

Christ, Reality, and Good

Christ, Church, and World

Those who wish even to focus on the problem of a Christian ethic are faced with an outrageous demand—from the outset they must give up, as inappropriate to this topic, the very two questions that led them to deal with the ethical problem: “How can I be good?” and “How can I do something good?” Instead they must ask the wholly other, completely different question: what is the will of God? This demand is radical precisely because it presupposes a decision about ultimate reality, that is, a decision of faith. When the ethical problem presents itself essentially as the question of my own being good and doing good, the decision has already been made that the self and the world are the ultimate realities. All ethical reflection then has the goal that I be good, and that the world—by my action—becomes good. If it turns out, however, that these realities, myself and the world, are themselves embedded in a wholly other ultimate reality, namely, the reality of God the Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer, then the ethical problem takes on a whole new aspect. Of ultimate importance, then, is not that I become good, or that the condition of the world be improved by my efforts, but that the reality of God show itself everywhere to be the ultimate reality. Where God is known by faith to be the ultimate reality, the source of my ethical

concern will be that God be known as the good [das Gute], even at the risk that I and the world are revealed as not good, but as bad through and through. All things appear as in a distorted mirror if they are not seen and recognized in God. All that is—so to speak—given, all laws and norms, are abstractions, as long as God is not known in faith to be the ultimate reality. That God alone is the ultimate reality, is, however, not an idea meant to sublimate the actual world, nor is it the religious perfecting of a profane worldview. It is rather a faithful Yes to God's self-witness, God's revelation. If God is merely a religious concept, there is no reason why there should not be, behind this apparent "ultimate" reality, a still more ultimate reality: the twilight or the death of the gods. Only insofar as the ultimate reality is revelation, that is, the self-witness of the living God, is its claim to ultimacy fulfilled. But then the decision about the whole of life depends on our relation to God's revelation. Awareness of it is not only a step-by-step progress in the discovery of deeper and more inward realities, but this awareness is the turning point, the pivot, of all perception of reality as such. The ultimate, or final, reality discloses itself to be at the same time the first reality, God as the first and last, the Alpha and Omega. Without God, all seeing and perceiving of things and laws become abstraction, a separation from both origin and goal. All questions of our own goodness, as well as of the goodness of the world, are impossible unless we have first posed the question of the goodness of God. For what meaning would the goodness of human beings and the world have without God? Since God, however, as ultimate reality is no other than the self-announcing, self-witnessing, self-revealing God in Jesus Christ, the question of good can only find its answer in Christ.

The source of a Christian ethic is not the reality of one's own self, not the reality of the world, nor is it the reality of norms and values. It is the reality of God that is revealed in Jesus Christ. This is

the demand, before all others, that must honestly be made of anyone who wishes to be concerned with the problem of a Christian ethic. It places us before the ultimate and decisive question: With what reality will we reckon in our life? With the reality of God's revelatory word or with the so-called realities of life? With divine grace or with earthly inadequacies? With the resurrection or with death? This question itself, which none can answer by their own choice without answering it falsely, already presupposes a given answer: that God, however we decide, has already spoken the revelatory word and that we, even in our false reality, can live no other way than from the true reality of the word of God. The question about ultimate reality already places us in such an embrace by its answer that there is no way we can escape from it. This answer carries us into the reality of God's revelation in Jesus Christ from which it comes.

The *subject matter of a Christian ethic is God's reality revealed in Christ becoming real [Wirklichwerden] among God's creatures*, just as the subject matter of doctrinal theology is the truth of God's reality revealed in Christ. The place that in all other ethics is marked by the antithesis between ought and is, idea and realization, motive and work, is occupied in Christian ethics by the relation between reality and becoming real, between past and present, between history and event (faith) or, to replace the many concepts with the simple name of the thing itself, the relation between Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The question of the good becomes the question of participating in God's reality revealed in Christ. Good is no longer an evaluation of what exists, for instance my essence, my moral orientation [Gesinnung], my actions, or of a state of affairs in the world. It is no longer a predicate that one can apply to something that exists of itself. Good is the real itself [das Wirkliche], that is, not the abstractly real that is separated from the reality of God, but the real that has its reality only in God. Good is never without this reality. It is no general formula.

And this reality is never without the good. The will to be good exists only as desire for the reality that is real in God. A desire to be good for its own sake, as some sort of personal goal or life vocation, falls prey to an ironic unreality; honest striving for good turns into the ambitious striving of the paragon of virtue. Good as such is no independent theme for life. To take it as such would be the craziest Don Quixotry. Only by participating in reality do we also share in the good.

