

Chapter 4 What Remains?

Plato's Allegory of the Cave and the Investigation of Earliest Christian History

In his famous allegory of the cave, the philosopher Plato compares people with prisoners, who have been chained in a cave since birth. Unaware of the cave itself, all that prisoners become aware of in the cave is only their own shadows thrown on the wall of the cave and the echoes of sounds which reach their ears. Since the prisoners have never seen or heard anything different in their lives, they must regard the shadows and echoes as reality, not the people and the things from which they derive. If they were set free from their imprisonment in the cave and had the opportunity to view the true reality in the dazzling light of the sun, they would at first regard this only as an unreal dream and continue to attribute greater reality to their shadows. If on their return, however, they told the prisoners who had remained behind in the cave what they had seen and experienced outside, they would hardly find belief, but instead would only bring forth derisive laughter. And nevertheless, Plato concludes, in spite of all the toil and trouble, it is necessary to bring people from appearance to actuality, from the apparent reality into the true reality of their existence.

Although what the philosopher says relates to his own particular theme of philosophy, concerning its wondrous power to free people from appearance and to transfer them from the world of mere opinion into that of true existence, it can also be applied to the theme of this book: the history of earliest Christianity and its scholarly investigation. [204]

It may be that the experience of the reader who has followed the expositions of this book resembles that of the people in the Platonic allegory. It may be that the more he attempts to draw nearer to the colorful and graphic figures of early Christian history relied upon since childhood—Jesus, Paul, Peter, etc.—by means of historical criticism, the more he ascertains that they are historically out of reach and emerge as phantom figures. Perhaps he experienced that what he once regarded—also without closer scientific determination—as immediately illuminating, plausible, and settled turned out to be in truth only shadow-figures.

Just as every shadow makes reference to that which throws the shadow, however, so also those figures in early Christian history, which until now we assumed we saw before us in full reality, and which we now understand to be mere images, make reference to the real forces and leading figures who determined the history of early Christianity. The disappointment that so much was not the way we thought, and the way it had been presented to us, becomes outweighed by the fact that our insight into early Christian history gains depth and plasticity, that we perceive with fewer illusions, but so also more clearly and distinctly, the real historical forces in their battle for the truth, as well as for power and dominion. The loss is compensated for by the fact that we come to know other figures in early Christianity, unknown until now, in whom it becomes clear to us what immense spiritual forces, still entirely free and unhampered by any orthodoxy, were present in the cradle of Christianity, in comparison with which present-day Christianity seems like an extinct volcano.

Finally, however, our loss will be compensated for by the experience of a previously unknown freedom in dealing with the rudiments of our Christian faith. In place of rigidly holding fast or dogmatically adhering to so-called “facts of salvation,” a literal understanding of the biblical words, and dogmas thousands of years old, and in place of defending the reality of the shadow-pictures, [205] stands the serene composure of one who has learned to look at the ground of things, and in, with, and beneath the so-called historical facts of salvation to perceive the entirely unhistorical essence of the Christian faith existing beyond time and space, which is substantiated not from the distant past, but from the living moment in the here and now.

The Church and her Heretics

Whoever has reached the conclusion that *all* the Pauline letters are pseudepigraphic writings from the first half of the second century will then have to view the entire world of early Christianity from a different, changed perspective. For such a person, the trusted figures of early Christianity are no longer what they once were. From a historical perspective, there remains scarcely anything more of the great heroes of early Christian times than a distant reflection, hardly more than a shadow.

On the other hand, those figures who until now had only a shadowy existence in church traditions—the early Christian

nonconformists and heretics—begin to gradually step forward from the darkness of history and come nearer to us, with their spirit and even with their writings, which for centuries, without knowing it, we have regarded and revered as the sacred works of apostolic founding figures.

