

The Way of the Cross



Christ Mocked by Soldiers
by Georges Rouault

On Being Christian Today

Discipleship in a Strange New World

Anyone who has lived on this continent during the past three-quarter-century, as I have, will have passed through changes so vast as to be a source of continuing astonishment, if not bewilderment. The world that I encounter today as I leave my house or turn on my television is perhaps as different from the world of my childhood as was Luther's world from that of Augustine. In a matter of decades we have passed through alterations that even centuries did not witness in earlier epochs. Impermanence has become the most permanent of human assumptions.

This constancy of change has produced in many a kind of psychic vertigo that reaches out blindly for stability. Religion undoubtedly offers the most ready recourse in such gropings. The failure of *secularism*, which we noticed in the previous chapter,¹ as well as the renewal of supernaturalism in popular Christian and various other forms, can be traced in part to the sheer transience of a world in unprecedentedly rapid social transition. A new sense of the transitory had already begun to manifest itself with the industrial revolution. "Change and decay in all around I see," wrote the nineteenth-century British clergyman Henry Francis Lyte, and so like countless others since, he prayed that the God who "changest not" should "abide" with him.

Those who can find in themselves no sympathetic echo of such a prayer have either not lived long enough or are so far out of touch with any alternative to the status quo in the developed world that they possess no criteria of judgment. Religion has always functioned in human life and society as a sphere of reliability, a place to stand, a “rock of ages,” a “mighty fortress,” and Christian purists deceive themselves if they imagine that their faith permits of no such usage. Like other faiths, Christian belief and belonging regularly entail an element of world-weariness, and a longing for refuge from the shifting and often chaotic daily round. The Bible recognizes, accepts, and even approves this dimension of faith: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,” says Matthew’s Jesus (11:29); woe betide any Christian movement that in the name of political activism or worldly engagement discards or minimizes this invitation to rest. With few exceptions, the great activists of the Christian movement, including nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century advocates of the Social Gospel, Walter Rauschenbusch, J. S. Woodsworth, and the others, themselves relied upon the securities of faith for the courage and fortitude they needed for their involvement in the world.

There is, however, a fine line between faith and religious escapism. Most of us walk this line every day—and stumble often. Worship, prayer, scholarship—almost anything, including programmed activism—may become a mode of flight from the here and now. Theology has long been labeled an “ivory tower” enterprise, along with every other academic pursuit—and often with justification. It may be reasonably argued that a certain distance from life is requisite to comprehension and responsible behavior. The test of that claim, however, is whether such distance actually functions as the means to better understanding and more accountable involvement in the life of the world. Religion in general, as well as some specific religions, is not necessarily bound to such a test, but Christian faith is so bound.

That, at least, must be said of the Christian faith as it is understood within the parameters of the theological spirit and method we are seeking to interpret in these pages. Given the emphases of the

previous chapters in this study, it follows that the fundamental principle that must inform this chapter on *being* Christian is one of profound world commitment. It could be stated as follows: *Discipleship of the crucified Christ is characterized by a faith that drives its adherents into the world with a relentlessness and a daring they could not manage on the basis of human volition alone.* Anselm of Canterbury rightly insisted that genuine faith drives to a quest for understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*). It could be stated as categorically that genuine faith drives to greater engagement with the life of the world—indeed, that “discipleship” *means*, primarily, just such engagement.

Discipleship is therefore “costly” (Bonhoeffer), for there is that in all of us which resists precisely the high degree of participation in and commitment to creation that following Jesus Christ entails. One of the most poignant of Luther’s statements, written early in his career as a reformer, expresses his frustration—exasperation, almost—over the manner of unrelieved public prominence into which he feels himself being propelled: “God is pushing me—he drives me on, rather than leading. I cannot control my own life. I long to be quiet but am driven into the middle of the storm.”² Similar expressions can be found in the works of Augustine,³ who desired a life of calm, monastic contemplation and scholarship, and of nearly every notable figure in the history of this faith-tradition, including the prophets of Israel—including also that prophet who frequently sought solitude and who at the last prayed that the cup of destiny should be removed.

