

I Believe in God...

by

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INTRODUCTION

THIS book had its origin in a series of lectures given to a group of university students. During question time one of them asked: Isn't it rather silly for Christians to recite the Creeds so often in their worship services? Are Church people really so stupid that they need such repetitions every week? And if there is a God, must He not get sick of all these mechanical recitations?

These questions reveal something of the depths of misunderstanding that surround the Church in our day. Many people clearly find it almost impossible to enter into the spiritual atmosphere of the Church. When they hear the word 'Creed', they immediately think of intellectual narrowness, of closed minds, of lack of scientific liberty, *etc.* That a Creed may have quite a different function, that it may be a confession of love on the side of the Church, a song of praise and dedication offered to God, simply does not enter into their mind. And yet such it is. In the Creeds Christian believers openly confess that they love God, because of what He is in Himself and because of what He has done in His works of creation and redemption.

On the other hand there are those within the Church who, although they may accept the Creeds as venerable documents, reserve for themselves the right to reinterpret them. Such will still maintain that they can subscribe quite sincerely to the Creeds and Confessions of their own denomination. But the theology which underlies their writing and their preaching seems far removed from what has come to be regarded as Christian orthodoxy. They read back into the old formulas their own mid-twentieth-century theological ideas.

All this suggests that some brief study of the history and faith of the Creeds is called for, together with some assessment of recent theological trends. In attempting this latter task special attention has been paid to what has been called the New Liberalism represented by the writings of Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich and by those, such as J. A. T. Robinson, who have done much to popularize their views.

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CHAPTER I

CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS COMPARED

THE name 'creed' is derived from the opening word of the Apostolic and Nicene Creeds in their Latin version: *credo*, 'I believe.' In the Creed the believer confesses his personal faith in his God. At the same time, however, he confesses his faith within the fellowship of the Church. The Creed is much more than a purely personal confession. It is basically a confession of the whole Church. To put it in a definition: A Creed is a short, comprehensive formula of the Christian faith, expressed in language of the first person and dignified enough for frequent use in public worship.

The following elements should be noted.

1. It is a short formula, which does not elaborate on any point. And yet it is comprehensive, because it summarizes the essentials of the Christian faith, giving the whole message of Scripture, as it were, in a nutshell.

2. It is suitable for frequent use in public worship. There always has been and still is a very close relation between dogma (the Church's faith) and liturgy (the Church's worship). Historically dogma has grown out of liturgy. Long before the Christian Church fixed its faith in certain binding formulas this very same faith had already been sung or confessed in the liturgy. Take, for example, the doctrine of the divine Trinity. In the worship of the Church the Trinitarian formula was present long before it was fixed in the Trinitarian dogma. This is of very great importance for the right evaluation of the dogmas of the Church. They were never meant as abstract formulations, satisfying the mind only, but from their very first beginnings they were part of the song of praise which the Church in its worship offered to God. For the ancient Church there was no contrast whatsoever between dogma and liturgy. It could enumerate the hymn '*Te Deum Laudamus*' ('We praise thee, O God') among the Creeds! When the heart is overwhelmed by the greatness of God's love in

Jesus Christ, creed and worship, dogma and liturgy simply fuse together.¹

3. The Creed is expressed in language of the first person. Although, as we have already pointed out, it is a confession of the whole Church, it is at the same time the expression of the faith of the individual believer. It is therefore the most natural thing that the believers recite it together, each joining in with the other and yet speaking for himself. There should never be a contrast between the personal and the communal in the Church. 'The true confession is always the confession of the individual — "Blessed art thou, Simon" (Matthew 16: 17) — and the confession of all true believers. It is the confession of the individual believer and of the Church as a whole.'²

Usually the term Creed is reserved for the three main formulas of the early Church: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed. The other term which is often used for doctrinal summaries of the Church, *viz.* the term Confession, is usually applied to the theological statements that have come into existence since the days of the Reformation, both in the Churches of the Reformation itself and in the Roman Catholic Church.

There are some striking differences between the Creeds and these Confessions as to both form and contents. They can be put in the following scheme.

CREED

1. Strong emphasis on the personal element. First of all a confession of the individual believer. Hence language of the first person singular.
2. Originally designed to be incorporated into the worship of the Church.

CONFESSION

1. Of a more objective nature. Primarily a confession of a group of believers or of the Church as a whole. Hence language of the first person plural.
2. Exclusively meant as a theological document, belonging to the teaching rather than the worshipping service.

¹ At the same time the liturgy often works as a preservative with regard to the dogma. In many churches, where office-bearers and members have abandoned certain essential articles of the faith in their private religion, the liturgy of the Church goes on to proclaim these very essentials and thus keeps the Church, in its worship, in the fellowship of the Church of all ages.

² H. Sasse, in a paper on 'The Confession of Faith according to the New Testament', read for and distributed by the Australian Tyndale Fellowship.

3. Being uttered to God it speaks only of God and His truth. Human names (with the exception of Mary and Pontius Pilate) and errors are not mentioned.

4. Very short, only mentioning the essentials of the faith.

5. Historically the Creeds are notes of the unity of the Church.

3. Being uttered to one's fellow-man it emphasizes certain aspects of the truth in sharp opposition to deviating views, which are often enumerated and elaborately refuted.

4. Rather extensive, giving detailed statements of the truths only mentioned in the Creeds.

5. Historically the confessions of the Reformation and post-Reformation period are notes of the division of the Church.

The three Creeds are usually called the *Ecumenical* Creeds. This name speaks for itself. These Creeds are accepted by almost the whole Christian Church and as such are most valuable links that hold the various Christian Churches together. In actual fact, however, only one Creed is really ecumenical: the Nicene Creed. The Eastern Orthodox Churches, which regard this Creed as the infallible expression of the Christian faith, have never accepted the Apostles' Creed and the Athanasian Creed, both of which developed in the Western Church. But because the latter two are generally accepted by all Churches of the Western tradition, they too may be called ecumenical. In this tradition they are really notes of the unity of the Church in the midst of all denominational divisions.

On the other hand, the Confessions are comparatively numerous. As a result of the divisions which followed the Reformation almost every major Protestant denomination formulated its own detailed statement of belief. They have a great deal in common; but because they have helped to preserve the distinctive character of the denomination or group to which they relate we have characterized them as notes of the division of the Church. Thus the Lutheran churches have the Augsburg Confession, the Apology, Luther's Catechisms, *etc.*; Anglican churches subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles; and the Reformed Churches have produced such famous documents as the French, Scottish, Belgic and Westminster Confessions and the Heidelberg Catechism.

Within Roman Catholicism what is known as the Counter-Reformation produced the decisions of the Council of Trent (1545-63), which have determined the further doctrinal develop-

ment of this Church. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries its distinctive character was even more accentuated by the new doctrines of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (1854), Papal Infallibility (1870) and the Assumption of Mary (1950).

The distinction between the Creeds as notes of unity and the Confessions as notes of disunity should not, of course, be unduly pressed. On the one hand, there is still a great deal of unanimity in the diversity of the Confessions. This is particularly true of the Reformation Confessions, as appears from the fact that Calvin and other Reformed theologians several times subscribed to the Augsburg Confession, and that not merely for reasons of political expediency, but because they wholeheartedly agreed with its basic teachings. On the other hand, the Creeds have their place and are interpreted within the context of the whole body of teaching accepted by the various churches. The phrase 'I believe . . . the holy, catholic Church' has an altogether different meaning in Roman Catholic theology from the interpretation held by the Churches of the Reformation. Yet, in spite of these differing interpretations, there is the undeniable fact that, historically, the Creeds are truly ecumenical, accepted by all major denominations of Christendom.

CHAPTER II

THE ORIGIN OF THE CREEDS

I. THE APOSTLES' CREED

THIS Creed was *not*, as the name would suggest, made by the apostles themselves. But for many centuries the Christian Church held that it was. The Latin author Rufus tells us, in his exposition of the Creed (written c. AD 404), the following story. The apostles, having been equipped at Pentecost with the ability to speak different languages, were instructed by the Lord to go forth and preach the gospel to the several nations of the world.

'As they were therefore on the point of taking leave of each other, they first settled an agreed norm for their future preaching, so that they might not find themselves, widely separated as they would be, giving out different doctrines to the people they invited to believe in Christ. So they met together in one spot and, being filled with the Holy Spirit, compiled this brief token, as I have said, of their future preaching, each making the contribution he thought fit; and they decreed that it should be handed out as standard teaching to believers.'¹

Later on, in a sermon falsely attributed to the Church Father Augustine, the legend appears in a more developed and fanciful form.

'On the tenth day after the ascension, when the disciples were gathered together for fear of the Jews, the Lord sent the promised Paraclete upon them. At His coming they were inflamed like red-hot iron and, being filled with the knowledge of all languages, they composed the Creed. Peter said "I believe in God the Father almighty . . . maker of heaven and earth" . . . Andrew said "and in Jesus Christ His Son . . . our only Lord" . . . James said "Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit . . . born from the Virgin Mary" . . . John said "suffered under Pontius Pilate . . . was crucified, dead, and buried" . . . Thomas said "descended to hell . . . on the third day rose again from the dead" . . . James said "ascended

¹ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (1950), p. 1.

to heaven . . . sits on the right hand of God the Father almighty" . . . Philip said "thence He will come to judge the living and the dead" . . . Bartholomew said "I believe in the Holy Spirit" . . . Matthew said "the holy Catholic Church . . . the communion of saints" . . . Simon said "the remission of sins" . . . Thaddaeus said "the resurrection of the flesh" . . . Matthias said "eternal life".²

The legend became so popular that in the Middle Ages it was often given pictorial expression in psalteries, prayer books, church windows, *etc.*, each apostle being depicted with the particular article of the Creed attributed to him. In a church in Trier the twelve columns supporting the vaulting were in the fifteenth century adorned with representations of the apostles and the clauses of the Creed which they would have severally contributed.³

The motive behind this legend and its popularity is, of course, obvious. It was the strong desire to lend apostolic authority to the Church's Creed. Yet it was bound to explode in the searching light of increasing historical investigations. The first serious questioning took place at the famous Council of Florence (1438-45), where the Churches of East and West met for union negotiations. When at the beginning of these negotiations the Latin representatives invoked the Apostles' Creed, the leader of the Greeks, Marcus Eugenicus, metropolitan of Ephesus, roundly declared: 'We do not possess and have never seen this creed of the Apostles. If it had ever existed, the Book of Acts would have spoken of it in its description of the first apostolic synod at Jerusalem, to which you appeal.'⁴

The Council never solved the matter, but soon after the Council the apostolic origin of the Creed was sharply criticized by Lorenzo Valla, one of the great renaissance scholars, and Reginald Peacock, an English bishop. Their criticisms, however, were forcibly suppressed. Valla was compelled to recant and Peacock forced to resign his see.

Gradually the criticisms gained the upper hand. The Reformers were rather critical of the whole matter, but did not regard it as very important. Calvin's attitude, for example, is very clear from what he writes in his *Institutes*, after the discussion of the various articles:

² Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

³ Cf. Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁴ Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

'I call it the Apostles' Creed without concerning myself in the least as to its authorship. With considerable agreement, the old writers certainly attribute it to the apostles in common, or to be a summary of teaching transmitted by their hands and collected in good faith, and thus worthy of that title. I have no doubt that at the very beginning of the church, in the apostolic age, it was received as a public confession by the consent of all — wherever it originated. It seems not to have been privately written by any one person, since as far back as men can remember it was certainly held to be of sacred authority among all the godly. We consider to be beyond controversy the only point that ought to concern us: that the whole history of our faith is summed up in it succinctly and in definite order, and that it contains nothing that is not vouched for by genuine testimonies of Scripture. This being understood, it is pointless to trouble oneself or quarrel with anyone over the author.'⁵

Erasmus openly rejected the apostolic authorship. In the seventeenth century several scholars, among others Archbishop Ussher (1647), convincingly proved that the old legend had no historical basis whatever.

In actual fact the Apostles' Creed is the product of a long historical development. Its roots go back to the New Testament itself. True, the New Testament does not yet know creeds in the sense in which we defined the term at the outset of this monograph. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find 'fixed formulas summarizing the essentials of the Christian faith and enjoying the sanction of ecclesiastical authority'.⁶ Yet that which is basic to the Creed, namely, the personal confession of faith in God and in Jesus Christ, the Messiah sent by God, is found everywhere throughout the New Testament. The Lord Jesus Himself elicited such a confession from His disciples (Mt. 16) and, responding on behalf of all the others, Simon Peter made the first formal confession of the Christian faith: 'Thou art the Christ (*i.e.*, the Messiah), the Son of the living God.' This confession was only the beginning of a long series of similar confessions. Throughout the apostolic literature, as recorded in the New Testament, we find these confessions and undoubtedly they constitute the origins of the later Creeds.

It is extremely difficult to give an exact reconstruction of the

⁵ J. Calvin, *Institutes*, II. xvi. 19; New Translation, Volume I, p. 527.

⁶ J. N. D. Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

historical development from the personal confessions to the more or less credal confession. For a long time it was held that the development took place along the following lines. At first there was only the one-clause confession, which was purely Christological, *e.g.*, 'Jesus Christ is *Kurios*, Lord.' Under the pressure of the circumstances, especially the encounter with paganism, this developed into a two-clause confession: 'I believe in God the Father and in Jesus Christ, His Son.' And gradually the bi-partite confession would have grown into the full Trinitarian confession: 'I believe in God the Father and in Jesus Christ His Son and in the Holy Ghost.'

It is to be questioned, however, whether this picture is not too developmental. The evidence of the New Testament itself and of the post-apostolic literature seems to point in another direction. From the very start we find the three forms alongside one another. The one-clause form is found, *e.g.*, in the following passages:

'For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures . . .' (1 Cor. 15: 3ff.).⁷

'It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us' (Rom. 8: 34).

'Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God . . .' (1 Jn. 4: 2).

'Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God . . .' (1 Jn. 4: 15).

At the same time there are the bi-partite 'formulas', such as:

'For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist' (1 Cor. 8: 6).

'For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all . . .' (1 Tim. 2: 5f.).

'In the presence of God who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession . . .' (1 Tim. 6: 13).

⁷ All Scripture quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version, except where otherwise indicated.

