

Christianity and Religion in *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*

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ONE SOURCE of semantic confusion in the current theological debate is the use of the term "religion" in a disapproving sense, calling for a negative value-judgment on the part of the reader. When Thomas Altizer says, for example, that "Religious Christians may know a resurrected Lord of the Ascension,"¹ he intends the word "religious" to imply "ecclesiastical," to refer to the Christian who stands within the tradition of the orthodox confessions. Since he has already established a sharp cleavage between the authentic Jesus and the Christ of classic theology and church worship, it follows that he does not use the word here in a complimentary sense. A religious Christian, in his vocabulary, is one who by definition has lost the authentic Jesus in the church tradition. When he wishes to indicate the man who is most faithful to the original Jesus, he prefers to use the phrase "radical Christian." It is vital for the reader to remember this contrast between "religious" and "radical," for otherwise he will find himself hopelessly confused.

This special use of the word "religion" is characteristic of some of the most notable Christian thinkers of the post-1918 period, but not all who use it in a pejorative sense do so to the same effect. Most "anti-religious" theologians sharply distinguish Christian faith from religion, and thus can reject the latter while affirming the former. At least a few thinkers, however, deny the distinction and attack traditional Christianity as a form of religion.

Karl Barth and Emil Brunner were in the main responsible for the contrast so frequently drawn between religion and revelation during this period. As far back as 1927, Brunner, activated by the desire to secure the distinctiveness of Christianity as dependent upon the unique, once-for-all Mediator, attacked any attempt to discover some universal essence of religion, of which Christianity was only an instance, even if the supreme and normative instance. "This idea of revelation, since it is of its nature that it should be unique, is essentially, entirely different from the conception of revelation in other forms of religion."² It is true that Brunner does not categorically dismiss all other religions as totally in error, for he tells us that even the most primitive forms of religion are not without some elements of truth.³ Nevertheless, he insists that, although

1. Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), p. 103.

2. Emil Brunner, *The Mediator* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1934), p. 25.

3. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 33.

a Christian believer may accept a general revelation which he is able to discern from the standpoint of the faith which confesses the once-for-all Mediator, he cannot be an idealist or a mystic. Furthermore, the whole idea of religious genius represents humanity raised to its highest point – no less, but no more.⁴ Brunner does not entertain the possibility that such raising of humanity to a higher level in the non-Christian religions might not even be conceivable apart from some help from a higher Source. If such a raising of humanity is a fact and not merely a conjecture in the non-Christian world, then it seems at least possible that it took place because of some activity on the part of a power higher than or “beyond” man in his present state. To admit this, however, would have compelled Brunner to acknowledge that even non-Christians are not without some conviction of the reality of the transcendent, and perhaps some authentic glimpse, however inadequate, of its nature. In this case, while Christianity might still be unique because of the once-for-all Incarnation, it would be much less plausible to go on to say that Christianity is essentially and entirely different from every other form of religion. It is clear, however, that Brunner’s way of speaking encouraged this sharp dichotomy between religion (only human) and revelation (Christian and unique).

Karl Barth developed the same idea in similar fashion and gave it full-scale treatment in his section on “The Abolition of Religion” in *Church Dogmatics*, I/2. He does not deny that men everywhere and at all times have sought to relate themselves to some power or powers greater than themselves. Nor does he deny that Christianity as a psychological and sociological phenomenon is a religion in this broad sense, and may be classified with Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Shintoism, as well as every kind of animistic, totemistic, ascetic, mystical, and prophetic religion. This does not mean, however, that there is any genuine resemblance between authentic Christianity and the other religions. It does signify that Christianity in many of its historical expressions has forgotten its true character and has become a religion of salvation by human effort. In so far as Christianity has developed in this direction, it begins to resemble the non-Christian religions, which are essentially man-made attempts to rise to God. Barth thus distinguishes between religions rooted in human aspirations and human effort (this category includes all non-Christian religion and corrupted Christianity) and authentic Christianity, which springs from the judging and saving activity of the sovereign and gracious God who became man in Jesus Christ. The latter is wholly of divine grace and in no way the result of human aspiration and effort. Barth can thus talk of religion as unbelief and call for its abolition in the name of the true gospel of the one true God. Religion thus becomes a pejorative word, signifying something human which, by definition, is not a source of authentic knowledge of God.

