

Theological Briefs

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The case proposed is characteristic of the numerous questions that present themselves to the Christian in real life and which remain by necessity without a satisfactory answer. It is impossible to find a Christian answer, since both options are after all equally valid, without counting the one that would say that since God accomplishes all things, we can "limit" ourselves—if we really believe—to praying without doing anything more, for God to give to everyone his daily bread. But the very fact that there is no satisfying Christian solution should make us understand certain aspects of faith.

1. To begin with, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is not a means of resolving problems present in our societies. This revelation is a question asked about our lives and not an answer to our questions. It is even more impossible to draw from it a general system of answers. This has been attempted since the third century in "Christendom" and always results in failure. "Christianity" as an intellectual, philosophical, economic, etc., system can pretend to offer solutions, but there is then no more authentic faithfulness to revelation. There are no "Christian politics," nor is there a "Christian economic system." Nevertheless, to the extent that faith is faith in Jesus Christ *incarnate*, this faith must transfer itself to the social, political, and

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economic planes, but it is we, each one with his own specific options, who must find our own answer: one is concerned with the incarnation of one's faith, therefore with a work, and as such with expressing one's liberty in Christ. There is no objectively Christian work; one cannot refer accomplishments back to God. To say "I believe" involves at the same time committing oneself to some realization of faith. However for each of our works we must implore the forgiveness and the grace of God, even if we are convinced this work is just.

2. There is evidently opposition between the "I believe" which in the singular is a personal commitment of the individual and an expression of that which is deepest in the individual, and the establishment of a law which has a general character valid for all and implies a collective commitment. The difficulty here stems from the fact that Christians can propose a law, the contents of which in their eyes conforms to the Bible or to Christian morality, but this law must be observed and applied by people who are not Christian, who therefore do not have the same motives for accepting one particular attitude. There can be no legislation and no morality directly inspired from faith in the God of Jesus Christ, because the conduct this implies presupposes exactly this faith. Otherwise, if we are looking for a rule of conduct that would be acceptable to all, Christians and non-Christians, we are obliged to say that this rule of conduct is no more Christian than anything else. It can be very interesting, just, useful, effective, etc., but it does not express faith. Therefore, if Christians by the means of witness (or even of martyrdom) should proclaim the love of God in Jesus Christ, they do not have (contrary to what, unfortunately, the Church has done for centuries) the right to implore by constraint a certain type of morality or style of life upon people who are not Christians.

3. This appears all the more clearly if we take with complete seriousness the demand made by faith to be for others what God has been for us in Jesus Christ. In the case of assistance to one's neighbor (specifically collective assistance), this must express the love of Jesus Christ, to love as Jesus Christ loves us. Consequently, we are talking about the complete commitment of oneself, expressed by this assistance which will therefore be as limitless as the action of the "Good Samaritan"—assistance without conditions, without reservations, and expecting no gratitude. (The action of God in Jesus Christ is free,

expresses grace, and takes place without man's having to fulfill any conditions.) This assistance presumes that there is no domination over others, no pressure. This assistance must not be a means of exercising power over or guidance toward those one helps. Christian love implies no superiority. The common attitude during the nineteenth century of the Christians who gave to oblige people to come to church, or to convince them of the superiority of Christianity, is unacceptable. Finally, this assistance presumes total absence of judgment of others.

However, if we take all these presuppositions seriously, it will mean that the project of assistance to the Third World will have to be based on complete abnegation, the forgetting of personal interests (even legitimate ones), free giving, and Non-Power.* Can we, as Christians, require that non-Christians have this same attitude? Can we, if we have enough influence, impose upon them this kind of conduct? It would show a lack of love toward them. What is more, such conduct presumes great risk. What we call "the risk of faith" is not only intellectual and spiritual, it is also very concretely the risk of losing one's life (that is to say all that makes it possible to live, on the material level). Can we therefore ask a collective group without faith (and no collective group, not even the Church, has faith!) to assume such a risk? So that there is for the Christian no possibility to mitigate the radical requirement of faith. One cannot seek a midpoint, a solution in the middle, etc.