'I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom . . .' (2 Tim. 4: 1).

And side by side with them there are Trinitarian forms:

'Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God . . .' (1 Cor. 12: 4ff.).

'But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has commissioned us; he has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee' (2 Cor. 1: 21f.).

'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all' (2 Cor. 13: 14).

'Chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood . . .' (1 Pet. 1: 2).

'Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Mt. 28: 19).

It is evident, of course, that all these forms are not yet proper Creeds. In fact, most of them do not betray any credal background. But they clearly show that there was a multiplicity of forms in the New Testament period itself, and they are undoubtedly starting-points towards a credal fixation. The fixation itself, however, did not take place before the second century.

There were several factors which promoted the development of fixed formulas.⁸ First of all, there was the more or less *stereotyped way of preaching* of those days. We find this already in the preaching of our Lord Himself. Often He spoke the same or similar words and parables on different occasions. Thus we find two different accounts of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7; Lk. 6), of the Lord's Prayer (Mt. 6; Lk. 11) and of many other sayings. The same is true of the apostolic preaching. 'There is evidence that in the primitive Church there was a corpus of distinctive Christian teaching held as a sacred deposit from God (see Acts ii. 42; Rom. vi. 17; Eph. iv. 5; Phil. ii. 16; Col. ii. 7; 2 Thes. ii. 15; and especially in the Pastoral Epistles, 1 Tim. iv. 6, vi. 20; 2 Tim. i. 13, 14, iv. 3; Tit. i. 9). This body of doctrinal and catechetical instruction, variously known as "the apostles'

⁸ Cf. O. Cullmann, *The Earliest Christian Confessions*; A. Richardson, *Creeds in the Making*; E. Routley, *Creeds and Confessions*.

teaching", "the word of life", "the pattern of doctrine", the apostolic "traditions", "the deposit", the "sound words", formed the basis of Christian ministry, and was to be held firm (Jude 3; and especially in Heb. iii. 1, iv. 14, x. 23), handed on to other believers as the apostolic men themselves had received it (see 1 Cor. xi. 23ff., xv. 3, where the verbs "received", "delivered", are technical terms for the transmission of authoritative teaching . . .), and utilized in the public proclamation of the gospel.⁹

Secondly, there was the need of an appropriate *liturgy* for the public worship of the young Church, especially with regard to baptism and the Lord's supper. In the New Testament itself we can already discover the early beginnings of such a liturgy, in the form of ceremonial declarations of the faith (*cf.* Acts 8: 37 — even if not belonging to the original text, it is a very old interpolation, going back to the early period of the Church; Rom. 10: 9), hymnic compositions (*cf.* Phil. 2: 5-11; Eph. 5: 14; 1 Tim. 3: 16), liturgical prayers (*cf.* 'Maranatha', 'Our Lord, come', 1 Cor. 12: 3; 16: 22; Rev. 22: 20, *etc.*).

Thirdly, those coming from outside had to be instructed. No one could enter into the Christian community through baptism without knowing what he believed and making a confession of his faith. A clear example is the very early interpolation in Acts 8, the story of the eunuch. When they come to some water, the eunuch says: 'See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?' According to the interpolation Philip answers: 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' Then the eunuch answers: 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.' For the development of the Creeds the so-called *baptismal interrogations*, to which the candidate for baptism had to respond, are very important. In their very structure, which was Trinitarian, they are the antecedents to the later Creeds. In Justin Martyr's church (c. 100-165) the questions asked were the following:

'Dost thou believe in the Father and Lord God of the universe?
Dost thou believe in Jesus Christ our Saviour, Who was crucified
under Pontius Pilate?

Dost thou believe in the Holy Spirit, Who spake by the prophets?'¹

⁹ R. P. Martin in *The New Bible Dictionary* (1962), p. 274, s.v. 'Creed'.

¹ Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

In the church of Irenaeus (c. 130-c. 200) the questions ran along these lines :

' Dost thou believe in God the Father?
 Dost thou believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God,
 Who was incarnate,
 and died,
 and rose again?
 Dost thou believe in the Holy Spirit of God?'²

Finally, there was the factor of *heresy*. This factor has often been overestimated, as if almost every expanded clause was due to threatening heresies and intended to rebut them. This is certainly contrary to fact. Many of the more elaborate affirmations were already in the Creeds, long before they became controversial. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that in some cases heresies caused the insertion of a new clause or the expansion of an existing one. For example, the insertion of the adjective ' holy ' in the article of the Church and of the expression ' the resurrection of the flesh ' resulted from anti-heretical motives.

The whole process took considerable time. During the second and third century we see the primitive confessions slowly developing into fully-fledged Trinitarian Creeds. One of the striking features is that at first there was no rigid unity, either in form or in content. Several Creeds developed side by side in various places. The churches of Rome, Antioch, Caesarea and many other places, each had their own Creed. By the end of the second century in Rome we already find the so-called Old Roman Creed. Dr. Kelly gives the following translation :

' I believe in God the Father almighty;
 and in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord,
 Who was born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
 Who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried,
 on the third day rose again from the dead,
 ascended to heaven,
 sits at the right hand of the Father,
 whence He will come to judge the living and the dead;
 and in the Holy Spirit,
 the holy Church,
 the remission of sins,
 the resurrection of the flesh.'³

² Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

³ Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

How this and other similar Creeds developed into our present Apostles' Creed, we do not know with certainty. One of the reasons of this uncertainty is the so-called *Disciplina Arcani*, or Rule of Secrecy. This is the term used for the convention according to which inner mysteries of the Church, in particular the sacraments of baptism and Lord's supper, were treated as hidden from the uninitiated and disclosed to the instructed faithful only. One of the mysteries closely linked up with baptism was the Creed. 'As late as the middle of the fifth century the historian Sozomen was dissuaded by pious friends from writing out the text of the Nicene Creed, "which only the initiated and the mystagogues have the right to recite and hear". He continued: "For it is not suitable that any of the uninitiated should light upon this document."'⁴

Our present Apostles' Creed obtained its definite form probably in the late sixth or early seventh century. As far as we can ascertain, it originated north of the Alps, and most likely it was due to the influence of Charlemagne that it became the official Creed of the whole Western Church. By several measures he pushed the idea of uniformity forward, finally resulting in a firm establishment of the present Creed in the Church.

This short historical survey clearly shows that the name Apostles' Creed, taken in a literal sense, is not correct. And yet we must immediately add that, from another point of view, the name is not at all incorrect. For in this Creed we do find the *teaching* of the apostles. It is indeed a faithful summary of the apostolic doctrine, as it has been handed down through the centuries.

II. THE NICENE CREED

The Apostles' Creed was never accepted in the East. In the Eastern Church we can observe a different development, which eventually led to the acceptance of the Nicene Creed as *the* Creed of the Church.

The historical background is to be found in the heresy of Arius, priest in Alexandria, shortly after AD 300. Arius taught that Jesus Christ was not the eternal, only begotten Son of God in the sense of the Trinitarian doctrine. According to him Jesus

⁴ Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

Christ was the Word, a created being, which God called into existence before all times in order to create all other creatures through him. The Word himself was not truly God, but stood on the side of the creation. Only in a metaphorical sense could he be called the Son of God.

At first Arius' teaching was widely accepted. The doctrine of the Trinity is difficult and this seemed to be a very rational solution. In addition, Arius was a master in popularizing his view by preparing a collection of popular songs containing the new doctrine. In particular in Palestine and Syria he found many followers, even among the bishops. On the other hand, there was strong opposition to his teaching. Among others, Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, vigorously opposed it. The controversy ran so high that it threatened to disrupt the unity of the Church. When Constantine became master of the Empire (AD 323), he found it necessary to deal with the dispute, and after some vain attempts to settle the matter by correspondence he decided to summon a general Council. The Council met at Nicea in AD 325. After heated debates the Council decided against Arius and prepared a Creed condemning his teaching. Taking as a basis one of the existing local creeds it extended this with several anti-Arian expressions. In the second article it added to the words 'the Son of God' the following explanatory expressions:

'begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father.'⁵

The last expression in particular (Greek, *homo-ousios*, 'of the same substance') became the pass-word of orthodoxy.

Even after the Council the controversy went on. The Arians and many semi-Arians were not willing to abandon the condemned views. In the new controversy Athanasius, the successor of Alexander in the see of Alexandria, became the champion of orthodoxy. It was not before the second general Council, held in Constantinople (AD 381), that the matter was finally settled. At this Council the original Creed of Nicea was reaffirmed and slightly extended again. This is the form in which we now use this Creed:

⁵ Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

'And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God, Begotten, not made, Being of one substance with the Father (*homo-ousios*) . . .'

III. THE ATHANASIAN CREED

Again we must begin by saying that strictly speaking this name is not correct. As the Apostles' Creed was not composed by the apostles and the Nicene Creed in its present form is not from the Council of Nicea, so the Athanasian Creed does not directly originate from the Church Father Athanasius. This is clear from the fact that it supposes heresies which arose after the death of Athanasius. Furthermore, it was originally written in Latin, whereas Athanasius was Greek speaking.

Actually we do not know when, or where, or by whom it was written. Most likely it originated in southern France and developed from certain expositions of the Apostles' Creed. It consists of two parts. The first deals with the doctrine of the Trinity, emphasizing the equality of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the double procession of the Spirit, namely, from the Father and the Son (the so-called '*filioque*' clause). The second part deals with the doctrine of Christ, teaching the union of the two natures, divine and human, in the one Person.

This Creed has never had equal authority with the other Creeds in the Church. No doubt this is mainly due to the fact that it lacks the simplicity, spontaneity and majesty of the other Creeds. Though never officially accepted by any Council, it gradually obtained a place in the Western Church, and for centuries it has been the custom of the Roman and Anglican Churches to recite it in public worship on certain solemn occasions.

CHAPTER III

THE FAITH OF THE CREEDS

WHAT is the content of the Creeds? The answer can be brief. The Creeds contain a summary of the Christian faith. They do not give detailed statements on any point, but mention the essentials only. And in doing this they do not offer us profound speculations of divine mysteries, but they simply mention a long series of divine acts. In the first article they speak of God the Father and the act of creation; in the second of God the Son and the act of redemption; in the third of God the Holy Spirit and the act of applying the redemption accomplished by the Son.

THE HEART OF CHRISTIAN CONFESSION

There can be no doubt that the centre of the Creeds, both literally and theologically, is the second article that deals with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became man. Although in reciting the Creed we start with the first article, yet we may never detach it from the second. The article of faith in God the Father and His work 'is not a sort of "forecourt" of the Gentiles, a realm in which Christians and Jews and Gentiles, believers and unbelievers are beside one another'¹ as if they all to some extent would agree at this point. The Creeds do not speak of creation as a generally accepted fact which would be evident apart from the special revelation in Jesus Christ, but they speak of it as an act of God, the Father of *Jesus Christ*! In other words, the first article has to be read in the light of the second. The second article is the heart of the Christian confession, 'the fountain of light by which the other two articles are lit'.²

In the second article in particular we find a strong emphasis on the historical facts of Christ's life. In the Apostles' Creed we read: 'I believe . . . in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord,

Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
Born of the Virgin Mary,

¹ K. Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (1958), p. 50.

² K. Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
 Was crucified,
 dead,
 and buried,
 He descended into hell;
 The third day he rose again from the dead,
 He ascended into heaven,
 And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
 From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.'

And in the Nicene Creed we read: 'I believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God . . .

Who for us men, and for our salvation came down from heaven,
 And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary,
 And was made man,
 And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate.
 He suffered and was buried,
 And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures,
 And ascended into heaven,
 And sitteth on the right hand of the Father.
 And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick
 and the dead'

REDEMPTION A HISTORICAL FACT

This emphasis of the Creeds on the facts of Christ's life is of the greatest importance. It clearly proves that the early Church regarded our redemption as a historical fact that took place once for all on a certain day in the history of this world. And it is beyond doubt that this is in full harmony with the teaching of the New Testament itself.

In fact, at this point we find the great difference between the Christian religion and other faiths. In all other religions (with the exception of Judaism, which is based on the Old Testament) redemption is basically a matter of knowledge. This is again linked up with their view of man and sin. Man is first of all regarded as a rational being who through his reason is able to live according to the divine rules. But he sins, due to ignorance or incorrect knowledge. Consequently, and correspondingly, redemption is basically a matter of more, or better, knowledge. The classic example of this intellectual religion is found in Greek philosophy. Here religion is entirely a matter of insight or wisdom, and redemption means that man, through inner illumi-

nation, obtains this insight, so that he is able to keep his body under control.

The Christian religion, on the other hand, is historical through and through. At this point it is a direct continuation of the prophetic conception of revelation, redemption and history as we find it in the Old Testament. Already on the first pages of the Old Testament the relation between God and man is seen in fully historical terms. In the first chapters of Genesis we find the record of the creation of the universe and of man. In both cases the divine act of creation is thoroughly historical. The universe is not eternal and man is not an emanation of the deity, but both are called into existence by the word of God's mouth. Then, in Genesis 3, we find the story of man's Fall. This Fall is not merely a matter of wrong insight, inherent in man's finite nature (man had the right insight, due to divine revelation; *cf.* Gn. 2: 16, 17), but it is a matter of wilful rebellion against God, his Maker. Sin is a historical act! And so is the divine redemption, which sets in immediately after the Fall. We read that God comes to man and promises him redemption (Gn. 3: 8ff.). This redemption will be worked out in the historical struggle between the seed of the woman and the serpent: 'He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel' (Gn. 3: 15).

Further on in the Old Testament we find everything concentrated on the history of Israel. This history is recorded not because it is all that interesting if regarded merely as national history, but because in this history God's great redemptive acts take place. The central fact in the history of the Old Testament is the Exodus, the redemption of Israel out of the house of bondage in Egypt. And again we must note that it is a historical fact, then and there. In a sense the entire Old Testament is nothing else than a working out of this central fact. The prophets refer to it again and again. But they also point to the future. The Exodus is not yet the real redemption. In itself it was no more than a national affair and as such no more than symbolical of the spiritual redemption that will take place in the future, when the Messiah comes. To this messianic future the prophets continually point.