It could be said of the theology of the cross, in fact, that its chief *end* is the genesis of a community impelled (pushed!) toward the world despite its own resistance and reluctance. All that has been claimed for this theology in the previous chapters leads to such a conclusion: that it depicts God as one who lays claim to the creation and “will not abandon it prematurely”;⁴ that it is a theology of worldly engagement and therefore an inherently contextual theology, the incarnational theology par excellence; that it necessarily translates itself into an *ecclesiology* of the cross; etc. There can be no great distinction between theory and practice here, no hiatus

between knowing and being/doing. “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it!” (Luke 11:28). The measure of our hearing is our obedience. Contemplative or activist, scholar or streetworker, minister or layperson, Christians—according to this tradition—exist under the necessity of *discipleship*.

Discipleship as Outreach: Mission and Ethics

All this evokes the recognition that the goal towards which such *theological* reflection presses is the generation of a missiology and an ethic that adequately express the world-directedness of the theology of the cross. While Christian mission and Christian ethics represent two distinguishable aspects of theological investigation, both assume a single ideational foundation in this tradition; for both stem from the spiritual imperative that the community of the Christ is to be an “apostolic” community—a community sent out into the world. Both assume a single generative source, discipleship, and a single objective, world outreach. Missiology addresses the question of the church’s evangelical task in the world—its message; the Christian ethic addresses the question of the manner in which the church tries to live that message in its worldly context, both individually and corporately. A missional church is not only a church with a gospel to proclaim—not only an “evangelical” church; it is also a church that itself tries to understand and conduct itself according to that gospel. This is why the discussion of these two aspects of Christian outreach, mission and ethic, should never be separated. The *ecclesia crucis* assumes that those who would bring good news to the world must submit themselves to the “imperative” that the gospel’s “new indicative” announces.⁵

It would be difficult to imagine a less detached theology. “Take up your cross, and follow me” (Mark 8:34)—a command that, given the actual journey of the speaker, is virtually limitless in its demand for involvement. By contrast, it could well be said that the *theologia gloriae* lends itself to both a missiology and an ethic of detachment. I do not of course mean that various forms of what we may consider Christian triumphalism have *lacked* either mission or ethic. To the

contrary, the theology of glory can and does produce astonishingly zealous theories and practices of both. Much indeed of the missionary endeavor of Christianity, particularly in the nineteenth century and again in some quarters today, has stemmed from fervent desire on the part of successful, mostly Western churches to carry their messages to the farthest corners of the planet. As for ethics, one is conscious again today, as has been the case often in the Christendom past, that groups in which an unquestioning certitude concerning right and wrong prevails demonstrate a moral eagerness that appears anything but detached. By comparison, ethics emanating from the theology of the cross are bound to seem ambiguous and tentative, since, as we shall see, they presuppose ongoing interaction with the actual life of the world (the context) for which they are intended. But precisely because it is formulated without such interaction with its here and now, must it be said of the ethic as well as the missiology arising from a theology of glory that it is detached. A triumphalistic Christian mission is a mission *to* the world. Beyond superficial matters of language and custom, little account is taken of the fact that the world thus acted upon is—always!—a very specific, unique social context, whose deepest realities are not discernible apart from extensive and informed participation in them on the part of the missionizing body. The history of Christian missions is filled with variations on the theme of the imposition of Eurocentric-Caucasian cultural assumptions upon communities with completely different histories and presuppositions about existence. It is a sad story, despite some noble accomplishments and some laudable consequences; in its wake Christian mission *today* can only achieve legitimacy in the eyes both of the missionaries and those being missionized through an agonizing struggle with our missionary past.⁶

Similarly, an ethic that arises out of the theology of glory is typically imposed. It consists of moral precepts derived quite independently of actual human situations. The assumption is that such precepts, especially those gleaned directly or indirectly from reputedly biblical imperatives, are universally and immediately applicable. Thus, without anguish, without doubt and vacillation, the triumphant church already knows what is good and what is evil, and