It is important to realize that Bonhoeffer’s use of the term religion takes its origin from Barth’s treatment of the subject. He was fully in sympathy with Barth’s endeavour to distinguish religion as a human activity from the

4. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 39.

authentic tidings of the true God.⁵ Bonhoeffer also accepted the view that religion as an historical phenomenon, the religious consciousness in that broad sense beloved of psychologists of religion and some philosophers of religion, was the fruit of human speculation. Whether we have to do with apologetic theology attempting to find a place for God in a metaphysical scheme (natural or philosophical theology) or with the non-Christian religions with their varied and impressive "spiritual experiences," religion in this sense is neither to be regarded as a necessary pre-supposition of the Christian gospel nor to be lamented when it dies, as it has in the modern secularized world. Kenneth Hamilton has protested with justice, however, against claiming Bonhoeffer as an opponent of a truly supernatural faith.⁶ The latter may have had doubts about the Barthian strategy of throwing the gospel at modern men for a take-it-or-leave-it response. However, he evidently had no intention of commending the gospel by eliminating the living supernatural God of the Bible, in the manner of Bultmann, Robinson, van Buren, and the death-of-God thinkers. It is perhaps unfair to include Robinson in this list because he is by no means consistent at this point, but undoubtedly there are statements in *Honest to God* which bring the bishop very close to the radical theologians, even if he would not be entirely happy in their company.

It is essential to an understanding of Altizer's thesis to realize that he is not prepared to accept these generalized statements about religion as contrasted with the Christian revelation. He believes that we have no right to speak of religion unless we have made a careful and sympathetic study of the nature of religion, not in the abstract, but as it is manifested in the great non-Christian religions as well as in Christianity. It is no accident that he dedicates his earlier book, *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*, to Joachim Wach, the distinguished historian and sociologist of religion. He has been deeply influenced not only by the latter but also by Mircea Eliade, van der Leeuw, and other modern historians of religion. Their studies have convinced him that no attempt can be made to assess the meaning and significance of Christianity as if the latter were an isolated phenomenon. A truly catholic Christian theology must take account of the highest expressions of the non-Christian religions and come to terms with Oriental mysticism in particular, especially its Buddhist expression. "While this approach does not entail the assumption of the underlying identity of the higher religions of the world, it nevertheless assumes that a totality of religious meaning cannot be derived from one religion alone."⁷ By placing Christianity fairly and squarely in the context of world religion, Altizer shows himself fully aware of the impossibility of carrying on significant theological dialogue in the modern world as if Christianity and the Western culture influenced by it were alone in the world. It must be

5. Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1956), p. 148.

6. Cf. Kenneth Hamilton, *Revolt against Heaven* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 169ff.

7. Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 13.

conceded that this is a valuable insight, which distinguishes him from many Christian theologians who still continue their work as if there is only one viable religion and cultural tradition. In contrast to those radicals who are exclusively preoccupied with presenting Christianity in a manner congenial to the Western mind influenced by scientific method, positivism, empiricism, philosophical analysis, etc., and who still move within the Western tradition, though in its secularized form, Altizer sees the problem as set by the total religious experience of the race. Far from dismissing religion as illusory and man-made, over against the one and only true revelation in Christianity, he recognizes that any modern expression of the Christian faith must take very seriously the insights of the non-Christian religions.

It must be admitted that Altizer is right in thinking that the real challenge to Christianity in the future – indeed it is already with us – will come not only from Western secularism but also from the encounter of Christianity with Asiatic religion, not only on the lofty level of philosophical and theological dialogue carried on by the experts, but also on the practical level, as men of East and West continue to meet personally. A technologically unified world will result in ever closer cultural and religious encounters, with all the tensions and misunderstandings thereby generated. Altizer is not alone in seeing the religious problem in these terms. Both Roman Catholic and Protestant thinkers have recently been preoccupied with this issue. To name only a few, one thinks of R. C. Zaehner and Henry de Lubac on the Catholic side, not to mention the declarations of Vatican II on the subject. On the Protestant side there are W. E. Hocking, H. H. Farmer, A. C. Bouquet, H. D. Lewis, Ninian Smart, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and, of course, Paul Tillich, whose later work was very much concerned with the “encounter of the world religions.” Several new journals, including the Catholic *International Philosophical Quarterly* and *Religious Studies* edited by H. D. Lewis, lean very heavily in this direction. Even within the theological circle deeply influenced by Karl Barth the work of Hendrik Kraemer has been notable. Altizer, then, is not alone in his concern. The question is whether he has succeeded in presenting the Christian faith in a recognizable and authentic form, or whether, in his laudable desire to relate it meaningfully to the phenomena of religion as such, he has given us only a caricature of the Christian gospel.

