

CHURCH

The Human Story of God

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2. 'No salvation outside the world'

I The experience of radical contrast in our human history

I now want to radicalize what I have previously, indeed repeatedly, called important human experiences, namely negative experiences of contrast; they form a basic human experience which as such I regard as being a pre-religious experience and thus a basic experience accessible to all human beings, namely that of a 'no' to the world as it is. This has nothing to do with dualism or opposition between a good world and a bad world in the Hellenistic sense (though we should also reconsider this dualism on the basis of the deeper human experiences of the time). In any case, we have to do with this world of ours, and that worries us. What we experience as reality, what we also see and hear of this reality daily through television and other mass media, is evidently not 'in order'; there is something fundamentally wrong. This reality is full of contradictions. So the human experience of suffering and evil, of oppression and unhappiness, is the basis and source of a fundamental 'no' that men and women say to their actual situation of being-in-this-world. This experience is also more certain, more evident than any verifiable or falsifiable 'knowledge' that philosophy and the sciences can offer us. Indignation (which is certainly not a scientific term) seems to be a basic experience of our life in this world. So, too, is our world, unless we go through it blindly: keen only on consumption, bustle and oblivion... or power.

Without doubt there is also much goodness and beauty, much to be enjoyed in this world. There even seems to be more joy and song among the oppressed than among the oppressors. But all these fragments of goodness, beauty and meaning are constantly contradicted and crushed by evil and hatred, by suffering, whether blatant or dull, by the misuse of power and terror. This contradiction, which is so characteristic of our world, seems to balance out evil and good. Cynics also see it that way. For those who are not cynics, this attitude is anything but a sign of decadence, which no longer finds anything worth living or dying for. Despite all their wretchedness, human beings are too proud to regard evil as being on an equal footing with good.

In the meantime, however, in our world there is that constantly enigmatic mixture of good and evil, of meaning and meaninglessness. We do not know from history which will get the upper hand, nor whether, on the basis of what actually happens, there will even be a last word. History as such can come to grief.

Nevertheless, a positive element in this fundamental experience of

contrast, the second element in this basic experience, is this human indignation, which cannot be made light of. There are ethics here, and perhaps even more. (I myself see here what in the Catholic tradition of faith has been called 'natural theology', although that was set in a rather different context.) This human inability to give in to the situation offers an illuminating perspective. It discloses an openness to another situation which has the right to our affirmative 'yes'. One can call it a consensus with 'the unknown', the content of which cannot even be defined in a positive way: a better, other world, which in fact does not yet exist anywhere. Or, to put it in yet another way, the mere assumption of the possibility of improving our world: openness to the unknown and the better.

The fundamental human 'no' to evil therefore discloses an unfulfilled and thus 'open yes' which is as intractable as the human 'no', indeed even stronger, because the 'open yes' is the basis of that opposition and makes it possible. Moreover, from time to time, there are fragmentary but real experiences of meaning and happiness on both a smaller and a larger scale, which constantly keep nurturing, establishing and sustaining the 'open yes'. Both believers and agnostics come together in this experience. That is also a rational basis for solidarity between all people and for common commitment to a better world with a human face.

Those who believe in God fill out the one two-sided basic experience in religious terms. The 'open yes' then takes on a more precise direction. Its origin is not so much, or at least not directly, the transcendence of the divine (which is inexpressible and anonymous and cannot be put into words) as (at least for Christians) the recognizable human face of this transcendence which has appeared among us in the man Jesus, confessed as Christ and Son of God. So for Christians the fundamental muttering of humanity turns into a well-founded hope. Something of a sigh of mercy, of compassion, is hidden in the deepest depths of reality... and in it believers hear the name of God. That is how the Christian story goes. For Christians, the experience of contrast, with its inherent opposition to injustice and its perspective on something better, becomes that in which the unity of history comes about *as God's gift*.

II The process of liberation in human history as the medium and material of divine revelation

Facts only become history within a framework of meaning, in a tradition of interpreted facts. This is the first level of meaning: human liberation is achieved and also experienced. Within a religious experiential tradition of belief in God, that element of human liberation is interpreted