There is an old argument about whether only the will, the act of the mind, the person, can be good, or whether achievement, work, consequence, or condition can be called good as well—and if so, which comes first and which is more important. This argument, which has also seeped into theology, leading there as elsewhere to serious aberrations, proceeds from a basically perverse way of putting the question. It tears apart what is originally and essentially one, namely, the good and the real, the person and the work. The objection that Jesus, too, had this distinction between person and work in mind, when he spoke about the good tree that brings forth good fruits, distorts this saying of Jesus into its exact opposite. Its meaning is not that first the person is good and then the work, but that *only the two together*, only both as united in one, are to be understood as good or bad.

The same is true of the distinction that the American philosopher of religion Reinhold Niebuhr has made with the concepts moral man and immoral society. The split between individual and society that is expressed here is just as abstract as that between person and work. What is inseparable is here torn apart, and each part, which by itself is dead, is examined separately. The result is the complete ethical aporia that today goes by the name “social ethics.” Of course, if good is seen as an existing entity’s conformity to what ought to be, then the more massive resistance that society sets against what

ought to be must lead to an ethical preference for the individual over society. (And conversely, precisely this result should warn us to detect in this concept of the ethical its sociological origin in the age of individualism.) The question of good must not be narrowed to investigating the relation of actions to their motives, or to their consequences, measuring them by a ready-made ethical standard. An ethic of disposition or intention is just as superficial as an ethic of consequences. For what right do we have to stay with inner motivation as the ultimate phenomenon of ethics, ignoring that “good” intentions can grow out of very dark backgrounds in human consciousness and subconsciousness, and that often the worst things happen as a result of “good intentions”? As the question of the motives of action finally disappears in the tangled web of the past, so the question of its consequences gets lost in the mists of the future. There are no clear boundaries on either side. Nothing justifies us in stopping at any arbitrary point we choose in order to make a definitive judgment. In practice, we ever and again stop to make such an arbitrary determination, whether along the lines of an ethic of motives [Motivethik] or an ethic of consequences [Erfolgsethik]. Whatever we do will depend on the different needs of the changing times. Neither has any fundamental advantage over the other, because in both cases the question of good is posed abstractly, severed from reality. Good is not the agreement of some way of existence that I describe as reality with some standard placed at our disposal by nature or grace. Rather, good is reality, reality itself seen and recognized in God. Human beings, with their motives and their works, with their fellow humans, with the creation that surrounds them, in other words, reality as a whole held in the hands of God—that is what is embraced by the question of good. The divine “behold, it was very good” meant the whole of creation. The good desires the whole, not only of motives but also of works; it desires

whole persons along with the human companions with whom they are given to live. What could it mean anyway that only a part be named good, motives for instance, while works are bad, or vice versa? *Human beings are indivisible wholes, not only as individuals in both their person and work, but also as members of the human and created community to which they belong.* It is this indivisible whole, that is, this reality grounded and recognized in God, that the question of good has in view. “Creation” is the name of this indivisible whole according to its origin. According to its goal it is called the kingdom of God. Both are equally far from us and yet near to us, because God’s creation and God’s kingdom are present to us only in God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

To participate in the indivisible whole of God’s reality is the meaning of the Christian question about the good. To avoid misunderstanding, we need at this point a further clarification of what is meant here by reality.

There is a way of grounding ethics in a concept of reality that is completely different from the Christian way, namely, the positivist-empiricist approach. It attempts to remove the concept of norms from ethics completely, and sees in them only the idealizing of actual ways of behavior that are useful in life; good is seen as basically nothing but that which serves reality usefully and purposefully. It follows that there is no generally valid good, but only an endlessly manifold good that is determined to be such by whatever “reality” there happens to be. The advantage of this perspective over the idealistic view lies in its undoubtedly greater “closeness to reality.” Good here does not consist of an impossible “realization,” i.e., making real something that is unreal; it is not a realization of ethical ideas. Rather, reality itself teaches what is good. The question is only whether reality as understood here is capable of meeting this demand. It thereby becomes clear that the concept of reality underlying this positivistic

ethic is the vulgar concept of that which can be empirically established, which involves denying any foundation of this reality in the ultimate reality, that is, in God. This vulgar understanding of reality is therefore unsuited to become the origin of the good, because it requires nothing less than complete surrender to what is at hand, given, accidental, and driven by temporary goals in any given time. It is unsuited because it does not recognize ultimate reality and so surrenders and destroys the unity of the good.

