, 4, 13 (PG, 94, 1145).

7. Origen, *C. Cels.*, 5, 23 (PG, 11, 1217); John Chrysostom, *In Ep. ad Rom.*, 10, 2 (PG, 60, 477); *Missale Romanum*, prayers at the Offertory.

8. M. J. Scheeben, *Nature and Grace* (St. Louis: Herder, 1954), pp. 30f.

9. 2 Pet. 1:4; 1 Cor. 15:28; John 17:10; 1 John 5:11; Gal. 2:20; 2 Cor. 3:18.

supernatural life in God as to state the relation of human nature to the supernatural in such a way as to affirm and clarify the full reality of that relation and not, in effect, to obscure or negate it.

On this level, the crucial task is to disentangle the authentically supernatural from the pseudo-supernatural in both its antinatural and its naturalistic forms. By antinaturalism, I mean a doctrine in which the supernatural or divine is falsely identified with some supposed principle to which the entire natural order stands in no real and positive relation but which is thought of rather as being in the sharpest opposition to the natural. By naturalism, I mean the identification of the divine with the natural order as a whole or its reduction to some element of that order which, as such, cannot stand in a unique relation to the whole of nature. In either case the distinctive meaning of the supernatural as the transcendent fulfilment of nature in its completeness, at once really and uniquely related to creatures, is obscured, and as long as we remain in the sphere of the pseudo-supernatural we are ostensibly left with a choice between the simple assertion of the antinatural and the idolatry of the natural. My fundamental concern in this study is to make it plain that this is a false dilemma.

## II

"Every theology of grace," writes a contemporary theologian, "must safeguard at the same time the *primacy of God*, who alone justifies and sanctifies man, and the *realism of regeneration*."<sup>10</sup> I shall begin with the second point, as in many respects the more urgent one in the face of contemporary theological transcendentalism. I am convinced that much modern naturalism stems from the repeated assertions of the "primacy of God" by an antinaturalism which has failed to show that there is anything real to assert, and that bruised and battered naturalism would be ready enough to admit the transcendent if it could only see that it *is* real. At any rate, the first aspect of the genuine supernatural which we are to consider is its reality as ground and end of nature.

What I am getting at is that the relation of nature to the supernatural must be presented in "ontological" terms if it is to be genuinely intelligible. This means that Christian thought must resist the temptation to glorify God and his grace by asserting what is technically called the "equivocity" of being, which in this context means the utter and total unlikeness of the creature to the Creator. Once the latter position is taken up, any real divine purpose in creation and redemption becomes unintelligible, since the relation of nature and the supernatural is simply a matter of the divine will and decision, without any consideration of creative wisdom or of a created order which can be fulfilled in a real relation to the divine nature. On this showing, man's relation to God can be nothing more than a blind submis-

10. Charles Moeller, "Théologie de la grâce et Oecuménisme," *Irénikon*, 28 (1955), 22.

sion of the human will to the inscrutable divine will. As an inevitable result, the whole complex structure of man's nature and man's world ceases to have any theological meaning.

It is to this kind of theology, of course, that interpretations of the divine-human relation in terms of simple interpersonal relationships belong. Whether we find the heart of the Gospel in the complex of divine Word, responsive faith, and justifying forgiveness, in a personal "relationship" grounded in God's "acceptance" of man, or in an "I-Thou" relation deliberately and exclusively contrasted with a real relation of beings to Being, we are at least implicitly reducing the real richness alike of man's creaturely nature and of God's infinite love and grace to a simple dialectic of decisions, rooted in sheer will apart from any ontological foundation. But this is to deprive the supernatural of any intelligible significance for human nature and to strip the natural of any real supernatural orientation. Uniquely important as personality is in the Christian scheme of things, its importance must be evaluated in an ontological frame of reference, and will must not be left as the sole principle of cohesion between nature and the supernatural.