The joyful message of the New Testament is that this promise of real redemption has been fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. His was a fully historical appearance. He was born at a particular time and in a particular

place ('born of the Virgin Mary'). He performed His ministry at a particular time and in a particular place (Cana, Capernaum, Jericho, Jerusalem, *etc.*). He suffered and died at a particular time and in a particular place ('under Pontius Pilate'). Of course, the presence of the names of Mary and Pilate is more than an indication of time only. Mary's name first of all proves that Jesus Christ was truly human. Pilate is the judge representing God.³ Yet both names are also indications of a definite period in history.

But *why* all this emphasis on the historical character of redemption? The answer is: because man is a 'historical' being, from the beginning placed in a historical relationship with God. Therefore his sin was not a mere lack of knowledge, but a historical act. He rebelled against God, at a particular time and in a particular place, in wilful disobedience rejecting God's love and law. And this 'historical' sin, followed by innumerable acts of a similar nature, can only be made undone, or better, atoned for, by a fully 'historical' redemption.

THE NATURE OF THE BIBLE

All this also explains the typical character of the Bible. This book is quite different from other 'holy' books. All the others are rather speculative or moralizing treatises. Whether you take the Koran or the Upanishads, Buddhist texts or books of Chinese wisdom, they are all basically unhistorical, in spite of the many historical references that may be found in some of them. 'Revelation' is a mere communication of speculative or moral knowledge, and man's response in religion is a mere matter of knowledge and corresponding behaviour. This is fundamentally true even of seemingly historical narratives, such as the ancient Babylonian creation epic and flood story, for here and in other similar stories history is not real history, but only myth. That is, it is a historical description, in the garment of historical fact, of a non-historical event in the realm of nature or ethics.

The Bible, on the other hand, is a thoroughly historical book. The first part, the Old Testament, consists mainly of historical

³ This is the interpretation which the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the Reformation Confessions, gives of the words 'under Pontius Pilate'.

Question. Why did He suffer under Pontius Pilate as judge?

Answer. That He, though innocent, might be condemned by a temporal judge, and thereby free us from the severe judgment of God, to which we were subject.

books, giving a description of the early history of mankind and the subsequent history of Israel. As we have said already, the latter is given not because the history of Israel, from the viewpoint of the secular historian, is so extremely important and interesting, but because Israel is the elect nation, in whose history God is at work in redemption and judgment, judgment and redemption. The second part, the New Testament, starts with the Gospels, which contain the life and history of Jesus Christ, followed by a short account of the early beginnings of the new elect 'nation', the Church. After that we find a collection of apostolic Epistles, written to several congregations of the new Church. These Epistles are of a more doctrinal and ethical nature, but throughout them all we find that their one common basis is the same set of facts concerning Christ's life (*cf.* 1 Cor. 1: 23; 2: 2; 15: 1ff.; Gal. 4: 4f.; 1 Pet. 2: 21ff.; 1 Jn. 1: 1-3; 4: 2f., 9f., *etc.* Compare also for the early apostolic preaching Acts 2: 22ff., 32f., 36; 3: 13ff., *etc.*).

In the Creeds the Church followed this example and placed all emphasis on the historicity of the redemption in Jesus Christ, over against all possible heresies which wanted to evaporate the historical character of the gospel and make it a timeless philosophical system (*cf.* Gnosticism and especially Docetism).⁴ In praise and adoration the Church sang:

'I believe in God the Father, the Creator.'

This divine act of creation is the basic fact that forms the foundation of all further history. Indeed, this too is a 'historical' fact. It happened in time and it was also the beginning of all time.

'And I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only begotten Son,
 who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
 born of the virgin Mary,
 suffered under Pontius Pilate,
 was crucified, dead and buried,
 descended into hell;
 the third day He rose again from the dead,
 He ascended into heaven,
 and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
 from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.'

⁴ See *The New Bible Dictionary* (1962), s.v. 'Gnosticism'.

We should note that perfect tenses are used in all these clauses, with the exception of the last two. All these facts are truly historical facts that happened once in the past, but their impact is still being felt.

‘And I believe in the Holy Spirit.’

He is thought of as the Sanctifier and Perfecter. In this part of the Creed the emphasis is also on history. But now it is not so much on historical facts of the past as on historical realities of the present. So we continue, ‘I believe a holy, catholic Church, the communion of saints, baptism (Nicene Creed), the forgiveness of sins.’ Finally this is followed by the still-to-be-accomplished fact of the ‘resurrection of the dead’ and the reality which looks beyond the history of this world to the world to come, ‘life everlasting’.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CREEDS TODAY

All this is not mere theory, but of the greatest importance for our own personal life. If redemption is not a historical fact, we are not redeemed. Take, for example, the Exodus. An idea could not redeem Israel. It would not have been of much help, if some philosopher had come to the Israelites and told them: ‘You have a wrong view of the situation. You are not slaves at all. These Egyptians are not hard and cruel. It is only imagination on your side. You should see the matter in its right perspective, take an existential decision and you will find out that in reality you are as free as birds in the air.’ I am sure the Israelites would have laughed such a ‘preacher’ away! The message which Moses, God’s prophet, brought was entirely different. ‘Indeed, you are in sore bondage now, but the Lord, Yahweh, is your God. He is ready to lead you out with a mighty hand and He will show His power to Pharaoh, your oppressor, and to his servants.’ And so it happened!

The same is true of the great redemption brought about by Jesus Christ. If it were a mere idea, it could not really save us. For our sin is not a mere idea, but a grim reality. Guilt is not a deception, but a terrible fact. Only a truly historical redemption can save us. Only by such a redemption are we really and truly saved. We should never, under any circumstances, give this up.

CHAPTER IV

THE TRINITARIAN FRAMEWORK

WE have already noted that the Creeds set their confession of God as the Author of the history of redemption within a Trinitarian framework:

I believe in God the Father . . .
and in Jesus Christ, his only-begotten Son . . .
and in the Holy Spirit.

This was not just an incidental matter, but it expressed the deep conviction that this Triune Being of God, as revealed in Scripture, was the very foundation and 'explanation' of the whole history of redemption. For this reason we have to give careful attention to it in our story of the Creeds. At the same time, we should from the outset remember that it is expressed in the form of a personal confession. In the Creeds the believers speak about God not in a scientific, detached, objectivizing way, but they confess. 'We believe in this Triune God', they say, 'we trust in Him and expect everything from Him, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'

It has often been asserted that this doctrine of the Trinity is a purely speculative, theological hypothesis of later centuries, completely foreign to the original gospel. Neither Jesus Himself, nor the apostles, it is said, would have known it. The Christians of the first generation would not have understood it at all, but would rather have been horrified by this theory.

Perhaps there is some truth in these statements. It is safe to say that the Christians of the first generation did not yet clearly see this truth. It is also true that neither Jesus Himself nor any of the apostles ever gave an explicit doctrine of the Trinity. This doctrine is the fruit of historical development.¹ But this does not mean at all that it is false or unscriptural. One of the Reformation Confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), in its discussion of the Apostles' Creed, asks the questions: 'Since there is but one divine Being, why do you speak of three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?' (Question 25). The answer is: 'Because God

¹ See *The New Bible Dictionary* (1962), s.v. 'Trinity', pp. 1299f.

has so revealed Himself in His Word that these three distinct Persons are the one, true and eternal God.'

BIBLICAL DATA : THE OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

When we turn to Scripture, we first of all have to give attention to the Old Testament background of this doctrine. One of the most basic statements of the Old Testament is that of Deuteronomy 6: 4-9.

'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and on your gates.'

Together with some other passages (Dt. 11: 13-21; Nu. 15: 37-41) this became the Creed of the Jews, called the 'Shema' (after the opening word of Dt. 6: 4 — *Shema*, 'Hear'). The recitation of this 'creed' became part of the regular daily ritual of the Temple and later on the custom was taken over by the synagogue. According to Deuteronomy 6 these words were to be constantly in the Israelite's memory. They were to be impressed upon the young and to be recited in morning and evening worship. Pious Jews took the words of verses 8 and 9 so literally that they were wearing the so-called 'tephilin' in a forehead-band and had these words inscribed on the doorposts in the form of the 'mezuzah' (the glass, wood, or metal cylinder containing the first two passages of the Shema).²

Driver notes that the Shema expresses 'the fundamental truth of Israel's religion, the uniqueness and unity of God, and the fundamental duty founded upon it, viz. the devotion to him of the Israelite's whole being'. In our present discussion the fundamental truth about God's uniqueness especially requires our attention. Literally the Hebrew text reads: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.' For the last word the Hebrew uses the numeral 'one' (*'echād*). What does this qualification

² Cf. A. C. Bouquet, *Sacred Books of the World* (Pelican, 1955), pp. 262ff.

mean when applied to God? According to many scholars it implies a sharp contrast between Yahweh, the Lord of Israel, and the Baals. The Canaanites distinguished several Baals side by side: the Baal of Hazor alongside with the Baal of Maon, *etc.* (more or less similar to the Roman Catholic distinction of our Lady of Lourdes, Fatima, *etc.*). Over against this the Lord of Israel is one and the same, always and everywhere. It is quite likely that this is indeed implied in the expression of Deuteronomy 6: 4. But we believe that there is much more in it. The numeral used often has a much more pregnant meaning in the Old Testament. Professor A. van Selms, of the University of Pretoria, South Africa, has pointed to the following data. Abraham, the ancestor of Israel, is more than once called, '*echād*, 'one'. In Ezekiel 33: 24 we read that the remnant that stayed in Judaea after 568 BC (the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians) used to say to one another: 'Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many. . . .' Abraham was but '*echād*, a 'single individual' for he had no male descendants. That this is the meaning is also clear from Isaiah 51: 2 (*cf.* Heb. 11: 12) and Genesis 19: 9 (Lot had daughters, but no sons; therefore he was still '*echād*, a single individual). But the numeral also implied that such a man had no brothers (as Lot) or lived far away from his brothers (as Abraham). This is clearly expressed in Ecclesiastes 4: 8. 'A person who has no one (*lit.* 'there is one and there is no second'), either son or brother.' Applying this pregnant meaning of the numeral to Deuteronomy 6: 4 we read: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one' (*RSV mg.*), one single individual who has no relations. How different was Israel's God here from all the other gods! The heathen all had large families of gods. Every god had parents, brothers and sons. Every god lived in the midst of his family. Against this background Moses, in the name of Yahweh, proclaims: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, absolutely one. There is no other god beside Him. He does not fit into any of the existing theogonies. He is absolutely single. He is God and He alone.³

In a much later period of Israel's history God repeats this through the mouth of Isaiah. At that time syncretism was

³ *Cf.* also G. A. F. Knight, *A Biblical Approach to the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1957), esp. pp. 16f.

threatening on all sides. But to Israel comes the voice of the Lord:

'Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no saviour' (Is. 43: 10, 11).

'I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god . . . Fear not, nor be afraid. . . . Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any' (44: 6, 8).

'I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God . . . I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe, I am the Lord, who do all these things' (45: 5ff.; cf. 14, 18, 21, 22; 46: 9; 48: 12).

BIBLICAL DATA: THE TEACHING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament we find this very same teaching in many passages. As far as this is concerned, Christianity is not at all a new religion but a direct continuation of the Old Testament. In Mark 12 we read that the Lord Jesus, in answer to the question of one of the scribes: Which commandment is the first of all?, quotes the opening words of the Shema:

'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength' (Mk. 12: 29f.).

No doubt Jesus Himself had learnt these words as a child, at home and in the synagogue. In James 2: 19 there is a clear reminder of this most fundamental article of the Jewish faith: 'You believe that God is one; you do well. . . .' Similar echoes are heard in the following passages:

"There is no God but one." For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth — as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords" — yet for us there is one God, the Father . . . (1 Cor. 8: 4ff.).

'God is one' (Gal. 3: 20).

'For there is one God' (1 Tim. 2: 5).

(Cf. also Jas. 4: 12; Mk. 10: 18; Mt. 19: 17.)

But in the New Testament we also find an entirely new development. It contains the glorious message that Jesus, the Rabbi of Nazareth, is the Christ, the Messiah promised by God. The Gospels describe His birth, ministry, suffering, death and resur-

rection, and in doing this they have but one aim: 'These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah), the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name' (Jn. 20: 31). Here Jesus is called 'the Christ (Messiah), the Son of God'. The last term has to be taken in a very specific sense. From the Old Testament the Jews were accustomed to this term. Sometimes Israel as a whole was called the son of God (Ex. 4: 22; Je. 31: 9; Ho. 11: 1); sometimes the name was applied to officials among Israel, especially to the promised king of the house of David (2 Sa. 7: 14; Ps. 89: 27); sometimes angels (Jb. 1: 6) or believers (Gn. 6: 2; Ps. 73: 15) were called by this name. But when the term is used of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, it has a much deeper sense. From His own mouth the disciples had heard His claim to be the Son of God in a unique sense. More than once He had openly stated: I and the Father are one; and in their personal contact with Him the disciples experienced the truth of this statement. Before the resurrection, however, this experience was only faintly recognized and often blurred by a complete lack of understanding. Only after the resurrection were their eyes fully opened. According to the record, the first one to express this new recognition was Thomas, the man who had most stubbornly refused to accept the miracle of the resurrection. When in the second appearance to the disciples his unbelief was challenged in the very words he had previously used, he fell down at the Master's feet and exclaimed: 'My Lord and my God!' (Jn. 20: 28).

Throughout the apostolic literature we find clear evidence that Thomas was only the mouthpiece of all the others. To the Romans Paul writes that Jesus Christ was the Son, 'who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead' (Rom. 1: 3, 4). In the same Epistle he writes that Christ is 'of the fathers' 'concerning the flesh', but that He is also 'over all, God blessed for ever' (Rom. 9: 5, RV; cf. also RSV, marginal note). To Titus he writes about 'the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ' (Tit. 2: 13). Likewise the apostle John repeatedly speaks of Him as the 'only begotten Son of God' (cf. Jn. 1: 14, 18; 3: 16, etc.) and calls Him 'the Word' that was 'in the beginning with God'. 'And the Word was God' (Jn. 1: 1). Constantly He is called Lord (Greek: *kurios*), the name used in the Septuagint for Yahweh,

and often the New Testament ascribes to Him what the Old Testament explicitly ascribed to Yahweh Himself (*e.g.* Rom. 10: 13 compared with Joel 2: 32). But it is not simply a matter of some titles or epithets. Throughout the whole New Testament divine perfections, works and glory are attributed to Him. Through Him all things were created (Jn. 1: 3; Col. 1: 16; Heb. 1: 2) and in Him all things hold together (Col. 1: 17). The most striking fact is perhaps that He has the right and power to forgive sins! To the paralytic He says: 'My son, your sins are forgiven' (Mk. 2: 5). The reaction of the unbelieving scribes is: 'It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?' (2: 7). Every believer fully agrees with the latter part of this statement. Indeed, God alone can forgive sins. And therefore the believer falls down before Jesus Christ and exclaims with Thomas: 'My Lord and my God!'