As we have seen, what we can observe again and again in the later church history, namely, that the best and most creative powers have flowed to the Church from its heresies and that the actual role of the Church toward them has only been their ordering, selecting, dogmatizing, and reworking, was obviously already true for the earliest beginnings. The actual intellectual impulses, the great “inspirations,” the decisive theological ideas, came from the heretics. In this field, the Church has never been particularly rich or remarkably gifted in original ideas—and this has been the case until today. [206]

The Church’s (certainly genial) contribution lay rather in the refined appropriation of what was basically not its own and which it proclaimed as its possession only by means of a few clever artifices, small changes here and there. Thus, just as the Church understood how to “underhandedly take away” the Hebrew Bible from the Jews by declaring it to be *their* Old Testament, the forerunner to their New Testament, thereby taking possession of one of the most important documents in the literary and religious history of humankind,²⁰⁵ so also the Church treated their heretics. It watched them for a while and quietly left them alone, allowing the heretics to do their intellectual work for them—so then, at the right time, to make an appearance, appropriate the fruit of this work, and declare it to be their own. The Church’s relationship with its heretics, therefore, was always ambivalent: from them came the ideas that one did not want to renounce and could not. But instead returning to them the necessary thanks for this, one saw in them a source of great insecurity and trouble. The threat for the Church that emanated from the heretics on account of their simple presence and mere existence is comparable with the

²⁰⁵ Nietzsche, *Morgenröte*, Aphorism 84, in Schlechta I, 1067: “What should one expect from the after-effect of a religion that in the century of its founding carried out that outrageous farce with the Old Testament; I refer to the attempt to underhandedly take away the Old Testament from the Jews with the claim that it contains nothing else than Christian teaching and belongs to Christians as the true people of Israel, while the Jews had only appropriated it. And now a frenzy of interpretation and suppression results that is impossible to unite with a good conscience... Indeed, one was in a battle and thought about the opponents, not integrity.”

irritating threat a thief feels who is constantly confronted by his victim and thus is not allowed the freedom to take undisturbed pleasure in his booty. With an English proverb one could say: "Stones are never thrown but at the fruit-laden tree."

But we should not draw a black and white picture here. The heretics should not be glorified, nor should the men of the Church be demonized. That would be an unhistorical way of thinking and observing. The point is not to make moral judgments, but only to understand an intellectual-historical process.

From this perspective, one must say that the work of the Church redactors, which began in the middle of the second century to rework in Catholic ways the world-denying, ascetic Marcionite-Pauline message of a foreign God, carried out an important historical and intellectual-historical mission. By connecting freedom with the law, what is above with what is below, and today with yesterday and tomorrow, they tied the message of the Marcionite Paul with this earth again [207] and in this way prevented Christianity from slipping into a world-denying asceticism, or mysticism. At the same time, with regard to Gnosticism, they dammed the vast flood of Gnostic fantasies, and cultivated, tended, and straightened the embankment, to make it possible for the Church-ship to have smooth sailing through the rough currents of the time.

In these ways they made Christianity commensurable with Western culture. And at the same time they may have prevented Europe from being overcome by Asian culture.

All this is the direct consequence, a direct result, of the Catholic genius empowered by the "heretical" writings, which served as catalyst and break at the same time.

Paul and Jesus

In our deliberations thus far, one figure, from whom all occupation with early Christian history originates, and to whom we return again and again, has still not been considered: namely, Jesus of Nazareth.

Until now, we have met him only now and then, in the story of the anointing of Jesus at Bethany, for example, where we thought we could see for a brief moment the face of the ever-present Samaritan magician flare up behind his name and person.

In order to forestall misunderstanding, I would expressly emphasize that I in no way make the claim here that the Jesus of

the New Testament received his life breath from that Samaritan magician whose all-powerful and over-towering person stands at the very beginning of Christianity. Even if there are indications that the figure of Jesus does in fact bear some marks of the Samaritan Simon, which can be well explained from a tradition-historical perspective, and even if it can be seen here and there how the builder of both persons sometimes allowed the two figures to curiously flow together, we have to do nevertheless with two entirely different persons. Without doubt, the Gnostic Simon from Samaria, and the apocalyptic Jesus [208], stemming from the house of Judah, have entirely different origins.

But — did a historical figure named Jesus exist at all?

In itself, the thesis that the letters of Paul are inauthentic, and that the letters of Paul are thus excluded as a witness to the existence of a historical Jesus, could very well lead to the supposition that there had never been an historical Jesus. With the exclusion of the Pauline letters as the supposedly most important witnesses for the historicity of Jesus, many things do in fact look very different, and many things are possible which until now did not seem possible. In itself, in view of the complete absence of non-Christian sources, doubt in the factual existence of the man Jesus of Nazareth lies close at hand. No person with a sound mind would suppress such doubt, if he or she were not hindered by church tradition and socialization and by a theological consensus that declares every doubter in the past and present to be a “fantasizer.” What then should we think about a man who surfaces nowhere except in the writings of his followers and even concerning whose origin and years of birth and death there is no agreement? Obviously, we must doubt his existence.