It is fair to say that *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* will be completely unintelligible to many of its readers without constant reference back to *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*. Here much light is thrown, not only upon “religion” as a universal phenomenon, but also upon the author’s interpretation of Christianity. It is important again to realize that Altizer does not start from the premise of a sharp distinction between religion and Christianity. (On the contrary, as we shall see, he will eventually reject historic Christianity just because it is essentially “religious.”) The data for study are to be taken from the religious experience of all the “higher” religions, and Christianity is to be evaluated within this universal context. Furthermore, Christianity in its finest expression must not be compared with Oriental

religion at its lowest and most superficial, not to say superstitious. The real confrontation is between Christianity and the higher forms of non-Christian mysticism. Before we can compare and contrast, it is necessary to have a reasonably accurate notion of what we are comparing.

The basic question, then, is whether Altizer is correct in his assessment of Oriental mysticism and biblical faith and experience and whether the resemblances and similarities are such as he chooses to emphasize. It is notorious that the definition of mysticism is one of the most difficult tasks facing historians of religion. The psychologist of religion is equally puzzled, and the problem of the interpretation of mysticism is only too evident in the diversity of psychological views.

Let us try first of all to state Altizer's position, and then to consider it in the light of recent studies of mysticism. "Our initial judgment about Oriental mysticism must be that it is a way of radical world-negation."⁸ To stop there, however, is to fail to appreciate the deeper implications of the Eastern approach. "In the beginning" and "beyond" the objective world as we experience it lies the sacred Totality, the One from which the varied pattern of multiplicity has emerged. Though our spontaneous reaction to our environment may imply some awareness that the universe is one and not simply chaotic, the normal consciousness is more acutely sensible of the many things which go to make up the experienced world: tables, chairs, houses, trees, mountains, persons, animals. This world of many things, however, is not only attractive in its diversity. It is also the place where man experiences his worst bondage and his most radical frustrations. Suffering, sin, death, characterize this world of endless change and becoming. To the Oriental, moreover, the world is made still more frightening by his dogmatic interpretation of it as the expression of an endless series of reincarnations, which extends man's bondage beyond his present individual experience, both backwards and forwards in time. Before birth and after death, the cycle continues and the logic of *Samsārā* still operates. The splitting up of the original sacred Totality must be regarded by the Oriental mystic as the beginning of the Fall.⁹ Whether this present experienced world is regarded as real or unreal (in the various senses which the theory of knowledge would give the word "real"), whether the world is interpreted, either crudely or in a refined manner, as an objective reality "out there," or is viewed as unreal, *Māyā*, illusion, the basic solution to the human cry for deliverance is the same. Salvation consists in freedom from this world of multiplicity and in assimilation once again into the sacred Totality from which the world emerged mysteriously in the first place. This is why Altizer sees Buddhist mysticism not only as a negation of the ultimate reality and permanence of this world and the persons within it, but also as a return, a going back, to the primordial reality. "Salvation can be achieved only through the absolute denial or negation of the world."¹⁰

8. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, p. 33.

9. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 36.

10. Altizer, *Oriental Mysticism*, p. 115.

Freedom from the craving for individual or personal existence, which is the source of all misery, and from pain and suffering, which are the inevitable consequences of this craving, can be obtained only through this radical negation of the world, which is also a return or a going back.

At first sight, nothing seems so sharply contrasted with Jewish and Christian ideas as this radical negation. Indeed, it is frequently asserted that Buddhism is world- and life-denying while Judaism and Christianity are life-affirming. Before examining the reasons which led Altizer to deny the justice of this contrast, it may help us to return briefly to Buddhism and to ask whether the goal of deliverance which it offers is positive, despite its negative assessment of this world. Is ordinary reality being negated, not in the interests of sheer negativity, but in order to open the way to a positive and permanent bliss or reality in which men can participate? In other words, what is the precise nature of *Nirvāṇā* in the Buddhist view? (Buddhism, rather than Hinduism in its other manifestations, receives special attention – no doubt because Buddhism is the only great non-Christian religion, other than Islam, which has universal pretensions and claims. Hinduism is still too closely bound up with specific cultural and cultic patterns and practices, not to mention customs confined to a specific geographical area, to be seriously considered a world religion. Only when Hinduism gave birth to Buddhism did it produce a “religion” capable of true universality and offered as such. Buddhism, like Christianity, offers itself as salvation and deliverance for man, not for Eastern man or Western man. This resemblance is important, despite the manner in which both religions have taken on forms and patterns from the diverse cultural environments in which they have been at work.)