Christian ethics speaks otherwise of the reality that is the origin of the good. It means thereby the reality of God as the ultimate reality beyond and in all that exists. It means also the reality of the existing world that is real only through the reality of God. The reality of God is not just another idea. Christian faith perceives this in the fact that the reality of God has revealed itself and witnessed to itself in the middle of the real world. *In Jesus Christ the reality of God has entered into the reality of this world.* The place where the questions about the reality of God and about the reality of the world are answered at the same time is characterized solely by the name: Jesus Christ. God and the world are enclosed in this name. In Christ all things exist (Col. 1:17). From now on we cannot speak rightly of either God or the world without speaking of Jesus Christ. All concepts of reality that ignore Jesus Christ are abstractions. All thinking about the good that plays off what ought to be against what is, or what is against what ought to be, is overcome where the good has become reality, namely, in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ cannot be identified either with an ideal, a norm, or with what exists. The enmity of the ideal toward what exists, the fanatical imposition of an idea on an existing entity that resists it, can be as far from the good as the surrender of the ought to the expedient. The ought as well as the expedient receive in Christ a completely new meaning. The irreconcilable opposition of ought and is finds reconciliation in Christ, that is, in ultimate reality.

To participate in this reality is the true meaning of the question concerning the good.

In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other. The reality of God is disclosed only as it places me completely into the reality of the world. But I find the reality of the world always already borne, accepted, and reconciled in the reality of God. That is the mystery of the revelation of God in the human being Jesus Christ. The Christian ethic asks, then, how this reality of God and of the world that is given in Christ becomes real in our world. It is not as if “our world” were something outside this God-world reality that is in Christ, as if it did not already belong to the world borne, accepted, and reconciled in Christ; it is not, therefore, as if some “principle” must first be applied to our circumstances and our time. Rather, the question is how the reality in Christ—which has long embraced us and our world within itself—works here and now or, in other words, how life is to be lived in it. What matters is *participating in the reality of God and the world in Jesus Christ today*, and doing so in such a way that I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, nor the reality of the world without the reality of God.

As we travel further along this road, a large part of traditional Christian ethical thought stands like a Colossus obstructing our way. Since the beginnings of Christian ethics after New Testament times, the dominant basic conception, consciously or unconsciously determining all ethical thought, has been that two realms [Räume] bump against each other: one divine, holy, supernatural, and Christian; the other worldly, profane, natural, and unchristian. This view reached its first peak in the High Middle Ages, and its second in the pseudo-Reformation thought of the post-Reformation period. Reality as a whole splits into two parts, and the concern of ethics becomes the right relation of both parts to each other. In the high

scholastic period the natural realm was subordinated to the realm of grace. In pseudo-Lutheranism the autonomy of the orders of this world is proclaimed against the law of Christ. Among the Enthusiasts the church-community of the elect sets out to struggle against the enmity of the world in order to build the kingdom of God on earth. In all of this the concern of Christ becomes a partial, provincial affair within the whole of reality. One reckons with realities outside the reality of Christ. It follows that there is separate access to these realities, apart from Christ. However important one may take reality in Christ to be, it always remains a partial reality alongside others.

This division of the whole of reality into sacred and profane, or Christian and worldly, sectors creates the possibility of existence in only one of these sectors: for instance, a spiritual existence that takes no part in worldly existence, and a worldly existence that can make good its claim to autonomy over against the sacred sector. The monk and the cultural Protestant of the nineteenth century represent these two possibilities. The whole of medieval history turned around the theme of the rule of the spiritual realm over the worldly, the *regnum gratiae* over the *regnum naturae*, whereas the modern age is characterized by an ever-progressing independence of the worldly over against the spiritual. As long as Christ and the world are conceived as two realms [Räume] bumping against and repelling each other, we are left with only the following options. Giving up on reality as a whole, either we place ourselves in one of the two realms, wanting Christ without the world or the world without Christ—and in both cases we deceive ourselves. Or we try to stand in the two realms at the same time, thereby becoming people in eternal conflict, shaped by the post-Reformation era, who ever and again present ourselves as the *only* form of Christian existence that is in accord with reality.

