ON NORMATIVE RELIGION:
AN ETHOS NOT A FACT

Christianity has been, is, and will be no one single, universal teaching of salvation. Since its origins in Palestine in the first decades of our Common Era, Christianity has been a plethora of schools of thought (αἱρέσαι; haireseis) that arrived at their individual self-understandings of the faith in the smithery of conflict.   Paul in I Corinthians 11:19 expressed the relationship among alternative positions in the church: "... there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized", a passage referred to by Origen of Alexander in *Contra Celsius* Book III, chapter 13:

> ... why should we not defend ... the existence of heresies in Christianity? And respecting these, Paul appears to me to speak in a very striking manner when he says, "For there must be heresies among you, that they who are approved may be made manifest among you." For as that man is "approved" in medicine who, on account of his experience in various (medical) heresies, and his honest examination of the majority of them, has selected the preferable system,-and as the great proficient in philosophy is he who, after acquainting himself experimentally with the various views, has given in his adhesion to the best,-so I would say that the wisest Christian was he who had carefully studied the heresies both of Judaism and Christianity. Whereas he who finds fault with Christianity because of its heresies would find fault also with the teaching of Socrates, from whose school have issued many others of discordant views. [Indebted to Gérard Vallée, *The Shaping of Christianity, 95,* for reference to this text in Origen.]

Christian history is told as a sequence of systems of faith that begins with the disappointments of universal apocalyptic, travels through the narrow passage of the individual apocalyptic of red martyrdom, flirts with the grand speculations of Marcionism and Gnosticism, compromises with the ascetic spirituality and apocalyptic fervor of New Prophecy, settles down into the serious work of attempting to hammer out the meaning of the Trinity (Modalistic

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Monarchianism, Dynamic Monarchianism, and Logos Theology) and the meaning of creation[1] in the last third of the Second Century only to be overshadowed by the allegorical Alexandrians Clement and Origen, and, finally, to be reined in by the efforts of the ecumenical councils beginning with the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE.

Of course, the ecumenical councils resolved little or nothing with respect to the identification of the "true" system of Christian faith.   Neither the Old Roman Symbol (later called the Apostles Creed) of circa 150 CE nor the Nicaean Creed of 325 CE (or as modified by later Councils) can be read as anything but a dialectical antithesis to the thesis of rejected schools.   Adolpf von Harnack observed that among the early Christian authors we find prior to Augustine only Apelles, who is recognizable without great effort to be a Christian.[2]

However, not even the history sketched above can begin to claim comprehensiveness with respect to the multiplicity of faith convictions that drew persons to Christianity even to the point of risking their earthly lives in its name.   At the least, the usual historical litany of Christianity tends to ignore everything that happened outside of the Roman Empire.   For example, the history of Christian persecution is told as a history within and ignores the history of persecution outside the boundaries of the empire.

Neither will a return to the "true" teaching of the "historical" Jesus get us to the "true" belief system of Christianity.   What the "historical" Jesus taught is intentionally, apparently, couched in figurative language (parables, aphorisms, and parenetic charges) whose meaning is tied to the context in which it is spoken.   When we read the text in a new context, its meaning

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1. The first "normative" Christian theologian to articulate the notion of creatio ex nihilo is Theophilus of Antioch.   See Gerhard May, *Schöpfung aus dem Nichts. Die Entstehung der Lehre von der creatio ex nihilo* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1978), 75, 78, 149, 159f, 181.

2. Adolf Harnack, *Marcion. Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott, eine Monographie zur Geschichte der Grundlegung der katholischen Kirche* (Leipzig: J.C.Hinrichs, 1921), 187. See Gerhard May, *Schöpfung aus dem Nichts*, 158, n. 39

changes, as well.   Even were we able to re-construct what the original audience heard in its historical context, we would not have arrived at the Holy Grail of Christian truth, for we are reminded by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur that meaning is inseparable from application.   What a hearer/reader draws out of a word event is a project not a set of facts.   As the speaker/author has drawn on the repertoire of tropes available to her/him to (re-)construct the text, so the hearer/reader can respond to the speaker's/author's re-construction from out of the recipient's grasp of the text's tropes and the tropes that inform her/his situation to (re-)figure the text in light of the hearer's/reader's context of action.