Is the Buddhist *Nirvāṇā*, then, purely negative? If it is, in what sense is it negative? The question is complicated by a certain ambivalence in the Buddhist texts and sources themselves. *Nirvāṇā* does not mean the permanence of a self, or a portion of the self, as the word self is understood in Western philosophy and psychology, still less the immortality of the soul as presented in the Platonic tradition and in Christian doctrines of immortality and eternal life influenced by it. Still less has it anything in common with the “resurrection of the body,” interpreted as the survival of the whole man, consisting of body and soul, integrally related. On the other hand, early Buddhist texts deny that *Nirvāṇā* means annihilation: it is bliss and the highest reality. How can this be? Certainly most Western men find it difficult, indeed impossible, to see how one can combine a positive idea of bliss with a thoroughgoing denial of the reality and permanence of the individual person.

There is no need to pursue further the difficult problems of Buddhist exegesis and interpretation of the sacred texts. The subject has been introduced here only because it helps us to understand better the “Christian atheism” which Altizer is advocating. It has already been noted how frequently a sharp contrast has been drawn between life-denying Buddhism and world-affirming Christianity. Altizer stoutly rejects this contrast on the ground that early Christianity, dominated by its eschatological expectations of an

imminent end of the world, was just as negative as Buddhism in regard to the present world and our existence in it. Primitive Christianity, like Buddhism, offers total deliverance from the present age (this world) and hopes for a new age which will be a completely new order of existence involving the destruction and annihilation of the old. It is therefore illegitimate to condemn Buddhism for its indifference to personal existence in this world, with all its social and cultural values, and to commend Christianity as being concerned with the positive values of the individual and of society as these are understood in the world-affirming tradition of Western humanism. Primitive Christianity, as distinct from later developments, is no more concerned with personal development, politics, science, cultural progress, etc., than is Buddhism. "The radical nature of the ethical demand of Jesus leaves no room for a positive attitude toward civic, political and cultural responsibilities. And this is precisely because it is given in indifference to all those things."¹¹

It is clear from this statement that Altizer is committed to a particular interpretation of the New Testament and of the role and mission of Jesus. The essential elements of the Weiss-Schweitzer thesis have been accepted by him. Thus when, in *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, we are told that modern men cannot possibly return to the Jesus of history or the Christ of New Testament faith, what is meant is that the "eschatological" Jesus, dominated by the expectation of the end of the world, cannot possibly be significant *in that context* for modern men. The latter do not expect the speedy end of the world, but rather look for its indefinite continuance, with all the positive and this worldly responsibilities which such a hope entails. The fear that the human race may destroy itself with the atomic bomb is not the same as the eschatological belief in the end of the world. Modern man tends to assume that if the human race does annihilate itself some sort of physical process will continue. He may cherish the hope that, just as life emerged on this planet aeons ago, so the same extraordinary accident may happen again when the earth has settled down after the atomic holocaust. Or he may hope that the adventure of life will be resumed on some other planet. Or he may assume that the death of the race will be a tragic accident in a meaningless world, or the fortunate removal of a creature so obviously lacking in self-control. This attitude is totally different from the early Christian hope of a new age or aeon, when the Kingdom of God replaces the old order. Somehow Jesus must be lifted out of his eschatological context if he is to speak meaningfully to modern men. Both Buddhism and primitive Christianity say "No" to the present order of existence. Modern man must say "Yes" to it – hence the importance of Nietzsche as one of the great "Yes"-sayers of the modern period.

We shall have occasion to come back to this thesis and examine it with more care. Granted that both Buddhism and primitive Christianity involve detachment from this world, is the nature of the detachment the same in each case? Is *Nirvāṇā* the same as the Kingdom of God, and if not, must this not involve for a Christian a relationship to this world (to what Bonhoeffer calls

11. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

the penultimate) of a very different character from that taught by Buddhism?