4. Can one say under these conditions that there is nothing Christians should do on the social or collective level? Of course not! But Christians (i.e., those who confess authentically, "I believe," and not those who are only listed on church rolls), belong to a society in which are represented all tendencies: ideological, political, etc. These Christians represent in society one of the streams that runs through it. For non-Christians this would be a current qualified as "political." However, Christians must bear witness to something else: they must

* There is here an essential distinction between Non-Power and Powerlessness. Non-Power is on the part of one who can do something, but who voluntarily decides not to do it, of one who has the power to decide not to exercise that power. Example: at the time of his arrest, Jesus said, "If I wished it, twelve legions of angels would come to fight for me." But he decides not to do it. The choice of Non-Power is symbolized by the Christmas Birth.

present the absolute demands made by faith with regard to each question that arises. They do not exercise power (and do not have to think they ought to), but they must introduce an element of intransigence, of radicalism in each discussion. For example, in the debate about aid to the Third World it is evident that for a Christian the percentage of 1.5 of the gross national product is not enough. In the same way, real assistance should come from an economic reconversion of developed countries and a reduction in the consumption of unnecessary products, such as a reduction in waste. In other words, Christians need not choose between two or three "reasonable" solutions. Christians must present the radical demands of faith, must take a prophetic stance in debate in such a way as to lead gradually public opinion to a deeper and more serious consciousness, which will allow then for the elaboration of a more effective system of assistance. It is not at the level of laws, but at that of the elaboration of opinion that Christians must act. But while doing this, one must remember that faith is not an opinion, where one might be concerned about winning a debate through argument; faith concerns itself with winning through witnessing.

5. The last point one should comment on is the question of the "building of the Kingdom of God." It is true that the Christian cannot limit him or herself to immediate assistance, without preoccupying him or herself with the future. The Christian must remember that this future of potential, radical starvation is foreseeable sociologically only if the individual does not act. (For example, my expectations or those at M.I.T. are probable only if no intervention of liberty takes place.) The Christian must constantly call upon persons to act without becoming discouraged and to make their own history. But planning and long-term forecasting are not the same as "building the Kingdom of God": This latter is the work of God alone who makes use, when and how He wants to, of our works. Through our works, in fact, we put at the disposal of God materials so that *He* performs the miracle of the Kingdom of Heaven (just as the loaves and fishes were brought to Jesus in the account of the multiplication of loaves). Our efforts to build the future are therefore not a coming of the Kingdom of God (which would be the result of historical evolution), but are only the most reasonable choice so that the history of man could continue, and that is all. Therefore, in each case we may have

to make decisions differing in nature, but each time these will express the reality that faith is a renewed decision.

If I were in Senator Berg's situation (but I am not!), I would answer under my own name supporting unconditional assistance without discrimination. But at that moment, to the extent to which such assistance would involve far-reaching consequences, I would be engaged in a much larger movement, which I would probably have to begin myself. In fact, it is not possible to visualize, given this option, assistance that would merely be "charitable," allowing populations to avoid just barely starving to death. There would have to be the possibility for these peoples to improve their own situation themselves. This is only possible if two conditions exist: first of all, *political nonintervention* within these people, the willingness to let them take their own destiny into their own hands, and to provide them simply with the necessary means without influencing them (accepting inevitable wastefulness and political orientations which do not please us); secondly, an *economic reconversion of the United States*, to produce fewer products that raise the standard of living within the country itself and more products needed by the Third World. I have absolutely no illusions, however, about the success of such a project. It is a very long-term task to bring about a psychological reconversion first of all of a way of thinking. I believe that in the United States, this could be built upon a renewal of the proclamation of the gospel.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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The case before us effectively raises a question about the meaning of Christian faith that many persons today no doubt take to be important. This is the question whether such faith is to be understood as essentially passive to God's activity, and thus as the "simple trust" that is content to leave the long-term course of history in his hands; or whether faith is more appropriately understood as essentially active, in that it is believers themselves who as "God's agents" bear responsibility for the direction and outcome of historical events. Of course, one might be inclined to reply that the alternative as thus formulated is false, because Christian faith is rightly understood only as somehow essentially both—passive response to the activity of God and active working together with him for the liberation of the world. But the task then is to make clear exactly how and why it is both; and to do this we need to approach an answer to our question by way of some more basic considerations as to the nature of Christian faith.

Whatever else it may be or involve, Christian faith is faith in God. As such it is an understanding of oneself as a human being in the world in relation to the encompassing mystery of our existence—namely, *that* understanding according to which this final mystery itself is understood to be the boundless love whose gift and demand to humankind are decisively revealed in Jesus Christ through the witness of the Christian church. In other words, the question of faith necessarily presupposed by the Christian witness and by faith in the God whom it attests is, at bottom, the universally human question of the true understanding of our existence. To ask this "existential" question of truth, as every human being does and must simply by existing as human, is at least implicitly to ask the question of faith in God to which the Christian witness claims to represent the decisive answer.

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