THE CHURCH'S REFLECTION

It is obvious that, against the background of the strictly monotheistic teaching of the Old Testament, this recognition of Jesus Christ as the Son of God in such a unique sense was bound to lead to a more profound and differentiating reflection on the Being of God.

In the New Testament we find hardly any serious attempt towards such a reflection. All the necessary data are present, but they are not worked out in a systematic way. But after the death of the apostles the Church was soon compelled to think this mystery through. It was in particular the pressure of heresies that forced the Church to formulate its faith on this point.

On the one hand, there was the heresy of Sabellius and his followers. They recognized that Jesus Christ is fully God, but according to them He was only a certain manifestation of the one God; not a mode of being, but only a mode of appearance. (Hence the other name used for this heresy: Modalism.) The one God would have revealed Himself in various successive manifestations: in the Old Testament as the Father, in Jesus Christ as the Son, after Pentecost as the Holy Spirit.

After the condemnation of Sabellianism by the Church, Arius sought the solution in another direction. As we have already seen, Arius denied that Jesus Christ is truly God. He admitted that Jesus had a unique place, having been created before all

times and being the One through whom all other things were created, yet He was not God in the unique sense in which the New Testament speaks of His deity.

Although these two heresies were quite different in their doctrinal presentation, they were one in their rationalistic approach, and in both cases the solution was that the Trinity was sacrificed to the Unity. Sabellianism tried to maintain the oneness of God by robbing the three Persons of the Godhead of Their independence. It metamorphosed the Persons into three successive modes of revelation of the same divine Being. Arius tried to arrive at the same end by placing the Son and the Holy Spirit outside the Deity. The Son was not more than a mere creature, albeit of a unique nature, and the Holy Spirit was not more than an impersonal, divine power.

The Church could not accept either of the two solutions, because in both cases the Person of Jesus Christ as depicted and confessed in the New Testament was destroyed. According to Sabellius Jesus Christ was not an independent Person any more, whereas Jesus Himself so clearly distinguished between Himself and the Father. According to Arius Jesus Christ was not really God, whereas the whole New Testament testifies that He is God, really and truly God. In opposition to these heresies the Church came to its doctrine of the Trinity. There is but one God. 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.' And yet there are three Persons in this one God: the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Son and the Holy Spirit are fully of one substance (*homo-ousios*) with the Father. As the Athanasian Creed expresses it:

'The Catholick Faith is this:

That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son: and another of the Holy Ghost.

But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal.

Such as the Father is, such is the Son: and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate: and the Holy Ghost uncreate.

The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible: and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible.

The Father eternal, the Son eternal: and the Holy Ghost eternal.

And yet there are not three eternal: but one eternal. . . .
 So the Father is God, the Son is God: and the Holy Ghost is God.
 And yet they are not three Gods: but one God.'

This is but a stammering attempt to express something of the inexpressible. One divine Being, consisting in three Persons, each Person having the fulness of the divine Essence. It is not so that the Father has a third of the divine Essence, the Son another third and the Holy Spirit the last third. That would mean three semi-gods. But the Father has the fulness of the divine Essence, and the Son has the fulness and the Holy Spirit has the fulness. And yet there are not three Gods, but one God. Here all our human arithmetic breaks down. One and one and one does not make three, but one.

At the same time the Church clearly repudiated all Sabellianism or Modalism. There is a definite personal distinction of 'being' between the three divine Persons. To quote the Athanasian Creed again:

'The Father is made of none: neither created, nor begotten.
 The Son is of the Father alone: not made, nor created, but begotten.
 The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son: neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.
 So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons: one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts.
 And in this Trinity none is afore, or after another: none is greater, or less than another;
 But the whole three Persons are co-eternal together: and co-equal.
 So that in all things, as is aforesaid: the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped.'

Of course, this too is but a defective formulation. The Church has never claimed that it has 'caught' the Essence of the divine Being in these formulations. 'The church fathers always acknowledged this. For example, they held that the term "persons" which was used to designate the three ways of existence in the divine Being did not do justice to the truth in the matter but served as an aid towards maintaining the truth and cutting off error. The word was chosen not because it was accurate in every respect, but because no other and better was to be found. In this matter again the word is far behind the thought, and the thought is far behind the actuality.'⁴ Or to put it in Augustine's

⁴ H. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (1956), p. 158.

words: We speak of it only because we cannot remain silent!

A MYSTERY

The Church has always called this doctrine a mystery. This is not an escape into irrationalism, as those who deny this doctrine on rational grounds often say. It is a recognized fact that everywhere at the borders of our existence and knowledge we meet with mysteries. However many problems may have been solved by science, the deepest dimensions of life and death remain mysterious in their nature and defy all our searching out. How true, then, this must be of God, who is the Creator of all things and as such is far beyond all our thinking. In the Talmud we read the story of a Rabbi who was in conversation with the Emperor. The latter demanded 'Show me your God'. When the Rabbi replied that this was impossible because God is too great to be seen by man, the Emperor repeated his demand, threatening to take the Rabbi's life if he persisted in his refusal. Thereupon the Rabbi consented to comply with the Emperor's wish. He begged him to come outside. 'Would you be so kind as to look at the sun?' he asked. 'I cannot do that', the Emperor answered, 'it would completely blind me.' Then the Rabbi said: 'But if you cannot look at the sun, one of God's creatures, without incurring serious bodily harm, how then would you be able to see God and live?'

Indeed God's Being is far beyond all our comprehension. The apostle Paul expressed it in these words: God is 'the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see' (1 Tim. 6: 15, 16). His Being is one great mystery. Once again, this has nothing to do with an escape into irrationalism. The doctrine of the Trinity is neither anti-rational, nor irrational, but supra-rational. By faith we ascend to a level which cannot be reached by the inherent powers of reason. The great philosopher Kant has decisively proved that reason itself can never go beyond the phenomenal world. It can never climb up to God. If there is to be knowledge of God, it can come to us only by revelation on God's side. And when we accept this revelation in humble faith, we accept it with all our faculties, reason included. We meditate and reflect upon this revelation and discover that it is fully rational. Only it is a rationality on a different, higher level: the level of divine self-

revelation. On this level there is no contrast whatsoever between mystery and rationality, for the believing reason starts with acknowledging the mystery and its only aim is to reflect upon the mystery as a mystery of divine self-revelation.

THE RICHES OF THIS DOCTRINE

Taken by itself the doctrine of the Trinity sounds very abstract: Three in One, One in Three. It almost seems to be a formula of higher mathematics. We should not be put off, however, by the abstract formulation, but rather see the reality indicated by the formula.

The doctrine of the Trinity means that there is in God a fulness of life. Indeed, God is One; but it is not 'a contentless unity, not a solitariness, but a fulness of life and strength. It comprises difference, or distinction, or diversity. It is that diversity which comes to expression in the three persons or modes of being of God. These three persons are not merely three modes of revelation. They are modes of being. Father, Son, and Spirit share one and the same Divine nature and characteristics. They are one being. Nevertheless each has His own name, His own particular characteristic, by which He is distinguished from the others. The Father alone has fatherhood, the Son alone has generation, and the Spirit alone possesses the quality of proceeding from both'.⁵

Because of this fulness in God, there was no inner necessity for God to create the world. God did not need the creation to remove His solitariness. In Himself there is an eternal fulness of personal relationships. Yet in His sovereign freedom He decided from all eternity to create this world, and the existence of this world is from beginning to end linked up with His own Triune Being.

As creatures we owe our *existence* to God. 'I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.' The ground of our existence lies in the creative act of God. He who has life in Himself (Jn. 5: 26), has given life to us and sustains it through His almighty power. The Bible ascribes this to the Father. This does not mean that the Son and the Holy Spirit have no part in this work. In this respect there is no separation between the three Persons of the divine Being. All God's works,

⁵ Bavinck, *op. cit.*, pp. 158, 159.

creation, reconciliation and glorification, are works of the three Persons. 'Before creation He consulted with wisdom (Job 28 : 20ff., and Prov. 8 : 22ff.). And in time He created all things through the Word which was with God in the beginning and which was God (John 1 : 1-3; see also Eph. 3 : 9; Col. 1 : 16; and Heb. 1 : 2), and He created them in the Spirit who searches out the depths of God, gives life to His creatures, and garnishes the heavens (Job 26 : 13; 33 : 4; and 1 Cor. 2 : 10).⁶ Thus the work of creation is indeed an act of the Triune God. What the Athanasian Creed says of the mystery of the Trinity itself, is also true of the works: 'None is afore, or after other; none is greater, or less than another.' It is God who creates: God the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit.

We also owe our *salvation* to God. 'I believe in . . . Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God . . . Who for us men, and for our salvation came down from heaven . . . And was made man.' Again we speak of God, for Jesus Christ is, as the Nicene Creed says: 'God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God, . . . of one substance with the Father.' This is not an abstract playing with words, but is a statement about God, as He was made man. The Christology leads to the heart of the doctrine of the Trinity, for it tells us that God is more than Creator only: God Himself is also our Redeemer. And again there is no separation between the Persons. Our redemption is not the work of the Son alone. At this point too we must say: It is the Father through the Son. (Cf. John 3 : 16; Romans 5 : 8; and especially 2 Corinthians 5 : 18, 19, 'God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself . . . God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself'.)

Finally, we also owe our *glorification* to God. 'I believe in the Holy Spirit.' Again we speak of God, the very same God, but now as the third Person in the divine Being, the Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son, in an eternal procession from Father to Son and from Son to Father. And again it is not an abstraction we are speaking of, but it is a statement that bristles with life. For God the Holy Spirit is 'the Lord and giver of life' (Nicene Creed). He is the Giver of life in the act of creation, as Job confesses: 'The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life' (Jb. 33 : 4; cf. Ps.

⁶ Bavinck, *op. cit.*, pp. 168, 169.

33: 6). Yet this is not what we have in mind here. In the third article we speak of God the Holy Spirit as He applies the work of God the Son to our communal life (' I believe . . . the holy, catholic church, the communion of the saints ') and our personal life (' I believe . . . the forgiveness of sins '), and as He one day will bring us to eternal glory (' I believe . . . the resurrection of the flesh and the life everlasting '). In this article too there is no separation whatsoever. It is the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit.

How excitingly wide the Christian faith is. ' The confession of the church comprehends the whole of world history. In that confession are included the moments of the creation and the fall, reconciliation and forgiveness, renewal and restoration. It is a confession which proceeds from the triune God and which leads everything back to Him.'⁷

How comforting and rich the Christian faith is. On all sides we are surrounded by God. Before, under, over and after our life God stands, God in the fulness of His divine Being, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

⁷ Bavinck, *op. cit.*, pp. 144, 145.

CHAPTER V

THE CREEDS AND THE REFORMATION

DURING many centuries the Creeds were held in high esteem. In the Middle Ages the Creeds were one of the fixed elements in the catechetical instruction by the Church. Alongside with the Ave Maria, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments all children had to learn the Apostles' Creed. No-one would think of challenging the doctrinal truth and authority of the Creed.

The Reformation did not bring any change on this point. All the great Reformers, Luther, Zwingli, Melancthon, Calvin, *etc.*, wholeheartedly accepted the Creeds as binding formularies for all ministers and members of the Church. In the preface to his treatise *The Three Symbols or Confessions of the Christian Faith* (*viz.* the Apostles' Creed, Athanasian Creed and Te Deum), Luther wrote: 'I have *ex abundanti* caused to be published together in German the three symbols or Confessions, which have hitherto been held throughout the whole Church: by this I testify once and for all that I adhere to the true Christian Church, which, up to now, has maintained those symbols, but not to that false pretentious Church, which is the worst enemy of the true Church, and has surreptitiously introduced much idolatry alongside of these beautiful Confessions.'¹ Luther also took the Apostles' Creed, together with the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, in his Small and Large Catechisms, as the basis of instruction in Christian faith and morals. He explained this choice by saying: 'God Himself has given the Ten Commandments, Christ has ordained and taught the Lord's Prayer, the Holy Spirit has composed and conceived the articles of faith in the shortest and most correct manner.'²

At this juncture we cannot refrain from quoting in full the wonderful exposition Luther has given of the three articles of the Creed in his Small Catechism. This exposition shows us the warmth of Luther's personal religion and his masterly grasp of

¹ From R. S. Franks, *The Work of Christ* (1962), p. 283.

² R. S. Franks, *op. cit.*, pp. 283, 284.

the essence of the Christian faith. He expounds the first article as follows:

'I believe that God has created me and all that exists; that He has given me and still sustains my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind, together with food and clothing, house and home, family and property; that He provides me daily and abundantly with all the necessities of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves me from evil. All this He does out of His pure, fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness on my part. For all this I am bound to thank, praise, serve, and obey Him. This is most certainly true.'

The exposition of the second article reads:

'I believe that Jesus Christ, true God begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, delivered me and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with silver and gold but with His holy precious blood and with His innocent sufferings and death, in order that I may be His, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as He is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.'

Finally, there is the third article, which is explained in these words:

'I believe that by my own reason and strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, just as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian Church He daily and abundantly forgives all my sins, and the sins of the believers, and on the last day He will raise me and all the dead and will grant eternal life to me and to all who believe in Christ. This is most certainly true.'