Of course, Altizer is not uncritical of Buddhist mysticism. In fact, his judgment is very severe, because he sees Buddhism as essentially involving a regression, an attempt to go back to the sacred Totality before this world of multiplicity emerged. It is the longing for a return to a lost paradise prior to that distinction between sacred and profane which makes our present experience – however negative that paradise might seem to our Western mentality. The Buddhist's goal is "the cessation of all movement and process, including the movement of religion, and with the realization of that goal every individual identity returns to its primordial source."¹² Yet such a return is both impossible and undesirable. It involves a repudiation of the meaning and significance of our present existence, and this is a judgment which our radical theologian is not willing to make. In fact, he is determined to say "Yes" to life here and now, whatever its tragedies and inner contradictions. "It is only in the actual and contingent processes of history that Spirit fully becomes flesh,"¹³ and it is only in this movement into flesh that Spirit can be known and experienced.

However, if Buddhism is to be condemned for its emphasis on the return to a lost paradise, must not the same judgment be passed on primitive Christianity, in so far as it presupposes a transcendent Creator-God, existing before the world was, and in so far as its eschatology involves the return of Christ and man to a celestial realm beyond all present existence in the flesh? To this fundamental question Altizer gives a dialectical "Yes" and "No." In so far as the Christian seeks a return to God, conceived as transcendent Spirit prior to the creation of the world and of human existence in the flesh, then he too, like the Buddhist, seeks a lost paradise which is forever beyond his grasp. In seeking such an escape, he is saying "No" to present existence – and this is the supreme sin for the radical theologian.

What, then, remains of Christianity, and above all, the person of Jesus? Even if one eliminates the transcendent Creator "in the beginning" and denies the hope of an eschatological return to a spiritual existence in the presence of such a God, the fact remains that in Jesus we have Spirit in the flesh, and that in him the dichotomy of sacred and profane is overcome in a human existence which embodies completely the victory of the holy over sin, evil, and death, the holy now being identified with the *agape*-love which finds its complete embodiment in Jesus. Confronted with this Jesus, man is made aware of the possibility of a new existence in faith. When he enters into this experience, "knowing that his sin is forgiven, such a Christian can cast aside the crutches of guilt and resentment. Only then can he rise and walk."¹⁴ The reader, however, must be careful how he interprets the language of victory over sin, guilt, and death. It does not express confidence in a risen Lord who has ascended to the Eternal Father, for such a confidence would once again

14. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

12. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, p. 39.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

point to an escape from the realities of the here and now. If we dare to wager that Christ is fully present in the actuality of the present moment,¹⁵ thereby helping us to make a total affirmation of the world and our existence in it, that does not mean that we have any right to expect "a life after death" or entry into a transcendent Kingdom of God when history has come to an end. These ideas have already been firmly ruled out of court. The Christian, if it is still legitimate to use this description for the man who has attained to a new existence in faith, must be content to live wholly in the present with no illusions about a God who created and sustains the world, and with no false hopes about man's passage in due course to a realm beyond. "Radical faith calls us to give ourselves totally to the world, to affirm the fullness and the immediacy of the present movement as the life and the energy of Christ."¹⁶

Granted his premises, it is not difficult to discern a certain consistent logic in Altizer's doctrine of radical immanence. The question recurs, however, with increasing force: Is this really the biblical faith, and is the Jesus who is offered to us really the Jesus of the biblical witness? The Jesus of primitive Christian eschatology may seem an alien in the modern world, but is not the Jesus of the radical theologian an even stranger and more remote figure? There are some curiously close resemblances between Altizer's views and those of earlier thinkers who precede the emergence of the "God is dead" slogan. His argument is not wholly unlike Bertrand Russell's plea in his famous essay on "A Free Man's Worship," that we should build upon a foundation of unyielding despair and die like gentlemen when the universe overwhelms us, holding fast to our human values which the universe will never honour. The chief difference is that Russell does not find his ideal values clearly and unambiguously embodied in Jesus, and therefore feels no call to loyalty to him. He prefers to rest on his own value-judgments of the fine and the noble. Even more germane to our discussion of Altizer is the fact that Schweitzer, the great spokesman for a radically eschatological view of Jesus' teaching, attempted to ground his reverence for life upon an intuition which emerges from honest rational reflection on the will to live, and upon the necessity of faith as a positive affirmation of life. It is customary to describe Schweitzer as one of the greatest Christians of the modern period, and if the word Christian is taken to mean loyalty to compassionate love as embodied in Jesus, then this description is true. Nevertheless, Schweitzer was quite clear-sighted in separating his ethic of reverence for life from any world-view – from any claim to consistent knowledge about God in the classic theistic sense. Although Schweitzer never used such language, he could have followed Altizer and said: "God is dead; long live Jesus as the finest expression of reverence for life!" This is no doubt disturbing to many admirers of Schweitzer, among whom the present writer counts himself. It compels us, nonetheless, to ask of Schweitzer, as well as of Altizer, whether something must not be wrong with their biblical exegesis and their philosophical reasoning when they lead to

15. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 155.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

such odd conclusions. No doubt Altizer would reply that there is no other option for the man of today. His Christian atheism is the only way in which Jesus can be presented as relevant to contemporary man. If we do not accept it, we must say not only that God is dead, but presumably that Jesus also is well and truly dead as far as his significance for modern man is concerned.

Before turning to a more detailed study of Altizer's view of Jesus in relation to the Bible, certain further comments must be made by way of clarification of the relationship between Buddhism and primitive Christian eschatology. It seems to be an essential part of Altizer's thesis that, in so far as Christianity retains its belief in a transcendent Creator-God, it must, like Buddhism, seek a return to the sacred Totality which was "in the beginning." If he is right, we should expect the New Testament, rooted in the Jewish conception of God, to be preoccupied with a return to a paradisaical past. In actual fact, this is not so. Whether in the Old Testament or the New, the biblical hope is turned to the future, as even Altizer admits. But does the Bible conceive of this movement to the future as simply a devious way of returning to a state of affairs which existed in the beginning? The answer would seem to be "No," for the simple reason that the Bible does not conceive of the created order and the process of history as an emanation from the divine substance, which expands and then contracts back into itself. It is true that early fathers like Origen may have come perilously near to such a conception, but it has never been the accepted theological view of the church. Altizer again and again seems to identify the primordial sacred Totality of Hindu and Buddhist thought with the transcendent God, the Creator of heaven and earth, of whom the Bible speaks. Yet it is just such an identification that must be questioned. The sacred Totality of Oriental religion can be interpreted as impersonal or personal, but it does not demand a "personal" interpretation, and as the history of Buddhism shows, has tended to be interpreted impersonally. Whatever theological, philosophical, and semantic difficulties arise from the application of personal analogies to God, there can be little doubt that the Bible uses such analogies and intends us to take them seriously. For the Bible, God is not an impersonal "sacred" or "holy" — whatever that could mean — but a living "personal" Creator, who brought the world and men into being by an act of will, and not because of any immanent necessity which required his substance to diffuse itself throughout a hierarchical order of created beings, of which the lowest in the scale retain only the most shadowy and distant reflection of reality. Creation is distinct from God and, though they are under his control, men are permitted their own legitimate and proper exercise of freedom and responsibility. The notion of divine purpose enters inevitably into the picture here. God is fulfilling a plan which assumes that, at the end, a redeemed and perfected community of created spirits will exist, which did not exist at the beginning. History is not the automatic unfolding of what has always been. It involves the category of novelty, genuine newness, new historical actuality, through which God achieves his goal. However mysterious the relation between eternity and time may be, we must say from our perspective that God envisages a real

future for his creatures and the fulfilment of a purpose through and in them. Thus biblical and Christian thought does not look back to a past to which all things must return to be assimilated. It moves with God into a real future, where goals will be achieved which would not have been possible apart from the creation and relative independence of finite spirits.

This emphasis on future fulfilment makes a vast difference when we come to compare Buddhist and Christian detachment from the present world. At first sight it might seem as if both were simply negative in regard to the significance of present existence, but this is not so. Even if the extreme eschatological interpretation of the New Testament is accepted, the confession of the living God of the Bible makes the Christian hope for the future very different from the Buddhist. The New Testament nowhere envisages the assimilation of persons into a sacred Totality where personal existence is annihilated. God is the God of the living and not of the dead – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and not a Totality which absorbs persons back into an undifferentiated unity. However hard we try to interpret *Nirvānā* in a positive sense, there still seems to be a great gulf fixed between man's destiny as viewed by Buddhism and the redeemed community of faith and love which is implied in Jesus' conception of the Kingdom of God.