As hard as it may now seem to break the spell of this conceptual framework of realms, it is just as certain that this perspective deeply contradicts both biblical and Reformation thought, therefore bypassing reality. There are not two realities, but *only one reality*, and that is God's reality revealed in Christ in the reality of the world. Partaking in Christ, we stand at the same time in the reality of God and in the reality of the world. The reality of Christ embraces the reality of the world in itself. The world has no reality of its own independent of God's revelation in Christ. It is a denial of God's revelation in Jesus Christ to wish to be "Christian" without being "worldly," or [to] wish to be worldly without seeing and recognizing the world in Christ. Hence there are not two realms, but only *the one realm of the Christ-reality [Christuswirklichkeit]*, in which the reality of God and the reality of the world are united. Because this is so, the theme of two realms, which has dominated the history of the church again and again, is foreign to the New Testament. The New Testament is concerned only with the realization [Wirklichwerden] of the Christ-reality in the contemporary world that it already embraces, owns, and inhabits. There are not two competing realms standing side by side and battling over the borderline, as if this question of boundaries was always the decisive one. Rather, the whole reality of the world has already been drawn into and is held together in Christ. History moves only from this center and toward this center.

Thinking in terms of two realms understands the paired concepts worldly-Christian, natural-supernatural, profane-sacred, rational-revelational, as ultimate static opposites that designate certain given entities that are mutually exclusive. This thinking fails to recognize the original unity of these opposites in the Christ-reality and, as an afterthought, replaces this with a forced unity provided by a sacred or profane system that overarches them. Thus the static opposition

is maintained. Things work out quite differently when the reality of God and the reality of the world are recognized in Christ. In that way, the world, the natural, the profane, and reason are seen as included in God from the beginning. All this does not exist “in and for itself.” It has its reality nowhere else than in the reality of God in Christ. It belongs to the real concept of the worldly that it is at all times seen in the movement of the world’s both having been accepted and becoming accepted by God in Christ. Just as the reality of God has entered the reality of the world in Christ, what is Christian cannot be had otherwise than in what is worldly, the “supernatural” only in the natural, the holy only in the profane, the revelational only in the rational. The unity of the reality of God and the reality of the world established in Christ (repeats itself, or, more exactly) realizes itself again and again in human beings. Still, that which is Christian is not identical with the worldly, the natural with the supernatural, the revelational with the rational. Rather, the unity that exists between them is given only in the Christ-reality, and that means only as accepted by faith in this ultimate reality. This unity is preserved by the fact that the worldly and the Christian, etc., mutually prohibit every static independence of the one over against the other, that they behave toward each other polemically, and precisely therein witness to their common reality, their unity in the Christ-reality. As Luther polemically led the worldly into battle against the sacralizing trend of the Roman church, so this worldliness must be polemically contradicted by the Christian, by the “sacred,” in the very moment when it is in danger of making itself independent, as happened soon after the Reformation, reaching its high point in cultural Protestantism. The issue in both cases is precisely the same, namely referring to the reality of God and the reality of the world in Jesus Christ. In the name of a better Christianity Luther used the worldly to protest against a type of Christianity that was making itself

independent by separating itself from the reality in Christ. Similarly, Christianity must be used polemically today against the worldly in the name of a better worldliness; this polemical use of Christianity must not end up again in a static and self-serving sacred realm. Only in this sense of a polemical unity may Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms [Zwei Reiche] be used. That was probably its original meaning.

Realm thinking as static thinking is, theologically speaking, legalistic thinking. This is easy to show. Where the worldly establishes itself as an autonomous sector, this denies the fact of the world's *being accepted* in Christ, the grounding of the reality of the world in revelational reality, and thereby the validity of the gospel for the whole world. The world is not perceived as reconciled by God in Christ but as a domain that is still completely subject to the demands of Christianity, or, in turn, as a sector that opposes its own law against the law of Christ. Where, on the other side, what is Christian comes on the scene as an autonomous sector, the world is denied the community that God has formed with it in Christ. A Christian law that condemns the law of the world is established here, and is led, unreconciled, into battle against the world that God has reconciled to himself. As every legalism flows into lawlessness, every nomism into antinomianism, every perfectionism into libertinism, so here as well. A world existing on its own, withdrawn from the law of Christ, falls prey to the severing of all bonds and to arbitrariness. A Christianity that withdraws from the world falls prey to unnaturalness, irrationality, triumphalism, and arbitrariness.

Since ethical thinking in terms of realms is overcome by faith in the revelation of ultimate reality in Jesus Christ, it follows that there is no real Christian existence outside the reality of the world and no real worldliness outside the reality of Jesus Christ. For the Christian there is nowhere to retreat from the world, neither externally nor into