And nevertheless the theories put forward until now radically disputing the historicity of Jesus seem insufficient to me. As A. Schweitzer rightly recognized, one of the greatest problems for a consistent-symbolic interpretation of the Gospels is, above all, the *apocalyptic* Jesus with his (disappointed) expectation of a soon end of the world, who can be adapted as the hero of a temporally-transcendent Gnostic salvation story only with difficulty.²⁰⁶ It is obvious that involved here is not only literary design but also tradition-historical memory, the river of tradition here flowing

²⁰⁶ A. Schweitzer. *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, 553ff.

through time, which on its slow current drags along what in the meantime has long since become out of date and unusable.²⁰⁷

So the solution of the entire problem obviously cannot be to *fully* delete a man named Jesus from history. Rather, one must investigate from a tradition-historical perspective the individual components and building blocks from which the New Testament picture of Jesus was constructed [209] —which, like corpuscles and waves, floats back and forth between historical and kerygmatic existence. Rudolf Augstein already correctly perceived that the solution to the entire Jesus problem obviously lay in the recognition that we have to do here not with one, but with “several figures and currents flowing synthetically into one appearance.”²⁰⁸

Without doubt, we are confronted here with an exciting task, that we can only solve, to be sure, if we do not imagine that from the beginning we already fully possess, as *Beati possidentes*, the only beatific historical knowledge regarding early Christianity. Instead, we should rather recognize—as shameful as this might be after more than two centuries of historical-critical research—that basically, with regard to the most important things, we still know nothing at all, or much too little to be able to accept the *historically grounded* claims of the Christian religion (we would be glad to discuss the other claims).

Instead, we should happily admit our own curiosity and in addition admit—as unpleasant as it might be—that for us the naked historical truth is sadly a most beautiful illusion.

The Foundations of the Christian Faith

In many bestsellers trumpeted as sensational the authors attempt thereby to give an added drama that promises their readers that their new theses and discoveries will shake the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Thus, the authors of the book *Verschlußsache Jesus*, for example, believe they “have in hand religious explosive—something that could bring down the entire edifice of Christian teaching and Christian faith.”²⁰⁹ One can also

²⁰⁷ R. Augstein, *Jesus Menschensohn*, 26: “From where would the first collectors and transmitters create their faith in the imminent return of the Messiah if not from the shaking of what was experienced or what was only imagined, and from what experiences came their power to invent and propagate the passion and resurrection of only an imaginary figure?”

²⁰⁸ Cited by J. Kaiser, *Spiegel Spezial* (Rudolph Augstein, 70), 1993, p. 86.

²⁰⁹ Cited by K. Berger, *Qumran und Jesus*, 57.

find similar spectacular announcements in other books again and again.

If the best-selling authors instead of the Christian faith, would speak rather of the Church, or the *faith of the Church*, one might be able to even affirm them, [210] provided that their theses were valid. For history in fact plays a great role for the Church as the basis for (what is in its eyes) right belief. Thus, we have seen, for example, that for the Church— i.e., for the Catholic great church emerging in Rome in the middle of the second century—it was of decisive importance, in debate with other Christian groups, that it could represent itself as the legitimate historical heir of the early church in Jerusalem. The Church needed history, and in accordance with its own self-understanding still needs it today in order to represent itself as the original (= true) Church and its faith as the original (= true and correct) faith, from which all other churches and heresies are derived.

The notion that the Church can present itself, like everything that comes into being historically, only as something “derived,” namely, a form of Gnostic heresy, is thereby excluded. Strictly speaking, as has already been conceded in the meantime by a number of theologians, the historical claim of the Church is a fiction. The fundamentals for the faith of the Church and for what later constituted Catholic orthodoxy were defined in the second century, not the first. That is decisively shown by the fact that, according to current opinion today, the New Testament contains only seven authentic writings, i.e., writings deriving from apostolic times—and in my view consists exclusively of pseudepigraphic writings. Tracing and projecting these fundamentals back into the apostolic age only functions as a historical legitimization, which, as one can still observe, has a great significance in human legal affairs. Whether it should also have such significance in religious affairs is very doubtful. Nevertheless, over against the Gnostic currents of the time, institutionally less defined and trusting more in the Spirit, it provided the Church with a powerful advantage, which finally made them victors in the historical struggle for Christian sovereignty.