Calvin in his two Geneva Catechisms (1538, 1545) and Ursinus and Olevianus in the famous Heidelberg Catechism (1563) followed the same pattern and also included an exposition of the Apostles' Creed. The Anglican Catechism only requires that a candidate be able to recite it. The Shorter Westminster Cate-

chism, which gives a more theological and systematic exposition of the Christian faith, nevertheless mentions the Apostles' Creed (along with the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer) in an appendix and calls it 'a brief sum of the Christian faith, agreeable to the word of God'.

The Creeds are also mentioned in several Confessions of the Reformation period. For example, the French Confession of 1559 states in Article V that all things have to be regulated by Holy Scripture, 'the rule of all truth, containing all that is necessary for the service of God and for our salvation.' All things should be examined, regulated and reformed according to these Scriptures. 'And therefore we confess the three creeds, to wit: The Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian, because they are in accordance with the Word of God.' Likewise Article VIII of the Thirty-Nine Articles says: 'The Three Creeds, Nicene Creed, Athanasius's Creed, and that which is commonly called the Apostles' Creed, ought thoroughly to be received and believed: for they may be proved by most certain warrants of holy Scripture.'

Why did the Reformers receive and retain the Creeds without any hesitancy? Let us first put it in the negative. They did not do this because these documents were so old and venerable. Antiquity and venerability were never decisive for the Reformers. In their struggle with Rome they had learned that there is but one absolute authority: the Word of God. All human traditions, however ancient and august, are subject to this Word. The Belgic Confession fully expresses the mind of all the Reformers, when it says: 'We may not consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with those divine Scriptures, nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, since the truth is above all; for all men are of themselves liars, and more vain than vanity itself. Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever does not agree with this infallible rule which the apostles have taught us, saying: Prove the spirits, whether they are of God' (Article VII).

The last part leads us to the correct answer to the question we asked. The Reformers accepted the Creeds, because they found that they did agree with the Word of God. In the first place, they wholeheartedly accepted the doctrine of the Trinity, as

expressed in the Creeds. In his *Institutes*, for example, Calvin explicitly defends this doctrine against several theologians of his own day, who rejected it on purely rational grounds. And secondly, for the Reformers, too, the historical reality of the redemption was of paramount importance. The cross of Christ was the centre of all their thinking and theologizing. They knew but one place where a sinner can meet God in His grace: this cross. On the cross God's own Son took the sins of the world upon Himself and atoned for them before God's countenance. In Part II of the Smalkald Articles (1537), under the heading 'Christ and Faith', Luther writes:

'The first and chief article is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, "was put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification" (Rom. 4: 25). He alone is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world" (Jn. 1: 29). "God has laid upon him the iniquities of us all" (Is. 53: 6). Moreover, "all have sinned", and "they are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, by his blood" (Rom. 3: 23-25).

Inasmuch as this must be believed and cannot be obtained or apprehended by any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that such faith alone justifies us, as St. Paul says in Rom. 3 "For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law" (Rom. 3: 28), and again "that he (God) himself is righteous in that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3: 26).

Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed. For as St. Peter says, "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4: 12). "And with his stripes we are healed" (Is. 53: 5).

On this article rests all that we teach and practise against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it. Otherwise all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and all our adversaries will gain the victory.'

In his Large Catechism he explains the second article thus:

'If you are asked, "What do you believe in the Second Article, concerning Jesus Christ?", answer briefly, "I believe that Jesus Christ, true Son of God, has become my Lord." What is it to "become a Lord"? It means that He has redeemed me from sin, from the devil, from death, and from all evil.'

After a more detailed exposition of the term 'Lord', he continues:

'The remaining parts of these articles simply serve to clarify and express how and by what means this redemption was accomplished — that is, how much it cost Christ and what He paid and risked in order to win us and bring us under His dominion. That is to say, He became man, conceived and born without sin, of the Holy Spirit and the virgin, that He might become Lord over sin; moreover, He suffered, died, and was buried, that He might make satisfaction for me and pay what I owe, but not with silver or gold but with His own precious blood. All this in order to become my Lord. For He did none of these things for Himself, nor had He any need of them. Afterward He rose again from the dead, swallowed up and devoured death, and finally ascended into heaven and assumed dominion at the right hand of the Father. The devil and all powers, therefore, must be subject to Him and lie beneath His feet until finally, at the last day, He will completely divide and separate us from the wicked world, the devil, death, sin, etc.'

CHAPTER VI

DEISM, LIBERALISM AND NEO-ORTHODOXY

IN the first century after the Reformation no criticisms were heard in the Churches. All accepted the necessity and validity of the Creeds. But gradually a spirit of criticism began to raise its head. Already in the seventeenth century we see the rise of Rationalism that placed human reason in the centre of all things and regarded this reason as capable of judging all things, religion included. This led in the eighteenth century to Deism, that still believed that God had created the world, but denied any dealing of God with the world after the creation. This was unnecessary because the laws of nature, which He Himself put in the creation, regulate all things. In this conception there was no place for special revelation either. The true religion was the 'religion of nature', that is, the religion which is grounded upon the truths of reason. The essential truth about God could be discovered by the 'light of nature', reason. This was the age of books such as John Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity*, John Toland's *Christianity not Mysterious* (his book was burnt by the public hangman in his native Ireland!), and Matthew Tindal's *Christianity as Old as the Creation, or The Gospel a Republication of the Religion of Nature*.¹ Of course, in this climate there was not much appreciation for the Creeds, which contain a summary of supernatural revelation. Yet hardly anyone would openly criticize them.

The great attack came from nineteenth-century Liberalism. It could not possibly accept the gospel as proclaimed by the New Testament authors. For the Liberal the Bible was not the authoritative Word of God, but the record of the religious experiences of men and women of many centuries ago, still inspiring but in no way authoritative. These experiences had to be checked by one's own personal experiences, and the latter were in many respects entirely different. Modern man could not possibly accept the concept of God, as given in the Bible, nor the concept of man,

¹ Cf. Alan Richardson, *The Bible in the Age of Science* (1961), pp. 36ff.

nor the concept of Jesus Christ. God was primarily seen as the immanent One and a basic continuity was assumed between God and the world. Man, though definitely not identical with God, has a divine spark in himself, in his reason and conscience. Jesus Christ is not the ontological Son of God in the sense of the doctrine of Chalcedon — one divine Person with two natures, a divine and a human — but Christ is humanity at its top and as such the embodiment of deity. But the emphasis is on the humanity. 'Whatever else Jesus was, He was man.' One of the critics of the older Liberalism has formulated his criticism in these trenchant words: in its extreme form Liberalism taught that 'a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross'.²

It is obvious that for this Liberalism it was impossible to accept the Creeds in their existing formulation. They contained too many mythological elements which no thinking person could accept any more, such as a virgin birth, a physical resurrection, a real ascension, *etc.* As early as the middle of the nineteenth century some theologians in Germany made attempts to draw up a new Creed without the offensive mythological elements. This Creed (known as the Nitzschenum, after the theologian Nitzsch) did not contain the virgin birth, the ascension and the resurrection of the flesh. The attempt did not meet with success, yet the tensions remained. At the end of the same century it came to an explosion in Germany in the so-called 'Apostolikumstreit' (controversy around the Apostles' Creed). Many ministers had great difficulty in reciting the Creed. Some felt that their conscience did not permit them to go on in this way. The whole matter came finally to a head in a publication of the great leader of German Liberalism, Adolf Harnack. He was a great scholar, one of the founders of the modern history of doctrine, but he was also very critical of the dogma of the Church and of the Bible itself. According to him the dogma of the Church, as we know it, was the product of the Greek spirit, which had cast the Christian truth in the moulds of Greek philosophy. In fact, this dogma was already introduced into the New Testament itself, notably in the theology of Paul and John. The original teaching of Jesus, which we find basically in the Synoptic Gospels, would

² H. R. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937), p. 185.

have been a simple message about the Fatherhood of God and the infinite value of the human soul, so ennobled that it can and does unite with God. Jesus did not consider Himself to be the Son of God in a metaphysical sense, nor regard His death as an atonement for sins. These are all philosophical elements later on added to the gospel. According to Harnack we should not stumble over such matters as miracle or belief in demons. They are only part of the framework in which the gospel is presented. The essential gospel is quite independent of such beliefs. The real gospel is found in the parable of the prodigal son: God waiting for man to return to Him and desiring to grant forgiveness in answer to repentance. Of course, Harnack did not accept such matters as the virgin birth, resurrection, ascension and second coming.

In 1892 Harnack was asked by a group of students whether they should not organize an action against the requirement for young ministers to subscribe to the Creed. He told them that it was not their task to do this, but also promised that he would deal with the problems in his lectures. Afterwards he published the relevant part of these lectures. From this it was obvious that Harnack himself did not accept the Creed; in particular he did not believe in the virgin birth. The result was a tremendous controversy in Germany, which also spread to other countries, for example, Holland. In Britain there was generally a more traditional attitude towards the Creed, although many were just as critical of some of its statements.

This pure Liberalism, however, was rather short-lived. Its shallow optimism could not stand up to the hard facts of life. In Europe, both on the Continent and in Britain, it broke down under the pressure of the first world war. The same happened some ten years later in America under the pressure of the great depression. It was generally replaced by Neo-orthodoxy. The great names to be mentioned here are those of Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr. The new theology was generally characterized by an open recognition of man's sinfulness and his urgent need of redemption by God Himself. This redemption was again found in Jesus Christ, whose death on the cross was accepted as the great divine act of reconciliation. Yet the new theology remained critical of Holy Scripture and of many dogmas of the Church. Barth, although accepting many of the classical doctrines, including the virgin birth, declared that the Bible in

itself is only a human, and therefore fallible, witness, which has to *become* the Word of God through the revealing activity of the Holy Spirit.³ Brunner, who was much more critical, openly rejected the virgin birth, which would not be part of the original gospel but a later insertion due to an attempt to give a biological explanation of the miracle of the incarnation and of Jesus' sinlessness. Niebuhr was very critical of the historical reality of the resurrection in the sense of a bodily resurrection. In the course of the years Niebuhr has become increasingly critical of Karl Barth, in whose theology he finds a representation of the older orthodoxy.

Yet in our day we hardly ever hear of any open attack on the Creeds. This is due to the fact that an entirely different method is followed, *viz.* that of reinterpretation (*Umdeutung*). The Creeds are accepted as venerable documents; as such they are explained, but at the same time the theologian's own ideas are read into the old formulas. Karl Barth affords a very clear example of this. In the course of the years he has given three different expositions of the Apostles' Creed. In none of them is there any trace of criticism. But none of them is an historical interpretation of the Creed. This is nothing other than an exposition of Barth's own theology in terms of the old formula.

In a way this new method is even more dangerous than the earlier open criticism. The Liberal attitude was clear and honest. Everyone knew where the Liberal stood. The reinterpretation method, however, is apt to confuse the whole matter. New ideas are launched under the cover of the old formulations. Quite often the terminology used is identical with that of the older orthodoxy, but the contents are quite different. Usually one will not hear an outright denial of truths accepted by the Church for many centuries. They are simply passed by in silence. As one has aptly remarked: You do not find the heresies in what is said, but in what is omitted!

³ Cf. K. Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Eerdmans, 1962).

CHAPTER VII

THE NEW LIBERALISM

IN chapter III we considered the relevance of the Creeds for our own day. We stressed that only a truly historical redemption can save us and that under no circumstances should this basic truth be surrendered. But today many voices are urging us to do just this. A new Liberalism has arisen represented by such theologians as Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich, and popularized in such books as Dr. J. A. T. Robinson's *Honest to God*.¹ This new teaching is not concerned about this or that isolated statement in the Creed which has to be preserved by a more or less subtle reinterpretation. It is the gospel itself which is at stake. The whole message of Christianity has to be translated in categories which modern man can understand. In the form in which it is presented by the New Testament itself, it is through and through mythological. This mythological garment has to be removed in order to find the real essence of the Christian message. And this mythology is found everywhere, not only in the virgin birth and the ascension, but also in the cross and the resurrection, yes, even in the biblical image of God. Modern man does not understand these things any more, and rightly so, for they are all part and parcel of the categories of thought of another time. Yet behind them the real gospel is present, the gospel of redemption.

THE INFLUENCE OF RUDOLF BULTMANN

The most influential voice in this plea for the demythologizing of the Bible's history of redemption is that of Rudolf Bultmann, a German theologian whose ideas are widely accepted on the Continent and in the English-speaking world. According to him the Christian revelation is truly historical but it contains many time-conditioned elements. The biblical revelation has to be stripped of these mythical elements, if it is to make its full impact on modern man. One such element is the so-called 'three-storey universe' which the biblical writers used as the framework for

¹ S.C.M. Press, 1963.

their message. But this is only the beginning of 'demythologization'. Bultmann wants to go much further. The whole historical drama as recorded in the Bible has to be demythologized. In his Gifford lectures (1957) he openly states that the historical events in which the Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles saw God at work in the history of this world, redeeming the world in His Son Jesus Christ, have no more meaning to him than the 'three-storey universe'. The whole story of redemption is translated in existential categories. For example, the New Testament teaching of the cross (which is not denied to be a historical reality) is mythical. It is mythical in asserting that the pre-existent Son of God died vicariously for the sins of the world. Bultmann uses strong language on this point. He speaks of a 'hotch-potch of sacrificial and eschatological analogies'. The real meaning of the cross is cosmic and eschatological. It is not an objective atonement or reconciliation accomplished once for all, but it is cosmic and eschatological in that it is the point where all men can become in-authentic-existence. Through sin man's existence is unauthentic, that is, man is not what he ought to be. Being enslaved by the powers of this world he lives in this world as if it were a world without God. It is precisely at this point that the cross has its 'saving' relevance. For the cross means crucifying the flesh with the lusts thereof. It means entering into a new reality in which we are freed from the enslavement by the powers of the world and therefore from our unauthentic, this-world existence. The resurrection as a resuscitation of a corpse is also mythical. The only thing that really happened was that the disciples began to believe in Jesus Christ as the Living One. The resurrection also, therefore, has a cosmic and eschatological meaning. It means the new, authentic life in Christ.