If, however, we assert a real ontological relation as one aspect of the Christian doctrine of the supernatural, we must immediately affirm the unique and analogical character of this relation, and so avoid what A. E. Taylor called "the old and deadly error" of supposing that the "equivocal" and the "univocal" are exhaustive alternatives.<sup>11</sup> If it is true that a non-ontological doctrine detaches the supernatural from the natural, it is also true that an ontology which posits the univocity of being—that is, the doctrine of being as simply a *summum genus*, realized in all particular beings—loses the supernatural in the natural and, by so doing, turns its back on the eternal mystery of the true God only to find itself left with an incredible imitation. If, on the assumption of equivocity, the creature can have no real supernatural significance, for a univocal ontology there is no real supernatural significance for any creature to have. For the former, the Christian mystery of divine action is at least a magnificent manifestation of the divine will; for the latter, however, it can hardly be more than a "mythological" puzzle, to be translated, as soon as our philosophical equipment is equal to the task, into the conceptual terms of a naturalistic metaphysic. It is to this final philosophical *débâcle* of a non-analogical theism that Sidney Hook points, when he rather ambiguously compliments Reinhold Niebuhr for "his canny refusal to give his theology a systematic character or to defend an ontological religion," and attributes this refusal to Niebuhr's awareness that "such theologies cannot survive the probe of reason."<sup>12</sup> Leaving Niebuhr to defend himself as he sees fit and passing over the interesting question of how we can be sure that pure reason, after alighting tentatively in such places as Athens, Alexandria,

11. A. E. Taylor, *The Faith of a Moralist* (2 vols., London: Macmillan, 1937), Vol. I, p. 51.

12. *The New York Times Book Review*, 29 January 1956, p. 22.

Paris, Oxford, and Berlin, has finally folded its wings in Washington Square, we should recognize what Hook is really getting at. He is saying (and quite rightly) that on the presuppositions of a univocal ontology *there can be no God*. We can have the sheer Will of equivocality, the divine Being of analogy, or nothing—save perhaps an idol which a whisper of rational criticism will shatter.

Even this is not quite the end of our critique of non-analogical theology. I have already argued that antinaturalistic doctrines of the divine will deprive the supernatural of any meaning for human nature, but I should add that in the end the strange dialectic of antinaturalism leads to the total disappearance of the supernatural and transcendent. The theology of sheer will is ultimately incapable of maintaining the transcendent reality of God, because its very concept of divine will, if an analogical interpretation of the divine-human relation is excluded, must be either surreptitiously univocal or totally contentless. In either case it can have no transcendent content, which means that at last we have disclosed the naturalistic skeleton which lurks in the antinaturalistic cupboard. I suggest that what in fact happens in the formation of an antinaturalistic theology is that some concept derived from our natural experience—such as the notion of “personal will”—is posited over against nature as a description of the transcendent. The contradiction inherent in this procedure is obvious enough; a concept which arises out of our knowledge of creatures is used without question to point to the “wholly other” Creator. Once we recognize this, however, the dilemma of the antinaturalist is perfectly plain. He must either fall back into naturalism or decline to speak of the transcendent at all. But the latter alternative is itself only another road to *de facto* naturalism, since to affirm a “God” without expressible content is to leave naturalism in complete possession of the mind. At the beginning, perhaps, the theological voluntarist’s assertion of “personal will” may seem plausible to the Christian believer, because he spontaneously reads into it the traditional ontological associations of the term “God.” But when the rejection of analogy and univocity strips away all these vestiges of ontology, we are left with a transcendent self-assertion minus a self. Those readers of Lewis Carroll who have had some difficulty in grasping the notion of the grin that remained after the gradual disappearance of its ontological basis in the “Cheshire cat” will possibly be the first to recognize the nature of this theological version of their old problem, but a little reflection will make the lesson plain to all. In the end, the antinaturalistic alternative to naturalism is illusory, since it begins with the projection of a natural entity over against nature—hence the inevitability of antinaturalism at this stage, expressed in the affirmation of will against will—and ends with a retreat into naturalism or an advance into nihilism, which means in effect that nature is allowed to choose between being sacrificed to an idol and being immolated before an illusion.

In view of all this, it is not surprising that the implicit or explicit decision of most thinkers in the tradition of historic Christianity has been to speak in terms of analogy, as the only valid formula for the relationship between nature and the supernatural.

Because it is so fundamental to the Christian experience and religious consciousness, analogy is normative in distinguishing Christian philosophy from its secular competitors, be they rationalist or irrationalist in spirit. The philosophers of analogy emphasize that this mode of understanding is intrinsic to Christian thought. . . . Analogy is of particular value in the exposition of theism because it presupposes both sides of the experience of the divine presence, immanence and transcendence. . . . It is the acknowledgement that the relation of man to God must be interpreted from a perspective which allows for both likeness and difference, immanence and transcendence. Analogy joins both in a dynamic unity.<sup>13</sup>

13. Niels C. Nielsen, Jr., "Analogy in Christian Philosophy," *Anglican Theol. Rev.*, 35 (1953), 182.

*(To be concluded)*