It was history, therefore, or, better, *the fiction of history*, that placed the Church on a firm foundation, [211] so that it could survive for hundreds and even thousands of years. When and so long as the Church makes its authority, its existence or non-existence, dependent on this history, it must defend this claim

with whatever means necessary, or its foundations will be shaken by the discovery that what is claimed to be history is only pseudo-history—unless it prefers, instead, to change its own self-understanding and to ground its authority in spiritual power instead of history.

Now the Christian faith, nevertheless, cannot be identified with the faith of the Church, and certainly not any one church, even if the Church representatives, as a matter of course, more or less hold fast to this claim. Strictly speaking, for the Christian believer, who in his or her faith seeks comfort and support for the crises of life, who would like to be stimulated, comforted, or “edified” by the biblical writings, by the stories in the Old Testament about ancient people, the marvelous parables in the Gospels, by the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, or by the spiritual fervor of freedom in the Pauline letters (to be sure, sometimes greatly dimmed by Catholic insertions)—for such a person, whether or not these writings come from the hand of a Moses, or a Paul, or any of the other apostles, is a matter of relative indifference. In his or her view, what grants authority to the writings, indeed, is not the *person*, in whose name they were written, but the *spirit* that speaks to him therefrom for hundreds and thousands of years. If the authority of the writings were based on the authority and the name of their author, i.e., on a historical fundament, he would be next to despair. For now his faith would be dependent on the results of historical research, and with such a faith, if one really takes seriously the constantly changing results of historical scholarship, he must soon give up. The very next newspaper report that reaches him at breakfast about a new manuscript found in the desert of Palestine or Egypt could collapse his well-constructed edifice of faith. In contrast to the faith that grants the calm security [212] of a deep, existential trust and comfort and support for one’s life, this kind of faith is a restless, unsettled to-and-fro that has no end and leads the believer, as if he were hooked on drugs, to continually require new assurances.

I am certainly well aware that there are many Christians for whom the connections I have attempted to sketch make little sense. For them, in the same way as for the Church, faith is simultaneously *faith in history*, i.e., it is based on specific data, which are sometimes accepted as historical on trust (the so-called “obedience of faith”) and sometimes simply accepted as historical without reflection on the matter. It cannot be disputed that these

persons can find therein support for their lives, i.e., in a faith that provided a center of meaning for many people for more than fifteen hundred years. On the other hand, however, it likewise cannot be denied that since the awakening of historical consciousness and the beginning of historical inquiry regarding the fundamentals of faith much has changed and that since then there are many people who experience very intensely the great uncertainty that has taken hold of faith (as faith in history) since then. They can no longer be satisfied with a faith that still stems from the phase of human history prior to historical consciousness. In their criticism of the foundations of the old faith, which is basically only the reverse side of their search for a new foundation, they are often in danger of throwing overboard the baby with the bath water, i.e., faith along with history, and thereby Christianity as such.

In spite of this danger, it seems to me that this crisis of faith is both necessary and unavoidable. One does not deal with it, as most theologians today do, by making light of, glossing over, or obscuring, but only by pushing the crisis to the extreme limit. Its extreme limit takes place in radical theology. Only a radical (i.e., going to the roots) questioning of the foundations of Christianity is able to bring about the crisis, whose absence makes the Christian faith suffer, and, after faith is no longer able to withstand historical criticism, is perhaps also able to provide a look at what is really at stake. [213] In this sense, radical historical criticism poses no danger for faith. Radical criticism of the foundations of the Christian faith necessarily leads, in a first step, to the destruction, the demolishing, of what has come before, and in this sense to absolute zero. And nevertheless, from the crisis of the Christian faith in history something new necessarily proceeds, i.e., a faith that no longer requires historical fundamentals for its confirmation. Christianity would thus have finally become a *religion of the Spirit*—as it once was at the beginning of its history, when there was not yet any (Catholic) church at all, in the Churches of the “heresiarch” Marcion or Simon and all the other Gnostics.