We may sum up by saying that, according to Bultmann, the Christ event is not some act of God buried in the past, but it is a cosmic, eschatological, existential reality now, today, in our own life. 'The meaning of history lies always in the present . . . do not look around yourself into universal history, you must look into your own personal history. Always in your present lies the meaning of history, and you cannot see it as a spectator, but only in your responsible decisions. In every moment slumbers the possibility of being the eschatological moment. You must awaken it.'² The ultimate thing is our own personal, existential

² R. Bultmann, *History and Eschatology* (1957), p. 155.

decision over against the Christ event, and in this decision the present is filled with eschatological meaning.

Walter M. Horton in the book *Twentieth Century Christianity*³ is all too right when he cites Bultmann and Tillich⁴ as 'striking examples' of a new type of Liberal theology which he calls post-Barthian Liberalism. In some points it is indeed different from the older Liberalism. It is, for example, less optimistic about the nature and situation of man. It speaks openly of predicament and alienation as characteristic of man's life in this world. It speaks of sin and a Fall. And yet, essentially it is the same Liberalism. Again Jesus Christ is stripped of His honour as the pre-existent Son of God in the flesh. Again His great act of redemption accomplished on the cross and divinely confirmed in the resurrection is robbed of its unique, objective, historical meaning. This time He is not simply degraded to a moral example, but His significance is said to be of existential value for every man. In Him man is said to encounter God. But in reality He is no more than a symbol in the existential struggle of man. All that is left is that in the preaching of this symbol man may hear the actual speaking of God, calling him to a decision of faith.

DR. ROBINSON'S 'HONEST TO GOD'

Recently these and similar views have been promoted in a popularized form by Dr. J. A. T. Robinson, the Bishop of Woolwich, in his best-seller *Honest to God*. In this small book Dr. Robinson is mainly concerned with the doctrine of God. He is of the opinion that we can no longer accept the traditional view of God, which is outmoded and unsuitable for our time with its scientific outlook.

Dr. Robinson here follows the lead given by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was imprisoned by the Nazis and hanged shortly before the end of the second world war. In his prison-letters Bonhoeffer was the first to posit the thesis that we have now come to that stage of history which can be characterized as 'the religionless era'. Modern man has completely abandoned the Christian world view and Bonhoeffer accepts this as good and necessary. To him it is proof that our world has

³ Edited Stephen Neill (1961); see p. 291.

⁴ See below, p. 58.

'come of age', and we have to accept this as God's will.

'God is teaching us that we must live as men who can get along very well without him. The God who makes us live in this world without using him as a working hypothesis is the God before whom we are ever standing. Before God and with him we live without God. God allows himself to be edged out of the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us and help us.'⁵

Dr. Robinson fully agrees with this and infers from it that our whole mental picture of God has accordingly to change. In the light of the new developments of a religionless world we are forced to admit that the old, familiar picture of God, accepted by the Church for many centuries, cannot be maintained any longer. Actually he sees a development in three stages in the concept of God.

1. First, there was the picture of the men of the Bible themselves. The first chapter of his book opens with the statement: 'The Bible speaks of a God "up there"' (p. 11). It was an image of the God, seated upon a throne in a localized heaven above the earth. Although the more sophisticated among the Bible writers, if pressed, would have admitted that their language was symbolical, they apparently never felt such pressure, for they all take the picture of God 'up there' literally. Even Luke, an educated Greek, describes the ascension of Christ as a literal being 'lifted up' into heaven, and John and Paul also write 'most uninhibitedly' of this 'going up' and 'coming down'.

2. Gradually Christian theology began to realize that this 'up there' is impossible. This was due to the fact that their whole world-view changed. The three-storey universe was replaced by the Copernican universe. To be true, 'most of us still retain deep down the mental image of "an old man in the sky"' (p. 13), but we do not really take this seriously. We have exchanged the God 'up there' for a God who is spiritually or metaphysically 'out there'. It is the picture that somewhere beyond the universe is a Being, a centre of personal will and purpose, who created this universe, who loves it and who 'visited' it in Jesus Christ. This is 'our' God, the God of theism, Dr. Robinson asserts.

⁵ D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 164, quoted by Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 39.

3. But in our day this second image is no longer satisfactory either. People of this modern, scientific space-age cannot accept such an image any more. They cannot think any more of God as a Being somewhere 'out there'. To them — and Dr. Robinson agrees with them — such a Being is nothing other than a sophisticated version of the 'old man in the sky'. The only idea that appeals to modern man is that of God who is 'in', in the sense of 'deep underneath us', 'the very ground of our being'. Dr. Robinson is particularly impressed by the following quotation from one of Tillich's sermons:

'The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is *God*. That depth is what the word *God* means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps, in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself. For if you know that God means depth, you know much about him. You cannot then call yourself an atheist or unbeliever. For you cannot think or say: Life has no depth! Life is shallow. Being itself is surface only. If you could say this in complete seriousness, you would be an atheist; but otherwise you are not. He who knows about depth, knows about God.'⁶

All this means, of course, a complete change in our traditional image of God. It also means that the whole idea of supernaturalism, which is basic to this traditional image, has to be abandoned. But is this possible in the light of the Bible? Dr. Robinson realizes the difficulty of the situation full well. He frankly admits, 'The whole world-view of the Bible . . . is unashamedly supernaturalistic' (p. 32). But to him this is not an insurmountable difficulty, for he believes that all this is part of the mythological framework of the Bible, and that it is the great task of present-day theology to demythologize the Bible on this point. He even agrees with Bonhoeffer, when the latter says that Bultmann, the originator of the demythologization programme, did not go far enough (p. 35)! Bultmann concentrates on the miracles and such events as the ascension; but we should go much further. The miracles are not in principle separable from the conception of God, faith, *etc.*

⁶ *The Shaking of the Foundations* (Pelican, 1962), pp. 63f., quoted by Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

They are all 'religious' conceptions and we should interpret and proclaim them all, God and miracles, in a 'non-religious' sense.

Theism, as commonly accepted, cannot be maintained any longer.

'We shall eventually be no more able to convince men of the existence of a God "out there" whom they must call in to order their lives than persuade them to take seriously the gods of Olympus. If Christianity is to survive, let alone to recapture "secular" man, there is no time to lose in detaching it from this scheme of thought, from this particular theology or *logos* about *theos*, and thinking hard about what we should put in its place.'

What then is the new and real picture of God? First of all we should stop speaking of God as 'a' being. God is not 'a' being, but being itself, 'the infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being' (p. 46), 'the ultimate depth of all our being, the creative ground and meaning of all our existence' (p. 47). This implies that we also should cease to think of God as a Person, as theism does. In its common theistic form this is also mythology. Yet Dr. Robinson wants to retain the idea that God is personal, for reality at its very deepest level is 'personal'; personality is of *ultimate* significance in the constitution of the universe; in personal relationships we touch the final meaning of existence as nowhere else.

'To believe in God as love means to believe that in pure personal relationship we encounter, not merely what ought to be, but what is, the deepest, veriest truth about the structure of reality. This, in face of all the evidence, is a tremendous act of faith. But it is not the feat of persuading oneself of the existence of a super-Being beyond this world endowed with personal qualities. Belief in God is the trust, the well-nigh incredible trust, that to give ourselves to the uttermost in love is not to be confounded but to be "accepted", that Love is the ground of our being, to which ultimately we "come home".'

But does all this not mean that theology becomes anthropology? Dr. Robinson believes that to a large extent this is correct. He says that in a real sense Feuerbach was right in

⁷ J. A. T. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁸ J. A. T. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

wanting to translate 'theology' into 'anthropology'. But Feuerbach went too far when he simply equated the two. That is impossible. 'Theological statements are indeed affirmations about human existence — but they are affirmations about the ultimate ground and depth of that existence' (p. 52). Although we do find God as the deepest ground of our existence, He at the same time transcends our existence. As Horton has said of Tillich: 'The Divine, as he sees it, does not inhabit a transformed world *above nature*; it is found in the "ecstatic" character of *this world*, as its transcendent Depth and Ground.'⁹

TILlich'S DOCTRINE OF GOD

To many readers Dr. Robinson's views occurred as something novel and highly original. In actual fact, however, there is very little originality in them.¹ His book is really nothing other than a popularization of views previously expressed by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the American (but German-born) theologian-philosopher Paul Tillich. The latter in particular is the 'father' of this new conception.

For many years Tillich has asserted that in our doctrine of God we have to go beyond both supranaturalism and naturalism.² Supranaturalism makes the great mistake of taking the biblical statements about God literally and therefore it conceives of God as a personal, eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, *etc.*, Being. Naturalism goes to the other extreme and basically identifies God with the creation, which means pantheism. Tillich believes that the only way to go beyond supranaturalism and naturalism is to speak of God as 'being itself' or 'the ground of being'. To speak of 'a' God (as theism does) makes God 'a being alongside others or above others' and makes Him subject to categories of space and time.³ Only when God is being itself, the ground of being, the power of being in everything and above everything, only then is He really unique. According to Tillich this is the only non-symbolical statement we can make about God. 'The statement that God is being-itself is a nonsymbolical statement.

⁹ W. M. Horton in *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, ed. C. W. Kegley and R. W. Bretall (1952), p. 37 — quoted in Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

¹ As Dr. Robinson himself admits, *op. cit.*, pp. 21ff.

² Cf. *Systematic Theology*, II (University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 98.

³ *Systematic Theology*, I (1951), p. 235.

It does not point beyond itself. It means what it says directly and properly. All other assertions about God can be made theologically only on this basis.⁴ In fact, all other assertions we make are symbolical. In this way the Old and New Testaments speak about God. Their language should not be taken literally. It is all symbolical and therefore must be translated for modern man.⁵ If we take it literally, we miss the real point in the message.

In the mean time it is very hard to understand who or what God really is in Tillich's (and Robinson's) system. It all sounds so philosophical and abstract. God is 'being itself' or 'the ground of being'. He should not be thought of in personal terms — that is mythology. In fact, it seems that Tillich's and Robinson's 'God' is the great mysterious 'X' that is under and behind all that exists, without being identical with it. This 'being itself' reveals itself by 'revelation'. At this point Tillich uses a term which is common to all Christian theology, but he gives it an entirely new meaning. It is not God's speaking to man so that man is 'in possession of true propositions about God'. But it is the moment when the mind all of a sudden is grasped by the mystery of the ground of being. This revelation can take place by several media, for example by nature, historical events, language, prayer, etc. In no case, however, is it a simple matter of God speaking in propositional or conceptual form. Prayer, for example, discloses the mystery of being. But 'if it is brought down to the level of conversation between two beings, it is blasphemous and ridiculous'.⁶

EVALUATION

As we try to evaluate this new conception of God we must say, first of all, that it is founded on a complete caricature of the theistic view always held by the Christian Church on the basis of the Bible. To say that this view is one of a God 'up there' or 'out there' is a serious over-simplification and distortion of the Christian view of God. It is true, of course, that in ordinary life we often think of God in such terms. Even Dr. Robinson has to admit that he, too, is often still inclined to do this. And on this point he is in very good company indeed! The Bible itself sets the example here. No less a person than our Lord

⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 238f.

⁵ As an example: the statement that God is personal, *op. cit.*, pp. 244f.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 127.

Jesus Christ taught His disciples to address God as 'our Father, which art *in heaven*'. But such expressions are never meant in an exclusive sense. They do not affirm that God is a Being who is only somewhere 'up' or 'out there', and who, although infinitely 'higher' than other beings, is yet on the same co-ordinate level with them. 'The God of the Bible, of both the Old and the New Testament, is not "alongside and above" what He brought into existence in any crudely spatial sense. And yet the biblical God is a God that is a perfect person, a being that has brought the world into existence, a being that "governs the world according to a plan, directs it towards an end, interferes with its ordinary processes . . . and will bring it to consummation". Tillich simply rejects such a God and in so doing places himself outside the main stream of historic Christianity.'⁷

It is abundantly clear that this is a *new form of Liberalism*. Again the theologian masters God's Word and makes it say what he thinks. The words of the Bible are no longer allowed to have their own meaning, but are first emptied of their original meaning and then refilled with the philosophical presuppositions of man. The result of this process is not the picture of the living, personal God as proclaimed by the Bible, but some vague, virtually impersonal 'being itself' or 'ground of being'.

As far as we can see this is nothing other than a modern version of Gnosticism. Gnosticism was the philosophical deformation and reinterpretation of the Christian gospel in the first centuries of the Christian era. According to this view the 'spiritual' man should go beyond the crude forms of revelation (especially those of cross and resurrection, but also of God as revealed in Christ) and discover the eternal ideas behind them. The crude forms are only the external symbols. The reality is the idea behind them.

Against this Gnosticism the early Church has spoken a clear 'No'. In doing this it followed the example of the apostle Paul who, against the rising Gnosticism of his day with its 'wisdom' and 'mysteries', wrote: 'I know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor. 2: 2). To him the cross was not just the external form of the 'mystery', a form which has to be discarded to find the real gospel, but he summarized his whole message in the expression 'the word of the cross' (1 Cor. 1: 18,

⁷ David H. Freeman, *Tillich* (1962), p. 11.

cf. also verses 20-25). The same is true of his view of God. To Paul God is not 'being itself' or 'the ground of being', but He is the same living, personal God, who was preached by the Old Testament prophets. Above all He is the same God who was not only preached but revealed by Jesus Christ, who 'is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities — all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together' (Col. 1: 15-17).

All this is not said to deny that all our speaking about God (and also the Bible's speaking) is symbolical. Every thoughtful Christian realizes that. For example, when we use the name 'Father' as applied to God, this is not simply Fatherhood as we know it. God's Fatherhood infinitely transcends our idea. This is first of all true of the inter-Trinitarian Fatherhood of God. God is the eternal Father of the Son in an eternal act of 'generation'. And by 'eternal act' is meant an act eternally completed and yet eternally going on. 'He who is able to receive this, let him receive it' (Mt. 19: 12)! Here Fatherhood has a meaning to which we cannot even approximate in our thinking. On a different level this also holds when the Bible calls God 'our Father'. This, too, transcends our human idea of Fatherhood. No thoughtful Christian thinks here of 'an old man somewhere high up in the sky'. He knows that this Fatherhood is a divine Fatherhood. Yet at the same time he knows that it is real. God is our Father in heaven, to whom we stand in a really personal, filial relationship. He is a truly personal Being.