The text is (!) a subversive event.   The text changes the hearer/reader's understanding, world, and action, but the subversive (even salvific) transformation is and can by no means be univocal.   Historical facts cannot establish existential meaning.   Furthermore, the farther existential meaning is from facts (e.g., the more spiritual, intangible and/or mystical the meaning), the less validity historical facts have for the recipient of the text.   This by no means, however, eliminates rigorous historical scholarship.   The world can be changed by "factual" knowledge as we can clearly see in Lorenzo Valla's historical debunking of the Donation of Constantine.   Yet the meaning of Valla's "discovery" is the consequence of the role the Donation of Constantine had played in empowerment of the Roman Popes and in the Investiture Controversy leading to Canossa.   Given the absence in the West of Eusebius of Caesarea's understanding of the emperor as "Godly Monarch" and the influence of Hosius of Cordoba's notion of the "Two Swords Doctrine", the power of the Roman Papacy was greatly enhanced by the "discovery" of the Donation of Constantine in the 8th Century.   In other words, the bare "facts" of the Donation of Constantine can in no way account for its meaning in Western Christian history.   Analagously, faith in general and Christian faith in particular are concerned not with historical facts but existential meaning that always stretch us beyond facts.

The task of theology, then, is neither to determine the "truth" of any one system of faith nor to seek an historical foundation as the determining criterion for faith.   As Wilhelm Dilthey

proposed at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, our task is neither to discover the true system among the cocaphany of systems nor to search for the proper method that would lead to the promised land of an ever expanding true system (i.e., the ever detailed articulation of the proper system recognized as historically conditioned and, therefore, never as closed).   Rather, the challenge is to recognize the role of assumptions in, the radical limits to, all rationality that leaves us examining presuppositions.   In such a situation the purpose of theology cannot be to establish a linguistic hegemony over a community.

The easiest thing to accomplish with respect to inherited systems of all kinds is to merely provide a defense of them without engaging in the "meta-"analysis of examining the necessity of a mental system for understanding whatever we take to be "reality".   The meta-analysis of systemic models of reality shared by communities demonstrates that reality is nothing literal or univocal.

Since we cannot place the physical world directly into our minds and our understanding of "reality" is far more than a mere mirroring of what is present to consciousness in any particular moment, "reality" including any notions of causal relatedness among elements in any sequence is more a non-tangible and imperceptible construction out of memory and future anticipations than it is the immediacy of the present.   Furthermore, given the complexity of our non-tangible and imperceptible systematic model of reality and given our inability to "get outside" of our systematic model to the physical world the model empowers us to understand, the criteria we have for adjudicating the "truth" of our reality are coherence and practical applicability not indubitable correspondence to the "facts" of the case.   Assuming that our model system does not involve gross contradiction and is adequate for our making decisions and performing of our life tasks, if all we ask is, "Can I believe what I have learned and want to believe," then the answer is always, "Yes!"   Of course, it is always best to have a community of support, but that community does not have to be a contemporary community.   One can find one's "community" at any point in history.

However, the articulating and defending of one's system even an anti-system such as Deconstruction is always susceptible to the danger of establishing a hegemonic incestuous discourse.   Systems are analogous to human character.   They emerge over time as a consequence of what Aristotle in Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics* calls ethos/habitus. Character is not univocal, but it does tend to uniform patterns of insight and behavior.   System characters allow us to determine periodizations in history.   Nonetheless, as with human character, historical periods are not univocal.   A dialectical movement emerges out of the interlocution among the individuals sharing a particular historical period's character, and, when the character reaches a point of extreme or the character encounters an anomalous "other" with an alternative system of coherence for understanding "reality", the same dialectical movement can subvert and transform a dominant character by teasing out or demanding immediately a new ethos/habitus.

Critical Idealism offers such an opportunity for a subversive engagement not only of Christianity but of all "historical" manifestations of religion.   Its practical advantage is that it places moral effort at the core of what it means to be human rather than as already a failure because of an "original sin" or relativity.   Humanity is a "moral" species not because we necessarily act morally but because we are capable of acting on the basis of imperceptible moral principles that can call all "cultural" rules into question.   In short, we are moral species not because we are or must be but because we can be.

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