The poem about *The Lost Church*, by Ludwig Uhland, whose opening lines I found as a hand-written remark in the book *Antiqua Mater*, from the estate of the radical critic Bolland, had a continuation, as I learned when I returned home, picked up an edition of Uhland’s work, and read:

I recently went to the deep forest
 Where no foot had climbed for a long while:
 From the ruins of this age
 I turned to God.
 In the wilderness where all was silent,
 I was again aware of bells ringing;
 The more my longing increased,
 The nearer and louder they rang out.
 My mind was so wrapped up in thought,
 My senses so captured by the ringing,
 That it never became clear to me,
 How I had risen so high.

With the words of the poet Rückert, one could also say: “If what one should believe — one can no longer believe — the age of one faith is complete — and another begins.” [214]

Ratzinger, the Christian and Fortunate Hans

In his *Introduction to Christianity*, the Catholic theologian Joseph Ratzinger, in view of the development of the theological movement of the last years and decades, was reminded of the story of “Fortunate Hans.” As everyone knows, in the story we are told how Hans, who served his master honestly and faithfully for seven years, received a gold nugget as a reward. Because on his journey the lump of gold became too heavy, however, he traded it for a horse. Over time, however, he was not pleased with the horse either, so he traded it for a cow. Later the cow was exchanged for a goose, and the goose for grinding stone. Hans first finds true fortune, however, when he sees the stone sink into the water and is now entirely free and relieved of every burden. Ratzinger comments:

Has our theology in the last years not often found itself on a similar path? Has it not reinterpreted the claim of faith, which one found all too oppressive, step by step and bit by bit, so that nothing important seemed to have been lost, and nevertheless always enough that soon afterward one could consider the next step? And will not the poor Hans, the Christian, who with complete confidence let himself be led from exchange to exchange, from interpretation to interpretation, instead of the gold with which he began, soon really hold only a grinding

stone in his hand, which one may confidently advise him to throw away?²¹⁰

Although I like very much the comparison Ratzinger makes between modern theology and the fortunate Hans, I cannot agree with the conclusions the Catholic theologian draws from this—to begin with, only because the story is obviously not correctly interpreted. With reference to modern theology, with which he compares the destiny of the figure in the story, Ratzinger is critical of the loss of the gold (i.e., pure and uncorrupted Catholic dogma) and remarks uneasily: “How long his drunkenness lasted, how grim was the moment of awakening from the story of his supposed liberation, as one knows, the story leaves to be worked out by the imagination of its readers.”²¹¹

But here the worried Catholic churchman reads something into the text of the story that is not found there. In the story, the loss that Hans suffered is really seen in a positive way. With a wink of the eye, the story leaves the decision to the reader either to take delight in the great foolishness of Hans (in which case, of course, the reader’s own cleverness would not have brought him very far), or to perceive the deeper truth behind the apparent foolishness, that nothing more is required for true freedom, for real fortune, than—precisely nothing at all; and that the person who is most free and most fortunate is one who, as the ancient mystics already knew, is free and relieved of all things. For obvious reasons, this point fully eluded the worried churchman. If the story were understood as it intended to be, the conclusion for modern theology that Ratzinger would like to make from the comparison would backfire and apply to himself.

It has precisely to do with the “foolishness” of the matter, one must now say—i.e., one who has learned to lead his life free from and unburdened by external dogmas and authorities, instead of tying his freedom and spiritual health to the golden luster of doctrines transmitted from ancient times. Whoever has enjoyed this freedom will never again long for the gold of the ancient authorities. Nor will he allow anything else to take the place of the lost gold. The places of Jesus and Paul will not be taken by Mohammed, nor Moses, nor Buddha, so highly valued at present, no Koran, no Bhagavad Gita, and not the rattling of Tibetan prayer beads, as interesting and exotic as all these might be, but

²¹⁰ Ratzinger, *Einleitung*, 5.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

he will let it rest that what he once had in his hand he has now lost, or, better, that what he once possessed he still has only as something recalled deeply within. Like the fortunate Hans in the story, the Christian will finally “spring away from all that with a light heart and free from every burden.”

The basis for this freedom is not, as Ratzinger presumes, the rashness and hubris of modern man who has thrown everything overboard, but rather the deep recognition that the treasures of the past can be made useful for the present not by desperately and fearfully [216] holding on to them and preserving them, but only by criticism and new interpretation.