Of course, if at this point we speak of 'a' Being, we do not simply mean a Being alongside other beings. God is the only truly self-existent and self-sufficient Being upon whom all others depend. We may put it even more strongly. He is the One in whom all the others have their existence. For 'In him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17: 28). Yet this is altogether different from Tillich's and Robinson's abstraction: 'being itself' or 'ground of being'. The Bible never speaks this language. Not because the Bible writers were not educated enough or not sufficiently philosophically-minded, but because the Bible does not know of another relation between God and man than the personal one, the one of 'I' and 'Thou'. Tillich

may call this *symbolic*. We agree with that. But then we immediately add: 'It is nevertheless *fully true*.' We can never get beyond it, nor can we ever get 'underneath' it. If we try to do this, the result will be an entirely different theology. It is astonishing to see that neither Tillich nor Robinson seem to realize that, instead of demythologizing the Bible, they are actually re-mythologizing it. They reject the concepts selected by the Bible, *i.e.* by God Himself, to communicate to us the reality of His Being and of His creative and redemptive activity, and replace them by quite different concepts. But this means, of course, that the reality expressed by them is also quite different.

We know that Tillich asserts that his basic concept is not symbolical any more. We repeat his words: 'The statement that God is being-itself is a nonsymbolical statement. It does not point beyond itself. It means what it says directly and properly.' But this is simply a gratuitous assertion. What is more, it could be argued that when taken literally, these words are nothing short of blasphemous. Here a man makes the claim that he can speak of God in a terminology so adequate that it is not transcended any more by the divine reality expressed by it. Here a man claims to have discovered an equation, in which the mystery of God's Being is fully 'caught' in human words. Perhaps this very fact is the clearest indication of the extent to which the new Liberalism has deviated from Scripture. For if there is anything clear in Scripture, it is the fact that God is so great, so incomprehensibly great, that His Being can never be adequately expressed in human words, nor fully grasped by human understanding. The Church therefore has never ventured to make such a claim. Indeed, it believed that what it confessed about God in the Creeds was true, fully true; but it also realized that all our human words fall short of the reality. Tillich, to the contrary, boldly says: what I say is literally, unequivocally true. 'It means what it says directly and properly.'

But even apart from the basically blasphemous nature of this statement, we must also say that it is a fallacy. We are not led to a better and deeper understanding of the biblical message of God and His salvation, but we receive an altogether different understanding. The dilemma is not: either symbolical or nonsymbolical, but: either the one set of symbols or the other. Brunner has formulated it well in this trenchant criticism: 'It is evident that this abstract system of concepts is not, as was

intended, unsymbolical and adequate, but that all that has happened is the replacement of the symbolism of time and personality by the symbolism of space and things.⁸ And the tragic result is that the personal God of the Bible, who transcends time but also redemptively enters into time, has disappeared and in His stead we see the god of the philosophers, a god who is not much more than an abstraction,⁹ an impersonal and virtually unknown 'It'. Indeed, this is the tragic result of all demythologization, and the modern version is no exception. The terms change, but with the terms the contents change too.

THE CHRISTOLOGY

How true this is appears also from the new Christology. For Tillich Jesus Christ is the central fact of the Christian faith. In Him we find the final revelation of God. 'If theology ignores the fact to which the name of Jesus of Nazareth points, it ignores the basic Christian assertion that essential God-Manhood has appeared within existence and subjected itself to the conditions of existence without being conquered by them.'¹ But again we should be aware of the fact that all concepts have a different meaning in Tillich's system. This is immediately clear when we listen to his negative statements. Jesus Christ is definitely not the pre-existent Son of God who came down from heaven and became man. All this is pure mythology. What Tillich means by all this is clear from his 'demythologization' of several terms applied to Christ in the New Testament (*e.g.*, Son of man, Son of God, Messiah, Logos, *etc.*). These terms have developed in four stages.

'The first to be mentioned is that these symbols have arisen and grown in their own religious culture and language. The second is the use of these symbols by those to whom they had become alive

⁸ E. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith and the Consummation* (Lutterworth, 1962), p. 406.

⁹ Brunner points out that 'abstraction' is characteristic of this way of philosophical thinking, which seeks the one ground behind all mere appearances, the truth behind all truths. But in the mean time the meaning of the biblical utterances is totally changed. 'The world of God of which the Bible speaks is transformed into Plato's world of ideas, into the ontology of timeless Being, into the Absolute of the Advaita doctrine, the Absolute which has nothing confronting it but which is at once the eternal ground of everything and its negation' (*Ibid.*).

¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, II, p. 98.

as expressions of their self-interpretation and as answers to the questions implied in their existential predicament. The third is the transformation that these symbols underwent in meaning when used to interpret the event on which Christianity is based. The fourth is their distortion by popular superstition, supported by theological literalism and supranaturalism.²

The great enemy for Tillich is the fourth step, that of literalism. Applied to the title Son of man it imagines 'a transcendent being who, once upon a time, was sent down from his heavenly place and transmuted into a man. In this way a true and powerful symbol becomes an absurd story, and the Christ becomes a half-god, a particular being between God and man'.³ The same is true of the other titles. To take the expression Son of God literally means that 'a human family situation is projected into the inner life of the divine'. Similarly the title Christ 'became an individual with supranatural powers who, through a voluntary sacrifice, made it possible for God to save those who believe in him. The paradox of the transformed messianic symbol disappeared'.⁴

Who then is Jesus Christ? He is a historical reality in whom the New Being is present. Indeed, Tillich emphatically maintains that He is a historical reality. 'If the factual element in the Christian event were denied, the foundation of Christianity would be denied.' But this does not mean that we know the man Jesus as a historical personality. We only know the picture which the New Testament writers had of Jesus. 'Faith cannot even guarantee the name "Jesus" in respect to him who was the Christ. It must leave that to the uncertainties of our historical knowledge. But faith does guarantee the factual transformation of reality in that personal life which the New Testament expresses in its picture of Jesus as the Christ.'⁵

The only thing we know with certainty is that in the historical person, which the New Testament calls Jesus, the New Being was present. What does that mean? It means that this man Jesus as the Christ conquers the estrangement, the great predicament of man. Man exists in a state of estrangement. 'Man is estranged from the ground of his being, from other beings, and from himself.'⁶ The result is that man is filled with anxiety. He is not

² *Op. cit.*, p. 109.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 107.

³ *Loc. cit.*

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 44.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 110, 111.

what he ought to be and he knows this. He has unbelief, *hubris* (pride), and concupiscence, and he is going to die.⁷ Now Jesus as the bearer of the New Being overcomes this conflict between the essential unity of God and man and between man's essential and existential being. That is the glorious message of the New Testament: in Jesus Christ existential estrangement is overcome. For whatever tensions there may be in the biblical picture of Jesus as the Christ, there are 'no traces of estrangement between him and himself and between him and his world'. That does not mean that Jesus was sinless. That, too, is only a mythological expression. Admittedly, the Gospel records do not mention any sin on His side. 'There is, in fact, no enumeration of special sins which he did not commit, nor is there a day-by-day description of the ambiguities of life in which he proved to be unambiguously good. . . . The term "sinlessness" is a rationalization of the biblical picture of him who has conquered the forces of existential estrangement within existence.'⁸

How far-reaching this reinterpretation of the Christological dogma is, becomes particularly evident in Robinson's popularized version of the new theology. Jesus is not God in the sense defined by the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon. 'The New Testament says that Jesus was the Word of God, it says that God was in Christ, it says that Jesus is the Son of God; but it does not say that Jesus was God, simply like that.' John 1: 1, for example, only affirms that 'what God was, the Word was' (NEB). That means, if one looked at Jesus, one saw God. 'He was the complete expression, the Word, of God. Through him, as through no one else, God spoke and God acted.' The apostles bore their witness to this conviction and confessed it in the language of their day. 'Here was more than just a man: here was a window into God at work.' But this 'more than just a man' should not be pressed too far. In Himself He was only man. To be sure, He was 'the man for others', 'one in whom Love has completely taken over, the one who is utterly open to, and united with, the Ground of his being.' But, nevertheless, He was man, 'most entirely man'.⁹

CROSS AND RESURRECTION

What is the meaning of the cross and of the resurrection in this

⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 47ff.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 126f.

⁹ See J. A. T. Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 70, 71, 76.

new theology? In Tillich's system they play a very important role. But again they do not have the usual meaning which they have in classical Christianity. They are symbols and must be understood as such, for they lose their meaning if taken literally. As to the Christological symbols, Tillich insists that our great task is not 'demythologization' but 'deliteralization'. It should be kept in mind that when he speaks of symbols he does not mean empty signs. Symbols have a relation to a factual reality; yes, they participate in this reality. But the factual element can be found only in the language of the symbol. 'Without the factual element the Christ would not have participated in existence and consequently not have been the Christ.' But the acceptance of this factual element is quite different from taking the symbols literally.

For Tillich cross and resurrection are interdependent symbols: they cannot be separated without losing their meaning. In the New Testament 'the cross is seen as an event that happened in time and space. But, as the cross of Jesus who is the Christ, it is a symbol and a part of a myth. It is the myth of the bearer of the new eon who suffers the death of a convict and slave under the powers of that old eon which he is to conquer. The cross, whatever the historical circumstances may have been, is a symbol based on fact'. Or to put it in another way: the passion story is cult-legend. 'The only factual element in it having the immediate certainty of faith is the surrender of him who is called the Christ to the ultimate consequence of existence, namely, death under the conditions of estrangement. Everything else is a matter of historical probability, elaborated out of legendary interpretation.'¹

In the case of the resurrection the situation is much more difficult. Something did happen. But, of course, we should not think of a real physical resurrection.

'It is told in the story of the tomb which the women found empty on Easter morning. The sources of this story are rather late and questionable, and there is no indication of it in the earliest tradition concerning the event of the Resurrection, namely 1 Corinthians, chapter 15. Theologically speaking, it is a rationalization of the event, interpreting it with physical categories that identify resurrection with the presence or absence of a physical body. Then

¹ See P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, II, pp. 152-155.

the absurd question arises as to what happened to the molecules which comprise the corpse of Jesus of Nazareth. The absurdity becomes compounded into blasphemy.²

But what then did happen? Briefly this, that the disciples became aware of the fact that the New Being in Jesus is spiritually present with them.

'The power of his being had impressed itself indelibly upon the disciples as the power of the New Being. In this tension something unique happened. In an ecstatic experience the concrete picture of Jesus of Nazareth became indissolubly united with the reality of the New Being. He is present wherever the New Being is present. Death was not able to push him into the past. But this presence does not have the character of a revived (and transmuted) body, nor does it have the character of the reappearance of an individual soul; it has the character of spiritual presence. He "is the Spirit" and we "know him now" only because he is the Spirit. In this way the concrete individual life of the man Jesus of Nazareth is raised above the transitoriness into the eternal presence of God as Spirit. This event happened first to some of his followers who had fled to Galilee in the hours of his execution; then to many others; then to Paul; then to all those who in every period experience his living presence here and now. This is the event. It has been interpreted through the symbol of "Resurrection" which was readily available in the thought forms of that day.'³

Thus cross and resurrection are both event and symbol. The cross is an event and symbol, the resurrection a symbol and an event. Likewise the other 'facts' of Jesus' life are factual symbols. Again they should not be taken literally. The pre-existence and post-existence of Jesus, as Paul, for example, describes them, should not be taken as 'stages in a transcendent story of a divine being which descends from and ascends to a heavenly place'. Both descending and ascending are spatial metaphors which express the eternal dimension of the New Being, pre-existence indicating the 'eternal root of the New Being' and post-existence 'the eternal confirmation of the New Being'. 'The story of the Virgin Birth belongs to the symbols corroborating the resurrection. It expresses the conviction that the divine Spirit who has made the man Jesus of Nazareth into the Messiah has already

² *Op. cit.*, pp. 155f.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 157.

created him as his vessel. . . . The factual element in it is that historical destiny determined the bearer of the New Being, even before his birth. But the actual story is a myth, the symbolic value of which must be seriously questioned.' The ascension is also a symbol that corroborates the resurrection. It indicates the 'finality of his separation from historical existence. . . . It is therefore another symbolic expression of the same event which the resurrection expresses'. And like the symbol of 'Christ sitting at the right hand of God', 'if taken literally, its spatial symbolism would become absurd.' The symbol of the 'Second Coming' primarily serves 'to exclude the expectation of a superior manifestation of the New Being'.⁴

CRITIQUE

We have given this rather elaborate exposition of Tillich's views not because we personally believe that they are an important contribution to a better understanding of the biblical message. On the contrary, we believe that this is a most serious distortion of the gospel, robbing it of all its saving power. We have done it only because Tillich is so influential in our days and his theology so clearly represents the new Liberal climate.⁵

Indeed, this is again pure Liberalism. Again the facts of the history of salvation as proclaimed in the Bible have evaporated. All that is left is a vague notion of a mysterious God who is not to be thought of in personal terms (although it is admitted that there is an element of selfhood in God; He is not a mere thing or object), but who is 'being itself' or 'the ground of being'. Jesus Christ is not the eternal Son of God, who assumed the form of a servant and became man, but He is a vague historical personality in whom the New Being was present. He is still called the Saviour and Redeemer, but He does not reconcile us to God by bearing the penalty of our sins; rather He reconciles our estranged existence by His participation in this estrangement, by 'his surrender to the ultimate consequence of existence, namely, death under the conditions of estrangement'.⁶ Tillich explicitly rejects the idea of 'substitutional suffering'.

'It is a rather unfortunate term and should not be used in theology.

⁴ See P. Tillich, *op. cit.*, pp. 158, 160, 162.

⁵ Cf. Daniel Jenkins, *Beyond Religion* (1962).

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 155.

God participates in the suffering of existential estrangement, but his suffering is not a substitute for the suffering of the creature. Neither is the suffering of the Christ a substitute for the suffering of man. But the suffering of God, universally and in the Christ, is the power which overcomes creaturely self-destruction by participation and transformation.'

And the task of man is not to know simply that someone else suffered for him, but 'participation in divine participation, accepting it and being transformed by it'.⁷

Dr. Robinson, too, rejects the classic idea of atonement. He calls this a 'highly mythological, and often rather dubious, transaction between two parties'. Even in its best form 'the whole schema of a supernatural Being coming down from heaven to "save" mankind from sin, in the way that a man might put his finger into a glass of water to rescue a struggling insect, is frankly incredible to man "come of age", who no longer believes in such a *deus ex machina*'.⁸ What really happens is that Jesus Christ in His life as 'the man for others' overcomes the estrangement and alienation of existence. This is also what Paul means by the 'new creation' or the new man in 'Christ Jesus'.

'It is the life of "the man for others", the love whereby we are brought completely into one with the Ground of our being, manifesting itself in the unreconciled relationships of our existence. It was manifested supremely on the Cross, but it is met wherever the Christ is shown forth and recognized in "an entirely different mode of living-in-relationship from anything known in the world". For there, in however "secular" a form, is the atonement and the resurrection.'⁹

We called this pure Liberalism. This statement has to be qualified. We do not mean to say that it is exactly the same as the older Liberalism. There is at least one important difference. In the older Liberalism the Christian faith was not a 'historical' faith any more, but a purely moralizing message, brought by a certain man Jesus Christ, whose only function was to be a teacher. In this concept the man Jesus was basically not essential at all. His message could just as well have been brought by someone else. At this point the new Liberalism is different. It is indeed post-Barthian. The rediscovery of the Christian gospel as a

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 176.

⁸ J. A. T. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 82.

gospel based on facts of history has not altogether been forgotten. The New Being is linked up with a certain historical personality, Jesus of Nazareth (or whatever His name may have been). The New Being appeared at a certain moment of time, in a certain man. In Him alone is salvation and we can be really saved only when we participate in this New Being. But that is just as far as this Liberalism will go. The next step is that the message is robbed of its concrete, actual historicity. All features of this Person and His life, as pictured in the New Testament, are but symbols of the real event. The real event is an unknown quantity behind the symbols. The only thing we know with certainty is the symbolical meaning of the event, as interpreted by Tillich. The corresponding historical reality is one great questionmark. All that we know is that long ago some disciples discovered that the New Being was present in a certain individual and that their own existential estrangement was conquered in Him. But who this individual really is, we do not know. What we know with certainty is that He was not the pre-existent Son of God who became man, atoned for our sins by His suffering and death and was raised by the Father on the third day. That is all mythology. The only true reality is that of the New Being.

As Evangelicals we can only say 'No!' at this point. The Roman Catholic scholar George H. Tavard has aptly summarized the orthodox Protestant criticism of Tillich's theology (and it holds equally true of Dr. Robinson's version):

'Tillich's approach is deficient, not to say misleading. It is not biblical enough, not historical enough, not theological enough. It develops a philosophy of a Hegelian type, rather than a theology. . . . We have a diluted Christology which might be rather acceptable to a Hindu or a Buddhist; they can accept everything in Tillich's exposition, except precisely the fact that Jesus himself and no other was, and is, and ever shall be, the Christ. But the latter point is not essential to the notion of eternal Godmanhood appearing in existence.'¹

Indeed, we believe that this Tillichian version of the Christian gospel will kill all missionary endeavour. Why should we go out with such a message? Let the heathen descend into his own depths! Why should he not discover the same 'God', 'being

¹ *Paul Tillich and the Christian Message* (1962), p. 167.

itself'? Admittedly, he would not yet know of the man Jesus in whom the New Being is manifested, but would it make such a great difference? Would it really? It is hard to imagine why it should.

Neither do we believe that this is the way to bring the gospel to the intellectual of our day. No doubt it will appeal to him. But will he find the gospel in it? We cannot possibly see how he ever would, for there is no gospel in this philosophy! It is only a new world-view which, as such, may assist modern man in finding more coherence and depth in the perplexing multitude of phenomena and experiences. But it cannot save, because it does not contain the saving power of the Christian gospel.

And what is the value of such a message for the average man? It is far beyond his possibilities, and consequently relegates him again to the position which the 'ordinary believer' had in the Gnosticism of the first centuries. He is only a 'natural' man, who cannot rise to the heights (or depths!) of the 'spiritual' man. For this reason we believe that instead of helping the 'religionless' man of our day, this new system will push him still further into his religionless existence. God will at most be an 'abstraction', existing somewhere at the borderline of man's existence. The Bible will at most be a book with interesting psychological insights into the complexity of man's nature and situation. But at the same time it will, most likely, remain a closed book.

And this is not surprising at all. In the new theology itself the Bible does not really play a decisive role. It is striking indeed how little Scripture proof is found in the works of Tillich, and also in Robinson's book. We cannot remember having seen a single explicit reference to any Bible text or passage in the whole 187-paged second volume of Tillich's *Systematic Theology*, which deals with 'Existence and the Christ'. All that happens here is a thorough reinterpretation of certain biblical motifs in the light of the existential situation of modern man. In *Honest to God* the references to Scripture are very few and, generally, very vague. This is, of course, a natural consequence of the whole demythologization programme. If the Bible words and concepts may no longer be taken in their actual meaning, there is no sense in appealing to Scripture any more. The only thing one can do is read one's own view (*after* this has been arrived at) into certain texts. And this is what actually happens in *Honest to God*. All

theological (or should we say, philosophical?) decisions have been made before the Bible is opened, and all that the Bible is allowed to do is to add subsequent affirmation, and this only by means of a thoroughgoing reinterpretation.

The only passage of Scripture that is really discussed in *Honest to God* is the prologue of the Gospel of John.² Dr. Robinson first deals with the opening verse: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (Jn. 1: 1). He rejects the orthodox exegesis (*i.e.*, the Word was truly God) and defends a semi-Arian interpretation. Agreeing with the translation of the New English Bible, 'And what God was, the Word was', he says: 'In other words, if one looked at Jesus, one saw God — for "he who has seen me, has seen the Father"'. He was the complete expression, the Word, of God. Through him, as through no one else, God spoke and God acted: when one met him one was met — and saved and judged — by God.' 'Jesus never claims to be God, personally: yet he always claims to bring God, completely.'³ A few pages further on, John 1: 14, 'And the Word became flesh', is discussed. These words do not mean a real In-carn-ation, as the Church has always held. They do not mean 'that something (*sic!*) from outside comes into and is encased in flesh', but they tell us that 'in the man Christ Jesus stands revealed, exposed at the surface of "flesh", the depth and ground of all our being as Love'.⁴

It is obvious that this new theology does not represent the message of the Bible. This 'translation' changes the Christian faith into a mystery religion, expressed in philosophical terms of essence and existence, estrangement and alienation. But there is nothing left of the plain gospel in its factuality, as proclaimed in the New Testament. We believe that the New Testament itself rejects this system. What Tillich calls mythology is of the utmost importance, in a very realistic and historical sense, for the writers of the New Testament. For Paul, the bodily resurrection is not a myth, but an incontestable fact, albeit a fact that at the same time transcends all our ordinary facts. To the Corinthians he writes: 'If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised

² *Honest to God*, pp. 70ff.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 73.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 77.

Christ. . . . If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins' (1 Cor. 15: 14ff.). To say that Paul here speaks in symbolical language which should not be taken literally is to rob his words of all their meaning. In fact, it is in clear conflict with the rest of the very same chapter, where he discusses the body with which the believers shall be raised on the great day of Jesus' coming (verses 35ff.). For the apostle John the pre-existence of Christ is not a symbol and myth, but is again firm 'fact'. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (Jn. 1: 1). And it is this eternal Word that 'became flesh' (verse 14). This 'becoming flesh' is not a mere symbol, referring to some existential fact, but the real birth of God's Son in human form. 'Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God' (1 Jn. 4: 3). To call this mythology is to change the plain meaning of the words and to turn the gospel into a philosophy.

As we have said before, we do not deny that the words and facts of the Bible also have a symbolical meaning. We believe that it is one of the 'merits' of Tillich's theology, and also of Dr. Robinson's book, that they compel us to realize this anew, and better than we did before. When we speak of God, for example, in personal terms, we must realize that the Being of God transcends all our terms. The same is true when we speak of Christ as the Son of God, or the only begotten Son, or when we speak of the incarnation and resurrection. And yet we may believe that these terms are analogically true. They may transcend our understanding, yet the understanding which we have does not become false by its limitations and imperfections. Elsewhere we wrote the following words, which we repeat here:

'It is also generally accepted by Reformed theologians that the human character of the Bible involves a limitation. . . . Human thoughts and words can never contain the full riches of the divine revelation. They can never do full justice to all the glories of God; to His grace, His justice, His omnipotence; to His sovereign freedom and love in His works of creation and redemption. Here we fully agree with the words of Augustine, aptly quoted by Barth: "For to speak of the matter as it is, who is able? I venture to say, my brethren, perhaps not John himself spoke of the matter as it is, but even he only as he was able; for it was man that spoke of God, inspired indeed by God, but still man. Because he was inspired he

said something; if he had not been inspired, he would have said nothing; but because a man inspired, he spoke not the whole, but what a man could he spoke.”⁵

Augustine did not write these words to derogate from the divine nature of the Bible. For this Church Father the Bible was the inspired, infallible Word of God.⁶ But he also realized that this Word comes to us in human words; words that are fully true, but can never contain or convey the full riches of the divine reality. The Being of God, the twofold nature of Christ united in the one divine Person, the atoning work of the Saviour, all transcend human words. And yet in the human words a true picture is given, which no man is allowed to change.

⁵ K. Runla, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture*, pp. 67ff.

⁶ Cf. A. D. R. Polman, *The Word of God according to St. Augustine* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1962).

EPILOGUE

THE RELEVANCE OF THE CREEDS TODAY

IT will be evident to all our readers how extremely relevant the Creeds are in the present situation. In many ways the situation is very confused. Tillich and his followers also use the terms of the Creeds, but they obtain a totally different meaning. When we try to formulate Tillich's interpretation and 'translation' of the Apostles' Creed, we come to something like the following:

I believe in God, Being itself or the Ground of Being. And in Jesus who is called the Christ, in whom the New Being was manifested. He was the Son of God for in him the essential unity of God and man has appeared under the conditions of existence. Even before his birth historical destiny determined him to be the bearer of the New Being (= 'conceived by the Holy Spirit', 'born of the Virgin Mary').

He — most likely — died on a cross, taking away existential estrangement and reconciling existence and essence.

After his death his disciples in an ecstatic experience realized that death was not able to push him into the past, but that in him the New Being is present in the Spirit (= 'he rose again'). His separation from historical existence is final (= 'ascended') and he will not be transcended by anyone else who may appear in the course of history (= 'he shall come again').

I believe that in faith I may participate in the New Being and in doing this will be transformed.

And so on. Is this still the same gospel as that which was preached by Jesus Himself, by Peter and Paul, John and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews? The answer must be, No. This is a new gospel, faintly reminding us of the original, but in reality lacking all the essential historical features of it.

When Evangelicals adhere to the literal meaning of the words of the Creed, because they hear in them the language of the New Testament itself, they will certainly be called 'literalists' and 'biblicists' by Tillich and his followers. Others will call them 'fundamentalists' and 'obscurantists', who have fallen behind in the progress of human thought. But they should not be per-

turbed by these names. What really matters is not that we are in line with Tillich or Bultmann or any other contemporary theologian, but that we are in line with Paul and John, with the Apostles' and Nicene Creed, with Athanasius and Augustine, with Luther and Calvin, in brief, with the main stream of orthodox New Testament Christianity.

Underlying such a statement is the conviction that we can be true Christians only when we stick to the Christ of the history of salvation, as proclaimed in the New Testament and confessed in the Creeds. If this Christ is mythological, then the whole gospel itself is mythological. It follows that we then have to go behind the gospel as it is described in the New Testament to find the 'real' gospel. But the inevitable result will be, just as it was in the case of the older Liberals, that finally every theologian has his own 'gospel'. And such indeed is the case. Tillich has his own gospel; Bultmann has his; and many other theologians have theirs. A new tidal wave of subjectivism is descending upon the Church. Again the Christ of the New Testament is disappearing behind the philosophical systems and all that is left is an ontological (Tillich), or existential (Bultmann), or some other kind of -logical abstraction. In our opinion the words of the apostle Paul, addressed to his spiritual son Timothy, fully apply here: 'Guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge, for by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith' (1 Tim. 6: 20).

Of course, if we accept the gospel as proclaimed by Scripture, it is not sufficient to have a merely intellectual knowledge of it. That would be a 'historical faith' in the unfavourable sense in which this term is used in systematic theology, viz., a faith that accepts the facts without a living personal relationship to God in Christ. It is impossible to be a true Christian without the personal acceptance of Christ. One of our modern catchwords expresses the thought well: we have to be 'involved'. It is not sufficient that God is an IT, whose objective existence we intellectually accept, but He must be the great, living THOU for us, the Father in Jesus Christ, in whom we trust.

We must also realize that mere traditionalism is useless and fruitless. Traditionalism is as a swamp filled with stagnant water. After a while it begins to smell, becomes poisonous and finally kills. We must always be willing to learn, even from those with

whom we wholeheartedly disagree. We must be willing to learn from a Bultmann and a Tillich, even if it is only that they compel us to re-think the terms we so often thoughtlessly use. Evangelicals must always be alive to the problems of the modern world, in particular to the problem that modern man, in his alienation from the gospel, so often does not understand its terminology. They, too, are under compulsion to 'translate' the old message in new terms. In other words, the tradition must be a living stream of which we are part. A river is continuously fed by its original source, and at the same time it goes always forward until it empties in the ocean.

God's Word is an inexhaustible source. It contains the living water of the gospel. Whatever else may change — and we are living in an age of continuous change — this gospel does not. Our understanding of it may — and must — be deepened, but the gospel itself remains the same. The essentials of this gospel are well summarized in the Creeds. Admittedly they speak in fallible human words, with all the limitations involved; but in spite of these limitations they clearly speak of the great miracle of God who entered into this world to save sinners. It is a confession of faith. But it is simultaneously a confession of love and hope. In this confession the twentieth-century believer, joining in with the believers of all ages and places, says:

Yes, I believe in Thee, O God,
God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth, also of my life;
God the Son, Redeemer of the world, also of my life;
God the Holy Spirit, Sanctifier and Perfecter of the world, also of
my life.
I believe in Thee, O my God;
I put all my hope in Thee and Thy promises;
I love Thee with all my heart.