Only that person has this freedom, however, who, like the radical critics, is prepared, in certain circumstances, to give up the “fixed formulas of the past” and leave them behind, because they constrict his or her questioning and critical spirit, and threaten to suffocate it. The peculiar paradox is that precisely this freedom over against the traditional Christian faith, which should not be confused with a hostile and negative attitude with regard to the Christian faith, can have as a consequence a much narrower and more intensive tie with the individual contents of the tradition than the conserving (conservative) desire to possess and preserve. Only those persons who are prepared, in certain circumstances, to relinquish traditions that they haul around without understanding, and which really represent life-threatening ballast, are able to experience that what they just thought they had given up returns to them as a refined inner possession, no longer as an authoritative demand, but as a freely won insight. So what still encounters them as the external authority of faith (letter, law, history) returns to them again inwardly (Spirit), so as from then on to constitute an indispensable component of their individual religious lives.

The Letter Kills...

In an essay in which the Dutch radical critic Van den Bergh van Eysinga discussed the importance of Christianity for present-day people, he sketches the development and the course of the education of a child until full maturity. The child is interested first of all, often even before he begins school, in only the mere letters of the alphabet, which he comes to know and learns until he himself can read and write. Afterward comes a time when he is interested not only in reading as such, but where there is a choice and he is concerned with different facts and events. After that

comes a further [217] phase of development, where the maturing adult begins to be interested not only in historical facts, but also in their spiritual content. Now it no longer seems important for him whether what is written really took place, but he reads it to suck out for himself the spiritual content—like bees suck honey from blossoms. It occurred to Van den Bergh van Eysinga that the parable stories in the Gospels were good examples, since here also whether what they report actually took place is irrelevant for understanding them, but only the written content. The parables are not devised “to make the hearers believe something, but to make the believer wise. Whether all these things took place far from us a long time ago is not the issue; but the issue has very much to do with whether, on the basis of what took place or what was written, something happens in us, whether the Spirit bears witness to our spirit — then we know that it is true... But the parable itself may never stand in place of its significance, in place of the truth itself.”²¹²

If one transfers the picture of the maturing child to the present-day situation of Christianity, one would have to say that many Christians still find themselves in the phase of learning the alphabet and learning to read. Even today, for a great number of Christians it still seems more important to militantly defend the letters of one statement of faith or the other than to inquire about the spiritual truth contained therein. Their passion, and not seldom their fanaticism, is ignited by the question as to whether there was “really” a resurrection, an ascension, or a miraculous birth from a virgin, i.e., as historical events, and less often by the question as to what significance this then has for their life. It is not surprising that, in view of this sad picture that the discussion carried out among Christians sometimes provides for them, that precisely the free spirits feel repelled and turn away with horror from Christianity and the Church as a whole.

“What value are all the arts of reading and criticism,” F. Nietzsche, who came from a pastor’s family, already complained, “if afterwards as before, the Church’s interpretation of the Bible, the Protestant as well as the Catholic, must be upheld! One does not sufficiently account for the barbarity of ideas in which we Europeans still live. That one can still believe that the salvation of the ‘soul’ depends on a book! ...And someone tells me people still believe that today. What value is all the scholarly

²¹² Van den Bergh van Eysinga, “Christendom voor nu,” *GWS* 14/1.

education, all criticism and hermeneutic, if the kind of absurd biblical interpretation upheld by the Church has not yet made shameful red the color of its body.”²¹³ In his rejection of a Christianity degraded to a religion of mere letters and books, Nietzsche was not alone. In a remarkable way, with his criticism of letters and of the common argument among theologians, “It is written....” he stands shoulder to shoulder with the author of 2 Corinthians (3:6): “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

For the person from whom this beautiful statement derives, the decisive criterion for the Christian faith is not whether something is in accordance with scripture; rather, the one and only thing that mattered to him was the Spirit as the ground and source of religious life. One can question whether the Church has given this Spirit sufficient room in its history, or whether the fact that churches today are often so empty is not related to the fact that in its history the Church has depended primarily on the letter instead of the Spirit.

Of course, it is more comfortable to rely on letters: one risks nothing; one never needs to make his own decision; the letter meets our natural need for security and order. Even today, in both the Protestant and Catholic churches, with the words “It is written” one appeals to particular biblical statements in the same way as to legal declarations. The only danger in this is that the security that the letter seems to mediate will finally turn out to be an illusion; that the peace that it seems to provide for our Christian faith when it is disturbed by all kinds of doubt will turn out to be a peace of mind like that of a graveyard.

The letter kills. Not only the letter kills faith, but closely related to it, *history* as well, [219] which the letter relates, can kill faith—at least so long as it is conceived only in a literal way.

Against an all-too-free “spiritual” interpretation of the biblical writings, which in the history reported there sees only pictures and symbols in historical clothing, it is often objected that, in contrast to Asian religions and in common with Judaism, Christianity is a kind of historical religion. The Christian religion, it is said, is based on salvation history, on the facts of salvation. A Christian lives from the facts of salvation.

When one considers the author of 2 Corinthians, for whom the historical side of the destiny of a man named Jesus was of no consequence at all, one may have to relativize these statements

²¹³ Nietzsche, *Aus dem Nachlaß*, Schlechta III, 646, 648.

somewhat. Moreover, one must ask what is meant here by the so-called facts of salvation. What is the birth in Bethlehem, the ascension, the crucifixion on Golgotha, seen in and for themselves, if we know them only as historical facts, but they signify nothing for us and have no relationship with our personal life? As the Mystic Angelus Silesius said:

*If Christ is born a thousand times in Bethlehem
but not in you, you remain still forever lost.*

All so-called Christian facts of salvation are nothing and, in spite of their claimed factuality, would be essentially non-existent *for us* if we did not make them our possession, if we did not make our own the ideas on which they are based and which have as their basis only the *one* fundamental idea that God is present among us and within us—not as the “wholly other,” but as Spirit—and that in our midst and within us God wills to become reality and that we make a place for him.

And what is remarkable is that in the moment when we have understood what should be said to us in the clothing of pictures and parables, which very often also bear the character of historical events, [220] the facts themselves begin to become entirely immaterial, a matter of indifference, and recede into the background.

Then under certain circumstances we can even do away with them—as someone who has learned to walk can throw away his crutches. Then it no longer matters whether this or that “really” took place, i.e., as an historical event; then we also do not need to doubt our faith and despair simply because we cannot reconcile something or another with our scientific world-view. Because we have understood the history, or “stories,” as *ideas*, we no longer need to understand them as facts. We grasp that Christian faith does not represent faith in some historical event that took place in one way or another in the distant past, but that this Christian faith can have no other “object” and no other content than that which, according to Christian understanding, is present and active among us in Spirit and in Truth, not only once upon a time 2000 years ago, but here and now.

Again, as Van den Bergh van Eysinga wrote:

The written gospel is picture and parable, a shadow of the true gospel, that is not written on yellowed, holy pages, but on the table of our heart. No fact from the past: no birth in Bethlehem, no cross on Golgotha, no resurrection in the garden of Arimathea, no ascension, no outpouring of the Holy Spirit in

Jerusalem, not one of all these facts of salvation, so-called facts, can save us.

What can “save” us, according to Van den Bergh van Eysinga, who employs here a decidedly mystical terminology, is a decisive factor deep within ourselves: “The union with God through the delivering up of our own I.”

The Role of the Church

The story of the fortunate Hans is a beautiful parable for the way in which modern theology must be transformed into radical theology, with its final and most sincere consequences, [221] in order to provide freedom, identity, and personal fortune in life for people today. Using another picture, one could say that our Christian religion is like a school, like the home of our parents in which we grew up, who raised us, and, in the moment when we had become grown up and mature, gave us our freedom. Our future relationship to the Christian religion, therefore, is no longer one of dependence, but one characterized by an interested, critical sympathy and affection. We are and remain true to our origins, of course, and in this sense continue to remain Christians—but, as people who have now set off on our own way, with the necessary critical distance which complete freedom and independence includes.

Does that mean that in the future we no longer need the Church? Yes and no. The Dutch radical theologian Frater Smid explains:

The Church must terminate itself as a Church. If it does not do this, it betrays its calling, for what it must promote is not the Church, but Religion. And Religion as such has no need of the Church. At most it can make use of the Church as a resource, as a shelter, a wayside inn, where one may well stop for refreshment, but cannot remain.

For the religious person there are no limits, no resting place or quiet place. His religion is an adventure of *his* spirit, which at all times and places pours into the universe of *the* Spirit, so as in this way, without doubt or fear, to attain the true security of ‘faith.’

This is the adventure that the Church must prepare and make possible. It cannot regard its task as completed until it has guided every last person to this adventure. In every person whom the Church brings to religion in this way, it terminates itself. That is its task and its destiny.²¹⁴

²¹⁴ Frater Smid, *Bevrijdende Twijfel*, 68.